

**Interviewee: Thomas Tillman**  
**Interviewer: Kieran W. Taylor**  
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KT: Just to get us started, I'm wondering if you could, to identify the recording, if you could say your name and when and where you were born.

TT: Okay, my name is Thomas Malik Tillman. I was born in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina at Good Samaritan Hospital, which the majority of people of color were born in. There was a time when Good Samaritan Hospital was the hospital that only blacks could get services from. And it started out as some church organization providing funding to provide health care services, emergency care services as well as general physician care, as well as emergency services. If someone needs to go to the hospital with an emergency, they would take them to Good Samaritan, as opposed to the white hospital which was called the Shelton Memorial Hospital. That's where I was born. 1955. January 1.

KT: January 1.

TT: 1955.

KT: Where did your family live?

TT: I was born primarily in this general area where we are now, at First Ward. I resided at 719 East Ninth Street which unfortunately was lost, the property, from eminent domain in the 60s, early 60s. I was about six years old, seven years old. Maybe eight years old when they purchased my house, the city, for less than ten thousand dollars. That same property is worth over a million dollars now. You know what was interesting? You asked me that. It was a wonderful neighborhood we lived in. It was a mixed

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neighborhood, both black and white. There were some limited resource people up to middle and upper income people that lived in the First Ward community. So there was a mixture of white and blacks in the First Ward. As well as Fourth Ward, which is an adjacent neighborhood to the, in Charlotte they had ward systems. First Ward, Second Ward, Third Ward, and Fourth Ward. I lived in First Ward, which was primarily downtown. Both schools that I attended, elementary schools, were in the area. They were also teachers as well as the principal that lived in the neighborhood. So as a kid, I experienced watching my principal walk by my house going to school in the morning. The teachers walked to school in some cases. So it was very interesting time that I was in my early days, my elementary days in First Ward.

KT: Well that must have been important for building a sense of cohesion and the neighborhood and you had that continuity of seeing your teachers and principals in the--.

TT: What was very interesting about that, what's intriguing also that comes to mind is that I never saw a homeless person when I was a kid because there was less resources in terms of funding. People made less money during those days, but people were more, had a more spirit of hospitality and a spirit of caring and sharing for other people. Especially in reference to the youth. The parents in the neighborhood cared for all the kids. So the parents of somebody's else's family were just like your parents. So if they saw you doing something wrong, they would tell your parents or they would punish you themselves. But now they have these new laws that, they call it child abuse if you touch a child. People have different attitudes now so if you do something to a kid or you correct them you're more likely to get confrontation from parents. But back then, including the fact that your teacher lived in the neighborhood, you had to watch your

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step. When we got out of school, the kids, there was always a rowdy kid. There was always a bad apple on the tree. So there was some misbehaving going on, but the teachers being in the neighborhood and coming after school, walking home, they could see the kids playing, shooting marbles or playing hopscotch or playing football in the field or shooting basketball. Back then we, basketball rims were, we didn't have parks like they do today as well so there were a lot of homemade basketball courts in the backyard made out of bicycle rims. And baskets, fruit baskets. Nailed to a tree. Which was very interesting because some of the houses had backyards that didn't have grass because the kids played basketball. One kid had a full court in his backyard, which was really interesting.

KT: I bet he was popular.

TT: He was very popular. Everybody was at his house. His mother was like mother to everybody. Ms. Haley, her name was Ms. Haley. That was John Haley that lived on Myers Street, which was like one block from where I lived.

KT: Was he about your age?

TT: He was maybe a few years, he was in high school. I was maybe in sixth grade or seventh grade, going to the seventh grade. I was at Piedmont Middle School. They call it middle school now. We called it junior high. You know, everything's got turned around now. He went to Second Ward High School. It was very interesting also, the older kids were also like mentors to the younger kids. So the younger kids looked up to the big boys. As I was saying, in the early days we didn't have many resources like bicycles. We didn't get new bicycles every year. In some cases, we made homemade bicycles. We found the frame, maybe went to Sears and Roebucks, which was downtown, Sears and

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Roebucks, the building still exists today. It's the Hal Marshall building. It's a government building now. But Sears and Roebucks you could buy screws and axles and wheels and so on and so forth. So kids that were limited in resources, they would find a frame, you know somebody throwing a frame away. They'd see it on the garbage. They'd get that frame and go buy two wheels and refurbish it and make a bicycle. So there was a different kind of attitude about kids nowadays as opposed to then. I think about that a lot when I see kids reacting now. Like we shot marbles. You don't see kids shooting marbles like you did. Or getting their pebbles and the dirt. We had to take our school clothes off, your nice clothes that you had. Coming up, when you got out of school, you took your nice clothes off and you put on some dungarees, you know those jeans with the holes in the knees. You'd go out and shoot marbles and you'd play football or you played tackle, you played soccer, whatever we did. We swang in trees. We'd climb trees. We'd walk the railroad track. We'd go down to the creek. In a lot of cases, some kids were ashamed of it, to admit it, but they swum in the creek back then. It's a little funny, but they took their clothes off. They're swimming and they're naked. And that was one of the experiences. It was an area called, it's traditionally in Charlotte people remember, they call it Bum Bottom. Or they call it Bum Bottom Creek, Bum Bottom Beach.

KT: [Laughter]

[Noise in background.]

TT: Excuse me. They call it Bum Bottom Beach. It's interesting that you--.

KT: So, people remember that as Bum Bottom.

TT: People remember that as Bum Bottom Beach or they remember it as, it was like a beach, because people back then, like limited resource people, couldn't afford to go

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to the beach. So the creek was actually like the beach. And in the summertime, you'd find kids playing in the creek, walking in the creek, wading in the water, and throwing rocks. What we called the skip rock. You know, throw the rock in the water and make it skip? You remember that one?

KT: Yes.

TT: We did that. Oh that was like heaven.

KT: Why would people be kind of ashamed of that now?

TT: Well, because now we have these amenities where we have the pools. We have the neighborhood pools, and we have the YMCA. We have a pool that's sensible and some like the YMCA. They have free programs for people who are limited resource kids now and are able to have access to things that we didn't have. All kids in my neighborhood wasn't limited in resources. Let's get that straight, too. There were some kids who were middle class that lived in my neighborhood. And that was another interesting part of the experience growing up. There were some kids that had and some kids that didn't have. Like there were some kids that wore clothes that came from more expensive stores, like Belk's, and Ivey's, which were the really exclusive department stores then. And there were some kids who had to get their stuff from Kmart or Rose's, we called it. There was a store called Rose's. And the very thing that was highlighted in community was having a pair of Chuck Taylors, Converse.

KT: [Laughter.]

TT: And that's an interesting thing.

KT: As early as the early 60s to wear hi-tops.

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TT: To wear hi-top Converse goes back to early 60s. I was like a little kid, and the big boys had a pair. If you had a pair of Chuck Taylors on, it was like having a pair of Jordans on now. They cost one hundred and fifty, two hundred bucks. And they were only \$9.95. And it was very interesting because when I was a kid I always had an entrepreneuring spirit. My father, he was, he worked for a tire company. He also was a construction person and did the buildings downtown, like the First Union building. Now it's Wachovia Bank of course because they merged. He built, he worked on a bunch of those buildings downtown. And what was interesting then that I think about now, another thing that comes to mind in terms of the jobs, in terms of the employment, accessibility, was that most of these building you see going up downtown now, they have more Hispanics working. When I was a kid, there were more people of color. There were more African Americans doing the brick mason work, doing the drywall, doing the painting, doing the roofing, and those kinds of jobs. They were accessible to African American men. So, there was a changing point. I think desegregation brought about a bunch of changes in terms of the marketing or the accessibility of jobs and so on and so forth. Desegregation was good in one sense, but it had some bad repercussions on another sense. We could talk about that a little more, too. As it references schools, as in reference to jobs, as in reference to being able to purchase affordable housing in certain areas. There was also a thing back then where realtors had an attitude that if a person could afford a house in a certain area, that they would jack the price up. I've heard many stories about realtors, white realtors, jacking the price up on a house. In fact, I experienced that myself when I lived in Cherry, the Cherry neighborhood, which is a traditional black neighborhood that's right next to Myers Park neighborhood. I attempted to purchase a

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house in Cherry once and the price was like way up for me and I found, I had one of white friends to do the same thing and the price was much less. That was happening even in the 80s, the late 80s, early 90s.

KT: Were you able to report it?

TT: That stuff was still going on. So that was another thing that people of color had to deal with in terms of housing, in terms of jobs. After desegregation, when times were segregated, it was interesting also that I experienced and as I get older and I mature now I look back and see people in the early, before the turn of the centuries, the black community builds schools like Johnson C. Smith or Biddle college was a Presbyterian school. Of course, a church school. But they raised all this money to build these institutions of higher learning, like Shaw University in Raleigh, and Salisbury, Livingstone College. Then you have colleges all over the country. Howard University. The Freedmen's Bureau, which was an organization that adhered to helping limited resource get higher learning in terms of getting education to get better jobs, better quality of life. They had less funding and less resources in the early 1900s, but yet they were building schools. But now we have people of color making all this money, and they have degrees now. They have better jobs. They have better conditions and better understanding of what's going on, but yet, we don't see schools going up. We don't see it. I haven't seen an institution of higher learning since I was a kid, to say, "Well, there's a new historical black institution."

KT: College, right.

TT: College, per se, quote, that's being built. And that's something that I wrestle with in terms of being an African American and understanding that education, we get an

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education to get a better life, get better jobs, to have a better understanding. But yet I look at the overall picture and I don't see any schools being built. I don't see any hospitals being built.

KT: Well it's just the opposite. They're actually closing the historically black colleges

TT: Absolutely.

KT: They're struggling to hang on.

TT: Absolutely, and that's something that I think that as a community we need to take inventory of ourselves and ask why as a people in terms of our resources, take an inventory of our resources and trouble-shoot where we need to start giving more attention to resolving those kind of issues, in terms of the state of our community at large.

KT: Tell me a little bit about your mom. What kind of work did she do?

TT: Interesting, very interesting question. My grandmother did domestic work. And my mother did as well. That was another interesting part of my life that I got an opportunity to experience seeing my grandmother work for a family for most of her career. That's what she did, my mother's mother. She worked for the Clarkson's, which were very popular. They had the Wing Haven. They turned their house into a bird sanctuary because they were bird lovers. And everybody knew the Clarkson's lived in Myers Park. And my grandmother, they have these parties, the tea parties and the wonderful gatherings, and they were art enthusiasts. These people were into the arts. They were into the community. They were community people. They were actively--.

KT: Where did they make their money? Do you know?



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TT: I don't know if he was--. That's another question that I probably could answer that later but, I know there was a Judge Clarkson. I don't know if they were related. They were in the judiciary.

KT: So your grandmother, she would go down every day to Myers Park?

TT: She would go and she'd--.

KT: Or did she stay in the house?

