

Young, white and standing up for civil rights

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(Photo: SPECIAL TO BMN)

In the footage, Eade Anderson of Montreat talks about walking head down out of his church in Greenwood, Mississippi, one Sunday some 50 years ago. Troubled and lost in thought about a black kindergarten worker whom members of the church wanted fired, Anderson, the church's pastor, suddenly felt himself being lifted off the ground.

Holding him by his robe was the county's former sheriff. "You keep your G.D. nose out of this, Eade Anderson," Anderson quotes the sheriff as saying in the video. "We know how to handle n***** in Mississippi."

Though Carolyn Crowder has been editing her video footage for months now, the Black Mountain resident's voice still rises when she tells the tale. Anderson's story is one of many that Crowder and associate producer Rod Murphy have been cutting together for "At The River," an oral history project and documentary about the efforts and trials of young, white Southern Presbyterian ministers who fought for civil rights in the Deep South during the 1950s and '60s.



Phil Noble, preaching in Anniston, Alabama, recalls getting call from the Ku Klux Klan threatening to kill his family. (Photo: SPECIAL TO BMN)

In interview after interview that Crowder and Murphy compiled the past two years, the men - and the women who helped them - talk about being scared but resolute, certain they were doing the right thing, even at great cost. Phil Noble, one pastor Crowder interviewed, talked about having to check his car for bombs each morning before he took his children to school in Anniston, Alabama.

In the documentary's trailer (attheriverfilm.com), the pastors, now quite old, talk about the urgency and fear they felt back then. Many describe calls they got from the Ku Klux Klan at night, threatening to kill them and their families before morning. Noble, now 95, talks about receiving them especially on Saturday nights.



Carolyn Crowder (Photo: Paul Clark)

Crowder is an unlikely person for this project. Now 71, the retired psychologist grew up in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1950s. She was 9 when, in 1955, Rosa Parks in Montgomery sparked a series of boycotts, protests and marches by refusing to give up her seat to a white bus rider. Crowder was 17 when, on Sept. 15, 1963, Ku Klux Klan members in Birmingham killed four girls in a church bombing. She was 19 when, on March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers in Selma

brutally beat civil rights marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Crowder's parents were racist, as were many of her friends. As a teenager, she campaigned for George Wallace, Alabama's pro-segregation gubernatorial candidate. Racism was so central to the household she grew up in that her father sent her and her brothers to Auburn University, where he thought they'd be safe from progressive views about inter-racial relationships.



At her Black Mountain home, Carolyn Crowder and Rod Murphy edit one of the pastor profiles that will be a part of "At the River." (Photo: Paul Clark)

Crowder and Murphy conducted some 50 interviews for "At The River," many of them with people in the Black Mountain-Montreat area. They interviewed pastors and people throughout the Mississippi Delta. They got footage of churches and services in Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky, and Charlottesville, Virginia.

"Every time we'd get together, we'd search for another handful of interviews and that would turn into a trip into the Deep South," Murphy, a West Asheville resident, said. "And those turned into a few more trips into the Deep South. And now it's grown into this project."

Murphy and Crowder, who plan to enter their documentary in film festivals, have been editing a series of profiles for the past several months (six of the raw interviews are available on the website). The footage of the pastors talking about their experiences – the death threats, the moral certainty, the excitement and fear – are notable records of history.

Just out of seminary, they were young, generally in their mid-20s, living in rural towns in the Deep South with wives and children. “They were isolated,” Crowder said. “It’s not like they had a big support system. The church, by and large, was not with them.” In old photos of their faces, she sees sweet idealists, untested but earnest, young men who look too young for the trials their beliefs would subject them to. The two-minute documentary trailer attests to that.

“I had no business being up there in privileged Cambridge, Massachusetts, when what I needed to do was get down there in the South where the trouble really was and be a part of it,” Wallace Alston, a Maine resident who lived in Auburn, Alabama back then, says in a clip.

“American history was finding its center right in the middle of our Southland. There was no reason not to jump in there somewhere and experience it,” says Jim Chatham, of Asheville, who took a job as pastor of two small churches in southwest Mississippi.

