

**Julian Bond Oral History Project**  
**“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**

**Interview with Kasim Reed**

**Special Collections Division**  
**Bender University Library**  
**American University**  
**Washington, D.C.**

**2021**

## **PREFACE**

This interview is part of an oral history project entitled, “The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-1968.” Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is Gregg Ivers, Professor of Government and Director, Julian Bond Oral History Project, American University.

The reader is encouraged to remember that this transcript is a near-verbatim transcription of a recorded interview. The transcript has been edited for minor changes in grammar, clarity, and style. No alteration has been made to the conversation that took place.

Notes, where and when appropriate, have been added in [brackets] to clarify people, places, locations, and context for the reader.

### **Biographical Note for Kasim Reed**

Kasim Reed was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, and moved to Atlanta, Georgia while still an infant. He attended public schools in Atlanta, and later graduated from Howard University in 1991 and Howard Law School in 1995. In 1998, Mr. Reed was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, where he was, at that time, the youngest member. Beginning in 2008, Mr. Reed was elected to the State Senate four consecutive terms before resigning in September to run for mayor of Atlanta. In December 2008, Mr. Reed won the first of two consecutive terms as the city’s mayor.

Mr. Reed was mayor when the City of Atlanta renamed a part of Fair St., SW, Atlanta Student Movement Boulevard and placed a historical marker on the property of what was once the Yates and Milton Drug Store, located in the heart of the Atlanta University Center, where Lonnie King, Julian Bond and Joe Pierce founded the Atlanta student movement in March 1960.

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American University**

**Kasim Reed (30-JBOHP)  
June 13th, 2021  
Atlanta, Georgia**

**Interviewer: Gregg Ivers  
Production Assistance: Jessica Merriman**

**Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Kasim Reed [KR]**

GI: Today is Sunday, June 13th, 2021. My name is Gregg Ivers, and I am a Professor of Government at American University and Director of the Julian Bond Oral History Project. I am in Washington, D.C., and speaking remotely with former Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed via Zoom from his home in Atlanta, Georgia.

Mayor Reed, thank you so much for taking time from your schedule to talk about the impact of Julian Bond and the Atlanta-based civil rights movement on your life and career.

KR: I'm happy to do it. I believe oral histories are so important and I think that the work that you're doing in this space is important. So to the extent that I can make a contribution, I'm happy to do so.

**PERSONAL AND FAMILY HISTORY**

GI: So why don't we begin by having you tell us about your personal and family history. Where you were born, where you went to school, people within your family and beyond that kind of set you on the path that it did.

KR: Sure, so both of my parents are from South Carolina. My father is from Hartsville, SC. My mother is from a place called Spartanburg outside of Greenville, and they met at Claflin College, a small liberal arts HBCU in South Carolina. My mother got pregnant at Claflin, then my parents got married and went on establishing their lives. I have three older brothers. My oldest brother is Charles Reed. The second oldest is Carlton Reed and the third oldest is my brother Tracy Reed. So my family, they had four boys. And my dad wanted a different community to raise his family and so he set out made the decision, thankfully, for me to set roots in Atlanta.

I was actually born in Plainfield, N.J., but I was born there because my dad was on a business trip. He was working on an extended assignment in Plainfield. My mother went to

visit him and so I was actually born in Plainville, but my entire life has been spent in the city of Atlanta.

I went to public schools here. I went to a small school called Utoy Springs Elementary, which is probably three miles from where I'm sitting today. I went to a high school called Westwood High School. It's now Westlake. And so, Gregg, my entire life has been spent within three miles of where I'm sitting right now. My brother Tracy actually lives in our family home, so the home that I was in all of my life is still in my family.

Before he moved into the house, I lived there. I actually bought the house from my dad. I live in Southwest Atlanta. It's a very historic part of the city. If you have read Tom Wolfe's book, *A Man in Full*, the community that he writes about is the community that I live in, and so basically it has been the seat of the Black political class and business class in the city of Atlanta that made so many of the strides that Atlanta is now known for around the world.

For instance, if you were here and we got in a car together, we could be at the home of former Congressman John Lewis in about six minutes, a Presidential Medal of Freedom [recipient]. We would be at the home of [Rev.] C.T. Vivian before he passed and another Presidential Medal of Freedom winner in about eight minutes. We could get to [former United Nations] Ambassador [Andrew] Young's house in about ten to twelve minutes. Then we could drive about two minutes from Ambassador Young's house, and we would get to Hank Aaron's home, another Presidential Medal of Freedom winner. In going to those places, we would pass by the home of Dr. Joseph Lowery, another Presidential Medal of Freedom winner [and Rev.] Ralph Abernathy and his wonderful wife Juanita.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF THE ATLANTA-BASED CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERSHIP**

The point I'm making is that the bedrock of the civil rights movement in the city of Atlanta has probably been within ten, twelve, fifteen minutes from me my whole life. Julian Bond and his family were about fifteen minutes away from where we sit. I say, all of the time that Atlanta is a very intentional city. And these people were the bedrock of the community that has made Atlanta move from a sleepy southern town to certainly the most dynamic city in the South, the Southeastern region of the United States.

