Ben Ostermeier (BO): Hello everyone, it is August 15, 2018, and I'm talking today with Dave Dennis, who will be talking about his experiences with SIAP and the growing of the National Alliance. So, hi Dave!

Dave Dennis (DD): Hi how are you?

BO: I'm good how are you?

DD: I'm good, thank you.

BO: Okay, so the first question I have prepared is, you worked with SNCC and CORE during the Civil Rights movement and how did these experiences influence your work with SIAP?

DD: Well, the, I've got to talk a little bit about how I got involved with the Algebra Project, because SIAP is actually a, grew out of the Algebra Project. It was once a project of the Algebra Project, and so when I began working with Algebra Project in 1992, with Bob, it was the idea there to begin to work with the Algebra Project to the deep south. At the time I came on with the Algebra Project, it was called Southwest Conference in Atlanta, in Atlanta, Georgia with the school system there. And so, the Algebra Project received a grant from the [inaudible] foundation to experiment with the project in the deep south. And so Bob wanted to bring it into Mississippi, some of it was based on my experience with him in organizing during the 60s, the reason why he brought in, because what we wanted to do was begin to develop a community organized based, using the methods we used in the Civil Rights Movement, to put the project together in Mississippi, because we felt that, there you have to put a floor, when you try to do it in the schools. Because there we knew we were working with the bottom quartile, of the students at the lowest level. And so it was that experience that really got me involved, I think as Bob brought me in as part of the Algebra Project I organized what we called then the site development portion of the Algebra Project. So it was through those experiences that we had it is, the knowledge that in Mississippi, and also in terms of how to do organizing, which I learned from my experience in CORE, beginning in Louisiana in 1960.

BO: Yeah, that makes sense. So SIAP grew out of the Algebra Project as you mentioned, can you talk about the distinctions between the missions of the Algebra Project and SIAP?

DD: Yeah, well, there's not much of a difference there, the mission has always been, when I first began with the Algebra Project, was how to give access to students at the bottom quartile and students of color, to quality education. And so there were two issues there, one is how do you address the issue of development of quality education in an area or place or country that did not provide quality education for kids. And then whatever the education was how do you begin to make it accessible to students of color and students of the bottom quartile, and so based on our work in Mississippi with the freedom schools and others, those were some of the methods we used, so what happened here is that these

southern initiative, which was a program, at that time working with the Algebra Project, we went to work in the south, has always been my preference in terms of when I was with the Civil Rights Movement, I remained in the south, and when I conditioned to work with the Algebra Project, I wanted to work with the project in the south. And so the program of the Algebra Project from 1992 on through the 90s, we were as a program the project that really moved in terms of the south into nine states. We actually developed sites in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, we had some in South Carolina, North Carolina, some of the other areas in Georgia, and also a little bit of pieces in Tennessee, and so the project would expand to a lot of different areas or sites with the most prevalent sites being in South Carolina and then North Carolina and Weldon, North Carolina. And the deep part of South Carolina throughout the Mississippi Delta, and in Jackson, Mississippi, and then New Orleans in Louisiana were the primary sites we developed in the south. So the idea there is is that the, during the same period of time that was the development of the youth component of the Algebra Project called Young People's Project. And so as we moved in the project again to get larger, Bob always felt that we should diversify, and what that meant is is that, the youth as they got stronger, they should have their own 501(c), and so when the SIAP, the Southern Initiative, became stronger, it required its own 501(c) also. So that's how it evolved. The difference is then, of course the YPP has the youth focus, SIAP's focus has always been old schools, and when we first began even in 1992, we worked with the Algebra Project to start out really in the south as a middle school initiative, and we soon discovered and felt that you could not just work with middle schools because by the time kids got into middle school, they were so far behind, so you had to move the project down, and then you had to move it up to follow them through the high school level. But that experiment started one piece with Bob and then moving the project from Franklin Middle School on to a near high school, and with the cohort model. And so SIAP began to really develop what we call "whole schools," beginning looking at elementary all the way through 12th grade. And we got our first shot at that experiment with St. Helena, which is in Beaufort County, South Carolina, which is a little elementary school...

[call cuts out]

BO: Hi

DD: I just realized I lost you.

BO: That's all good, you were talking about, sorry, Beaufort County I believe.

