

INTERVIEW WITH THE HONORABLE RUFUS LEWIS
(Interviewer Gwen Patton, TSTC)
November 6, 1996

Dr. Gwen Patton: This is November 6, 1996. We're in the office of the Honorable Rufus Lewis. He's looking mighty sporty. My name is Gwen Patton; I'm the interviewer and our guest today, our honoree, is Rufus Lewis. How are you doing coach?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Fine, indeed.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Can you remember what you did on yesterday?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You have to recall; it has slipped my mind.

Dr. Gwen Patton: I know you remember on yesterday, you had a busy, busy day. I understand you went to the doctor and you look quite well. What was his report?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: He had a good report.

Dr. Gwen Patton: He had a good report for you. Then you went to the barber shop.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: If you see how much better I look today than yesterday, you know I've been to the barber shop.

Dr. Gwen Patton: You look wonderful. And you went to vote.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Yes.

Dr. Gwen Patton: How do you feel about that, going to vote on yesterday?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Well, I think I voted for the right person.

Dr. Gwen Patton: All right. Do you know that this is the last time in this century that we could vote for the President of the United States.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I didn't know that. That's good information for me.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Yes. You knew who the candidates were. We had Clinton, Dole, and Perot who ran as an Independent. Clinton was the Democrat, Dole was the Republican, and Perot was the Independent. You don't have to tell me because I know voting is a secret and you're in the business of getting our community registered to vote . . . you can keep it a secret, but would you like to share with us for whom you voted?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Well, it is a secret; you just keep it a secret.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Yes, sir. I know being past president of the Alabama Democratic Conference, I think I might be able to draw some kind of inference there.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Yes.

Dr. Gwen Patton: What does voting mean to you in this day?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Voting is an extremely important thing. It helps you to take an act in getting things right the way you think they ought to be. And you get the person to do the right thing. So you vote for that person.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Can you recall any of the activities that you used to do trying to get our people registered to vote.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Well, it's the initial thing that you have to get the applications well made, and you have to get plenty voting certificates that you can pass around to the many people who need to learn what it's about and how to fill them out when they go to register.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Very good. What about having the candidates to come to the community?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: That's a fine thing if you have all the candidates to come and you have the knowledge of each one of them. Then you can recommend the best candidate to the people that you think will be voting.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Did you see the yellow ballot? Can you recall from yesterday when we passed out the ballots to voters, the recommendations based upon the assessments of the candidates and how they would respond to the Black community? Can you recall seeing that yellow ballot?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I don't have a good picture of it now.

Dr. Gwen Patton: But you remember you used to put out the ballots?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Yes, that was the most important thing, when I put out the ballot, because I would get the information that was necessary for the people to have to vote for who they think is best.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Do you know, Coach Lewis, that tradition is still today. We are still putting out the yellow ballot as a way to inform the people.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: That's extremely fine for you all to be still doing that because it's a nice thing to do. It's a good thing to do.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Coach Lewis, we are at the end of the 20th Century. What are your feelings about this past century?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You have to do some thinking about it. Right off, you know you haven't done all you need to do. You know you haven't made your contacts that was so essential to you during the century. But you've done the best you could, and you have to let it go at that.

Dr. Gwen Patton: What do you think our people should do for the new century that will be here in four more years?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: That is an extremely important thing to think about before you can get the right answer to that. But to do what is best to do to help the people go forward is the thing that we should do.

Dr. Gwen Patton: You have been involved in the voting rights struggle most of your life . . . at least 65 or . . .

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Since I was old enough.

Dr. Gwen Patton: . . . 70 years. You have been involved in this voting rights struggle. You also were a business man. And an educator. What would you tell young people today, how they should shape their lives to go toward the 21st Century?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I couldn't tell them anymore than what I think was important then and it is important now. That is to get a good education and to keep up with the voting responsibilities because the candidate you vote for is the candidate who is going to run your community, and your whole area. So, know them well. Try to select the best one of them to do the things that you think ought to be done.

Dr. Gwen Patton: What about economic development? Tell us about how you got involved in business. You are part owner in a funeral home, you have the Citizens Club. Tell us you entered into . . .

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You become interested in doing things that are going to be productive to you and to productive to the community. And when you select things like that, you can't help but be successful if you give all you can to achieve those things.

Dr. Gwen Patton: You will be 90 years old on November 30. You look every bit of 50 . . .

Mr. Rufus Lewis: (laugh) I certainly don't feel old. I feel well enough to keep doing the things I think ought to be done to help people and to help yourself.

Dr. Gwen Patton: What did you do that makes you look so well and have such a long life?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: What did I do?

Dr. Gwen Patton: Well, what are you doing?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I'm trying to do what is necessary to do. Voting, working, taking care of yourself, feeding yourself properly. Things of that nature. Doing the right things to help people are the things I think are very important.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Anything else you would like to add or say for our short interview?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I would have to do some thinking about doing what I think is best to do to help people and to help yourself move forward.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Thank you so much, Mr. Lewis. Thank you so much. We are honored that you are with us and that you have led the way. Do know that we love you. And happy birthday. Happy 90th birthday!

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Thank you.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Mr. Lewis, you will be 90 years old on November 30. What do you think about 90 years?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: It is wonderful to have lived that long and to have done things that you think are worthwhile and are important to yourself and to people. If you can look back and see those things, you can't help but be satisfied with the life you tried to live.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Do you ever think about it or does each day just come and go?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You may think about it when you get in a conversation like this. Normally, it's just what you have to do today that is so important to you. You don't think about what you've done 20 or 30 or 40 years back. But what you have to do now and what you hope to do tomorrow.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Yes, sir. Thank you again.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Well, you don't think about you've lived that long. It's just extremely important to realize that someone telling you that you've been here for so long, and you can't help but be thankful and grateful to do what you think is best to do and to continue to do that as long as you are here.