“In Meridian, I preached a sermon that they really didn’t like,” Charles Stanford of Louisville, Kentucky, says. “It was about, ‘if anyone says I love God but hates his brother, he is a liar.’”

“It was a time of chaos,” Gay Mothershed, a resident of Highland Farms who spent her career as a Christian educator with the Presbyterian Church (USA), said in an interview with The Black Mountain News in mid-December. “The church was attempting to make a public witness by being willing to join with our black brothers and sisters.”

“It was a period in which there were still lynchings,” Erskine Clarke, a Montreat resident who has written about the South of the 17th-19th centuries said in an interview with The Black Mountain News (Crowder interviewed him for the documentary). “There were deep assumptions of race and racism.” Many of the white pastors took unpopular stands after concluding those assumptions were “fundamentally flawed,” he said.

“For some, it cost them their churches,” Clarke said. Elders of many of the churches relieved the pastors of their pulpits, leaving the young men unable to support their families. “Pastors were suddenly without a church and had no place to go,” Mothershed said.

What the men did was groundbreaking, Crowder said, but not necessarily earth-shattering. They went to black churches to meet fellow ministers; they invited black people to supper in their own churches; they preached about the encompassing nature of love - “subtle but important acts that changed people,” Crowder said. “There were people watching, and listening. It made them think.”

One of them was Crowder herself.

While at Auburn University, she worked at a camp for poor white children that was directed by John Kuykendall, a Charlotte native (and later president of Davidson College). Speaking to a group of church women one day, Kuykendall, then associate pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Auburn, said he could no longer direct a camp that excluded black children. Crowder, a camp counselor, was awestruck.

“The women said, you can’t do that,” she recalled. “He put his job on the line, right there in front of me. When he did that, it was like cold water to the face. That’s when I turned.”

With the help of Kuykendall, Crowder got a job with a young, integrated organization that sought to

improve neighborhoods in Richmond, Virginia (but whose real purpose, Crowder suspects, was to unite black and white young folks in social work). Crowder volunteered in a largely black veterans hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Married and in her early 20s, she went to work for the welfare department in Alabama. “That just finished me off – I was seeing the poverty up close,” she said. “The shacks along the road, I was in them. I saw dirt-level poverty. I could not live with the fact that I could go home, flip on the heat and two blocks behind me was a shack with a family with no heat and no food.”

She moved out west (partly to get away from the South’s discrimination), where she spent her career as a psychologist working in prisons and schools. She liked it out there, but she missed what she said was the “sweetness” of the South. She retired to Asheville, then Montreat, then Black Mountain.

Being surrounded by progressive ministers here, Crowder remembered the white ministers she knew on the periphery of the civil rights movement. Having produced three documentary films on Southern topics (and having published books about parenting), she decided to write a book about the pastors’ work. A friend convinced her instead to do a video project – something she thought she could handle herself and then give to the Presbyterian Heritage Center in Montreat.

But she was soon overwhelmed by the camera work. She reached out and found Murphy, who has won a dozen awards for his documentaries and produced videos for clients including Outward Bound, American Express and New Belgium Brewing.

Murphy convinced Crowder that her material was too important to make short work of it. He suggested a documentary in addition to the raw interviews. “I give Rod credit for thinking bigger than I was thinking,” Crowder said. They start work on the documentary in January and are already thinking about film festivals.

The project has enlightened Murphy, who jokes he couldn’t spell “Presbyterian” before he began. Raised Catholic in Massachusetts, he lost his faith long ago and, he said, “didn’t have any hope of seeing religion as a good thing again.”

But as they interviewed and filmed, he came to see the selfless, often dangerous, participation of white pastors as “the good side of religion.”

“These are great people that did the right thing at a young age,” he said. “It’s just a good, under-told story.”

Catch a glimpse of a heroic past

Carolyn Crowder and Rod Murphy will screen 20-minute profiles of three ministers at 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 28 at White Horse Black Mountain.