

The University of Texas at Arlington

Significant African American Public Figures of Texas

POLITICS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Interviewee: DIONNE BAGSBY, Tarrant
County Commissioner, Precinct One

Interviewers: Pamela K. Bass, Michelle Astacio,
Latasha McCrary

Transcriber: Pamela K. Bass

Faculty Supervisor: Jose Angel Gutierrez, Ph.D, J.D.

Date of Interview: September 26, 2002

Location: Arlington, Texas

Page Length: 26

Commissioner Dionne Bagsby

Dr. Gutierrez: We are now recording this is the 26th September 2002. We are at The University of Texas at University Hall building in basement Room 6, 14 and we're interviewing County Commissioner Dionne Bagsby plus part of the African American Archive on Significant Public Figures. And your we've gone over the Deed Of Gift form which you've signed.

Comm. Bagsby: Yes.

Dr. Gutierrez: Voluntarily.

Comm. Bagsby: Yes.

Dr. Gutierrez: And we've introduced you to the student panel that'll be asking your questions, and we've invited you to augment your archive with any other paper documents and we'll have an archive on you and you'll be the first of this collection that will exist at our University, and we thank you in advance for coming.

Comm. Bagsby: Thank you.

Dr. Gutierrez: Commissioner.

Miss Astacio: Good morning Commissioner Bagsby. It's a pleasure to have you here with us this morning. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come. We have three parts we'd like to cover today: Your biography, your political career, and how you feel about issues and your opinions. First of all, who is Dionne Bagsby?

Comm. Bagsby: Well, Dionne Bagsby is a complex entity that's traveled over a great spectrum to get where she is. I was originally, I was born in the Midwest in Illinois. I was educated in the Midwest. I went to the very prestigious Thornton Township High School which is located in the suburb of Chicago. We were considered commuter kids, because although we lived in the suburbs, your life was in the great magnificent city of Chicago. It's in that city that I took

piano lessons, and my cousins took art lessons, and we lived among the great architecture of a great urban area as well as having the opportunity to exist in an area that was very, very culturally diverse. So I grew up in a very non-segregated society. I grew up with many different ethnic groups. Many different religious groups were a part of my friends and friendships. I grew up in a fairly affluent black family. My parents owned a lovely home. I lived in a lovely place, and was quite sheltered growing up. I experienced the good things of life. I went off to college in the middle part of Illinois. I went to a school Illinois Wesleyan for my undergraduate work. I began toward the end of my baccalaureate education to think, "you know, my world's not real. There are issues and problems out there that I've not experienced, or that I don't know about that I need to know about.

And so, I never will forget, I went down to the Chicago Board of Education and I said, "I'd like a job teaching, but I want it to be in a ghetto school", and the lady looked at me and said, "If you can pass the psychological, you have your choice of places, (laugh) to work. And I did, I went to work in a, well everybody there was on some type of government assistance, in an area called Altgel Gardens (Illinois). Very interesting and very broadening for me, who had come from a very protected environment and you know, I, I didn't understand why we had police at the door. Well, quickly, I found out we needed our police at the door. Quickly I found out that it wasn't as easy to survive in that environment as I may have thought at that time. I'm not gonna tell you exactly how old I am, but I'm old. (Class laughs). I then met someone who came from, we were like night and day. He was from Texarkana, Texas, he was very very radical. He was very different than anybody I had ever met before. And upon our first meeting, he said to me, "Don't fall in love with me." And you that are African

Americans will understand this, "Because you're a little too dark for me." And I said to him, "You can be assured if I'm all that stands between you and your confirmed bachelorhood, you will always be a bachelor." (Class laughs). That took place in July. For some strange reason I went out with him in September, and in January, I married him. (Class laughs). So, I tell you that story because often opposites who are not attracted to each other initially, end up together.

Dr. Gutierrez: So, is Bagby (Bagsby) the married name?

Comm.. Bagsby: Yes.

Dr. Gutierrez: What's your maiden name and who are your parents? Comm.

Bagsby: Phillips. My parents were Ann (Ann Wicks) and Paul Phillips.

Miss Astacio: And they're, where do they come from?

Comm. Bagsby: My mother's family they both came from Illinois, but my mother's family came out of Tennessee, the Memphis area and my father's family originated out of Georgia, Decatur, in that area.

Miss Astacio: What can you tell us about your own family? Do you have children..?

Comm. Bagsby: I have two adult children. And I have two grandchildren...who are beautiful, and talented and brilliant. (Class laughs).

Dr. Gutierrez: Can we, names of the children?

Comm. Bagsby: Yes.

Dr. Gutierrez: And the husband?

Comm. Bagsby: Yes, my husband's name was, he's deceased, his name was James Bagsby. My children are Dionne Bagsby Jones, and my grandchildren are Kirby Jones and and Kelly Jones, but they are both girls. And my son-in-law's name is Kirby Jones, also. (laugh).