TT: No, she didn't stay there. She was like a daily. She'd go. She'd ride the bus from down, we lived on Main Street. You ride the bus to Myers Park, Salem Avenue, off of Salem Avenue. And that house, she was like the maid. And she cooked also for them. So that was your tradition in the black neighborhoods back in the day. There were a lot of domestic workers who actually raised the kids and took care of the household tasks for most of the prominent white business community and well as people in academia, all walks of life. They actually raised their kids. I have friends whose parents also were domestic workers who actually work for one family for many years. So they actually raised the kids. They fed the families. So, in terms of our culture, in terms of our type of food we eat, the mannerisms, just the spirit of us as a people, impacted the kids in terms of the way you treat people, manners, all that stuff. So it wasn't just they came and cleaned the house. They were like a part of the family. They were like raising the kids because when the kids, the families went off, sometimes the domestic people kept the kids while they were gone. I'm not sure whether Clarkson had kids, but my mother also was a domestic worker.

KT: Do you ever remember going down with your grandmother when she'd have to take you along sometimes?

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TT: Of course, I've been down there with my grandmother, as well as my mother. And I've met the Clarkson's. My mother worked for several families during her tenure as a domestic worker. But my mother even though she was a domestic worker, she went to school, went to college at Central Piedmont. She graduated childcare, childcare development program, through, they had educational assistance program. I think it was called, what was the name of it? It was CEP.

KT: Oh, sure.

TT: Do you remember that?

KT: Hoyle Martin was in charge of that.

TT: Hoyle Martin was in charge of that. My mother was a part of that. She went and got, went through that program and got certified to go to Central Piedmont and got her certification to do daycare. She worked at a daycare. In fact, she worked at the daycare in the basement of the school

KT: Oh, is that right?

TT: Going back to the basement of this building. I went to kindergarten in this building. The Little Rock AME Zion Church.

KT: So did she stop working in white people's homes after that?

TT: She did that. Prior to her doing the domestic work, she did the daycare stuff.

KT: I see.

TT: That's what my mother did in the early days. She did domestic. She worked also with the A&P, which was the old grocery store. She worked in the deli. What do you call it where they make the sandwiches?

KT: Sure. Meat cutting in the deli.

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TT: In the deli. She worked in a deli out at Independence Boulevard next to Kmart. The A and P out there, grocery store. She worked at that deli. Then she went into the daycare business. She did that for two daycares. It was one on Ninth Street, like on my block. She did it for daycare on my block on Ninth Street, which was a minority-owned daycare. And she worked at this church, which was a daycare where I went to school, where I went to daycare before I went to elementary school. My first school was Trinity Garden in the basement of this church. And also where I got my vaccination. So this church, which was Little Rock AME Zion Church, was shepherded by a gentleman by the name of Bishop George Leake. He later became bishop, but when he was Reverend George Leake, he was a renaissance man. He was a community activist. So his concern was health, education, and the welfare of the people, the community at large. First Ward kids was his passion, but he had a passion for the whole city. And later on, the city acknowledged that, and they even named a street after him. Leake Street.

KT: When did he pass away?

TT: And they named some apartments after him. His church, which is Little Rock Apartments. He passed in the 70s, maybe the 80s, of a car accident. I got a photograph of him and his wife, their twenty-fifth anniversary. His wife Velma Leake, who's now a county commissioner. She just got elected. She was the Board of Education person for like ten years on the board, board member. So that community activism and community concern also, she kept that legacy alive.

KT: Do you remember your mother or your grandmother talking about their work in white homes?

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TT: Of course. My grandmother I remember vividly talking about people, that all white people weren't mean. Because the perception of white people was that they were better than us, as a kid. For instance, like the segregation of restaurants. There was a place in the neighborhood called Jewel's Sweet. J-E-W-E-L. Jewel's Sweet. The had sweets. There was a wrestling match at the park center, which is out at Grady Coles Center. They named it after a radio guy, used to be old park center owned by Park and Recreation. We go there to the wrestling match. Before we'd go to the wrestling match, we'd stop by Jewel's Sweets and get a hot dog. But when you got your hot dog, you couldn't sit down and eat. And I was a kid. I never did understand that stuff. Like going there, and we'd get hot dog or ice cream sandwiches, which I loved a lot. Ice cream sandwich, man, I'd go in there, Jewel's Sweet. There was a bakery next door. You could go to the bakery or you go to Jewel's Sweet. But you go in Jewel's Sweets, you couldn't sit down and eat. They had magazines. You could go in and buy spinning tops and yo-yos and all that stuff, but you had to leave. I never understood why they gotta say, "Well you can't, y'all gotta leave out of here." We'd go in and the kids looking at the stuff and you'd be excited. You'd see everything is litten up and you know as a kid, you don't know what's going on. You don't even know what racism is. You can't even, you don't have a clue that you're being discriminated against or that you're being treated less than, beneath your [        ]. I didn't understand it until I was maturing age, late, many years later, that deep that was actually going on. Because actually we were so excited about just living and just having fun that racism, it just didn't, it didn't bother us. I didn't really get my first really, really, really, really glimpse and understanding of what racism really was until I got to high school. That's when schools were desegregated. When I saw white kids

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with a chain in their hand on the back of a station wagon, swinging the chain, saying, “Niggers, niggers you niggers are not coming. You niggers ain’t--. You niggers not coming over here,” swinging a chain. And then a few weeks later, I see fights breaking out in the cafeteria. And I see white kids getting thrown out of windows. And I see the helicopter coming, snoopy coming. And I see police cars getting flipped over because the black kids never had just been confronted that close with white kids on a large scale. So there was a big riot.

KT: And I want to get to that in some detail. But just going back to your mom and grandmother. You got a sense of what their experiences were like working as domestics? They talked about that a little bit?

TT: They talked about it a little bit. They didn’t talk about that much because, I’m going to tell you why. I think that primarily that was their living. And the relationship that they had with working with, as a domestic in white homes was that that was their discipline. So that the focus was on their discipline, as just being obedient and doing a good job, making a living. But in terms of the social or the psychological impact that it had on how they were treated, they didn’t talk a lot about that. Unless there was an incident that took place that was not too pleasant, they might bring it up. If somebody said something, call them a nigger, or something like that. You’re going to have that because all white people didn’t have the same sentiment about blacks being around, being in the house, or being in the neighborhood. So there was some of that racism that took place that occasionally you would hear that. But that was very minimal because I think a lot of times they didn’t want us to be discouraged in the sense that you don’t need to be

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around white people. They're just bad people. Because in most cases domestic workers had good relationships with the people that they worked for.

KT: Or if they didn't they wouldn't--?

TT: If they didn't, they wouldn't be there. You know what I'm saying? So it wasn't like slavery, where you had to be, where you were forced to do it. You're doing it to make a living. And then there were benefits from white people to have a domestic worker who could cook, who was very clean, who had good, who had real positive etiquettes. Yes ma'am, no ma'am. Good morning. Thank you. Just those little fundamental etiquettes. The really significant part of that is that their kids learned from those domestic workers about mannerisms, about etiquettes, and about yes sir and no ma'am. Thank you. Just the little fundamental stuff. Not saying that white people didn't have that, but being that these domestic workers came from a different environment and had a different way of seeing the world because they were discriminated against. They experienced racism. They look in books and they see their grandmothers who were slaves or worked in the cotton fields or their great-grandmothers being lynched. Or their great-great grandmothers being killed or raped by the slave master. It's a whole different picture of things when you look at your history and see that there was a time where, for instance, when I was six years old, which was 1960, '61, a person of color, a black man, could not be a police officer in Mecklenburg County. He could be a city police, but he couldn't be a county police. The requirements, and I have all this stuff documented, which is going in my publication, he couldn't be a police officer. He could work the walk beat for the city. Meaning that he couldn't drive a car, the police officer. And he walked the beat in the black neighborhoods, which is old Brooklyn. They call it Log Town before

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Brooklyn but I think it was Brooklyn during this time. First police officers like 1941 or something like that, Bub Houston, a few guys. I've got some of the names. In fact, those first officers were in the 40s and they walked the beat. And they couldn't arrest a white guy. So if a white guy spit in their face, they couldn't arrest him. They had to call a white back-up to come and arrest this guy. He'd call them all kinds of names, you SOB or you whatever. You had to restrain, so the spirit of humility, just looking at my history and seeing this and see how humility can strengthen a person and how it can define a person's spirit to the point of no return. It's just a whole different--and then when I go to high school and I see all this stuff, see it first-hand, racism. Like for instance, my homeroom teacher in high school, tenth grade, told me that I couldn't play golf because I wasn't a member of Myers Park Country Club, which is a country club right across the yard from the school. A hundred thousand dollars a year, and this is in the 70s, early 70s. That was the cost of a family having a membership at Myers Park Country Club. Now it's probably triple that. Also the tennis, same thing with tennis. I had an interest in tennis because, in the neighborhood we had tennis balls and tennis rackets and we practiced. When I was a kid, like I was telling you about in the yard, that a lot of the neighborhoods, a lot of the backyards in First Ward didn't have grass because the kids played football. That was the playground because the closest playground was Alexander Street School, which was maybe several blocks from my house where I went to elementary school. My first school was Alexander Street School. We had a playground and that was where the creek was as well, behind that. And my school separated Piedmont Court. The creek separate Piedmont Court and my school, which was an all-white neighborhood, projects. So that's where the limited resource people live, right back door of my school across the creek.

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KT: But these were poor white folks.

TT: These were poor white folks.

KT: In the courts, initially.

TT: These were poor white folks. In fact my high school basketball coach lived in Piedmont Court at one time. He was a very interesting guy. He understood poverty. So he was a different kind of spirit. That was another interesting thing I learned during desegregation at the white school, Myers Park. The white people that had experienced poverty had a different mindset of black people, than the white kids who never experienced poverty, who were born with a silver spoon in their mouth. They looked at us like we were just animals or something. I mean those guys stick their nose up at you. They look at you like they had two eyes in their nose. They wouldn't speak. They'd see you, they'd go the other way. That kind of mentality. I experienced that. And that was like cultural shock.

KT: You had said that in middle school you were expecting to go to--

TT: Second Ward High School.

KT: To Second Ward.

TT: Which was an all-black school. In the fifth grade, going back to the fourth, fifth grade, when Second Ward had a pep rally, the whole community went to the pep rally. It was like a holiday. And they had a football game every year called the Queen City Classic. They played West Charlotte. That was like Fourth of July. Everybody would dress up in the school colors and go to the game. And it was like, oh my god, there's nothing I can ever remember as a kid that was more entertaining and that was



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more engaging, emotionally, for the community than the Queen City Classic. And also the House of Prayer.

KT: I was wondering about that, the parades.

TT: They had the parades. They had the parade every year when Daddy Grace came. Those were the two highlights of the year. That was like Christmas and Fourth of July.

KT: So you can remember those parades?

TT: Oh my god. I would sit on the porch. The parade came right by my house down Main Street. It started at Sears and Roebucks at Ninth and Tryon, came down Main to McDowell and out McDowell to Brooklyn. That was the route for the House of Prayer parade. Down Main Street, which was past my house, I used to sit on top of the house. We'd sit on top of the house. Climb on top of the house and watch the parade. I saw that. Even the Queen City Classic, the Shrine Bowl which was off-limits when I was a little kid because it was all white. They didn't have black kids in the Shrine Bowl until later in the 60s. That's when things were segregated. We used to get on top of the house at the football stadium. We'd get on top of some friend's of mine house that's near Central Piedmont. Now there were houses on this little street called Park Drive. We'd get on top of the houses and watch the game. And we were not allowed to go to the game because it was all white. I remember that vividly man. And just those little things, man. Climbing on top of houses, climbing trees, walking the railroad track, walking the creek bank, throwing the rocks, all those things I remember like it was yesterday. Getting back to, we were talking about the back yards? We'd play basketball in the backyards. We'd play golf. We had nine holes of golf in several backyards. We'd dig the holes, and we'd put.

