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John Carlos, Oral History Index

John Carlos

Shannon Carter

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Interviewee: Dr. John Carlos
Interviewer: Dr. Shannon Carter
Technical Support:
Others Present: Kelly Dent
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Summary:

In this interview, Dr. John Carlos speaks about his time as a student at ETSU and provides insight about the struggles he faced while being an African American student athlete during the desegregation era. Carlos is originally from Harlem, but came to ETSU on a track scholarship. Carlos participated in a demonstration during the 1968 Olympic Games where he and his fellow medalists held up the “Black Power Salute” fist on the podium.

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2:20-4:30 CARTER: When you came here, you grew up in Harlem, um and, uh, we brought you from Harlem to Texas and what were your impressions of Texas before you came?

He had no preconceptions about Texas prior to his arrival, but was excited to get an education and have a nice place for his family. Upon landing in Dallas, Carlos witnessed segregated restrooms that he had never seen in person. He describes the glaring difference between the conditions of each restroom.

4:30-4:47 CARLOS: Then I recall, uh, going in and we had a coach, Delmer Brown that pretty much recruited me to go to school down there. Uh, he recruited me through a young fella by the name of, uh, I think his name was Pete Matthews or something like that.

4:47-5:30 CARTER: Pete Peterson.

Pete Peterson told Carlos that the community was a good place to raise a family and that there was no prejudice.

5:30-5:38 CARLOS: And then, uh, I went from there to, uh, the coach mispronouncing my name.

5:38-8:03 CARTER: Oh, how did he do that?

Carlos describes being called racial slurs like, “boy” and “niggra”. He had never experienced being called things like that before coming to Texas. Carlos says that he made a mistake coming to Texas, but made some good friends along the way. He says that most of his friends did not have a choice but to stay at ETSU at the risk of being drafted to Vietnam.

8:03-8:14 CARTER: You had um, uh, you named several people who became, uh, uh, lifelong friends that you met here, uh, both white and black. There was some activism on this campus.

Carlos describes activism as just young people wanting to make friends.

8:39-11:04 CARTER: What did you guys do for fun here? [Joint laughter] That you can say on tape?

He liked to go to track meets. He reminisces about his time in Commerce and how he could have stayed and finished his college career, but his daughter was harassed by a white man, which led him to make the decision to leave Commerce.

11:04-13:22 CARTER: You did, um, you did stay through some complex moments many times I think you said for the team, um, uh, other times, um, cause it was the right thing to do, I think. You said, um, you started speaking out kind of early though, I mean you write about a moment where you stood outside the Student Center and, um, said you were leaving. Was that a speech or?

He gathered with some fellow Black athletes who wanted him to stay. Coaches then came and tried to convince him that what Delmer Brown had said was not what he meant and that he made a mistake. He then reminisces about his friend and teammate, Terry Barnett, who convinced Carlos to stay and win the NAIA track championship, which they did.

13:22-14:40 CARTER: The only time I think.

He said they were given very small track championship rings, which were much smaller than the football championship rings. He made complaints about the lesser rings and was ultimately given normal-sized rings like the football players were given. He describes his relationship with the Delmer Brown as a bad combination. He also said Delmer Brown declared that blacks had an extra bone in their bodies, which allowed them to do certain things.

14:40-14:48 CARTER: He taught anatomy, didn't he?

He did teach anatomy. Delmer Brown said that black people had a tail.

14:48-17:45 CARTER: In his lectures?

No, he would say it in conversation, one-on-one. He explains how Delmer Brown said he was doing a favor for Carlos by bringing him to ETSU on a scholarship, but Carlos said it was he who was doing Brown the favor by bringing him championships. Carlos says that the coaches could not control him like the other athletes, so they broke up 2 friendships Carlos had with people from New York, Don Mitchell and Jimmy Ray Smith. He says that Delmer Brown would spend 10 minutes talking about Anatomy, and the rest of the 40 minutes talking about his feats as an Olympic trainer. Carlos would take notes on the stories Delmer Brown told, instead of anatomy. When it came time to take the tests, Carlos would rewrite the stories and pass the class while others would fail. He knew this happened because of his role as a prominent track star and meal ticket for Brown. Carlos did it to spite the coach.