Dr. Gutierrez: And your son's name?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, and my son! Yes, my my son, my unique, wonderful son is James Tipkins Bagsby. Who is not married and has not brought me any grandchildren. (Class laughs).

Miss Astacio: Moving on to your political career, you are presently Tarrant County Commissioner for Precinct 1, and we have read your biographical sketch and see that you have been and are presently involved in many organizations before being Commissioner, and you have won many awards. But, how did this all begin?

Comm. Bagsby: Well, it all began kind of by marrying that strange person I was just alluding to. My family was not very political, my parents voted regularly. But, we didn't talk politics and we weren't activists in any way. I married someone who leads lived and breathed those kinds of things. Was extremely interested. Loved to read American History as well as anything else historical. was very, very active. And as I was telling you, we came from such different backgrounds. He had "gone" to segregated schools. As a matter of fact, he walked "past" the high school that he should have been able to go to, to go to a high school that was several miles away, in Texarkana. So, he was really, enthused and infused with a "passion" for politics and for a change in this nation and dedicated himself to that. He was quite a charismatic person. Everybody knew him, and everybody liked him, and he was always being elected chairman of something. (Class laughs). And then he'd come home and he'd say, "O.K., I'm chairing A, B, C, D and I need "you" to get such and such a thing done." So, quickly we became a team, he was the big pitcher gregarious person that would make things happen, and I became the technician. The person who put together those little details so that you could have a march. We moved from Chicago, from everything that was near and dear to me, and that I understood...in the '60's, where anybody that looked like us was moving where I was from, we moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. We became co-chairmen of the Civil Rights Movement during

that period. We lived in Pine Bluff. He worked all over the state and really all over the country. We were very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement. We were a part of the marches, we a part of the sit-ins in Pine Bluff, etc. We were a part of of just many many interesting and dynamic things. And it is (clears throat) that relationship and my life living there, that taught me a broader view of our nation and our country and of those issues that were going on then. And gave me some perspective and some commitment but, about politics. But my personal involvement was to do things in my neighborhood or within my own social circle, etc. But Jim was quite a visionary and quite dynamic and he lived and breathed it. And our children as they grew up and went off to school and you know people would say well "my folks weren't very political at all" and they said "we grew up in somebody's campaign (laugh) on the floor of somebody's campaign", or there was always somebody political. And our children, I regret that I did not keep a guest book. Because many of the names that you've read about or have heard about all came through our house, and it was just, you know, take it for granted. I'll tell you one quick story. My daughter was in the third grade and all of you have heard of Barbara Jordan, I'm sure. Barbara Jordan and my husband were classmates at Texas Southern. So, Barbara was a good friend and came to visit us and. So, Dionne knew Barbara Jordan as this big lady that was her Daddy's friend that whenever she came, she'd come and stay at our house, and she would read her stories. And so you could imagine at being seven or eight years old and you'd go to bed that night and Auntie Barbara comes in and reads you bedtime stories. And I never will forget, Dionne came home one morning we took dropped her off at school and the teachers knew that Barbara was a friend and had been there and would that she read to Dionne. And

so Dionne came home that evening and she said, "Mother, is Auntie Barbara famous?" And I said, "I think so, Dionne. (class laughs). I think you could consider her famous." But, many, many people from that era spent time in our home and it's unfortunate that I didn't keep a guest book. Because it would be a living history of that period.

Miss Astacio: O.K. And when did your own political career begin, and when were you first elected County Commissioner?

Comm. Babsby: Well, I guess when I was elected County Commissioner, my political career began. I had always worked on campaigns, as I told you before. My part of politics was to be engaged with someone I thought would be a good public servant. And then to help that person be elected and then to come back to my own little cocoon. I was quite successful and quite good at that. I to the point that I was then sought out to help run statewide campaigns. And had the opportunity to work on at least three national campaigns. But, never had any desire to be an elected person myself ever. Just not who I was. I was a teacher, I was a mother, I was a neighborhood activist, I was an advocate for children, I was an advocate for a better ac a more accessible and better health care for people who didn't have access to it. But I was not someone who wanted to be an elected official. It came about because of the then sitting Commissioners Court attempted to fire a woman who was head of a department. And in their attempt to fire her, some of the then all male Commissioners made very inappropriate statements. They talked about her bust size. They talked about the fact that she was just angry because they wouldn't be involved with her in a personal way. They made some really stupid statements. But of course were reported in the newspapers. And women throughout Tarrant County, and probably further, were incensed as they said, "it's time to change, it's time not to let

people who think that way about women or speak that way about women...represent us.

Dr. Gutierrez: When was this?

Comm. Bagsby: This was back in 1987, 87.

Dr. Gutierrez: If it's in the press, who was this person?