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KT: [Laughter]

TT: We'd made like we're betting with bottle tops. We'd take bottle tops and save them. And they were like coins, like they do in Vegas, the chips?

KT: Right.

TT: And we'd make like we were playing for money. We'd putt and use the bottle tops as trade for your award. We'd have Augusta.

KT: [Laughter]

TT: We'd have like we were at Augusta. We'd imagine that we were on the tour. We're on the PGA, as a kid. Because my uncle used to watch golf, and we watched it. When I went to high school, I had a desire to play golf. After they told me I was going to the white school, the first thing I thought, I said, "Well, maybe I'll get to play golf." But my homeroom teacher discouraged me, instead of encouraging me. And I was used to this all these years in school, when they were segregated, I was used to this nurturing from the teacher, loving you and encouraging you and motivating you to excel and to be at your best. But when I got to high school, it was the opposite. I didn't have that nurturing anymore. I was on my own. It was like a kid being put out in the desert and you gotta learn how to, survival of the fittest.

KT: Do you remember him saying to you, that you had to be a member of the country club?

TT: In so many words, he started talking about the country club. He didn't encourage me to say, "Okay, come out today. We're having try-outs on such and such a day." He didn't do that. That never happened. In other words, he was telling me, that's out of limits. This is a white boy game. Same thing with tennis. Now later on they let

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black kids. There was probably in the 70s, I can find out the specific date and the student's name because I know how to do that. I'm a research expert. I could find out who was the first black person to play tennis at Myers Park. And the first black to play golf. That's public record. But I know I wasn't. I had experience. And where did I have my experience? On the field at Alexander Park. We'd drive across the railroad tracks. I used to take a driver, hit it. We'd drive, see who could hit it the farthest, towards the railroad track, over the track at Alexander School. But I got my first experience as a bird dog for this guy who later became a lawyer. His name was James Martin. He could knock the rubber off a golf ball. He died of a heart attack on a golf course several years ago. He went to college and became a lawyer at North Carolina Central. Him and some more guys used to drive and they used to put holes out in the field, and they'd put. They'd do all that, round the shed at the park. They'd put holes and they'd drive and then they would do putting.

KT: These guys had nowhere to play.

TT: These guys had nowhere to play. These guys had to go to, later on, a place called Revolution Park, which is a race barrier was broken by a guy by the name of Mr. Ray Booton. And a guy named Willy Porter. Willy Porter is now about in his eighties, maybe eighty-four. And Reverend Booton is almost ninety years old. He's ill now. But these guys were awarded just recently. They had a ceremony about that racial, the racial barriers being broken for these guys that play in a public golf course. This was public. They wouldn't let them play in public. But these guys played since the 40s, the late 30s, early 40s. Reverend Booton has tons of trophies. I would love for you to interview him but he has a trach now so he can't talk very much. I could definitely get you with Mr.

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Porter, who was a golfer. So, racial barrier. So that happened. And as I was saying, we used to put in the backyards. But these guys, where I got it from, where I learned this from, they used to caddy, some of the guys. And some of them played. But they hit the ball and we'd go find the ball for a nickel. They'd call us bird dogs. They'd hit the ball and you'd go get the ball, you'd get a nickel. So I used to do that. So I was an entrepreneur. Let me tell you a little bit about my entrepreneuring experience. I used to do that, be a bird dog. I also, when I was a kid, I was about eight, nine, this was what, '63, '64. I used to take the ashes, we had a pot belly stove. I used to take the ashes from the stove, put them on the side of the house. Everybody had chores in the house. We cut wood because we had an oil heater, but we also had a wooden stove. That was tradition in the neighborhood. A bunch of people had wooden stoves. The coal man came and the wood man came. You bought wood. I would take the ashes when I'd shake the grate, and it was my turn to do it, and put them on the side of the house. I told my brother to do the same thing. Just leave them out there. He says, "What are you doing with the ashes?" I said, "Don't worry about it." But I had a guy in the neighborhood, Mr. Carr. He had a mom and pop store on the corner. He had a garden in his yard and he used the ashes for fertilizer. There was another man named Mr. Murray who lived at the corner of Ninth and Myers Street that had a grapevine. He'd put ashes around his grapevine to make it really, nurture it, and make those grapes just look like they're just phenomenal. But anyway, Mr. Murray and Mr. Carr was my major customers. I had other customers in the neighborhood. I saved those ashes and when the spring comes, I'd give them wheelbarrows of ashes for fifty cents.

KT: Wow.

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TT: And I'd have a pocket full of change and I'd shake my pocket. You know back in the day you'd shake your pocket so they could hear your change.

KT: [Laughter]

TT: Don't worry about it. They said, "What are you doing with those ashes?" I'm the little guy. He's Big [        ]. "Where that boy going with them ashes? Look at him." You know, and rolling them ashes. "I'll be back. Don't worry about it." They'd say, "Where you going?" "Don't worry about," I said. I didn't want anybody to get my hustles.

KT: [Laughter]

TT: So that was that entrepreneuring spirit. Then later on as I got a little older, I was right at that age. I'd knock on people's door. Everybody in the neighborhood, the seniors, the really senior citizens who couldn't get out and walk, go to the store for them. Get a quart of milk. Get them a loaf of bread. Fifty cent worth of bologna. Dollar worth of ham. Get them some Crisco or dip or snuff. And the older guys, they'd chew tobacco. Or some of them made their own cigarettes. Back then kids could buy tobacco products. Of course, you can't do it now. I get the snuff or get Red Man tobacco or I'd get Sir Albert cigarettes. They'd twist the cigarettes up and the papers and whatever they wanted from the grocery store, I'd get it. And my favorite response was, "Keep the change."

KT: [Laughter]

TT: So I'd go and they'd give me two or three bucks, or a dollar. Really a dollar was like going to the grocery, you'd get three dollars worth of grocery, man, you had, your wagon was full. I had a wagon. I'd go to the store for people. I'd ride with my knee on the wagon, on the back of that wagon, and push it. And ride with one knee on the

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wagon. I was like a taxi service. I went to the store for everybody in the neighborhood. Everybody knew everybody so, "Here comes Michael." They'd call me Michael. "Here come Michael. Michael going to bring you, do you want anything from the store?" I loved to hear that, too. "Here comes Michael on that wagon, Y'all want anything from the store?" So that was my hustle. I was an entrepreneur. So I was learning how to generate revenue at an early age because we didn't have a lot of money like a lot of families. We weren't the poorest family in the neighborhood, but we weren't the richest family. I did things like that to generate revenue.

KT: What about crime? Were there gangs? Was there anything dangerous?

TT: No, there was, the only danger there was I remember vividly was there were people always there were people gambling. That was always around. I didn't know much about prostitution, that kind of thing.

KT: There was some of that.

TT: Oh, sure. There was some of that. They had, what do you call, guest houses around the city. They didn't have a lot of hotels back then. They'd call them guest houses. I remember that vividly. Also there was places where people would gamble.

KT: Would they call this--?

TT: When the Prohibition was going on.

KT: Would they call those the gambling houses?

TT: Yeah, they called them, liquor houses. They call them liquor houses now, but back then they had home brew. They made home brew. The brown-looking stuff, looked like beer. That was always going on.

KT: How about the numbers? Was the numbers big?

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TT: It was big as I got older. I didn't know much about that. I'm sure it was around. As a kid, I didn't know much about that, but crime-wise, people didn't, there wasn't a lot of shooting. Every now and then, you'd hear somebody cut. People carried knives more than. You hear about people getting Red Devil lye thrown on them. I remember. Yes, throw lye on you. Like some kind of acid. People use a different kind of method of violence then. Of course that was horrible back then, but that was about the most horrible thing I heard of. People doing stuff like that. There wasn't a lot of shooting because people didn't have, the guns weren't as accessible as they are now. It just wasn't the blatant kind of violence you have now because all these kids have guns. They give guns away. You can get a gun now for a sandwich. You can get a gun faster than you can get a sandwich. You can get a gun faster than you can get a plate of food or some clothes to go on your back, or whatever. Guns are just easy to get. Back then, it was out of limits for a child to have a gun. There was a .32. They called it a Saturday Night Special. A .32 caliber was the gun back then. A .32. If you had a .38, you were like, that was what the police had. So you were like a detective. You were like a private eye if you have a .38. But anyway--.

KT: How about, I'm wondering--?

TT: The ambulance, I remember that.

KT: What was that called?

TT: The ambulance. What we call the ambulance now? That transports you to the hospital? I remember as a kid that was another thing that sticks out in my mind. It was in a hearse. So black people, if somebody got hurt or shot or lady having a baby and they need to rush her to the hospital, the hearse came and got them.

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KT: [Laughter]

TT: The hearse from the funeral home.

KT: They ran the ambulance.

TT: They ran the ambulance services like Alexander, the oldest business in Charlotte that still exists, black business, is Alexander Funeral Home. They had one. Of course Greer funeral home is another old one and Long Funeral Home is another old one. I remember those. I was a paperboy for Long Funeral Home. They were in the neighborhood on Caldwell Street, which is right up the street. I remember as a kid taking the paper to the funeral home. This is when I got a little older. I had a paper route. The funeral home, the guy would try to get me to come into the funeral home. I was afraid of dead people. That's another thing. Black kids didn't [ ] with the dead.

KT: [Laughter]

TT: When I was a kid, in my neighborhood, somebody died, they had the wake at the person's house. They brought the body home and they stayed overnight. So man, that was, oh my god. If I had to go to the store and somebody died on the block, I'd cross the street to avoid going past that house because I was afraid. They'd have the light and the flower. They'd have a flower on the door and they'd have the funeral home company name and the person's name on the door. That sort of got a lot of attention. They'd say, "Somebody's dead on the block." They'd see a flower on the door. So when I had to go to the store, I'd go around the block or across the street, whatever, just to avoid that because that was just out of limits. But I remember vividly Long Funeral Home. Me and Mr. Lem Long, the guy who owns the funeral home now. We laugh about it. The guy



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picked up. I don't know who that guy was and tried to take me into the funeral home and said, "I'm going to put you in one of these caskets."

KT: Oh, lord.

TT: Oh my god. I hollered and Mr. Long said, "Leave that boy alone. Let that boy go." And from that day on, I would never go to collect money. I'd just give him a paper.

[Laughter]

KT: [Laughter]

TT: I dropped the paper. He say, "When are you going to come and collect?" That traumatized me so much. I didn't go back to collect anymore. That was funny.

KT: Were there people in the neighborhood who you identified as real strong race people? People who were--?

TT: Activists?

KT: Activists.