DD: Yeah okay, Beaufort County, when we got our first shot at an elementary school level. And so that's a whole story in itself, which is written up in *Radical Equations,* but there we began there, at one of the schools that was at the bottom in the state in terms of scores, and we in a three year period experimented with that school, we moved it to

one of the top schools, in fact it beat out the Hilton Head students there, we had a 99% black population. Then we began to put it together, and that moved into Petersburg, Virginia where we actually for the first time really got full funding through the Cameron Foundation, which is a local hospital foundation, and so they had used the funds for local area... So they funded us to work in the school system areas for five years, and so we were able to put a whole package together of a pre-K through 16 by hooking in with the Virginia State University, which is a local HBCU, historic black college university, so that sort of really helped give birth to the pre-K - 16 model that we now are moving around the country, with an emphasis on the HBCUs and the bottom quartile, looking at low-performing schools. So we actually, all of the schools we work in are low performing schools in the south. So that will move us into that model, so that model was a great model, is that we had the, when we got there in 19- maybe 2006 it was, they only had one school that had been, that wasn't accredited, and the high school had not been accredited since 1998, and so by 2010 we had all the schools but one school accredited, and that school only missed accreditation by like five or six points, and so that gave us, and then we began to move students to be able to graduate with calculus at the end of the fifth year, we had more students graduate with calculus when we left than we had in Algebra II when we got there. So that gave us this idea of how to move this, because now you had Virginia State University now getting students locally, who were able to go and who were STEM-ready, you know, went right into, didn't have to take any pre, prep courses, remedial courses in mathematics. And so that gave birth to the pre-K - 16 model that we have, and so what we do now is actually working in the schools, looking at feeder patterns with HBCUs at the top. We're now working at five different sites, trying to develop this perfect, to perfect this model, for replication around the country.

BO: Well great.

DD: So that model includes the four components. One is a, of course professional development component, and that has to do with summer training of teachers at a minimum of two weeks, and that's teaches and anti-feeder pattern, to teach mathematics. And then that program is followed by classroom visitations and Saturday workshops throughout the year, and with a minimum of at least four per year. That is, that teachers, every teacher in the program is visited at least four times. And that that there are at least a minimum of four Saturday workshops throughout the year. And then that program is going for a minimum of three years, three to five years, we prefer five, minimum is three years. And we don't want to, that's part of one of our conditions for coming in, because we don't feel that we can make any significant changes in teachers, the way teachers teach, in less time than that. Any significant changes. And so the other component to that is, is the youth development component, where we

actually train students at the college to be mentors and tutors to students in the high schools and middle schools. And students in the high schools to be tutors and mentors to students in the middle schools. Now one of the things about this also at the university level is, we also look at how to train students to work with federally-supported programs that are developed in order to support students who are low-income students. So that's like your Upward Bound programs or your TRIO programs and things, so there can be some kind of consistency work we're doing with the students across the board, because a lot of those students in those TRIO program actually come out of the schools that we'd be working with in pre-K - 16 model. And you get some federal support, and that is by working with those students in there, it's sort of like building your own little army of students to give that support. The third component to that of course is the training, you know work with the faculty at the university level, and especially if they have a School of Education, also with their math department, to get support for us, and to help them have support the teachers and the schools that we're working with, but also trying to figure out how to change the culture around the development of teachers. And the fourth component of that is, which we consider to be our main component, is that to begin the program, we have a, we ask for years of planning. The years of planning for the program is that we actually put together what we call a design team, and that design team is composed of representatives from the university level, from the school system, but also from the community, not only just parents, students, but also from business and also from organizations that provide services to low-performing areas, low-income areas, so we actually get a chance of coming from the bottom quartile. And so that way we get people from all sort of, maybe not on the same page, but on the same book, to see how we can all work together to give support to the students and to the work we're trying to do in the areas. So it's really trying to change the whole culture, and the other piece is how do you really develop communities, because, re-develop communities, what's happening is kids coming from the bottom quartile, we figured out, is that most of them, they aren't real communities. Some from the fact is that groups of people live together, they have food deserts, they don't have any recreation facilities, they lack all the resources to have a very healthy community that exists. So we're looking at how to figure, we know we can't, we don't have the tools to create new communities, cause we call it, communitive learners, whereby, there's a lot of focus on the education of the students coming from what we call these places, and a good example of that is when we were in Petersburg, some of the students who really became lead students, were the students coming out of what we call the homeless community. And so some of those kids in Petersburg, they had these like old Motel 6s that had been vacated, where a lot of homeless people lived. So some of those kids who came out excelling in mathematics actually came out of those homeless kids, and in Petersburg we figured

out that we had over 300 students who were actually to be determined homeless kids in terms of what their profile was. So we figured that the program had to address this issue, because that's a lot, large number of population that we're finding in the schools, and this whole connection we were dealing with also the problems of the HBCUs, HBCUs were actually getting more of these kids who were able to make it through high school, low-performing students, a high level, number of these kids who have to take remedial courses where we had been, so we developed this pipeline of growing beyond, and it seemed to be most supportive the HBCUs also, to help them to function. So the design team became what we think is, very important here is, because we don't think you're going to be able to move this needle unless you get ready for community around the efforts that exist, that's needed in order to move these kids. So those are the four components that we operate with as part of the pre-K-16 model we're trying to develop at this time. And we have a lot of problems with it.