Comm. Bagsby: Well, it was a number of people. None of them are on the Commissioner's Court. My, my predecessor, Dick Anderson was one of them. O. L. Watson who represented Arlington was one of them. Probably all of them were fairly guilty. So women from all over Tarrant County began to gather and meet and say we need to run somebody. It happened that that particular year, the Precinct One Commissioner was up for reelection. At some of these meetings, I said, "Let's find a good candidate, and I'll run the campaign gratis. As I had run most campaigns gratis. But I'd gotten to be pretty big time now. I'd worked on a couple of national campaigns where I'd gotten paid (laugh), and so (laugh) They said, "Well, oh, she'll do it gratis, we'll be excited about that.

Miss Astacio: Which campaign nationally did you work on?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh I worked on the Jimmy Jimmy Carter campaign. I worked on Jim Wright's campaigns. I worked on, well, of course we worked on some Congressional campaigns. Number of campaigns. A man that later became State Senator from Arkansas, we went and helped on his campaign.

Dr. Gutierrez: David Pryor?

Comm. Bagsby: Yes. And so I, women began to look and we got a couple of people at over at TCU (Texas Christian University) I believe to do some polling. And they dropped a lot of names in the hat of women who were activists and who had name ID to see who would be a good candidate. My husband had served on the City Council for ten years. I had been fairly active. I worked in the public school district. I'd done teacher

training throughout the state, so a lot of people knew me. I got a telephone call and they said, "Well, we don't want you to run the campaign. The candidate will not let you run the campaign." I couldn't imagine a woman who wouldn't want me on her campaign team. I mean I had built an impressive record. And I said, "Fine, but I sure would like to know why." And they said, "Because you're gonna be the candidate." (Class laughs). And I said, "Thank you so much, but no thank you, I don't like politics, or politicians well enough to be a candidate." (Class continues to snicker). And I, I, I stuck to that. I mean I really had no intentions of running, and I kept suggesting people that I felt like we could build a good campaign around and be successful. And, finally someone got to three young people all of whom are attorneys and said, "We can't get her to commit, but she won't turn you down." And so they show up at my office, and they said, "Your part of the reason that we're activists." Because I was all, I, I don't do real well with the old people, I was always hanging with the young folks. (Class laughs). So I always had recruited, as we were working on campaigns, young people. Because I, first of all, I wanted them to understand how the process worked. And secondly, I believe passionately that young people bring a freshness and a clearness that many of us that are "mature" are kind of cynical and jaded about. So, I always wanted them involved and around. And, and these three young people are all activists and very involved and. And so they showed up it was the last filing day less than an hour and they said "We want you to do this." Well anybody, if any of you ever become teachers, you will understand that a teacher can never turn down her surrogate children. I mean, that's just not who we are. And I looked at them and I said, "I don't even know what you need to do and it's almost five o'clock." They said, "We know what to do." They're all

attorneys as a matter-of-fact. One went down and paid the money. The one went with me to fill out the papers and the other one had already spotted a place that was gonna be the campaign headquarters. She wanted to take care of it. It was two two young men and a young woman.

Dr. Gutierrez: Can we get names?

Comm. Bagsby: Yes, one of them is a graduate of this institution, her name is Pamela Dunlop Gates. The other one was Jessie Gaines. The other one was (thinking)... Help me Roy (looking to her assistant Roy C. Brooks in the audience). Oh, why can't I think of his name? (Class laughs). He had to take the Bar seven times. (Class laughs). Leon Hailey. (Claps her hands together). I'm sorry, but that's, you've got to cut that out. Erase that part. But that's all, I couldn't think of Leon's name. But it was Leon Hailey, Pamela Dunlop Gates, she was just Pamela Dunlop then, (laugh) and Jessie Gaines. Those were the three.

Miss Astacio: And where is District One? And is it a predominately African American community? And if not, what is the majority ethnic makeup?

Comm. Bagsby: The majority ethnic makeup is Anglo. It is... there is no predominately African American precinct in Tarrant County.

Miss Astacio: And where is District One?

Comm. Bagsby: It covers six cities, Ft. Worth being the largest, Benbrook, Crowley, Everman, Forest Hills, Forest Park, Forest Hills, and Edgecliff Village. And if you, most of Ft. Worth is in Precinct One. And then if you think of terms of Tarrant County, the Southwest sector. The South and Southwest sector of Tarrant County is Precinct One.

Miss Astacio: How much money did you raise for your campaign and how much did you spend total?

