Vernon Barkstall

A Verbatim Transcriptionof an Oral Interview

17 Taylor Street
Champaign, Illinois
June 23, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This is an interview with Vernon L. Barkstall, the Executive Director of the Champaign County Urban League. Mr. Barkstall has been Director of the Urban League for 17 years. He was born on August 23, 1929, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

This interview was conducted on June 23, 1983, in the office of Mr. Barkstall at the Urban League located at 17 Taylor Street, Champaign.

The interviewers are Patrick D. Tyler and Melinda Roundtree representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Note: Inaudible parts of the tape are indicated in the text of the dialogue in the following format: *(inaudible).*

Vernon Barkstall, Oral Interview

Patrick Tyler: Mr. Barkstall, we are first interested in the national history of the Urban League. We would like for you to give us a brief history.

Vernon Barkstall: Of the National Urban League Movement?

Patrick Tyler: Yes.

Vernon Barkstall: I'd be glad to do that, Pat. You may know that at the turn of the century there was a great industrial revolution going on in the Western world in this country. And as a result, most of that impact was felt in the Northern part of this country — you know, in the East, and large cities like Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and St. Louis and New York and places North. Where in the South, this was still an agrarian economy, agriculture, farms.

Seventy percent of the blacks in this country lived in the South, Mississippi, in the Cotton Belt. And as you know, at the end of slavery, blacks found a new form of slavery called sharecropping and the land was very poor. So you were constantly just trying to scratch out an existence.

Well, there was a mass migration from the South — blacks heading north to the promised land — and concurrently there was a mass immigration of Europeans to the northern shores of the Atlantic, too. But, many blacks felt that the North was a promised land that they could go to — factories, get these good jobs, make good money, and bring their families north with them. Well, as a consequence with all of the movement to the North and the competition provided by European immigrants, many blacks got to the North and found out that New York and Washington, D.C., and places north were not the mecca that they discovered.

More than that, they had been living in an agrarian society and to find that culture shock of moving into a crowded urban area presented many problems.

So as a consequence, three organizations came together in 1910 and formed what became the Urban League, the National Urban League.

From its inception, it was directed by a volunteer board of directors who were interracial, primarily black and white, male and female, and nonsectarian, who banded together to promote the common good of both races and not the selfish interests of either. Because in the face of — you know at the turn of the century, prejudice and discrimination was blatant and job opportunities were minimal and the educational opportunities were minimal and the housing and health conditions were abominable. So as a consequence, the Urban League came into being in a storefront in New York City in 1910 and rapidly spread across the northern belt to the larger metropolitan areas where blacks were congregated and affiliates sprung up.

Today we have about 120 affiliates in the larger metropolitan areas including Champaign County, and the purpose of the Urban League remains the same. It is to work toward the elimination of prejudice and discrimination from all walks of American life and we do that in two ways primarily. One in terms of advocacy: advocating for the rights of the minority and helping our communities understand the benefits which will accrue to our total society if people are not judged by the color of their skin, but rather by their abilities.

In the meantime, we know that people are damaged by society, by the obstacles put in their way, such artificial barriers as race being primary among them. So as a consequence the Urban League tries to do, on the other hand, programs to help people overcome their lack of opportunity, lack of skill, and lack of abilities.

And so as a consequence, we try to program in what we call the four major life chances areas if the resources are available to do so. And those areas are housing, health, education and employment. And those are broad categories with many sub categories in it. We'll find that at the national level and at various places — voter registration where do you put that, you know. Crime programs and things of that nature. Always though there is that advocacy effort. And at the national level you'll see programs in wide and diverse areas.

So essentially I've said that the Urban League is working to rid the community of prejudice and discrimination, that it has affiliates of 120 cities across the nation, and it has regional offices to help us to our job better in four major parts of the country: North, South, East and West: Chicago, New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles. We have a research bureau in Washington, D.C., and our national headquarters is in New York. And we've been in business since 1910 at the national level, and these affiliates try to program consistent with the objectives of the National Urban League.

Patrick Tyler: We're also interested in the local history of the Urban League.

Vernon Barkstall: Well, the Urban League here in Champaign County became an affiliate of the Urban League twenty-two years ago. We just had our twenty-second anniversary, so that means in 1961 we came into existence here in Champaign County. The objectives and goals are precisely the same as at the national level. We program wherever the resources will allow us in housing, health, education, and employment.

We do more advocacy than we have health. The Urban League was a prime mover in the founding of Frances Nelson Health Center, so we don't see much need for us to be in the direct provision of health services. Frances Nelson is doing an excellent job in the community, so we don't try to compete with them, you know, to provide direct health services. But, we do advocate for good quality health, and we do try to be true to that basic Urban League and initial Urban League function of trying to help people find jobs.

We are also are heavy into housing related kind of programs in our energy program. Our Board of Directors is thirty members strong and including three high school representatives — one from Urbana, one from Central and one from Centennial — who try to help us shape policy and identify the needs of people in the community to try to address them.