BO: Sure

DD: And those problems happens to have to do with the top, and that is as a moving needle for us, as soon as you get things going, we say it takes at least three, most times about five years to make significant changes, that's more than the lifespan of superintendents and teachers in the area. So the result of that is, we keep getting, as you begin to get some foothold, there's a change in the administration, and every time they come in, the new administration come in, the new superintendent, they always come in with their own programs, and things get changed. So the only way, we think, to balance this is that you get strong community support, where we really have buy-in to the program that you're trying to put together is that they have taken ownership of it, so if it change the top, you know, the top will have to be more responsive to the demands of the community, you know, and so that's why we feel that, you know, if you don't begin to put a lot more focus around the development of community support, what we're doing is, you know, we're just going to be burning rubber, and trying to get this thing settled into a program that's consistent. So that's more or less of what the general the program, what SIAP is all about, what we do.

BO: Yeah, well thank for that very thoughtful, drawn-out answer. So what have you found most rewarding in working with SIAP?

DD: Well I think that the, just watching the change in students. I mean one of the things that's really, it reminds me a lot of when we were working in the 60s in Mississippi and Louisiana, was that, you know, the country really was saying that people, black people, people of color did not want to register to vote, and so one way we had to prove that is in large numbers, the demand had to come from them. So they had to

show up at the polls. As people began to move, that was really rewarding, to say that a landslide was beginning, to make the necessary demands. What's here is, is that the YPP students begin to make that changes, and begin to make the demand about "we want to learn, we want to be educated," and also able to show to the country, you know, that they could do this work if they just have an opportunity to do it. So that's what Petersburg, St. Helena, Weldon, and many other, all of the other places that we worked in, where we had a lot of success with this is, that's always rewarding. Now to see how all these kids around, different professions. They're lawyers, they're doctors, they're engineers, and stuff around the country, they stay in contact with us, and I guess that... For instance, when I began to work with Bob in 1992, I told him I would give him three years of my life in this work, okay, I'm still here, so [laughs]. It's important to me, and it is the next level of what I think the Civil Rights Movement piece is, and if we're going to change this country, you know, the voices of these people have to be heard, and they have to be brought to the table, so that's what the design team is saying to the country. The impact of the design team is essentially, it's one thing to get people to the table, that's not the most difficult part, to get them to the table. They'll come to a meeting and sit at a table. The issue is how do you get their voices at the table, whereby people are willing to listen to them, and they have enough information to be able to understand what the issues really are. So part of the design team work is educating community on the issues that's impacting their kids in their community and some places where they live. And so that's the other piece to this is that I think is extremely important.

BO: Yeah, what has been your greatest challenge in working with SIAP, and how did you deal with that challenge?

DD: Well the greatest challenge has been, you know, the leadership. It's not getting to the people at the bottom quartile. It's, as I was just explaining, it's when you get them to the bale, is you know, how do you get them to be heard, and the problem we have here is that, what I talked about earlier, the change in people, administrative piece is. So as you soon as you begin to get some foothold of a area, is that changes. So we haven't figured out yet how to stabilize that, we don't think you'll be able to stabilize it from the top, we have to do it from the bottom. So organizing people at the bottom, what makes that very difficult is it takes a lot of time to do this, and there is no funding in this country to do that kind of work, at least has been made available to us. We get funded for doing professional development work, we get funding for that, and to do some work with students. When it gets down to really organizing at the bottom quartile, organizing these communities around education, it's just like organizing around the Civil Rights Movement, that's when we do not have the funding to get that kind of a foothold. And I think that's intentional, and when you do get it, it's for two or

three years, and so that's not enough time to do the kind of organizing necessary in these communities or places, where these people live. So the other, I guess challenge we have, is stability in terms of teachers consistency, in that, no one really wants to work with the bottom quartile, in low performing schools. So most of the teachers you get coming into that level are teachers who don't want to be there, and so what they do is, that's the last place they hire, that's why in low performing schools you usually, their teachers are last hired, because they're actually trying to get jobs in other places, and when they can't find jobs other places they end up at the bottom quartile. And then you got the Teach for America kids, students who fill in those gaps. So having that kind of stability is another very difficult thing, because if you go through the training you do, and you work with them is, as soon as they can they want to get out, because the leadership they have is so temporary, and so they can't get a foothold. So finally sometime you're lucky enough to get some teachers who want to stick it out, but then once they get really comfortable with that work is, a new administration come in, you know, and so that changing needle at the top is really the issue that's causing us whole problems, and anything else. The fact is, is that the, even money by itself isn't going to change that, unless you're able to put money into paying teachers more, so that they have more of an incentive to want to stay. But to do that kind of work that it takes in that bottom quartile, teachers have to put 12, 14 hours a day, seven days a week, you know, just to stay on top of the game, and they don't get paid enough money to do that.