GI: And then if I'm not mistaken, Dr. [Martin Luther] King, I think his last address was on Sunset Ave. Is that correct?

KR: That's correct, and so Doctor King lives three to five houses down from Julian Bond's house. Their last home was on Sunset Ave. I could reach Dr. King's house in about fifteen minutes if you and I were doing Jay Leno's car show . . .

GI: . . . [laughs] well, I don't have Jay Leno's kind of money, so that's not going to happen anytime soon. So just out of curiosity, how far were you from, or how far are you from the Atlanta University Center?

KR: I'm about 15 minutes from the Atlanta University Center.

GI: So there is all that history in that area . . .

KR: Yes, and all the history in Southwest Atlanta, right. That entire corridor of Southwest Atlanta.

GI: I'm so glad that you're able to explain to people who will be watching this just how concentrated all the skill and ambition and drive was. And it had to have, I'm guessing, an impact on your own development as you began to see your own path forward in politics and public service.

KR: Absolutely.

GI: How old were you when you first became aware of who all these people were, whether it was Dr. King, Reverend Abernathy, Q.V. Williamson, Marvin Arrington, Andy Young, C.T. Vivian, I mean the list can go on for more time than we have.

KR: All these were places we would drive by going to one person's house or another. The straight answer to your question is I really started becoming aware of these individuals at about eight, nine, ten years old because you encountered them at your gas stations and in your grocery stores, and you could feel from your own parents that these folks are a very big deal, so it had special impact on me. When my parents got excited to see or meet someone, in a grocery store, for example, it wasn't uncommon to see any of these folks strolling through the grocery store, and they were so kind and so generous in spirit that they would shake your hand and spend one- or two-minutes saying hello as they went on their way.

My father had a friendship with a woman named Dorothy Cotton, who was very close to C.T. Vivian, and so they would come over my home socially when I was nine, ten, eleven, twelve years old and I would hear about their experiences in the civil rights movement very directly over long evenings of spades and other board games.

GI: Yeah, that's certainly a remarkable way to grow up. When people think of Atlanta as the cradle of the civil rights movement, they do refer to all the people that you've talked about. But what's often overlooked is the Atlanta student movement, which was founded by Lonnie King, Julian Bond and Joe Pierce. When did you first become aware of the Atlanta student movement and the contribution it was making and how, as a young person who aspired to a career again in politics and public service, did it influence you?

KR: Yes, well I became aware of it, certainly by eleven. I decided I was going to be mayor of Atlanta when I was thirteen years old. I'll give you a quick story on what happened.

GI: Please do.

KR: Andrew Young gave the Men's Day speech at Ben Hill United Methodist Church, another important church in the Southwest Atlanta community. I remember the morning – I still remember it – I'm fifty-two years old today.

GI: Happy Birthday!

KR: Thank you very much. I remember it like it was yesterday. I mean, my mother got up extra early that day for church. She prepared all four of her boys to the teeth.

And I was just wondering, "Why is she . . . I mean, what is different about this Sunday than every other Sunday?" She was so excited because Ambassador Andrew Young was there, and so that definitely had an impact on me. Once again, you know, your parents, your mom and dad, shape you more powerfully than anything else. I remember going to the Men's Day speech and at that time I was thirteen. I had a really strange, high-top fade. Lots of hair on the top, almost none on the sides and I used to spend a lot of time fixing it.

After the service, Ambassador Young was leaving and came out of the pulpit and my mother was just shaking with excitement to meet him. He patted me on my head, and I remember being frustrated because I had worked so hard to get my high-top fade in good condition.

After that, they used to have these things called, Encyclopedia Britannica. I went home and started reading about Dr. King and saw Ambassador Andrew Young's name. Then I wanted to know everything about him. I learned that he went to Howard University, so I decided I was going to Howard University. I really did try to mirror his path to the greatest extent that I could.

And then, because God works his way into our plans, I became a Trustee at Howard University on their Board of Trustees. At the same time, he's a trustee, and so we spent a year together developing a personal relationship. So I'm nineteen, getting ready to be twenty, graduating soon. I was thinking about taking a job in New York City at the time after Howard. I remember it like it was yesterday. He put his hands on my shoulder and said, "Son, you should come home because Atlanta is gonna need a mayor like you in twenty years. He has been in in my life ever since then.