I mentioned that we have several funded programs from different sources. One of them is a seniors job program in which we have some ninety people, fifty-

five and older working in not-for-profit corporations around the county. When I say not-for-profit, I mean social service agencies, park districts, city hall, libraries, schools — not churches, as you know there's a separation of church and state — but serving a wide variety of public and private not-for-profit corporations helping those agencies do their work that otherwise wouldn't get done due to the lack of resources.

We have a fuel bill program that we help people pay their energy bills, and we have a home weatherization service that we weatherize homes and help people overcome the heat loss that occurs in poorly insulated and antiquated houses. And, we have Mrs. Tanner and Mrs. Connely, who are directly working to help people throughout the community find jobs.

Patrick Tyler: We're also interested in the characters that run the Urban League locally, you know, so could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Vernon Barkstall: Okay, I'll be a … I'm one of those characters. (He laughs) I know you didn't mean that. I'm just being a little — levity. No, I'd be glad to tell you a little about myself. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, fifty-three, almost fifty-four years ago now.

And, very early in my life — four months old I think — my parents moved to Columbus, Ohio, which had been my dad's home anyway but he had been working in Cincinnati. And, I was raised up and went to public school in Columbus and which was pretty characteristic of the time.

When I graduated from high school I didn't see much need to go any further. Blacks weren't doing that much anyway in terms of that I'd been exposed to. I didn't know hardly anybody who'd go on to college and no one who had graduated by the time I'd got out of high school. My sister went for a quarter — one of my sisters went for a couple of quarters at Ohio State and later her boyfriend, husband — well, he was in college, but he went to the service during the second World War.

And so I did like most of my peers. When I got out of high school, I went to work in a factory in Columbus and dare say like most of my friends — had it not been for athletics — I may not have even gotten out of high school. Not because of lack of ability, it was just no one was motivating young blacks at that time, you know, to go on and do and perform.

So I got out of high school and went to work in a factory for five years, and then went to work. Then went to work — got drafted and went to the Army during the Korean Conflict. As you know, people never wanted to call it a war, although we lost many, many thousands of troops in Korea. But at any rate, I stayed in the service for a couple years and then as a result of the G.I. Bill, went to school at Ohio State and graduated in 1958 and got a master's degree in 1959 in education and educational administration.

And went to work in a settlement house in Detroit and stayed there for a couple of years, went back to Columbus in 1961 and taught school in Columbus for, until 1965. Got disenchanted — I loved teaching school, but that old ugly bugaboo of prejudice and discrimination was getting in the way of promotion from junior high school — I was coaching — to the high school level.

And so I got disgusted, and concurrently I was doing an awful lot reading about the Civil Rights Movement. And as you know, I was right there in the middle of sixties, the period I'm talking about now, and the Civil Rights Movement was on the move and I spent so much time reading and developed such a concern about doing something about the problems facing minorities — blacks specifically — at the time that I decided that after several years of prompting by the Urban League Director in Columbus to look into the possibility of getting involved in the Urban League Movement.

And as a consequence, I interviewed for two jobs — one in Marion, Indiana, and one here in 1966 — and liked the University community and was offered the job here and I took the job here. I went to Waukegan for about one year, but I've been here for sixteen of those seventeen years. And find, you know, this community very much to my liking.

I find too, though, that dealing with these problems day in and day out, sometimes can be pretty debilitating. By that I mean, you know, you're constantly faced with problems, problems, problems, and now I'm not complaining because the people who come here with problems got more problems than I have. But, everybody in their work likes to see problems resolved, and when you're dealing in Civil Rights and fighting for rights of the disadvantaged, progress is very very slow.

And in some instances seems to be nonexistent in terms of progress. But I know there has been progress and people let us know from time to time how much they really appreciate the help that we give them on their power bills, or weatherizing their home, or helping them get a job, or advocating for their rights in the marketplace, workplace, and things of that nature. But it's day after day after day these problems — there's some new people confronted with the same old problems.

I'd be remiss though if I didn't say to you conditions now in this community are infinitely better than they were in 1966 when I came here. Opportunities for young people like yourselves are infinitely better than they were for young people when I came to town in 1966.

Now, while I say that, overall from a economic standpoint I think it's fair to say that, and I think I would be remiss if I didn't say that, while blacks at the upper level education wise or opportunity wise provided by their parents or their own initiative are progressing faster, we still have the masses at the same relatively disadvantaged of position in comparison to whites as what they had years ago. The average income for blacks in this country is still is only, you know, less than 60 percent that of whites. That's where it was in 1956. That's what it was when I came here in 1966.

Now I don't say that to be pessimistic, and I certainly don't say that to discourage you and Melinda from — you know, looking up and working hard and getting a good quality education, developing some marketable skills because opportunities are out there for people who are prepared.

More and more blacks nowadays are being prepared, but also, you know, when I came here — well, a few years before I came here — they had the picket. That store you see across the street over there that's empty, vacant now, just got blacks to pushing the buttons on the cash register. Same thing in banks and grocery stores, you know. Blacks were relegated to menial jobs.

Those kinds of things have changed now and we're thankful for that. But, we still have that mass of people at the lower socioeconomic level who are in as dire straits as they were twenty, thirty, forty, a hundred years ago. And those are the kind of problems we try to give attention to in the Urban League.

Patrick Tyler: Okay, (inaudible)

End of Interview