Comm. Bagsby:

The first campaign? Thirty thousand dollars. Thirty thousand dollars. And let me tell you, we hustled so hard, we we had, my father was living at the time and he was in his eighties, and so he had all these senior groups that he was involved with and they came and worked on the campaign. And then we had lots of young people involved, and so we had babies, and we had strollers, and we had playpens, and so it was really interesting. And then we had all these people who had never been involved in politics at all because, and they should have been, but they weren't, but I went and pulled school teachers who had never been involved, and worked on, so it was a real interesting diverse group of people. Seniors, kids, and then we had lots of college students that got involved. I would come out here, and recruited people to help us, I went to TCC (Tarrant County College), now, it was TCJC (Tarrant County Junior College) then. Wherever I could find a group of young people, I would say, "Come help." And, because we knew we couldn't raise any money. I, the man that I was running against had been a County Commissioner for twenty years, so everybody you went to they said, "If you win, we'll give you money." (Class laughs). "We can't give you money up front because, you know, if you don't win, you'll be angry with us." We were very fortunate to raise that amount of money and it started a movement of sorts that said to women, "You have your own money. You don't have to ask permission to give your own money to a candidate." And most women at that time, they didn't write the check for a political campaign, the husband did. Or they at least consulted him. And so we said to women, every place I went, and I went everywhere, every place I went I said, "Do you really feel like I am a viable candidate?" And they'd say, "Yes." "Do you really believe in me enough to work and help me?" And they'd say, "Yes." And then

I'd say, "Give me a dollar." (Class laughs). Because let me tell you, anybody that gives you a dollar is investing in you, and they'll go vote. And if you don't ask, you won't get it. And if they don't give it, they don't feel invested in you, and they're less likely to go vote.

Miss Astacio: How many volunteers did you have on...

Comm. Bagsby: On the first campaign, hundreds. Anybody we could find. We'd go out, we'd gather, we'd get people who were homeless and say, "Look, come on, we've got food down at the campaign, but you've gotta stuff envelopes. (Class chuckles). And that was fine, you know, anybody that was standing around that we could drag in, we'd bring them in. Because we didn't have any money, so we had to do everything by hand. Somebody did help me buy some signs. But we had to build them, and we had to write the letters, and we had to stuff the letters, and seal them and. And I think about my last campaign which probably cost a hundred thousand or more dollars which was all very, we didn't, I mean we did nothing. I would go and sit down with the political consultant and he would show me mockups of things for signs or letters, I would O.K. them, or not. And then, it would go to a mail house or it went to a company that put the signs up. A very different day in 2002, or let's see I ran last year in 2000, than it was in 1988, when I ran the first time.

Unidentified: Do you think that the evolution from that volunteer base campaign to what it was last time, has that removed you from the people any? I mean, are you as connected as you were?

Comm. Bagsby: It has not removed me from the people, what it has done, is it has, it takes away the energy and the thrill of the work of doing it. But I'm a little older, now. I don't know, I mean that first time, we walked neighborhoods every evening, Saturday and Sunday afternoons. I don't know if I could do all that now. And of

course, with the technology, this time I could sit at my computer and email people back and forth and they could email me. I'm a known quantity, now. But, there's the thrill of being the unknown quantity is something that's not, you can never replace that. And, it's so needed in politics today, and that's why I'd like to see more young people run. I'd like to see them do truly grassroots campaigns. And, and I'm not knocking technology, I think it's great to put up a web site and have the technology to communicate with people that you never would communicate with. There's nothing like walking and knocking on doors, talking with people. There's nothing like seeing a bunch of folks standing in a park and you walk up and say, "Hi, I'm Dionne Bagsby, I'm running for County Commissioner, are you registered? If your not, here, fill this out. Can I pick you up and take you to be registered? Will you be here on Election Day? Can I pick you up and take you to vote?" I mean, there's nothing that can replace it, and that's what it's all about, and that's the way it ought to be.

Miss Astacio: Being that you were the first woman and minority to be elected to The Tarrant County Commissioners Court, what obstacles did you face as a candidate that the next woman or minority might not have to face?

Comm. Bagsby: I was black, I was female, I was moving into a an arena of government that had never had a minority or a woman and they really didn't think I could do the job. I constantly was asked, "What do you know about building roads?" My answer was, "Absolutely nothing." (Class laughs). Because that was the truth, I didn't know anything about building roads. I know a whole lot about building roads now. But I didn't know it. But my answer was also, "But I know how to manage people, and I know how to hire good people, and I know how to bring the

kinds of people that I need to build roads into my organization (unintelligible).

Miss Astacio: And how do you feel that African American women are doing in relation to African American men in holding public office in the DFW (Dallas/Ft. Worth) area?

Comm. Bagsby: Well, in the DFW area, we've been fairly successful. I don't see conflict in anyway, I mean we've had from Commissioners to District Court Judges that were African American and female. Unfortunately, I think that people still tend to vote for people who look like them. I, of course, had to appeal to a wider sector, because had I not, I could not have won. It was a little easier for me to do that because of my background, because I had worked in the schools, and because people knew me, and because I knew every PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) President in the world, and I knew parents, and I had worked with children who had disabilities, so I knew that whole arena of families, and. So, I was able to bring some people to help me that didn't know me. And since then, because I've done a good job, I've been able to stay.