TT: Yes of them one was Reverend Leake, who later became bishop. He ran for mayor in '65. He was so outspoken, it was just phenomenal. It was just amazing. He was very charismatic with delivering his approach or his feelings about what should be done to improve the quality of life for the community at large, the minority folk. He was just always on point. And he's just a very, very to the point orator that he just got in your bones when he spoke. He was like a father figure to the kids. We had here at the church, we had vacation bible school. We had summer youth programs. He got federal grants that were available. He later ran OIC, Organization for something is employment improvement. It was vocational education program, OIC. He ran that here in Charlotte later on. But when we were kids, he always got grants from the state and federal and local

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level to create jobs for youth in the summer. So he was very, very, very active in that sense. Then you had Dr. Hawkins, who was another who ran for governor in 1955, in the '50s. I don't know exactly what date it was, but he was an activist. That was, back then, was unheard of. A black man running for governor? In North Carolina? Even now that would be, just like Obama raised such eyebrows running for president. But back then, we had people who were activists who were very conscious of the need and the plight of the black community, who knew what the needs were, and fought with all, mustered all their energies and all their resources into making it possible to get the word out to people that were in a position to make effective change.

KT: What's your earliest civil rights memory?

TT: My earliest civil rights memory was [pauses] when Martin Luther King died. I went up downtown to the Square, Trade and Tryon Streets. That was my earliest. I used to hear people talk about when Martin Luther King was on TV and hear the speeches and they're talking about King. That was earliest memory. But to actually when he died, when he got killed. No, no it wasn't '68. He got killed in '68.

KT: That's right. April '68.

TT: It was April '68. Now that was the most vast memory that I had, '68. And you know what? That's interesting. I thought it was earlier. I don't know why. But Martin, early civil rights memory was third grade. I sold papers in the third grade. You know what's interesting? When we were kids, we did more progressive, radical things in terms of going out and doing, selling papers. Like I was saying, going to the store for people, knocking around people's doors, selling ashes like I did. Doing all these radical things that normal kids didn't do because we were limited in resources and we had to do

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it almost. We didn't have to do it, but it was good to do it because that was less your parents had to give you. But I sold papers called the Pink Files. That was after school when I was a kid. Third grade. And I think about my son now. He's sixteen and he's never did half of the things I did in his life and he's sixteen. I sold papers at eight years old on the middle of the street. The busiest street in Charlotte. Independence Boulevard. Shamrock and Eastway. There's a grocery store called AG grocery store. I sold papers in front of that store. We used to stand on the islands in the middle of the street at rush hour in the evenings and sell the Pink Files, which was the evening news of the Charlotte Observer. It was called the Charlotte News then. There was no Charlotte Observer. It was the News. There was a morning paper and there was an evening paper. They called it the Pink Files. And I sold that Pink Files. It had a pink strip on the side. Paper cost ten cents. I got two cents a paper. I had to sell fifty to make a dollar. Can you imagine at eight years old what a big bag of fifty papers? That was like carrying a, god, like a bear. Like a grizzly bear on your back. You know what's amazing? I wanted to make more money because the big boys had two. And I wanted to carry two, and I couldn't do it. It was just too much, to make two dollars. That was funny. But later on, I got where I got a big boy to get three. And I'd help him carry it. They'd take it off when I was working at a store that I didn't have to stand at the corner. When I'd stand in front of the store, I'd get two. So I could make two bucks. You'd worked all day, on a Saturday, to make a dollar. Make it all day to make two dollars. And that was a lot of money back then, of course, in '63, '64. Three or four bucks in your pocket. When I sold those ashes, and I knocked on the door for those people and go to the store, and I had two, three, four, five dollars in my pocket, man that was, I was high cut. Because they didn't take but a few more dollars to

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get a pair of Converse. Chuck Taylors were like \$9.95. So I could work two, three days and get me a pair of Chuck Taylors. I had a pair of Converse in an early age. People would say, "How'd he get them Converse?" And people would be, "Where'd that pee wee get them Converse?" Oh, I was cool, buddy. You couldn't tell me it. I had Converse. I had some white Chuck Taylors, my first pair.

KT: But you remember something to do with the civil rights movement going back that far?

TT: Of course. I can go back to the civil rights movement when, the furthest I can remember back was when I was in the third grade. President John F. Kennedy got killed. And everybody in the school was just crying and booing. What is the world is going on? The president is got killed. Somebody shot JFK. The guy that I sold newspapers for, he came to the school to get us early because they wanted to get that paper out. I went out and sold that paper that day. And man, that was a day that I will never forget. We sold so many papers. I sold like five bundles of papers. So that day I made about six, seven dollars. And I'm wondering why did I sell so papers. I didn't understand that. Why couldn't I do this all the time? But I could hear people talking about issues, about JFK helping black people. JFK did more than any president to change this country, just the whole spirit of him. Ask not what you can do for your country but you can do. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. That spirit, it was just ringing and it was just ringing. And then the civil rights pieces. The Black Panthers. As I was a kid, I used to hear a lot about them. The Black Muslims. You know, you could hear more of that stuff because people were talking about politics more. That was my first taste at like eight years old. Then I remember later on, the Black Panthers

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being visible in the community. They had a place on Irwin Avenue, well on Oakland, called the Black House. I was real young, but I remember them talking about it. And I remember seeing the house vividly. And I remember seeing the guys with the black tams on, walking around, talking about black power and talking about black people and unity and talking about improving the quality of life for the black community. People getting out to vote, talking about feeding people. In fact, they fed people. Those kinds of things I was exposed to at an early age.

KT: When King was assassinated, where were you when you heard the news?

TT: When King was assassinated, everybody immediately went downtown. We're going to the square. People started going downtown. And I remember vividly on the square, they were knocking out windows. There was violence. I mean there was reaction to that was to, you know, "You helped kill King. We're gonna get you back." Kind of mentality.

KT: People were angry.

TT: People were angry so people were throwing. I remember when I got to the square, the police officer said, "Y'all gotta get out of here. I'll catch ten of you." I'm standing in front of Eckerd's. It was like a cul-de-sac. And he starts coming towards us. I'll never forget. I was a little kid, man. I was like a kid. When I say kid, I was like twelve years old. Sixth grade. What month was it when King died?

KT: April.

TT: April? So school was in. So that was on a school day. So I was in the sixth grade at First Ward School. Interesting that you asked that question. I remember the

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breaking windows. Of course, I didn't participate because I was afraid, but I was there.

[Laughter]

KT: But the police came at you and wanted to try to clear the square.

TT: The police came out. Clear the street. Clear the street. I remember that vividly. They broke a lot of windows downtown. That happened all over the country. Looking back at it, it did happen here, too. I saw it. That was my first experience.

KT: Did the police end up arresting people downtown?

TT: I'm sure they arrested people. They arrested some people, I'm sure. There were some arrests. And they were some people that got beat with the sticks and what have you. I remember a time when I was a kid, everybody went downtown on the weekends to the square and it was like offbeat, off limits to do certain things down there, like spit on the sidewalk or jaywalk. Or there were stores down there that you couldn't--if you bought a hot dog in Kress's or Woolworths you couldn't sit down and eat. As a kid, I remember that. But it never dawned on me, like I was telling you, that this was going on. Because I didn't know what racism was. All I knew was that I was going uptown and I saw these buildings. And I was looking, window shopping, and wish, we call it "wish me." I wish I had this and I wish I had something because you couldn't afford it.

KT: Do you remember the sit-ins downtown?

TT: The sit-ins, I remember them talking about it.

KT: But you can't picture it.

TT: I can't picture. I'm like eight years old, seven years old when there's sit-ins. I'm like eight years old, seven years old, '63, '64. I'm like seven, eight, nine years old. I don't remember. I'm too young, but here I'm talking about it. But even then, it still didn't

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dawn on me as going through those stores that we couldn't sit down and eat. I do remember you couldn't, you had to move on. It was always you keep moving. That was the word. It was always keep moving.

KT: Keep moving.

TT: I thought keep moving was okay because they did it. It was a tradition. Keep moving. I remember Kress's, you'd get a hot dog. Keep moving. You just couldn't hang around. You guys can't hang around here. I remember hearing that as a kid. So I experienced that. So my view of the world was different from those kids I went to Myers Park with later on. And they looked at the world as, "This is my world. This is a white man's world. You're supposed to work for me. You're supposed to be in servitude to me. My grandparents had slaves. We want that back" mentality. That was the mentality that I had from these guys who I went to school, who I sit beside. And some of these guys I'd built relationships with, but still that racism was there. That giggling. They'd give me that love, for Brown Bear. They'd call me brown bear in high school. "Brown Bear, he's the guy. He's a lovely kid. He's a happy-go-lucky guy. He's always the same." Which I had a spirit of. I was always the same. But I could hear them giggling, "You know, that nigger or something." I could hear the little giggle. Or the little jokes. "Hee hee hee hee." And a lot of those guys turn up some of them are attorneys now, some of them are dentists. But all of them are not bad now. But some of them, I don't think of all them were bad then. They were just a product of their condition, the way they were raised up. They were a product of their environment. Just like I was a product of my environment.

KT: These would have been the wealthiest kids in the city, right?

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TT: In the city. For instance, in my homeroom there's a guy, a kid, when he turned sixteen, he had a brand new Porsche. Guess what? When I turned sixteen, guess what I did? I drove a school bus. My car was a school bus.

KT: You drove the bus?

TT: Sixteen, I think my sophomore year, my junior year I drove a school bus. And my senior year. I drove a school bus. Back then, kids could drive school buses. They don't do it now because adults do it.

KT: Whose bus were you driving?

TT: Myers Park. I drove the elementary school and junior high school bus.

KT: And then you dropped yourself off at the high school?

TT: I dropped myself off. I'd drive the bus home. We drove the bus home. In the morning, I ran my route. I did elementary school for maybe a year. I did junior high school, Sedgeville. I did my school. And I even drove the bus--check this out, this is interesting. Didn't have a car, so after basketball practice. I played basketball, of course. Couldn't play golf or tennis. That was off-limits, the white school like Myers Park. I didn't have Izod shirts and wore penny loafers, the best of clothing because we had nice clothing. In fact, I thought we dressed as nice as they did with less, because of my style. We had style back then. We wore nice pants and shirts. We didn't like they do now, the pants hanging down, that was a whole different mentality. You were trying to look nice for the girls. So we never had a problem with the dressing part because, as I said, I had an entrepreneuring spirit. I always had a job. I worked in the hospital, Carolina Medical Center. Well, it was Charlotte Memorial Hospital then. Washing dishes in high school. And in junior high school I worked at a Chinese restaurant, working washing dishes. So



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there were jobs. We had stuff. We were able to buy our own clothes, our own shoes and that kind of thing. But we just didn't have tons of money. We didn't have a credit card like the white kids. We didn't get a new car when we turned sixteen. Very few of us did.

[Laughter]

KT: Do you remember your first day at Myers Park?

TT: I vividly remember my first day at Myers Park. All I could think about was that station wagon, with the white kids on the back of it. With the tailgate down. We get to school, we--

KT: How did you get to school?

TT: We rode to school on a city bus. It was subsidized by the city.

KT: So this is before you were driving the bus?

TT: Before I was driving the bus. Sophomore year. Before I was driving the bus. We were bussed to school on a city bus, regular city bus that was subsidized by the school system.

KT: All black kids mostly coming from First Ward?

TT: Mostly coming from First Ward. The black projects. Piedmont Court was the white projects, which were for limited resource white people. Fairview Homes was the black projects, which was the limited resource neighborhood for black people. They were both built the same year, 1940. As well as another project called Belvedere Homes, was built during that same period. As a result of the Emergency Relief Act where they started doing things from the afternoon the fall of the 1929, when--.

KT: The Depression and the stock market.