17:45-18:25 CARTER: And that was the last straw?

Carlos describes his experience in math class.

18:25-23:24 CARTER: Um, you were on, uh, our campus when, uh, you learned about the, uh, Olympic protest in progress. Can you talk a bit about that?

He explains going to the post office to get some track and field news, where he learned about a potential boycott of the Olympic Games. He sees this during his conflict with Delmer Brown and some racism in the town. He explains that Professor Edwards in New York told him that he could get him enrolled in college in San Jose, CA, where he ultimately decided to go. Carlos says that race relations were only slightly better in San Jose than what he had experienced in Texas. It was in San Jose that he made the decision to be a part of the boycott. He recalls an article in the Dallas

Morning News about his opinions of the Olympic boycott, which was followed afterward by the Greenville Herald. The school paper also wanted to do a piece about the Olympic boycott, which Carlos agreed to under one condition: that the paper print exactly what he says.

23:24-24:29 CARTER: And they came, uh, was it Jesse Hawthorne who brought, uh, I guess the black athletes together and said we're not gonna have any more talk of this, is this right?

Carlos describes his willingness to leave after Delmer Brown met with the athletes.

24:29-26:58 CARTER: Was Commerce with you when you were at the, um, Olympic stand, raising that fist, was Commerce somehow with you?

Yes, Commerce was with him. He explains southern cities and race relations. Carlos describes his willingness to stand for something when it was not safe or convenient to do so.

26:58-30:17 CARTER: I wanted to ask you, also, to speak a little bit about, um your meeting with the, with Martin Luther King, um, you, uh, they heard about your, uh, about your position, um, on the, uh, on the boycott, um, when you were her at East Texas State. Can you tell that story about how you came to that meeting?

He received a phone call from Professor Edwards about coming to a meeting after getting permission from his mother. He got nervous during the meeting and saw Dr. King walk in. He said Dr. King cracked some jokes to ease the nervous feelings of some of the people in the meeting. Carlos says Dr. King could have been a comedian because he had a strong presence.

30:17-34:15 CARLOS: So, when the meeting was over, he asked, did I have any questions, I had two questions. First question is: why would you do it? Which he pretty much answered cause he said to me he said, John, its like this, if was out in the middle of the lake in a boat and the boat was still and everything was still, he said what does it look like, I said everything is serene man the water is still. He said what happens if you reach in the boat and you pull out a rock and you reach over and you drop the rock, what happens? I said it vibrates, he said, yeah, it creates waves. He said, those waves go to the far end of that lake. He said but that rock that created the waves would be the Olympic boycott. If you drop that rock, he said everybody want to know what is happening. [30:17-30:57]

Carlos says that he wanted to be a part of the movement that had the potential to change the world. He wanted to attend the Olympics instead of just staying at home because he knew that only he could represent the movement like he wanted to.

34:15-34:41 CARTER: So, um, 45 something years ago, um, we're took a, uh, you're at the post office, you get the track and field, um, and learn about this boycott. Months later, you're in a room with Martin Luther King and then, uh, months after that, Martin Luther King is gone. Um, you're, um, you're rocking the world with the, uh, the, with this important movement.

34:41-34:42 CARLOS: Actually, it was ten days.

34:42-34:44 CARTER: Ten days?

34:44-34:51 CARLOS: Ten days, and then he was gone.

34:51-39:05 CARTER: And that, uh, the, the, boycott didn't happen, but something had to happen, you felt.

Carlos says that the result of King's assassination had a deteriorating effect on the black community. African Americans got involved with drugs. The King Foundation did not succeed without Dr. King, and it was just a memory. He explains that complacency overtook the black community after the leaders of the civil rights movement were killed. He describes the family values that were abandoned in the wake of the loss.

39:05-39:08 CARTER: [Laughter from Carter] There are consequences.