Miss Astacio: And since you have been County Commissioner, what has been your biggest accomplishment, and what are you most proud of?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, I don't know, I there are just any number of things. I think the fact, that once I became a Commissioner, although people still don't know a whole lot about county government, they know a whole lot more than they did before I was a Commissioner. Commissioner Court sessions are now on Cable Television. Anybody can call up. One of the first things I did being an old school teacher is I had a book written, it's called County Government A – Z. Tells you exactly what county government does in Tarrant County and how it's structured, and if you have questions who to call and how to get the answers.

That's available. I think the fact I brought to county government some dignity, a different way of doing business, being more accessible to the people. All of that's very, very important to me. I always, I tell my colleagues, I'm a conscience of Commissioner's Court. I also approached it differently. Because I was, I'm not a career politician, I had no desire, although I've been offered many, many times, "Well are you gonna run for the State Legislature?" No, I'm not gonna run for the State Legislature, and I don't want to be a Senator, and I don't want to run for Congress, I don't want to do any of that. I'm very, very interested in local government and it being accessible to the people that it serves. The other thing that I am most proud of, I guess, would be health care is something that I have great passion about. I believe that it ought to be accessible to all people and that we have the ability to have the best health care system in the world. Our public hospital now has 16 outlying venues to serve the people. I am particularly proud of our Public Health Department which I'm often called the mentor for, or the protectorate for. We just received a multi-billion dollar grant for bio-terrorism, and so that's that's something I'm very, very proud of. And I'm proud of the fact that our Commissioner's Court is anybody's welcome to come, anybody's welcome to be a part of the dialogue. We treat people with great deference and respect when they come before us. That wasn't always true, before. It was considered as a backroom body of good 'ole boys doing strange things, and that's not true any longer.

Miss Astacio: And have you had opponents in the past, and if yes, who are some of the notable opponents you have encountered?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, yes, I've had opponents, although people accused me of recruiting them. (Class laughs). That's not true.

Dr. Gutierrez: Good fundraising.

- Comm.Bagsby: That's why they said I go out and recruit them. I've had (asks her assistant, Roy Brooks), Who have been my opponents?
- Mr. Brooks: You've had Woody Woods.
- Comm. Bagsby: Oh, yes, Woody Woods said he never would have run if he had known I had beat Dick Anderson. It was very interesting, once I won the Primary, Woody who was running on the Republican side and I was running on the Democratic side, would stand at the door of events and introduce me to people and say, "Oh, she's really good", you know, and I'd say, "Woody, we're supposed to be opponents here." (Class laughs).
- Mr. Brooks: Carlos Fuentes.
- Comm. Bagsby: Carlos Fuentes is my.
- Mr. Brooks: Twice.
- Comm. Bagsby: Is my always opponent. (Class laughs).
- Dr. Gutierrez: Is he the one who beat Luis Zapata in the City Council?
- Comm. Bagsby: Yes. He served on the City Council. He served on the School Board. He never finishes anything. (Class laughs). And he, bless his heart, he's a nice man, he really is, a very nice man. But, and he has a lovely family, and he runs against me every time I run, and I beat him every time. (Class laughs). So, it was very interesting, I'll tell you a story. We were at an event together, and I'd worked in public schools, and many years ago, I had all the north side schools, so I know a lot of Hispanics for the North side. I have a surrogate daughter that's Hispanic. So I go there and those are my people. Not because I'm a County Commissioner, but because they know me from years ago. And so, one of the women, who she has a birthday party every year, and so people Mexican American people kept coming by saying we'll see you at the party and I said "Yeah. I always come to the party." Well my opponent heard this, and so "where is the party?" And he thought it

was a political thing so he showed up and, you know, and it was all of them and me, and he showed up and start passing out political stuff and I finally said, "Don't do that, this is not a political rally." You know, but he just couldn't believe that I knew all these people that looked like him. None of them knew him. And they didn't vote for him anyway. (Class laughs).

Miss Astacio: What is next for Dionne Bagsby? Are you gonna to run again, are you gonna to retire?

Comm. Bagsby: Am I going to run again, am I gonna retire. I don't know, I, I really don't know. I have two years left on this term, and probably six months I'll make a decision whether I'm gonna run again. I seriously thought about not running again, but I have not made that decision, yet.

Miss Astacio: Moving on to the next section, what do you feel is leadership?

Comm. Bagsby: Well I think leadership is, part of it is having some charisma to get people to come along with you. But I think leadership is also the ability to listen and to learn and then to collate all of that to a point that you can articulate it and build policies that make sense in our good for whatever constituency you are working with or for. I think leadership is being open, I think it's about being able to engender trust from people. I think it is about not thinking that you have all the answers, but having the ability, I surround myself, I have a strong staff, because you have to be smart to work for me. You have to be strong enough to argue with me. You have to be opinionated, and I think people who are not comfortable with that often are not good leaders. If a person gets in a leadership position and wants to only hear validation of what they think, that is really frightening for me, personally.