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TT: The Depression. After the Depression, on the heels of the Depression, the New Deal, when Teddy was in office, they came up with these new things, new ways of addressing the needs of limited resource people. These places were being built in the neighborhoods, like I said, was mixed First Ward and Fourth Ward. And surrounding that you had these limited resource areas like Fairview Homes, Piedmont Court, place where you call New Town. New Town is over off where the men's shelter is uptown now. That was New Town. There were blacks living over there on the other side of the railroad tracks. During that time, when I went to Myers Park, vividly I remember, we were bussed by, like I said, the city bus, getting off the bus and white kids saying, shaking their heads like this. "No, you niggers ain't coming to this school." I remember that. I remember a chain in a white kid's hand. White kids on the back of a station wagon with cigarettes, smoking cigarettes and swinging the chain. "Niggers, you niggers ain't, we're going to beat the wheels off you niggers if you come in here. We gonna beat the wheels off you, baby." But that changed after a few weeks because them blacks, they just enough was enough. They'd never been, that was culture shock. They'd never been confronted like that. That wasn't a pretty picture, man, during that time. It was sad. And then after all that, the principal, Dr. Larry Lewis, got all the kids together. I love this man. I really, really wholeheartedly believe Dr. Larry Lewis was a man that had a spirit that all kids deserve an education. All kids deserve to be safe and deserve a safe environment for them to get an education. And all kids deserve to have equal resources. He really believed that. I didn't understand it at the beginning, but after I got to know Larry Lewis, he was one of the people out of all the people that was there, that encouraged me. That took time out and talked to me. "Brown Bear, you can be anything you want to be. You know what? If

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you put your mind to it, and you use your time wisely.” And that stuck with me. He said, “You can do anything you want to do. What do you want to do Brown Bear? What do you want to be?” He was the only teacher out of all the teachers over there. I had some black teachers, like Ms.--who later became teacher of the year, administrator of the year and all of that. She just came out of college. Her name was Thompson. She was a Thompson. She became Ms. Yage. Her name was Ms. Yage. She was a biology teacher. Marion Yage. M-A-R-I-O-N. Marion Yage. She just got out of North Carolina Bennett College. Biology major. She was my biology teacher. Tenth grade. Man, I never received so much love and nourishment. She was like the schools I’d come from all these years, and also Ms. Ashbrook, who’s her name, biology teacher. Ms. Ashley. Boy, I had some teachers that were tough, now. Tough as nails. Ms. Ashbury was also a teacher I had who was a biology teacher as well. Man, tough as nails. I see her now and she looks, “Brown Bear, is that you?” She remembered me, man, after all them years. I said, “That’s Ms. Ashbury, man.” It was like being in class again. They were disciplinarians. We had that at the school. There were some black teachers who came from other schools during desegregation. You had that nourishment. And you had that sense of, do the right thing, encourage you. But you didn’t get that from the white teachers. The white teachers didn’t get close to you because they’d never been around black kids. Some of the white teachers, they’d never taught a black kid. So that was culture shock to them, too. So they were breaking the coal on that as well. So it was some trying times for that transition.

KT: What events led up to the riots?

TT: What events led up to the riots was one day we’re in the cafeteria, and--.

KT: This is about how long into the year?

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TT: This is about the third week, second or third week of school.

KT: Of the year being?

TT: Sophomore year. 1970. Second or third week of 1970. Sitting in the cafeteria, eating, laughing. Having a good time. During lunch there's, school's the best part of the day, and recess and lunch.

KT: I'm guessing there's black tables and white tables?

TT: Black tables on this side. White tables on this side. It was desegregated. It was a desegregated school but the white kids sat on one side and the black kids sat on the other. There was no white kids sitting with the black kids and there was no black kids sitting with the white kids. It just wasn't happening. There may have been one or two that became friends and they were maybe mingling. But they weren't sitting right in the middle of the blacks or right in the middle of the whites. It wasn't happening. But what happened one day was a saucer, not a big plate, but a little plate, a saucer came flying across from the white side. And just like hit the top of a table and just, "Somebody threw a plate." A small plate over from the white side to the black side. Just threw it. Just threw a plate. And then from the black side something went over to the white side. A spoon or a fork. Then from the white side a tray of something came, and then it was just an all-out, started in the cafeteria. It was like, oh my god. That's how it was. It went from that to the ratch, the milk crates, them iron milk crates, to tables to chairs and people getting thrown out of windows. That's the way it was. The police came. I remember vividly the fights and the helicopters. Snoopy, they call it. A police helicopter came over. So I knew it was big time because when you saw snoopy when I was a kid, something real bad had

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happened. Like a car wreck or something that was going to be on the news. And then police cars get turned over. So that was a riot.

KT: So it moved out into the parking lot?

TT: It moved out into the yard, the middle yard, where the grassy knoll area. Between the L.A. building and the cafeteria building, administration building.

KT: Do you remember fearing for your own safety at some point?

TT: I'm going to tell you, after a few days and after getting rattled up and these white guys ain't going to beat me. This mentality. Talking on the bus and the guys with chains. That was a conversation, "These guys got chains." So people were getting prepared for it because they knew that they had to fight. The fight was coming. There was threats from the white kids. "You niggers ain't going to this school. You niggers ain't. Nobody come to Myers Park. This is white. And it's going to stay white." Because it was an off limits. Now there were blacks who went to Myers Park prior to 1970. '66, 68. But you couldn't count them on one hand in the student body.

KT: But this was before the bussing?

TT: This was before the culture shock, the bussing. There were white kids who were actually radical and rejecting the rule that we're going to have black kids at this school. So that's when the riots started.

KT: So black students realized you needed to defend yourselves and get prepared if they've got chains?

TT: Yes. They realized that these guys had chains, man. Guys shooting in the air. It got that bad. Shooting .22 pistols in the air and swinging chains, throwing the fingers, calling names.

## **Tillman**

KT: I'm sure people were arrested after that first?

TT: I'm sure there were some people arrested during that time. That's public record as well.

KT: And how long did that last, the back and forth?

TT: Backlash lasted about two, three days. The first day was major. The first day was major in all the schools, Garringer High School, maybe seven or eight schools.

KT: Just explosive.

TT: Explosive. They fought everywhere. So they were talking about, there was a fight yesterday at Independence. "Yeah, well tomorrow we're going to kick their ass." So it was that kind of thing. That stimulated, it was reaction to confrontation, as opposed to being proactive and doing something more constructive and avoiding it. It was just a reactionary kind of thing. It was stimulated, it was initiated by those things that we were talking about. The calling of names, and the swinging of chains.

KT: Do you remember trying to avoid being caught alone and that kind of thing?

TT: Oh yes.

KT: What did you do to--?

TT: I'm going to be honest with you. When I was a sophomore, I'd never been around that many white people. It was culture shock. It was some fear and then there was some aggression in me as well. I'm not going to just back down and just run. Because there was camaraderie. As I was saying earlier, I learned a lot about who I was by then. It just wasn't like I was a little kid. By this time I had learned about who I was in terms of African American, who I was in terms of Africa. Me coming from a land that had many resources that my ancestors, coming from a land that had all the diamonds, that had all

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the uranium, which this country operated on these resources that I've learned by then that this country became what it is based on the resources that came from my ancestors. Even the labor. The slave labor. A lot of the wealth that's been accumulated by the white community, these people living in Myers Park, was on the shoulders of my grandparents and my mother being a domestic worker then, and then my grandmother being a domestic worker. Raising your kids, building your fortunes, helping to build the coffers that they had. I had a better understanding. So of course there was some anger in me about these guys telling me that I'm less than who I am. That was a different mentality by then. Of course I was exposed to the Black Panthers, their rhetoric. I was exposed to Stokely Carmichael. Man, there's a lot of folk. H. Rap Brown. There's a number of activists out there who was visible and I could read then, and I'd read the paper and I'd see about these events taking place in New York and California, the civil rights movement and all that stuff. I was aware of what was going on. So there were a different kind of mindset by the time I got to high school, as opposed to when I was a kid. And blatant racism was in my face where when I was selling the papers and being called a nigger and people riding by, "Hey nigger, what the hell are you doing? Get your ass out of that street, nigger." You know, that kind of thing. I didn't understand it then, but as I got older, where people like T.J. Reddy came into my life at eleven years old and teaching me about Africa.

KT: Where did you meet T.J. Reddy?

TT: I met T.J. Reddy, there was a house in the neighborhood. There was a summer youth program that they had that T.J. worked with. That he taught culture and art, education. So arts and education was a thing that T.J. had passion for.

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KT: Was this through the North Carolina Fund?

TT: This was through a church. Some Episcopal church fund that he had a grant from. He could tell you more about it. You need to interview T.J. He taught us culture. He drew a picture of Africa on the board, on the black board, and inside of Africa he drew a picture of the United States. He said, "Do you guys know what that is?" We knew what the United States was. We said, "The United States." He says, "Well, what is this United States inside of?" Nobody knew what it was because we'd never been taught Africa in the curriculum, in the schools. They didn't teach Africa. They didn't teach Egypt. They didn't teach that there was civilization, the first civilization in the world was in Africa. They didn't teach that. They stayed away from that. The mummies and the hieroglyphics and science of medicine and mathematics and algebra and geometry was in Africa. And the great libraries that Socrates and Aristotle and these people from Greece and Rome went in Africa down in Africa in the libraries of Alexander to get wisdom and knowledge and understanding. They didn't teach us that. But T.J. was telling us about that kind of stuff. T.J. was telling us that Africa was a place that had many resources and that, look at Africa. And he said, "Look at it." And first he asked, "Well, what is it?" And we'd say, well we didn't know what it was. And he says, then one kid says, "It looks like an island." He said, "That's a big island there, ain't it? It is an island. It's in the ocean. It's connected. It's in a body of water." He did say that. And I looked at it and I said, "It looks like a boot upside-down." And he said, "Well that's a good analogy because you're going to remember it when you see it now." It's shaped like an upside-down boot. And I always remember that. He says, "Now look at the United States. See how small it is compared to Africa? Africa has vast resources, golds and minerals and natural resources



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such as uranium, which they use to take rockets up in the air. It has gold and silver and all kinds of fruits and vegetables and nutrients and soil and silver. He called it Mother Africa. The mother of Africa. He went on and on and on talking about the art, talking about the music, talking about all this different stuff.

KT: So you'd had some exposure to those kinds of politics by the time of 1970, as had, I'm guessing, most black kids your age, had gotten pieces of this through the media.

[Brief interruption.]

KT: So you remember going to the black houses as a kid?

TT: Yes, I remember going to the Black House, maybe I was about fourteen, thirteen, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. So that would have been '68. Yes, '67, '68.

KT: What would have brought you over there?

TT: There was an Oaklawn Community Center over there and we'd play basketball. They'd talk about the Black Panthers. They would visit. They'd walk around the neighborhood. They were recruiting people. They'd talk about voter registration. They'd talk about people helping themselves and being conscious of the fact that what racism, defining racism. Because a lot of people just didn't have knowledge of what was going on regarding around racism. That's what they stood on. Their platform was to protect themselves. You know they believe in arming themselves. That was a little scary right there, but it was real. It was in your face. Look, we're not taking no more of you guys. You guys are not going to just shoot us down and we're going to stand there and look at you.

KT: I know that in the West Coast police brutality was always a big issue.

