

Oral History

Interview with Gene Roberts

By Anish Shroff

Shroff: How did you get involved with the civil rights movement? Was it something you presumed or were assigned to?

Roberts: Well, in the early years it just happened. The spring I graduated from college, that's when the Supreme Court decision came down. On my second newspaper, I was in Norfolk when the state of Virginia closed six Norfolk schools to prevent school desegregation. Then I was a political reporter in Raleigh for the News and Observer. That's when the sit-in demonstrations started. They started across in Greensboro, but spread quickly into Raleigh and Durham. I got frustrated because civil rights was breaking all over the South, but it was hard because most civil rights groups didn't operate outside of their own states.

Shroff: What do you mean by that?

Roberts: Well, they were state news breakers rather than national news breakers. So you could cover things in whatever state you were in, but you couldn't go all over the South. So I left the South for a couple of years and went to Detroit. And then the New York Times hired me in 1965 to be the Bureau Chief in Atlanta. I had the specific responsibility of covering the civil rights movement.

Shroff: When you went from Virginia to Detroit, did you see a change in the way civil rights was covered in both newspapers?

Roberts: Basically, up until the Supreme Court decision and about a year after, the press didn't really cover segregation, blacks in America. The New York Times started in about 1957 – tried hard to give continuity of coverage, be at it day after day in the South. A lot of television networks were new with the whole business of journalism and covering day-by-day events like this. So they got their cues a great deal from the New York Times.

Shroff: So from a personal perspective you probably enjoyed covering this for the New York Times and the Detroit newspaper.

Roberts: I liked covering it for whatever I was covering and for whatever paper I was working for at the time.

Shroff: I did a story on a black athlete who is from Syracuse who played in the '30s and who got lost in the shuffle. People I talked with said you are changed, or change with the times and the era. Do you feel changed covering the civil rights movement?

Roberts: Yes. It was probably the most important story of my generation. And the people who were involved in it, the civil rights workers, were some of the most courageous and dedicated people I ever met. The single bravest person I ever met is John Lewis. He was a civil rights leader. And you can't be exposed to that and not have it affect you in a very permanent way.

Shroff: How did it change the way you thought or the way you think now?

Roberts: Those were remarkable times. I'm not sure I changed in my basic attitude. I was about twelve when segregation was very rigid. I was spending the weekend at the home of my uncle. We had been swimming in the river or creek that was near the house, and segregation was so rigid that whites swam in the morning. And when they were having lunch, blacks swam in the creek. And while they were having lunch one of the blacks wandered and drowned and a bunch of us went down to see if we could find the guy, and the whites never come up. I was the youngest in the group, so my assignment was run to the nearest house and call for an ambulance while they dug down. And they found the body, and all of us were trying to give him CPR. Then the ambulance arrived, and a white person was driving and he got out and he looked at the body and said, "You know nobody ever told me he was a nigger, we don't take those in the ambulance." And he drove away. So at that point I began to just look at things differently. I think the civil rights movement certainly heightened the intensity of my feeling.

Shroff: Twelve years old would certainly change the way you look at things. So did you have the sense that if I could do something to change segregation or when the seed was planted?

Roberts: From a pretty early age, I saw myself as a journalists and I was a chronicler of things rather than an activist. But I always grew up with this being my dominate desire in wanting to cover it in every way that I could. I think just getting the story out was the most important role the press could play

Shroff: Was it hard after a while covering civil rights and you become involved in the story and you become a major player in terms of covering it? To stay objective and not get involved because you have to remember that it is the most important thing – to get the story out. Was it tough to stay a half-step back and stay a bit removed from the situation, or did you have an agenda?

Roberts: Well, each of the stories took on the rights of the journalists and you are truly preoccupied in trying to report the facts and covering the story. No I never felt that. My roles were write what I saw and get a feel for the people.

Shroff: Let me ask you some word associations. When Martin Luther King, when those things come to mind, what are some of the things that pop into your head?

Roberts: The image that always pops in my head about Martin Luther King is that this has nothing to do with civil rights, but he was, of course, very human. And he liked Popsicles – the kind with two sticks, where you could break them in two. So when I would interview him in places like Chicago when he was living in a small apartment or his office, he would bring out a Popsicle and break it in two and he'd have one part and I the other. He would be licking away while I was doing the interview.

Shroff: Were you intimidated of him seeing he was such a significant person?

Roberts: No, he was very relaxed and easy about it, and there was a certain charisma there, but a totally easey mannerism when he took the podium in a small church and then it just became magic.

Shroff: Looking back, what would you say was your proudest moment covering the civil rights movements?

Roberts: My proudest? I can't answer that. But the moment that sort of is indelible in my mind is that time in Virginia when the schools finally reopened after being closed for months. And I was assigned to one of those six high schools. A young black girl – fifteen or sixteen – was to desegregate the school with a couple of thousand white kids. And they waited until all the kids got in school and then brought her up by car. And there was maybe about a block of the walkway going up to the school. And she got out, walked about half way, and then just froze and trembled all over. Then she stuck out her chin and just nudged in through the school. And as long as I live, I guess I will remember that. Sometimes we don't stop to think just what a burden it was on the handful of children who were the trailblazers in all this.

Shroff: More on the era itself. Looking at it now the progress that has been made in civil rights, what are your views today on the changes you've seen over the past 30 years?

Roberts: I grew up under segregation, and for a while I thought there would be some modifications. I'd rather say I see, in my lifetime, the degree of change. Which has happened. As a youth, segregation was so implanted and so rigid and a way of life, with the whites-only. It's a kind of remarkable credit to the nation that while there were murders and assassinations in the civil rights era, revolution was accomplished, and racial matters in this country have been accepted by law. And it resulted in the end a peaceful transaction, but it took a lot of courage to get there. The civil rights leaders accomplished an amazing amount.

Shroff: Mr. Roberts, I appreciate your time so much. Thank you.