

## Oral History: Paul Delaney Interviewed by Dana D'Aniello

**D'Aniello:** This is an interview with Paul Delaney on Saturday, April 24, 2004. It is taking place at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University during the symposium: Civil Rights and the Press. I am Dana D'Aniello.

Good afternoon Mr. Delaney, we are happy to have you as our guest today. I'd like to start by asking you, what inspired you to pursue a career in journalism?

**Delaney:** I remember never wanting to do anything other than write. Back in day one from considering a career back in grade school I guess. When I was getting ready to go to college, what would I prepare to major in – English or literature? But I didn't want to go to grad school or teach or have the long hard struggles of writers – literature writers. So, I got the bright idea, I would go to school. I went to journalism school, figuring that there was always a paper I could work on. And it turned out that way.

**D'Aniello:** When do you begin covering the civil rights story, and where were you working at the time?

**Delaney:** Well, if you want to break it into two phases, if you are dating it back to Brown vs. Board, I was not a reporter. I was still in school and in the army at that time. I was fortunate enough that in 1959 I went to work for a black newspaper in Atlanta, Georgia – the Atlanta Daily World. I went there in September of 1959. The movement started on February 1, 1960. So I was in the right place at the right time. Atlanta became kind of a headquarters for the movement. Anybody and everybody where a leader came through Atlanta, all of the kids who were demonstrating came through also. Atlanta was kind of R&R for students when they would go to small towns and demonstrate, then come back to Atlanta to rest and recuperate. So, I just had the good fortune of being in Atlanta, and also at the paper. Two doors from the paper where I worked were the headquarters of SCLC, Dr. King's organization. And diagonally across the street was SCLC the student organization. So, all the leaders were right there and readily available to us journalists.

**D'Aniello:** Can you tell us a little bit about the Atlanta Daily World. What kind of newspaper was it, and what types of stories did they cover?

**Delaney:** When I got there in '59, I was a general assignment reporter. We only had about three reporters; I was one of the three. We did feature stories for the most part, covering police – your basic newspaper reporting. But when the movement started, I started covering the movement. The Atlanta Daily World philosophy, well, editorially, was against the movement. The paper was owned

by conservatives. The man, who was the editor publisher, was a conservative. He was against it, essentially because he thought that the young black students were pushing too hard, were creating a lot of unnecessary anxiety. I think he was also concerned about his bottom line – that he would lose economically with the demonstrations and protests. So, editorially, he was against the movement. That unfortunately affected the coverage.

For example, I would go out and cover a story – three thousand students marched on downtown, sitting in. Their demands were an end to segregated lunch counters, hiring blacks as clerks and cashiers at department stores. The editor would see that and say, “I’m going to have to take these demands out of the story because I don’t want our readers to think that we support these demands.” That was the day-to-day hassles we reporters had while trying to cover the movement.

**D’Aniello:** Why do you think there was resistance at the paper to cover the movement at the time?

**Delaney:** I think, philosophically, they were against getting white folks upset, they thought, unnecessarily. They seemed to be true believers that eventually things would change and probably would have very slowly. But, the students, the movement nudged things along much quicker. They didn’t like that. They were afraid of that. There was an age factor, too. These older leaders versus the younger leaders. I imagine the older leaders thought the younger leaders were pushing them for leadership roles. So, they had to oppose them for that reason.

**D’Aniello:** What was the role in black press in civil rights coverage?

**Delaney:** Well, very important locally, because black papers didn’t have the resources. For example, that ABC/CBS – the network other news stations had. The black press was not strong nationally, but locally most of the papers supported the movement. By the local press and that was important.

**D’Aniello:** Do you think that the black press began to set the agenda for the Northern press and also the Southern press in terms of coverage of the civil rights movement?

**Delaney:** There was an influence because the black press was very strong in its coverage – the black community. So it could influence what other media was doing. I remember when there was a student newspaper that I helped with in Atlanta. Once we were established as a legitimate paper, the local white papers almost ignored every story in the black community. But, if we put this story out on page one – the story they had issued – they would kind of be forced to follow. So, yes, there was an influence the black press wielded, and that became important, that it influenced over the white media.

**D’Aniello:** Mr. Delaney, when you think back to your role as a journalist during the civil rights era, what are some of your strongest memories?

**Delaney:** The period we are talking about was very long – from the early ‘60s to the ‘70s, or through the seventies. I guess some of the strongest memories I have revolve around covering students as they protested and marched – watching as the student movement aged and matured, and eventually (fizzled) out. Watching how the movement changed, for example, the peaceful protest – the non-violent protest – turned into eventually some violent protests. After Dr. King was assassinated, the rioting that occurred, and watching how because of frustration, and other reasons, the movement became much more militant and, eventually, evolved into more of a headline maker. So, you had militant movement, but what was left of the movement, and you had urban riots. Oh, those provide great memories for me as a reporter. Just the era of violence, and all along, I remember covering the aspirations and frustrations of the black youngsters through the first civil rights movements, then into the Black Panthers. I saw a lot of youngsters who were members – they were confused by both non-violent and the violent parts of the movement. Then the military of the black Muslims and the Nation of Islam – all of those became indelible, as far as I’m concerned.

**D’Aniello:** You mentioned there were a lot of student protests. Can you describe a little about what kind of protests took place?

**Delaney:** In Atlanta, for example, in covering, I’ve been on campus when the students were getting ready to march. I’ve been on at the end of a march, where they would sit in at lunch counters that were segregated, go into restaurants or try to go in, that were segregated. I remember there was a march in Washington, in 1968, where there was a “Poor Peoples March.” It was more than students. These were a mixture, but mostly adults sitting in at the Department of Agriculture, demanding more aid to the poor. There were a lot of marches and sit-ins.

**D’Aniello:** Were these mainly peaceful protests, and was there ever any violence involved?

**Delaney:** For these, the marches and demonstrations were usually almost always peaceful. That is to – it was opposed to violence or rioting, which is not peaceful, by nature. I don’t think any peaceful protest I ever covered turned violent or into a riot. Most of them remained peaceful, and always an organized protest.

**D’Aniello:** Did you ever feel like you were at danger during the time you covered these protest?

**Delaney:** During the King riots, there were more people expressing themselves against the buildings. But there was one time during a riot in Washington, where a group of us reporters felt in danger. We were caught in the middle between cops and rioters. We joked that if we were shot, we wouldn't know who to blame – the cops or the rioters. So, yes, there were times we felt in danger. How much? I don't know.

**D'Aniello:** Thank you very much for sharing your memories with us today, Mr. Delaney.

**Delaney:** Thank you. It was very nice meeting you, Dana.