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TT: Yes, police brutality was--in my experiences, I used to see guys, as a kid, drinking, Walker Street drinking. I've seen police cars pull up on them and, "What are you doing? So and so public drunkenness." Just beat them. Beat them and put them in the car. Just whooped the wheels off of them. They'd be drinking, public drinking. They didn't just pick you up and put you in the car. The paddy wagon would come. That was a truck that they'd put you in the back. That was when I was a kid. I remember the paddy wagon. They didn't have that as I got older. "Here come the paddy wagon, get that guy. He's drinking." They would whoop him with the sticks and put him in the truck. They didn't just arrest you. "Well, you have a right to be arrested. You have a right to be" how do they say it? The Miranda.

KT: To remain silent.

TT: You have a right to remain silent and anything can be used against you in a court of law. You didn't read no Miranda to you, man. When I was a kid, there was no such thing as a Miranda. I never saw that. You have a right to be silent. Your right to be silent was that stick upside your head. [Laughter] That's funny. But that was the truth. Of course that changed over the years.

KT: At what point then did things settle down in the high school?

TT: It settled down, Dr. Larry Lewis, the end of, near the middle of the year, the end of the year, tenth grade, Dr. Larry Lewis was a renegade man. There's that had the active concern that really showed me the spirit of concern.

KT: This is a white principal?

TT: White principal who was not one of my teachers, but the head principal. He liked me and he made me feel good about myself being at that school. He calmed me, to

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make me feel it's okay to be here. It's okay, you can, to excel and to be a part of this experience, and make something good of it. And that you could utilize these resources to do some great things in your life and could make as much money. He told me right now, he said in my sophomore year in high school, no my junior year in high school, the end of the year. He said, "Brown Bear, with your ability and your spirit and your knack to get along with people and to lead, your knack to be a leader." I ran for student government. I was executive government, the Key Club. I was one of the first blacks to be on the Key Club, which was an all-white club. And also ran for student government my senior--not president, but I was a student executive. I had to campaign and ran for office because I was popular, playing basketball. I was active in the--.

KT: So you played all three years?

TT: Played all three years. Played J.V. in the tenth grade, which was another experience. White kids playing on the team, parents who had money, they thought they could buy their kids time to play on the court.

KT: You're kidding.

TT: So there was a little bit of that going on, too. The rich kid. "My kid's supposed to be playing." Talking to the coach. They were wealthy people, Myers Park.

KT: So they were just used to buying that access.

TT: They were used to buying their way. Used to buying access. So now you have black kids in the playing field now. We had to deal with that, too. The money was coming from the white community. They had all the money for the booster people. The booster people had influence on the coach to a certain degree. But we had coaches who

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were very hardcore, like Jack Hardman and what's my J.V. coach? I need to be whooped to death.

KT: [Laughter]

TT: Abe. Man, I feel ashamed not being able to say it right off. J.V. coach.

KT: Senior high, about how many--?

TT: It was Wayne Ears. My J.V. coach. Wayne. I couldn't never forget you.

Wayne Ayers. What a wonderful guy. Went to Appalachian State. His brother Pete Ayers played basketball for Myers Park. Wayne Ayers was quite a guy, man. He was encouraging me. He was [ ] too. My basketball coaches I was very close to because I loved basketball. That was one of my passions. Still is a passion. But Wayne Ayers was my J.V. coach and Coach Hardman who is now down at Wilmington. He's been under the weather a little bit. He's an older guy. He lived in Piedmont Court. He used to say, "There was a time that I didn't have much." He compared his being limited resource. He was one of the people, like I was saying, some of the teachers made you feel part of the school. But the ones who never experienced poverty or anywhere near poverty or middle class, they weren't sensitive to your issues. But the ones who experienced being lack of resources, they could identify with where you were coming from. So that impacted. I felt that very strongly.

KT: In your senior year, so about how many, twelve, fifteen boys on the team?

TT: Yes, in my senior year, I was the captain of basketball.

KT: How many blacks and how many whites on the basketball team?

TT: My senior year we had maybe, it was majority black. The schools were beginning to, back in the old day, there weren't many blacks because there weren't many

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blacks in the school. But when the schools were seventy thirty population or eighty twenty population or anywhere near that thirty percent, forty percent blacks, there were more blacks on the teams. Football and basketball. Baseball was few blacks. That was defined as a white boy's sport. Baseball was kind of off limits for blacks, just like tennis and golf. That was blatant racism, that blacks couldn't play baseball. Blacks couldn't play golf. Blacks could only run a ball and shoot a ball. That still hasn't been broken in some communities across the country, that we're just not smart enough. Even the quarterback. The quarterback wasn't smart enough. A black wasn't smart enough to be quarterback. The first black quarterback in Myers Park was Willy Mickerson, a good buddy of mine. We grew up together. That was funny. He could throw the ball. That kid could throw the ball forty yards at a blatant speed. Like a bullet, that boy was. And he could run the ball. That was broken, the racial barrier. Blacks couldn't throw a ball. Blacks couldn't do this, couldn't coach, couldn't be a manager and all that. Of course, that was happening on a national level. Then you had guys like Arthur Ashe who played tennis, who was a national, played in the Olympics, played professional tennis during my early days, high school. That raised the awareness of the white community that a black could play tennis. And you had Charlie Sifford, who was a black guy from Charlotte who played on a national tour. But one of the best black golfers in Charlotte was James Black who played in the L.A. Classic Open. He didn't win it, but I think he was in the top on the leader board. He was from Charlotte. There were some good golfers in Charlotte. But they just didn't believe that we were ready for it, the major leagues of golf. Now Tiger Woods is just proving them wrong all around the board with that. And when I see that sometimes, I think about, it reminds me of myself and my sophomore year and my home room class

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where I wanted to play golf and my home room teacher discouraged me instead of encouraging me to play golf. That leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. But I've forgiven him and in my spirit and prayed for him many times. I can't hold on to that.

KT: But I'm sure that--.

TT: It's just sheer ignorance.

KT: That wasn't a unique experience. I think that probably every black child went through a version of that homeroom teacher.

TT: Right. Even in band. "You shouldn't play this instrument. You should play this instrument. You shouldn't run track, but you should do this. But you should do that." Instead of just allowing the child to explore and try to encourage them. Set the platform and then encourage them to excel in what they feel is conducive to their needs or what's their calling. I don't think that's good. A lot of parents do that, too. Tell the kids, "You should be a doctor. You should do this. You should do that." And just ruin the child because they're doing something they don't want to do. And that causes a lot of stuff like, I think a lot of kids are suicidal, become suicidal when parents force them to do stuff. So you can imagine what racism did to black people when they were put in a position to do something they didn't want to do. That's the same difference. The people, educators, were in a position to make decisions that affect them in so many ways. But I think people like Dr. Larry Lewis, who was a little open-minded, who was very, very well educated man who was very sensitive to the fact that where these people were coming from was a different mindset. He was encouraging. He was the guy who told me I could make twenty thousand dollars a year by the time I got out of high school. Just go out and get a job because my ambition and my sense of diligence. He just saw something in me and the

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more I think about myself now, I think about, when I think about people that influenced me, he always comes back to mind. Dr. Larry Lewis. His wife, Georgia Lewis.

KT: What did you do after high school? Did you have an idea what you wanted to do as you're going through high school?

TT: When I was going through high school, I'm going to be honest. My experience from high school, having the challenges of racism and having the challenges of finding out what my course was or what my call was. High school was tough times for me because I was very inquisitive. There were still a lot of questions that weren't answered. I got involved in this thing of being very radical about my approach to get some answers. You know what I'm saying?

KT: This took a political direction for you?

TT: It took somewhat of a political direction in my early days. The peace movement, the hippie movement. I was sort of in a hippie mode. [Laughter] You know, that's funny. But I used to go to the concerts. I remember September 1974, the August Jam. That was culture shock.

KT: Where was that?

TT: That was at Charlotte Motor Speedway. The biggest motor speedway probably in the country.

KT: Who played at the jam?

TT: Black Oak Arkansas.

KT: [Laughter]

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TT: It was mc-ed by Wolf Man Jack. This was so huge. It was like a hundred thousand people there. This was so huge that the acts couldn't come through a gate or a door. They had to come through a helicopter pad.

KT: Fly them in.

TT: The Marshall what band?

KT: Tucker.

TT: The Marshall Tucker Band. Overdrive, who was that?

KT: Bachman Turner Overdrive.

TT: Bachman Turner Overdrive. Now we knew about that.

KT: What would have taken you to--?

TT: What do you know about that?

KT: This is just the music of the seventies.

TT: [Laughter] That was crazy man.

KT: That's the rock of the seventies.

TT: That was what I was in to.

KT: But that's like, I think of that as white southern rock. Is that?

TT: What was happening was, it was by me going to the white schools, I'd met friends who were into that. It was cultural exchange. I was into [AC-DC] and of course I was into jazz because I grew up around jazz. Miles Davis and all that stuff. But people like Earth, Wind and Fire. Stevie Wonder was always one of my renowned artists of all times. Stevie will always be on the top, top of the list. He was just there, man. In fact, he was in a concert here last year, last November. A phenomenal tour he did. But I was into



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that music scene as a means of exploring my horizons somewhat. People like Taj Mahal. People like Richie Havens, who were doing that peace thing, that peace movement thing.

KT: So you would go to the big concerts that would come to town.

TT: Oh yes. Richie Havens, that kind of stuff. That's music. You don't have that kind of stuff anymore. Of course he's still around, Richie Havens. But I went to a lot of that kind of stuff. I was into Jimi Hendrix, that kind of stuff. Of course, I was into rhythm and blues side of things. The music, dance music, we did that.

KT: What about soul?

TT: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. People like Otis Redding. One of my favorite of all times is, he just passed, some years ago, a light fell on him.

KT: How about like Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye?

TT: Curtis Mayfield was the cat. This is what I was into. That type of thing because they had music like [singing], "Keep on pushing." Those were political statements James Brown [singing], "Say it loud. I'm black. I'm proud." "What's going on?" Marvin Gaye. Those were political statements. That music was intertwined with the sentiments of the people that motivated people.

KT: Did you buy records as a teenager?

TT: Oh yes. We bought records uptown, with like 45s, for like fifteen cents. 45 was a quarter. You go get a 45 for a dime. I remember a 45 being a dime, fifteen cents, twenty, went up to a quarter. You get a 45 for a dime.

KT: Probably went up to a quarter because of the oil crisis.

TT: Yes. It went up to about a quarter.

KT: Were there local radio stations that you listened to?

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TT: Yes. WGIV was the station. It was the major station.

KT: Were there particular personalities who were--?

TT: Yes, there was Genial Gene Potts. There was Chatty Hattie. Joy Boy Sanders. Rockin' Ray. Genial Gene Potts. And Chatty Hattie. Those were the, when I was a kid, that stands out the most. Joy Boy Sanders, Rockin' Ray, who later worked at a white station. Rockin' Ray was really huge with the black and white community.

KT: And they stayed in the community?

TT: And Genial Gene Potts was the godfather of black music in Charlotte. Genial Gene Potts. He had a talk show. He was a comedian. He was quick with words and he knew all the hits. He knew all the cuts and knew everything about every artist. Genial Gene was the cat. He'd talk some stuff. And of course, Rockin' Ray, he knew his stuff, too. And Chatty Hattie was a female voice of the black radio. And Joy Boy Sanders, he was sort of a contemporary of those guys.