Dr. Gwen Patton: God has truly blessed you. And He's blessed us because He put you here for us. We consider you the father of the voting rights struggle in Montgomery, and in the state, and in the nation. I've had the privilege of going through some of your papers. You have papers from the '40s. And you've been so consistent. What makes you so disciplined and so persistent in your struggle?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: When you realize how important it is to do something like that. Put your mind on it. You can't help but work at because you know what you're doing and how important it is to do it.

Dr. Gwen Patton: How did you get started?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I don't know how I got started, other than looking at it, listening to folk and studying it, thinking about it, and realizing how important it is to cast a vote and to vote for those people you think will mean so much not only to you, but to the whole group.

Dr. Gwen Patton: What motivated you to put up the Citizens Club? Can you remember the Citizens Club?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Yes. The Citizens Club was an effort to get people to vote. That's what it was all about. You are a citizen! If you are a citizen, you've got to vote. A citizen votes. A citizen has ideas about what should be done and how it should be done. And if you're a citizen, that's what you'll do.

Dr. Gwen Patton: It was so creative. Nobody thought of that. Nobody in the whole country thought of putting together a Citizens Club for a social outlet, but the real purpose . . . I mean, I know it's been a long time ago, but I just want to acknowledge that. And if you can just recall . . . did you wake up one morning and say, "This is what I'm going to do?"

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I don't know how it came about because it's been so long ago. But it was a part of my thinking that a citizen has certain things they must do. And voting is one of the main things. If you are a citizen, you've got to vote. But if you are not a citizen, you don't have to vote. But, if you're a citizen, you've got to have a voice in electing people to do what needs to be done in your community.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Can you see the neon light in the Citizens Club? Remember the neon light?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Yes, and it's interesting to think about it.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Sometimes, you would let the teenagers come during the day and we would have meetings there so that we would plan how to get the leaflets out.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: (laughter) It's just interesting to have such a thing to do to help people and to see how people enjoy doing what is to be done for their own benefit and for the benefit of the whole group. . . . is to continue to do the things that you know are necessary for your own welfare and well-being. Don't give them up. Still work hard at it.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Thank you very much. Do you have any memories as you sit under the tree or go out? I understand you go out sometimes and look at your cattle or ride around town. Do you have any memory at all? What memories keep coming back over and over and over again?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I can't answer that right now because it takes time to think about what you're asking me. It takes time for me to think about the memories that I'm concerned with. The things that you want to do and think are important . . . the things that you think are not only helpful to you, but are helpful to the community is the thing that you can't help but continue to do.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Coach Lewis, I want you to know that we think of you all of the time. Every time we organize, Every time we go to the polls, Every time we learn about the candidates, Every time we vote, we think about you and the work that you've done. We want you to know that you are with us all of the time because of your efforts. And we thank you for that, and we think about you every second. You should see us in some of our political meetings, and we would say, "Now Coach Lewis would suggest . . ." or "Coach Lewis did thus and so we need to continue . . ." I want you to know that.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I'm grateful. I'm thankful to know that the things I've done these past years are helpful to the people in their own lives and they will continue to do them because they will continue to be improving and helping themselves.

Dr. Gwen Patton: It's important for people to know too, Coach Lewis, that you started this voting rights movement, and this voting rights struggle, long before the Civil Rights struggle. You were out there in the '40s trying to get people to register to vote, fill out the literacy test, and all of that.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I was intentionally interested in having a voice in the officials who run the whole area. And I know voting was the thing that put them in office. If they did not get the vote, they would not get in office. Knowing that the voting is necessary, then I must help get our people in a position where they can vote and they can select the best man who is running for the office.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Or a woman.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Or a woman, yes. And that's the importance of voting. Selecting the best person who can do the best job. Not only for you, but for the whole community. And that's what we try to do.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Coach Lewis, you might have to do some thinking on this. How can we make certain that those whom we elect will do the right thing for the community? What would you suggest?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: The only thing you do is to know the person as much as you can . . . the life he has lived, the things he has done prior to this. If you know the kind of person he is, then you feel fairly sure, if he is selected to do some important thing, he will do. But if you know he is not a good person--he's not honest and straightforward--you know you are taking a big chance if you select him.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Do you suggest that the community people go to meetings and go to city council meetings?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I suggest that the people not only go to meetings, but people plan meetings and encourage all the people in the community to have a voice in selecting good people--people that they know are worthwhile, people that they know are honest and straightforward--and help them to get in office.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Do you recall any experiences when you were U. S. Marshal ?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: It's hard for me to get anything particular about being a U. S. Marshal because that's when you select people because they are doing what is right and you reject people because they are doing what is not right. And it's a number of people on both sides.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Again, I want to thank you. And we will continue doing your work. You have our solemn promise that we will continue the work of Rufus Lewis.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Thank you so much and I hope that what I've done and hope that what I can do now will be helpful to the people.

Dr. Gwen Patton: When you went to the polls yesterday, did you have a special feeling or was that just something you were supposed to do?

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You've got to have a feeling for people you vote for. You just don't vote just to vote. You vote because people that you are putting in office, you believe will do the things that is necessary to do for that community. Therefore, you make a good effort to get those people elected. You vote for them, and you try to get other people to vote for them, if you know they are doing the right thing.