On the night that I won the mayoral election in 2009, in the suite at the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Atlanta, when they came in to tell me that I had won, Ambassador Young was sitting by my side with tears of happiness rolling down his face. And so I always felt like that's just one example of those only in Atlanta stories. To this day, as recently as last night his son Beau and I worked together at an event.

There is this generational stickiness in our city that I think makes it a unique place in the world. And it was Julian Bond's spirit. It was Ambassador Young's spirit. It was individuals like Mayor Ivan Allen's spirit. It was individuals like the former CEO of Coca Cola [Paul Austin] and their spirits. They used to meet in rooms all over the city of Atlanta and really worked at the issues related to race and rights in a way that I think is unique in the United States of America. The fruits of those relationships show in every way.

When you go to a football game in Atlanta, there's no stadium in the United States that has Black and white people in the proportions that we do for a football game. You go to a

basketball game. There's no basketball arena in the United States of America that looks like our basketball arena. What I think that we have done here is our commitment to what I call the Atlanta Covenant. It has made our city the beacon and the primary source of capital investment, first, from the Northeast and now globally.

The story doesn't get told enough about how we created this tapestry. It did not simply pop into being. There are a lot of people weaving and taking care of it and patching it up and cleaning it. And so that's what I'm trying to convey.

### **JULIAN'S BOND'S ELECTION TO THE GEORGIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES IN 1965 AND THE INFLUENCE ON POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE**

GI: Was the decision of a Julian Bond, of a Ben Brown, of those of that Class of 1965 (when eleven new Black members were elected to the Georgia House of Representatives), was that something that you looked to as something a young person could do to bring about the kind of change that's always been important to you?

KR: The answer is yes. I mean, as you well know, when you can see something and touch it, you're more likely to believe that it is achievable. And Julian Bond was an international star who lived around the corner and whose children I knew in high school. Julian Bond's daughter, Julia, and I were the same year and knew each other in high school. Her brother Michael was older, so the children of these, folks like Kwame Abernathy, all of them were walking around with us, so it really made it more real.

And then something happened in real time that even made it more powerful and that's during the [1992] Rodney King beating [by Los Angeles police], and the violence that followed in cities afterwards, Maynard Jackson focused our mind on the SNCC model because he didn't want the city of Atlanta destroyed because of the Rodney King beatings and so at that time.

I was a part of the panel that he assembled of the new generation of young people and then we were actually counseled by people like Julian Bond who were actively engaged in the civil rights movement. So basically, you had all of that energy and passion that occurs at moments of difficulty. It needed to be counseled so that it didn't become something negative. So so right then at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, you're really in a room with the people that actually changed the course of history, and they are counseling you on how to engage in constructive rather than destructive behavior.

GI: And considering that Rodney King was 1992, and if my math is correct, you were 21 years old at the time.

KR: That's right.

GI: So you're just a few years younger than Julian was when he was elected to the General Assembly.

KR: That's correct. You remember they denied him his seat . . .

GI: Who could ever forget that?

KR: Yes, and then if you fast-forward to 1998, I was the youngest member [at that time] of the Georgia General Assembly elected.

GI: So some interesting parallels there. But you had a lot better luck in actually being seated.

KR: Yes.

GI: But you had a lot better luck in being seated.

KR: Yeah, they did seat me. Yeah, and I learned from Ambassador Young. I mean, I'll give you a quick antidote that reinforces that point. Ambassador Young and I were spending an evening at Barack Obama's White House. He had had an event for one occasion or another and Ambassador Young and I were headed back home. We're in the Delta [Airlines] Crown Room engaged in a discussion about something I thought was really important, and a woman comes up and taps me on the shoulder and asked me to take a picture.

And Gregg, I turned her, focused on Ambassador Young and said, "Ma'm, you know, I'm having a conversation." He put his hand on my forearm and said, "Take the picture. Always take the picture. Martin [Luther King, Jr.] and I dreamed about the day when a person would want to take a photo with us. And this woman happened to be white. So I mean just having that gentle lesson. I never would have processed it that way.

Because of that, I've taken 10,000 pictures. Notw really because but it was that direct instant, calm coaching that I got . . . that changed my behavior for my entire time since, and so every time I'm somewhere and someone wants a photo I think about him saying Martin and dreamed of the day where folks, certainly of other races, would want to take a photo with a Black man.

GI: What it must have felt like when you were the mayor when the Atlanta Student Movement marker was unveiled at the old Yates and Milton Drugstore, and then later when that portion of Fair St. was renamed Atlanta Student Movement Blvd? I mean, that had to be a moment that I could only imagine was surreal.