KT: Are any of them still around?

TT: Joy Boy Sanders might be living. I know Chatty Hattie is. Now there would be a good person to interview.

KT: What does she do now?

TT: Chatty Hattie later on had a broadcasting school. I don't know what she's doing now. Chatty Hattie's still around. I can locate her. She'd be a good person to interview. I think I'm going to interview her for my publication.

KT: I have a good friend that, he's doing a dissertation on North Carolina. Part of his dissertation is on North Carolina soul music and radio stations. Black radio, black records, record stores. So he's been going around interviewing disc jockeys.

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TT: Interesting.

KT: He may have already talked to some of these folks in Charlotte.

TT: Doing his PhD?

KT: Yes.

TT: You have a PhD?

KT: Yes.

TT: In history?

KT: From Chapel Hill.

TT: What is your interest?

KT: I wrote about the labor movement in the 1970s.

TT: Okay. Labor movement. Interesting.

KT: Unions.

TT: Interesting. Well I want to get this guy who is head of the union. He's retired for Continental Tire. I mean what is the tire company here? I think it's Continental.

KT: Yes, that's right. Continental.

TT: I think Continental Tire. He's retired. He's head of the union.

KT: What's his name?

TT: Larry Murray. Write that down.

KT: He worked there for a number of years?

TT: Thirty years. Thirty-five years.

KT: And became head of the union?

TT: He was the union guy. He knows everything that goes on with anything union with them guys. General Tire. Get that right. General Tire. He'd be a good guy to

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interview. I'm trying to think of what other union guys. I might know somebody in the railroad union. Ivan Alexander, put that down there. Ivan Alexander. And remind me to get these guys' numbers. Railroad guy. Ivan Alexander. He's a train engineer. He can tell you about the days when it was out of, the guys couldn't drive a train. Now he's driving a train, been driving a train twenty-five, thirty years. But he remembers starting here. The guys were just porters. So that kind of stuff. That'd be some interesting meetings.

KT: Oh, that's great.

TT: Then this guy Larry. He's been around a long time. He could tell you about the early days. Blacks worked for General Tire, how things evolved and so on and so forth.

KT: That would be good.

TT: And then this guy, this sanitation guy. I'm going to get this guy for you.

KT: Who you knew as, you called--?

TT: I called him Pop.

KT: Pop.

TT: He's probably back now. I'll call him in a little bit when we finish up.

KT: What were the jobs, what opportunities were available to you coming out of high school? What sorts of things were you looking at?

TT: Well, the thing that I always wanted to do I couldn't get a job in. I wanted to be a radio disc jockey. The opportunities were limited. I don't know. I just remember vividly that that's where I wanted to work. It's just so challenging, so competitive. And you had to have the radio license or just had to, it was a good old boy, just like anything else. It's a good old boy and I just wasn't a good old boy that they wanted. [Laughter]

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KT: You were thinking of breaking into black radio?

TT: I was thinking about breaking into black radio. They had several radio stations, WGIV was one of them. I had a friend that worked for Big WAYS. I initially when I got out of high school, I went to D.C. There was a school there called Federal City College. It's called UDC now. Then there's Howard University. So I went to both of them.

KT: What took you up to D.C.? Was there someone up there you knew?

TT: D.C. I had family there. My oldest sister was in D.C. My aunt, my grandmother, my dad's mother. And my parents were there. My dad was there. So I went to D.C. My parents were separated when I was probably twelve years old. My dad lived in D.C. My sister, she moved when she was in high school. She went to an all-black school. I was anticipating going to Second Ward. That was in the marching band when I was in junior high school. But I didn't get to go be in the marching band. That was my ultimate goal because I had an interest in music. I still love music, play trumpet. I play konga and trumpets. The kongas, the African drum, the djembe. I play the djembe. I love that stuff, man. African rhythms. I went to school there. I worked for an oil company called Stewart Petroleum Oil Company. I worked as a dispatch clerk for an oil company. And supported their oil petroleum for--.

KT: This is up in D.C.?

TT: In D.C. supported petroleum for the naval bases there. St. Andrews Air Force base. Quantico, which is a Marine base. Several army bases. There were some bases that I provided oil for.

KT: At what point did you come back to Charlotte?

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TT: I came back to Charlotte after--. I worked there, I also worked in a bookstore because books is always, literature is always something that I had a great interest in. Worked in a bookstore and I worked there. I came back to Charlotte in about '75, '76. I went to Central Piedmont and started tinkering with, still interested in radio, just didn't have took radio, the classes to get my license. I remember vividly going through that. I had a friend that got a job with the white station and he worked in late night. Ed Moore, my buddy Ed Moore. We were in radio class back in the day.

KT: Which you probably couldn't have gotten just a few years earlier?

TT: Right.

KT: Into the white station.

TT: Right. He worked for Big WAYS, which was a radio station. He had a job in the radio station. Jewish guy owned the radio station. Stan Kaplan. And his wife was Sis Kaplan. And they were hiring blacks. That was unheard of, letting blacks work in a white radio station back then. But this was the '70s. You would think that all that stuff wouldn't be going on. Looking back, it wasn't just but a few years from that that a black couldn't arrest a white person. So you can imagine, that was a large leap in ten years. We're only talking a few years that a black couldn't arrest a white. That a black couldn't be a police officer. Or the racism with certain jobs, like firemen and just certain jobs. You just didn't have blacks being magistrates in the courthouse or the court clerk. You just didn't have blacks working certain jobs. Or blacks, like I remember as a kid, I didn't bring this up, in the library. I loved the library. Always loved the library. And I always re-emphasize to young people that the library is one of the greatest places you can go because everything is free. Then you get benefits there. Your benefits is that you learn a lot. You get free

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books as long as you bring them back. You can get free films, free tapes. You get on the computers for free. Anything is free. When I was a kid, I always had a very enthused spirit about going to the library because books were just, when you read a book, it takes you wherever that book is. So it's like traveling around the world. If you wanted to go to Colombia, South America, you could just read a book on that. Look at the big picture books. It's almost like being there. Look at the geography. Look at the demographics. Look at the elevation of it. Look at the beautiful colors of it. Reading books is like going to the place. You're actually going around the world. You can go around the world in the library. Just read the books.

KT: Your free ticket around the world.

TT: Amen. Free ticket around the world in the books. You know what was interesting? As a kid, there was a room called the Carolina Room. C.D. Spangler now, he sponsored that room in the public library, called the Spangler Carolina Room. C.D. Spangler Carolina Room. That room was off limits for black people when I was a kid. And that just, ooh, that keeps coming back to my mind. Blatant racism. I saw as a kid when I was about seven, eight, we'd walk to the library. We could check out books, but there was certain areas in the library that you couldn't go. Now going in the mom and pop spots, white spots, you couldn't sit down and eat like Woolworth's, which wasn't mom and pop, but Jewels Sweets was. You couldn't go in Kress's. You'd get a hot dog, but you had to keep moving. But in the library, I thought that was a little weird. Here we are going in the library. There's white people sitting in the Carolina Room. This was after work, after the rush hour. Of course, it was after school because we weren't in school. We go to the library. This white man sitting in there smoking cigarettes in the library, but

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the black people can't go in there. And I was wondering, "What is he doing in there?" There's guys reading the *Wall Street Journal*. I remember just reading the *Wall Street Journal*, seeing one for the first time, with the stock market on it. It looked like Greek, because I didn't know what that was. These guys sitting here reading *Wall Street Journal* with a cigarette in his mouth. I'm like, "What?" And then they say you can't go in. The Carolina Room was where all the artifacts and all of the, just like it is now, historical data.

KT: The history.

TT: The history. The stories. And you know what's wonderful, that I love? This is why I'm so intense about history, because it tells the story. And it tells the good part and it tells the bad part. And we learn from the good part and we learn from the bad part. What we learn from the good part is we want to make it better. And what we learn from the bad part we want to avoid, we want to not let it happen again, reoccur. So that's the interesting part about history. But when it comes to the Carolina Room, it stored all of those stories, the good and the bad. And we didn't have access to it, which was blatant racism like I had never ever experienced in my life. As I got older and I never forget that. You couldn't go in the Carolina Room. I'm not holding it against Charlotte, but a city which is now a world class city should have learned some lessons from that, and should, that should be addressed. That shouldn't happen again. Those kinds of things should never happen again because people should not be allowed to not learn. I guess if you could do that, you could even go back to slavery times when it was off-limits for a black person to read a book. It was against the law. So here we are in 1960s, mid-60s, still not having access to learning. And these are taxpayer's dollars to operate these facilities. And



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black people paid taxes, but they didn't have access to what they paid taxes for. So that's like taxation without representation. Like Washington D.C. is now. That stills happens. They pay taxes, but they're not represented on Capitol Hill. It's amazing how racism still haven't died out all the way. It's still some little nicks and corners that haven't been pried open, that flame of racism haven't been completely put out.

KT: Moving toward wrapping up, I'm wondering if there's something that we talked about earlier that maybe you want to elaborate upon or is there something maybe I didn't ask you about? Some key event in your life or something related to anything that we've talked about that you want to add as a way of summing up?

TT: I'm glad you said about the library, that came up, because that one stood out more than anything that I can remember, vividly. That one stood out like a sore thumb, because I used to walk by and see the smoke, and the windows. There was just something unique about that. The Carolina Room, because it had nice furniture, like somebody's living room. You had these newspapers from all these different cities. And I'm like, "Hmmm." Guys reading the *Wall Street Journal*. They dressed in business attire. "Why can't I go in there?" And I'm like, "Oh my god. If I ever get to go in there, I'm going to see what's in there?" And now it's like home in the Carolina Room is where I get all my stuff to do my research, as a budding historian.

KT: I'm wondering, think about the kinds of opportunities that your father had as he's a young adult or think about opportunities that maybe some of your younger cousins had, older cousins had in the 1950s and then look at the opportunities that you had open to you in the mid-70s after high school. How would you describe those changes?

TT: Some of the opportunities that my--.

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KT: Thinking about either your father or older relatives.

TT: Older relatives. Opportunities that they had.

KT: Who came of age in the '50s.

TT: I think about my aunties, my mother's sisters. My mother's sister was one of the first blacks to work downtown in an office. She worked for a bank, First Citizen Bank. She worked there thirty some odd years, maybe thirty-five years. It was many years she worked there. But she was one of the first blacks to work downtown. I just hear that. It was like, that was something to be proud of. Because downtown was, of course, back in day didn't have as many skyscrapers that they do now.

KT: It was prestigious.

TT: It was really prestigious. Busy. And my uncle, my grandfather for instance, my dad's, I mean my mother's dad, his name was Brown who I was named after, my middle name is Brown. They call me Brown Bear. That wasn't how I got that name. My grandfather worked for a store downtown, J.O. Jones and those places, Tate Brown's, you know those places. He worked down there. He died downtown. He had a heart attack at forty-six years old. But he worked at department stores washing windows, just like the maintenance guy. He was the utility guy, the guy that did whatever was--.

KT: Building engineer.