Miss Astacio: Who do you believe is the most effective African American politician today on a local and national level?

- Comm. Bagsby: I don't know. (Laugh). I I think Colin Powell is is someone who I admire, I. My immediate thought was not of somebody who was elected, necessarily. I immediately thought of Colin. And then I thought Mfume (Kweisi Mfume), who was a Congressman, and he now has NAACP (National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People). And I think he's quite a skilled person. I admire him and his the way he handles himself as well as the leadership that he has brought forth for that organization.
- Miss Astacio: O.K. And what organization, African American organization do you feel is the most effective in the also at the local and national level?
- Comm. Bagsby: Oh, I, well I think the NAACP is.
- Miss Astacio: What do you, what do you believe the most pressing or challenging issues facing African Americans today is and why?
- Comm. Bagsby: I think the most pressing and challenging thing is apathy. And, and it's, it's a problem throughout our nation. But it is particularly dangerous for African Americans and other ethnic groups to decide, "my vote, my thought doesn't matter, so I'm not going to participate."
- Miss McCrary: Where do you think that comes from? The apathy.
- Comm. Bagsby: Oh, I think there's been a disconnect with government. That I think it comes from having career politicians. I I personally believe that our form of government democracy was set up so that people should become very skilled in some area, build a career, and then at some point, be able to give back and serve. I don't believe in term limits, or two or four years, because you can't get anything done in that length of time. But I think that it is very dangerous that we now have people in middle school who are setting their course to become a Congressperson, and that Congressperson then, wants to stay in office (unintelligible). I just think that there ought to be some limitations that. And I think before anybody's elected

to anything, that they ought to demonstrate that they have some skills in some other areas and that they should have an impressive public service background. You know, "Where did you volunteer, what did you do, you need to do something beside ask me to elect you, and then ask me to reelect you for thirty, forty years." I think a part of what's wrong with our nation is we've become too politicized, we have too many career politicians. Democracy works best when you have at least two prevailing parties and that they're fairly balanced. I think it was, I couldn't believe when I moved to Texas that everybody was a Democrat. I thought that was the weirdest, craziest thing I'd ever heard of. And now, and Texas doesn't get it, and I love Texas, 'cause, you know, I choose to stay here. But now, we're all gonna become Republicans, and that's just as crazy as when everybody was Democrats. You need to have the friction of having almost two equal entities so that people will be forced to listen to each other and to compromise and to come up with good policy that the majority of the people expressed they like to have.

Miss Astacio: What do you believe are the underpinnings of the tension between African Americans and Hispanics today?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, I think it's, it's I think whenever you can find it, it's economics. It's desire for a bigger piece of the American pie, so to speak. I don't think there's been any great movement to tell those two groups of people to come together. I think, there's always been, "We'll take this segment, and you take this segment." And that both African Americans and Hispanics believe that their fortunes lie by the kinds of connections they make with the Anglo communities. I think that's unfortunate, it's divisive, and it's certainly something that I hope in the future there's going to be. There are some conversations going on here in Tarrant County,

now, between African Americans and Hispanics that I hope will lead toward a less tense kind of situation.

Miss Astacio: Since 9/11 (9-11-01), do you believe that Arab Americans have become the mainstream target of racism as opposed to African Americans? And how has this affected the African American community?

Comm. Bagsby: Well, I think the African American community. I've heard it from so many young African American males, who've said, "what's, what's the big deal, we've been being stopped (laugh) ever since we started driving. Or, whenever we show up somewhere." You know, so, they really don't understand the outrage that some of the Arab, Arabs have had about the... looked at differently because African American males have always had to deal with those kinds of issues. And, I think their attitude has been, "Well, it's kind of nice that somebody else now has to deal with this kind of an issue." I think it's unfortunate. It's certainly understandable. It's not a fairness issue. We know it's not fair. It's never been fair for African American males to have been categorized as they have been, but that's just the reality of a society in which racial prejudice is very prevalent.

Miss Astacio: O.K. What community organizations are you involved in, and are you involved in any civil rights organizations?

Comm. Bagsby: I'm a life, life member of the NAACP. And I'm involved in more community organizations than you have time to listen to. I can't give you a list (unintelligible). I serve on many, many boards, and many commissions. I guess the ones I am most active with are those that have to do with fair treatment of people. I've been on the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency) Advisory Board for a number of years, involved with a number of health care groups. And my one of my personal passions is the Arts. So, you'll always

see my name connected with some Arts group. I just went on the Van Cliburn Board this very week, Monday. I was elected.