39:08-42:18 CARLOS: Right.

Carlos describes his role in keeping his family's values and that his act of raising the fist at the Olympics does not solely define him as an individual because it was one moment, forty-three years in the past. He explains having his medal taken away and that fact intimidating other athletes. He says that people could have called him and asked him if he had his medal physically taken from him, but nobody ever did. He still has his medal because nobody came and took it from him, despite what people might read elsewhere. He emphasizes speaking the truth, because it allows people to understand without confusion.

42:18-42:26 CARTER: Is it better now, or worse, or both, for a black man in America?

42:26-42:41 CARLOS: I think its worse for everybody now. You know, a lot of people think while young blacks might be suffering more, but I think right now, blacks are saying, I'm glad that they turned up the volume on your ass so you can feel what I've been feeling all along.

42:41-42:45 CARTER: [Laughter from Carter] Fantastic.

42:45-42:46 CARLOS: When I count the numbers.

42:46-42:49 CARTER: And that's the Occupy movement.

42:49-42:51 CARLOS: That's right.

42:51-42:56 CARTER: Kelly, you had a couple of questions for Dr. Carlos?

42:56-42:58 DENT: Yes, I do. Let me get to them.

42:58-44:23 CARTER: Yeah, so, you've, um, uh, while she does that, you're, um, uh, you've spoken, uh, at, uh, Occupy Wall Street, and, um, how do you see this energy between that movement and what you were doing in 68?

Carlos describes his concerns with the strength of the movement and how it needs to be a united movement. He says the movement is fluctuating and has some splinters.

44:23-49:49 CARTER: But there was a makeshiftness to your, uh, to your, uh, uh, silent protest as well, just, well, but, except it had been leading to as well.

Carlos says the similarities between the movements are social and economic. He talks about robotics and how the future of the labor force will be automated while laying off thousands of jobs. He talks about the credit crisis in America and how fragile the system is if people would recognize what is happening. He says there will be long-term repercussions in the future that people will have to endure. Carlos explains the hypocrisy of Klan members hiding their faces behind sheets instead of showing him and the world who and what they are [48:37-49:49].

49:49-51:18 DENT: I had a question, um, I kind of focus mainly on power structures and stuff, and I was wondering if you could describe the power structure that existed in Harlem when you were a child. By that, I mean who in the community had economic, social, political power? How did you relate to that?

Social power was held by the merchants and banks. Economic power came from down town where blacks did not live or own property. Political power was owned solely by politicians

51:18-51:55 DENT: OK, and then I was wondering, um, when you're talking about what races, ethnicities were these people that had, like, the economic, were they white, were there some blacks that had economic power in Harlem, not New York as a whole, but in where you grew up in Harlem. Because we hear about the Harlem Renaissance and Harlem being, coming, growing up in the South, the way that I was taught was Harlem was this black dominated structure where blacks controlled the economy, the politics, and society. But, obviously, you would have grown up there, whereas I've lived my whole life down south.

51:55-61:53 CARLOS: Right.

Power was limited, but people like Marcus Garvey had influence. He said the blacks with some influence mainly told other blacks to "hang in there" because they knew things were difficult. Carlos says that Harlem found a way to survive in spite of the problems facing the black community. Carlos compares modern welfare to slavery in that it incentivizes splitting up families. He stresses the importance of a united family and that family is the basis for values. He talks about how drugs and welfare were designed to destroy families. Carlos talks about emphasizing non-violence until there is an instance where the individual must act and put a foot down to stop an evil action. People are afraid to offend their oppressor [59:20]. Carlos advocates for taking a side and not sitting on the fence when dealing with injustices or people who are bringing others down.

61:53-62:11 DENT: I had another question. In the book, you talk about how your family is part of what we call the great migration, meaning that they came from the South to the North. You grew up in the North. Was there any stories that you remember hearing your father talking to you about what it was like in South Carolina that kinda gave you that idea...

62:11-62:13 CARLOS: My father told me I could never put it on camera.