TT: Whatever he needed. Building engineer. Whatever they needed, he was there. He was real well-dressed gentleman. He was quiet, on the quiet side. My mother, I'd hear them talking about it. But just thinking about that, that sort of gave me to try to work in this world the first thing you must learn is how to work, how to get along with people,

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even though you might have differences. You might have different persuasions. Even if you don't have the same religion, or if you're raised, gender, you have to make an effort, an assertive effort to have some sense of consensus or some sense of working people. That's something that I think that my parents and my grandparents placed a lot of emphasis on. You got to be able to get along with people. Then as I grew older, I realized that this world we live in is just not an ideal world, a perfect world, where people just want to get along with you. Like the experience I had when I first went to Myers Park, with the chains and calling the names. You know, it's like this wasn't the way that I was raised. I wasn't told it. People are like this. But those adjustments in terms of what my parents and my grandparents and my uncles and cousins exemplified to me was different from the real world. So that's where the challenges kicked in. Where the values of my parents and values of my aunts and uncles was always keep your head up and dream big and be the best you can be. But yet, get along with people because in this world you have to get along with people in order to excel.

[Interruption due to noise]

KT: Any final sum up thoughts beyond that?

TT: I think about more than anything else in reference to what you're doing here is the fact that Charlotte, what it has become today, what comes to mind more than anything else is that the contributions that people of color made to make this city come what it has become, this world class city, there's a lot of pain and a lot of suffering and a lot of humility that has been exercised by a lot of people that never has been acknowledged. Like for instance, Thad Tate, who was a barber and insurance man and investor who lived on Seventh Street right here. I think this whole, whatever this is,

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should be named after him. Based on the fact that he cut hair for white men downtown. He had a barbershop. He had an insurance, one of the first black insurance companies in Charlotte, one of the largest, most successful businessmen of his time, of black people. When they built Myers Park, the white subdivision, part of the funding that the developer used to build that was his money. They were having some problems and they were about to having to shut it down. I heard this recently. I bet you, since I've been doing research I've just been learning so much. That's why history is such a powerful medium. That Tate's funding it had a lot to do with--.

[Interruption due to phone call]

TT: Had a lot to do with that stuff.

KT: But there's no acknowledgement of that in the public.

TT: There's no, but that's one of the strongest pieces that's going to be in my publication, some of that stuff. Because it has to be. It has to be done. The stuff like what we're doing, this whole thing. And what I think what you guys are doing is great. I think and I commend you for your making the sacrifices and doing what you do.

KT: No sacrifice at all. This is pleasure for historians to get out and talk to people.

[Beginning of disc two]

TT: Just talk about some holidays, for instance Christmas, what it was like in the black neighborhood in First Ward. Christmas Day was like oh my god. People didn't have a lot as I was telling you, but everybody got a pair of skates. Eighth Street, the street up here, there's a hill called Eighth Street Hill. Everybody from the neighborhood on Christmas morning got together and we made a train. We skated down the street. Some people had bicycles, the ones that could afford it had a new bike. There were some people

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on skates holding onto the back of bicycles. That was something you looked forward to. Skating, man. We skated until those skates, the wheels came off. We'd skate the wheels off those skates. Everyday after school, people would go get their skates. We on Eighth Street. We on Eighth Street. We going skating. And we'd skate backwards and people did all kinds of tricks. I learned all the tricks. As I got older, had a bicycle, we'd pop wheelies on the bicycles. See who could pop a wheelie the farthest. Pop wheelies on Fifth Street, up and down the street. Or Ninth Street. Eighth Street, in the neighborhoods. And that was just like heaven. It made me think about that song [singing] Heaven must be like this. It must be like this. That was like heaven, to ride in a bicycle popping a wheelie. And riding those skates. There was a time when we got a little older, the older guys, you know I always hung around older guys. So they had skates. We had skates. We'd skate all the way out Statesmore Avenue, which was a long time ago, the country wasn't far. We'd skate about ten, twenty blocks. Ten, twelve blocks you were in the country. We'd go skating out to the country and go fishing, horseback riding. Put the skates on and skate back to the city. We didn't have cars. You know what I'm saying? We had bicycles, but skates was a very universal part of the community. It was something that brought everybody together, to create conversation, to do tricks, to show off in front of the girls. So it was the skating was a very, very--. The fancy skates were the Red Devils.

KT: Were they the two pieces?

TT: Yes. Two pieces with a pipe in the middle. The Red Devils, they go along fast. The regular Union Fives was a regular skate.

KT: With the white high top.

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KT: But the Union Fives, you plug them onto your shoes. So you didn't wear your best shoes. You have the keys.

KT: And strap them.

TT: And strap them on. So you didn't wear your best shoes. Of course you couldn't wear tennis pumps to skate because the Union Fives would tear a pair of sneakers up. We used to make the trains and go down the hill, and make figure eights. Oh my god, you're talking about fun. You're talking about fun. Christmas day everybody was on the hill to go skating.

KT: Like an impromptu parade.

TT: And then after the skates got older, we'd put them on scooters. We'd get a two-by-four and make a scooter. There was a second phase, second life to the skates. I just had to put this one in. That was just like heaven. Those kinds of things. And I like was telling you about, in the backyards? Another thing was a part of this heaven, this blue heaven. My title was blue heaven. We'd go to apple trees in the neighborhood, [ ] trees, and black berry patches, pear trees, and pick pears in people's yards in the neighborhood. And that was another part of, and then we'd get together and eat the pears, wipe them, rinse them off and sit down and eat pears. In the wintertime, we'd pick pecans and walnuts and put them in bags. There was nothing like that neighborhood camaraderie, where we'd go skating together or go blackberry picking or apple tree or pear or [ ] picking. All kinds of thing. And little honey suckers. We'd get the honey suckers. It was all kinds of little fruits and nutrients on trees. We didn't have a whole lot, but it just seemed like it was so much richness in that coming together and doing those kinds of activities. It was just something that was amazing. Also, during that

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period of the 60s when they start tearing down houses, for urban renewal, for the negro removal period, or metropolitanizing the city. There's all kinds of names for it, which is funny. They were tearing down the houses. We saw that. The bulldozers come in and destroy this wonderful spirit of Eden. This was our Eden. This was our garden of Eden.

KT: Do you remember feeling sad about having to leave the neighborhood?

TT: Oh my god. I will remember feeling sad about seeing a bulldozer knock a house down in the neighborhood. Just sitting there, we're sitting there. We didn't know we had to move. And the bulldozers tearing the house down. Just watching it was just a love hate kind of, it was a numb feeling to see a bulldozer tear a house down. You know what I'm saying? And knowing the neighborhood's going to be gone and something new is going to come in. They built the projects, which I think was a slap in the face. They tore my two-story house down. It had a garden in the backyard, on about an acre and a half to two acres of land. Had a long garden in the backyard to the next block. Had all the vegetables, from grains to squash to potatoes to, we had everything in the garden. Beans. So we're sort of self-sufficient. Certain things we didn't have to buy from the grocery store. We'd grow it in the yard. They came and tore my house down. Even that time I didn't see homeless people. There was no such thing as homeless people. There were people that didn't have somewhere to stay was because they didn't want to live nowhere. Or they had some kind of mental issue. Now there were people who had mental issues that were out in the street, but there was nobody out there because they didn't have a job, or because they didn't have any family. People took in people, like the house we lived in had so many bedrooms, that when people needed to stay overnight or they needed

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something to eat, people would feed people. People had no problem feeding people and sheltering people in those days, as opposed to these days. Times is really changing.

KT: Where did you move to after the--?

TT: We moved from Ninth Street to Eighth Street.

KT: So you didn't move out of the neighborhood?

TT: I didn't move out of the neighborhood. Then I moved from Eighth Street to Seventh Street. Isn't that amazing? Ninth, eighth, and seventh. And now I work in the community, some forty years later.

KT: Just a couple blocks from where you were born.

TT: I work in the community. I work here where I went to kindergarten, and got my vaccination shot in the lobby and across the street is the rec center. So I'm still in the neighborhood. I did a 360. But it's amazing to sit up here and talk about it because some of the trees that were in the neighborhood are still here. You can count them on one hand. But I can take you down to where they used to knock the golf balls across the railroad track, and all those trees are down there. But in the city part up here, it's only a few. There's one up the street. There's two. The big oak tree and the house that was right next to the building I lived, it still exists. There was a building, 1955, for five thousand dollars. A brick house.

KT: They didn't tear that one down.

TT: A three bedroom. Now they're going to tear that down. But the school may tear it down because they're buying that property. That school up here, they want that property. I just wanted to add because that was a part of the flavor, that heavenly feeling



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of school, teachers in the neighborhood, the fruit, the nutritional trees that we, the walnuts, the pecans.

KT: Explain what blue heaven means. Where does that come from?

TT: Blue Heaven is the neighborhood in Charlotte. They call it Blue Heaven. The more I say it, the more I'm attached to, it's like heaven, but it's blue. It's like heaven, but something came along and took heaven in this, destroyed the heavenly part of this away. There was something that was threatening the heavenly-ness about it, to make it blue. Like the blues.

KT: Wow.

TT: So that's what the spirit of Blue Heaven means to me. That's my sentiment of Blue Heaven. But they actually call the neighborhood on the other side of Log Town (which they called Brooklyn later on, which they named after Brooklyn, New York because it was like a little Brooklyn. You had brisk businesses along the corner and Martin and McDowell Street, the Martin McDowell Street Corridor. Then you had housing, including shotgun housing. Some larger houses. Some Victorian large, big round porches, wrap around front porches. There were all kinds of styles of architectural designs in the neighborhood, including the shotgun houses were in the neighborhood. Then they had this brisk busy businesses on both sides of the street including churches in Brooklyn. And then on the other side of that was what we called Blue Heavens, which was like a little patch of housing, Congo Street, Hill Street, Brown Street.

KT: How did they get the name Blue Heaven?

TT: I don't know. But I do know when I hear Blue Heaven what it makes me feel. I'm not sure how the name, whether it was a nickname, but I do know how it makes me

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feel. And that's what I just described. Like heaven being threatened by something from the outside. That's interesting that you asked me that. That's the first time I ever made that definition. So it's all right.

KT: That's great. Well, it's on the recording. So we'll have it. We'll have a record of it. Any last thoughts?

TT: I think that's pretty much it. I talked about the railroad. We used to walk the railroad and hitchhike the train and ride across town. I didn't mention that. [Laughter] We used to have fun. That was dangerous. Yes, it was. We did that, too when I got a little older. We would throw rocks, man. Swim. And there was a white swimming pool. Thinking about that, that's another interesting point. We only had wading pools when we were kids. Where they sprinkle the water? We didn't have a pool per se. We used to walk to Brooklyn, you know when I was telling you about. There's a church called the House of Prayer that had a pool. They did baptism in. We'd go over there and swim in that pool in the off-season when they wasn't having baptism. And we also, they had Double Oaks swimming pool which was on Statesmore Avenue, which was the first black pool. And then Revolution was a white pool. Cordelia Park was a white pool. There were two white pools and one black one. Double Oaks was the black one. Revolution and Cordelia was the white one. Later on, in the 60s, the late 60s, they started letting us go to Revolution and Cordelia. They desegregated the parks before they did the schools, prior to the schools being desegregated. Of course, the golf courses were also segregated. Public golf courses. Revolution was a park. It had a swimming pool, but the golf course was connected to it. Later on they let blacks play golf there. Interesting time.

KT: Sure was.

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TT: Interesting times. [Laughter] I think we got a bunch--.

END OF INTERVIEW

Madeleine Baran, July 8, 2008

Verified KWT September 20, 2008