Miss Astacio: Are any of your community involvements tied to a political agenda?

Comm. Bagsby: No. Very simply. I've. The unique thing about me is because I'm not interested in climbing any political ladder. I've never had to do what was politically correct. I've never had to feel, I never weigh, "Oh, is this going to make people mad at me, and not support me?" Or, I just don't think that way. Roy does that for me. (Class laughs). You know he often has palpitations. (Class laughs). That's not me, that's not who I am. I never thought about being an elected person. It happened. I've enjoyed it. It's been life-changing. It's been exciting. But I had a career before. I've each year offered a job to do other things. When I decide to leave this, there will be other opportunities out there for me. So, I don't ever do anything that's politically correct, and, I've, wouldn't be me if I did.

Miss Astacio: Do you agree with Jesse Jackson (Rev. Jesse Jackson) that democracy began in the United States with the Voting Rights Act? (1965)

Comm. Bagsby: I think it was an extremely important Act and I think it took democracy closer to what it ideologically should be. I, I, I don't know that I can say that it was the beginning of democracy. I think the beginning of democracy was the thought. It was the actual construction, of something very unique that the founding fathers put together. But the actual practicing of it has taken a good many additions to that to the original thought.

Miss Astacio: What position do you take on Affirmative Action, and do you believe it's beneficial?

Comm. Bagsby: I, I support Affirmative Action. And if anybody would ever just go read what it says, I can't understand why anybody would be

against it. It only says, "Give everybody a fair share, give everybody an opportunity." And you have to understand the number of years that everybody wasn't given a fair shake, wasn't given an opportunity. And it's not about quotas, it's not about giving people opportunities that aren't qualified. It's none of that. It is simply saying that in this country, for a number of years, for hundreds of years, we denied access to any number of institutions and opportunities to people who look like me.

- Dr. Gutierrez: May I ask a few clean-up questions while ya'll gather your last notes? When did you graduate from college?
- Comm. Bagsby: Oh, you really are tough. 19...my undergraduate?
- Dr. Gutierrez: Yes.
- Comm. Bagsby: 1958.
- Dr. Gutierrez: When did you first come to Texas?
- Comm. Bagsby: 1968.
- Dr. Gutierrez: What were the years that you and your husband spent at Texas Southern University?
- Comm. Bagsby: I was not, I never went to Texas Southern. He went, he went to Texas Southern.
- Dr. Gutierrez: Were you involved with the Lee Otis Johnson case in Houston?
- Comm. Bagsby: No.
- Dr. Gutierrez: Did you know Curtis Graves?
- Comm. Bagsby: Yes.
- Dr. Gutierrez: Would you tell the class how you knew him and who he was?
- Comm. Bagsby: Well, I didn't know him well. But Jim knew him, and I met him at some event, and I really can't tell you a whole lot.
- Dr. Gutierrez: He was the first African American State Representative in Texas after the Voting Rights Act came to Texas.
- Comm. Bagsby: Right, right.
- Dr. Gutierrez: What is the staffing for a County Commissioner precinct and what's the budget? For a precinct.

- Comm. Bagsby: For a precinct. My precinct, we have of the as far as, the, what we call the
- Mr. Brooks: Administrative staff.
- Comm. Bagsby: Administrative staff, there are five people on the Administrative staff. Then there are another about forty-five people that work on the precinct garage level.
- Dr. Gutierrez: What is the term for County Commissioners to vest? How many years?
- Comm. Bagsby: Eight. In Tarrant County. Now it's different in different counties.
- Dr. Gutierrez: What is your salary as a County Commissioner?
- Comm. Bagsby: What is my salary? (Class laughs; she looks at Mr. Brooks). About a hundred thousand dollars, I think.
- Dr. Gutierrez: What's the employment pattern in Tarrant County for Hispanics, Whites, and African Americans?
- Comm. Bagsby: It's not as good as it should be. It's much better since I've been where I am. There are about four thousand people who work for Tarrant County. And of that four thousand, I would think, about twenty-five percent of them are minorities?
- Dr. Gutierrez: That include women?
- Comm. Bagsby: No, it does not include women.
- Dr. Gutierrez: O.K. These are people of color.
- Comm. Bagsby: These are people of color.
- Dr. Gutierrez: And is that broken down any further between Hispanics and African Americans?
- Comm. Bagsby: It is, I don't have that number in my head, but it's easy to get, and so if anybody's interested, I can get that for you quickly.
- Dr. Gutierrez: Do we have any last questions?
- Miss. McCrary: As far as opinions go, we wanted to know how you feel about the issue of reparations? (Class laughs).
- Comm. Bagsby: I think it's an impossible thing to execute to hap, for it to happen. I think it should have happened at the end of slavery, it should

have happened. I, at this point, I don't see how you ever could make it happen. I would much rather see some type of foundation set up so that no descendent of anybody that was ever a slave that wanted to go to any kind of training school, or university, or whatever, could do so. That money would not be an issue. I, I would like to see dollars put some place that any talented, creative person who was a descendant of a slave would have access to those kinds of dollars that would give them an opportunity to be trained or whatever. But, how you're gonna give me forty acres and a mule today, I don't know. I just don't think it's something that's workable.