KR: It's one of the high points of my life. And I was glad to be there, and I was just thrilled to be there and see Michael. Michael Bond actually was the thrust of that effort to finally have those folks recognized. And so as you know, anybody that tries to pursue the blessings of these big jobs, you do it to get stuff done. For all of the time that had passed, and no roses had been given, or at least not appropriate roses had been given by a city, for which their work and sacrifice undergirds the national and international story of who Atlanta is. To be the one that was able to make it so in partnership and with the Atlanta City Council, it's one of those high days in my life the way that you remember your favorite baseball game

If you're a collector and lover of baseball, and I see Hank Aaron over your shoulder and Dale Murphy the way that you feel on those magical days when you see really special

baseball, you amplify that by about ten, and that's how I felt when I was sitting on that stage as we recognized and honored people who do not get as much light as Dr. King and Julian Bond and Ambassador Young and Congressman John Lewis and Rev. Joseph Lowery.

## **THE IMPACT OF JULIAN BOND**

GI: I'd like to wind up with two questions and the first is if you could talk about the impact that Julian Bond had on you personally and professionally.

KR: The impact of Julian Bond was possibility. I think what isn't talked enough about Julian Bond is just his sheer talent. I have been around him on many occasions. You can't be around him without knowing that you won't be around somebody special. And you know that when you're in a room with someone that has that extra quality, that *je se sais quoi*, makes you want to find it within yourself.

You're not copying who that individual is. You don't want to be a copy, but you can't be enhanced, and you can't learn, and you can't want to come up with your own best version, right? I have on a suit and a tie on a Sunday while we're doing this interview because Julian Bond would have had on a suit and a tie while he was doing this interview, and Ambassador Andrew Young would have on a suit and a tie and a jacket while he's doing this interview and Dr. Martin Luther King would have had on a suit and a tie and a jacket because it was so important to put forth a positive image as a Black man.

And to not be bitter about that reality. Not to be upset about that reality but understand what comes with the job. And that's what I learned from Julian Bond – what comes with the job. If you talk to Michael and if you talk to Julia, all of the sacrifices that he and his family made, they knew that all of this came with the job, and that's my biggest Julian Bond lesson – what comes with the job.

When I'm sitting with my daughter, Maria-Kristan at the Pancake House yesterday and it was my birthday, and I was trying to have a pancake breakfast with my daughter. Folks come up to me and she's totally fine. She just asked them to say thank you after the photo. That's her thing. She just says remember to say thank you.

But she doesn't complain. She doesn't get frustrated.

And I think about Julia. I think about Michael because I can't imagine. . . . When I'm with Bo [Young, Andrew Young's son] last night. Bo Young and I were together last night. I know that when Bo was a child, and he was spending time with his dad all of the times when folks came up to Ambassador Young.

When you're in these positions or fortunate enough to be in this position – I was the second youngest mayor in the history of the city. You need to get what comes with the job. And you get what comes with the job by seeing people who did it better than you did. That's the blessing that I have.

## THE FUTURE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

GI: That's certainly a great way to put it, and I'd like to end our conversation this afternoon by asking you, how do you see the future of the modern civil rights movement?

KR: Greater confrontation. When I was advised by Ambassador Young when I had different protests or civic engagement challenges as a mayor, because when you are mayor, you have a different role than a citizen. You can feel in the air that the patience and planning and all of the rest that occurred during the civil rights movement in America is going to be harder to maintain because there is not that patience.

The speed of information is overwhelming and so the risk related to all those interactions are just harder and with more complex demands. They're really, really, tough. And there's an entire generation of people that have zero patience for certain kinds of behavior. That makes all of the dynamics harder, because anytime you can't talk and have a calm conversation, you're in a tougher business. That's the biggest difference that I see right now.

On the excitement side? The excitement side is that I see broader coalition than during the civil rights movement. I see an intensity in our white brothers and our Latino brothers and our Asian brothers and sisters that used to just be Black people.

I was watching a debate last night over an issue and I'll tell you, I mean, we're having a debate about the way that Dominique Wilkins had been treated at Le Bilboquet Restaurant in Buckhead and so a lot of folks. That's what came up and what was so satisfying to me was the intensity of the Indian people, and the white people was as great as the Black people around their offense. I mean, their dial was actually a little more intense than the Black people who were there.

That's a massive shift from where we were when Dr. King and Ambassador Young and Julian Bond were in a constant tug of war with the clergy community to be more engaged and dynamic and more outspoken.

So, what gives me so much hope? I believe that post 5/25 George Floyd's death, well, that gives me so much hope is there's this shared feeling that these issues have to change faster because we spent so many years and folks missed their whole lives, right? Not having a fair shot in or their fair share

Anybody that's watching this needs to understand whether you are a white leader or a black leader or an Asian leader or an Indian leader, that the time frame you have to deal with challenge is much shorter. If you want to have integrity on the issue, you better be able to point to what you were doing when no one was looking. And that's where I think we are today.

GI: Mayor Kasim Reed, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

KR: Your welcome. Thank you.