62:13-62:17 DENT: [Joint laughter] Yes, you could, we love honesty. Oh, be honest.

62:17-62:29 CARLOS: Don't put that on camera. [Incoherent joint laughter] You'll never get that one from me. It was rough times down there, I can tell you that. And my father never went back.

- 62:29-62:31 CARTER: He never did.
- 62:31-62:36 CARLOS: No because the problems down there were his problems and he probably wasn't nice the way he dealt with them. We'll leave it at that.
- 62:36-62:48 DENT: What, who all came north, like, was it just your dad, or does, did you still have, when you were growing up, did you have grandparents, aunts, uncles still living in South Carolina or did everybody move up?
- 62:48-66:01 CARLOS: Let me tell you this, I didn't know no one from my, my dad's family other than my grandmother and my grandfather. When I saw them, I was so young I didn't know who they was. OK, so I don't have no history on his side or my mother's side and the history of none of my grandparents. Uh, I went down south, uh, to visit some people one time. And I said, oh man, my father was born somewhere down here and, uh, I think I was in Columbia, and Camden was right outside of Columbia, South Carolina. And then I went there and checked it out. And I told my brother, I said you know what we need to do man I said the only time we get together is when people die. We have this family gathering and everyone come in. I said, why don't we have like a family reunion?

Carlos said most of the family didn't come out for the reunion. He explains that his uncles were war heroes and that his father was in the first world war. A relative asked him to buy some land in South Carolina, but he said that he wasn't ready for them and they weren't ready for him.

- 66:01-66:05 DENT: I think that's all I had. I think you answered the rest.
- 66:05-66:14 CARTER: Well, uh, um, we've, we could, keep on, but I know you've got tons of things going on. And, um, we're very grateful to you for visiting with us
- 66:14-66:15 CARLOS: Thank you, thank you.
- 66:16-66:22 CARTER: Um, we will, uh, we'll make a copy of this and make sure you get a copy of it. Can, do you think we can do that before Dr. Carlos leaves?
- 66:22-66:27 [Camera Person Acknowledges] CARTER: OK, tomorrow, for sure. OK, we'll make sure you get that.
- 66:27-68:28 [Chatter among people in the interview room.]
- 68:28-68:53 DENT: I had a question about, um, your continued relationship with the athletic department. Um, I'm sure you've been to the fieldhouse and they've got

like, the wall of heroes kind of thing, which is a whole lot of athletes, black and white, who were here. Some of them were here while you were here and I was noticing while I was there, like, on Monday, I was like, ok, well, where is John Carlos?

68:53-68:56 CARTER: There is still some controversy, yes.

68:56-71:01 [Multiple voices and laughter] CARLOS: Well, the difference is this, you know, when I came down here, I wasn't you know, I wasn't one of those guys who was down here who would let them do whatever they wanted to do and things. I was one of their pet peeves, and they still got some of the old guard that's still here on the campus.

Carlos says that there are still some members of the former regime's power structure in place from his time at ETSU. He says he still has friends he made while on campus. He felt bad that some of his friends paid a price by getting kicked off the campus just from being friends with Carlos.

71:01-71:12 DENT: What about, um, when you were here, presumably, you were here with a lot of southern, southerners who kind of had the, that's just how it is down here. How did they kind of react to...

71:12-71:17 CARLOS: That was the exactly the phrase that they used.

71:17-75:10 DENT: So, like, some of them, presumably, are, I mean, there's one person who, is here from 65 to 68 and he's on the hall and he's star football player and everything, so, was it, how was the disconnect with you coming, you know, you talk about southern negroes versus northern black people, how was the disconnect, um, where you were saying, I'm not gonna put up with this whereas they were kinda like, yeah you are, this is Texas.

Carlos explains that a former athlete and student was inducted into the hall of fame and stood up for John Carlos and said he should also be inducted. He details the disrespect that he was shown when attempting to gain access to the campus football game as a VIP.

75:10-80:27 [Chatter between members of the room regarding events which will take place later in the day. The interview is effectively over.]