Miss Astacio: O.K. How was it that your family was wealthy?

Comm. Bagsby: I never said my family was wealthy. I said I came from a fairly comfortable family. We were not wealthy in a sense of great wealth. How, how was anybody? My father was a master machinist. My mother worked for a large industrial company. And was the first African American to work for that company. In later years, he moved into the management ranks. My mother was a nurse, but once she married, became a housewife which was fairly traditional at that time. And, my grandparents, my grandfather, my paternal grandfather had owned a company that was a painting company, came from a family of people who worked hard and saved their money, took care of their families. We owned our own homes, we always had a car, we went on a vacation every year, but we certainly weren't wealthy, very comfortable.

Unidentified: Are you grooming anyone to take over your position when you do decide to ...

Comm. Bagsby: Yes, I took five people under my wing when I was elected. And any of those people can step into my shoes and they'll do a very good job. And they were all bright and intelligent to begin with. I think what I tried to do more than anything with them is to let them

understand the pitfalls, to understand how very important it is for you not to take the deals that are brought to you, and they are brought to you. I've worked on them having great integrity and strength to do this job.

Unidentified: Who were the five?

Comm. Bagsby: Who were the five? Well, gentleman sitting there's (points to Mr. Brooks sitting in class) one of them.

Dr. Gutierrez: You never introduced him now on tape.

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, O.K., Roy Brooks who is my precinct administrator, is one of them.

Unidentified: The other four?

Comm. Bagsby: The other four have all kind of moved away. Who. Pamela Dunlop Gates is certainly one of them. She now lives in Dallas County which you know, I keep hoping she's gonna move back. Jessie Gaines who who is an attorney in Ft. Worth and continues to be someone I rely heavily on as far as advice is concerned, is the other one. Another one. And the other two are out of the state.

Dr. Gutierrez: Could we have one more question back here?

Unidentified: I'm sorry, what is the role of the County Commissioner? What do you, what does your job entail?

Comm. Bagsby: O.K. That's a good question. Probably more than anything, we are financial managers. We interface with about forty-two different agencies, we appoint their boards and/or oversee their budgets. Our responsibility is, you understand, county government is not a legislative body of government. We are actually a branch of the legislature. We're an implementing body of government. Let me give you a very simplistic example. You have to have a license for your car, don't you?

Unidentified: Yes.

Comm. Bagsby: But you don't go to Austin to get that license. You find one of the venues here in Tarrant County to get your license. It's part of my

job to make sure those venues are in place and that that whole system works. We have to provide for the criminal justice system, the, and most departments in county government are headed by other elected officials, but the judiciary responsibilities come back to Commissioner's Court. So probably more than anything is that we manage your tax dollars.

Unidentified: One last question, what are the requirements if anyone wants to be a County Commissioner?

Comm. Bagsby: You have to be a citizen, you cannot have be a felon.

Mr. Brooks: You have to be a registered voter and...

Comm. Bagsby: You have to be a registered voter.

Mr. Brooks: You have to live in the county for six months.

Unidentified: Commissioner, do you agree with adverts from the gay rights movement to equate their agenda with the civil rights movement?

Comm. Bagsby: No, I do not. And I have spoke to them on any number of occasions and I have told them why.

Unidentified: What do you think the differences are?

Comm. Bagsby: Oh, well, African Americans are the most theistic people in this country. There's just no way that you're going to ever holistically get African Americans to embrace the whole idea that the plights are the same. African Americans certainly are probably more accepting and certainly understand some of the issues that they bring forward, but many of us, you know, we're just very theistic, and very tied to the language of the Bible. So, that's where the separation comes. And it's not likely to ever change.

Miss Astacio: Commissioner Bagsby, thank you for the interview and your time, and on behalf of the African American Politics class at UTA (University of Texas at Arlington), we wish you much success and happiness in your future endeavors.

Comm. Bagsby: Thank you. (Class claps).

Addendum to Comm. Dionne Bagsby Interview. See page 22.

Tarrant County Employee Statistics supplied by Commissioner Dionne Bagsby's office:

As of November 27, 2002:

503 African American Females	(11%)
289 African American Males	(7%)
333 Hispanic Females	(8%)
176 Hispanic Males	(4%)
33 Asian Females	(1%)
23 Asian Males	(1%)
7 American Indian Females	Less than 1%
15 American Indian Males	Less than 1%

Total Employees: 4,426

Total Minority Employees (31%): 1,379