BO: Right, so I have one last question prepared, which is how do you see the National Alliance and its member organizations challenging inequity and living up to the promise of We the People?

DD: I think that the, you know it's, the Alliance to me is, the most effective thing is to be able to focus on the national level on policy. You know, because, there's some work that has to be done that we can do at the bottom quartile pieces, that has to be done, but we need a strong force at the top that's going to change this administrative issue that I've just talked about, described. And that's all the way up to the top, the congressmen and others have to pass the kind of legislation that sort of gives the kind of support that's necessary to education. What's happening, cutting back on stuff, is because that's moving toward privatization of education. So one of the things we have to do is to stop that. And one thing that the Alliance needs to do is to begin to focus on how they can begin to put the type of pressure necessary on their local congressmen, and also at the state level and the national level, to make the necessary changes. So to me it's a political question, the rest of us can do a lot of the groundwork, you know, but we can only go so far until somebody begins to knock that door down. I mean, and make those changes at the top level. And that's a political issue, we have to begin to

threaten to put pressure on elected officials to make the necessary changes. Otherwise, we get beaten to death at the bottom level because we don't the tools to work with, the resources, both in terms of financial and human resources. Teachers are drying up, I mean, what's happening in terms of our kids being able to make it from the bottom quartile, to go back in the communities to work. That is beginning to become political questions. How do you really begin to build or rebuild these places so they can be communities for the people that we're trying to work with. It's not in terms of what they're trying to do in some ways. So actually poor people are being moved out of the inner city. Petersburg, Virginia is a good example. There they're tearing down the projects, and they're moving the people in the trailer homes into an adjacent county that's a large majority whites. And New Orleans, Katrina, the whole process began to develop, emerge, was out of Katrina, because Katrina gave this country an opportunity to experiment on rebuilding the city from the ground up, which is the first time that has happened since Reconstruction. So there they didn't allow the people back in. As they begin to together 1/3, 1/3 type community, 1/3 middle class, 1/3 low income, and 1/3 business across the city. Gentrification begins to move, and so then the poor people weren't allowed to come back in. Those who were ended up being stuck in one part of the city, and that's happening other places. Charleston, South Carolina, Richmond, Virginia, you name it, Detroit, Michigan, what you have is, this process is what happened to poor people. So now one of the things that's happened to piece out is where you've got privatization, prison privatization, privatization of education, centralism. So this is what's happening, moving in this country. So to stop that, you have to have a real movement at the top, whereby you've got people doing with influence is be able to make those political changes. That's one way the Alliance, one thing I think the Alliance can begin to do is, is really make a lot of noise at that particular level. Not in terms in isolation, we're uniting around the country with this particular focus.

BO: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So that's what I had prepared for questions, was there anything else you wanted to say about your experiences with SIAP or the National Alliance, or any other part of what you discussed today?

DD: No, I think that that's about it is, I think that the, what we're trying to do is is really develop our own little army of people, you know, that young people and other people, just as we did in the Civil Rights Movement. And so those people, finding people committed to this work, because that's what it's going to take for awhile, people committed to this work. There's no money in it, you know, committed to some sacrifice and fervor, that we had in the 60s, I mean this is, back on this again, and we need to really begin to figure out the Alliance. The Alliance has given us an opportunity to do this, I think that the, but you know, I'm not sure that the people in the Alliance are really

seeing it as that type of struggle yet, you know, and I think that there's a real confusion in terms of... Well let's put it this way, there's not clarity in terms of what we mean by bottom quartile. What do we mean by moving this needle is. So I don't think there's clarity yet, in terms of what the real issues are. You know, the issue is really around what it is in the classroom, you know, and what's being taught in the classroom. There's an issue around just who is being taught, you know, who this information is getting to. Or is it really moving the system as a whole, you know, and my position is moving the system and not in isolation, and so when you talk about quality education, what does that mean is that we need to begin to focus on that is, in making this as a national movement, you know, which as to involved and include people from what we call the low performing areas, low income areas, on the bottom quartile. So what's happening in the country about this is, there is a, it's almost like drilling for oil, but actually it's going out to help kids able to make it to the fourth grade, you've got programs that out helping to move them up. But when you've got to go deeper than that is, we're not doing any favors going any deeper. You get to these kids, to do that is, you've got to change, you've got to get to kids at birth, you've got to get to them at early ages, and that has to do with the places they live, how they live, what resources are available to them is. So they can become, by the time kids get to be five and six years old, living in some of these areas is, they already suffer from PTSD, you know, they already coming there with different issues and problems that are unbelievable. Based on the fact that it's the condition they're forced to live in. So how do you begin to address this issue, as whole, as a national issue, so I don't think you can look at it in isolation, you know, you have to figure out how to bring all this together.

BO: Yeah, well thank you so much Dave for taking the time to talk to me today.

DD: Okay, thank you for calling.