

JAMES WASHINGTON, SR. INTERVIEW TWO

Interviewee: James Washington, Sr.

Interviewer: Max Jensen

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This interview was reviewed and edited by Donna Odom, Southwest Michigan Black Heritage Society.

Max Jensen: Ready?

James Washington: Yeah.

MJ: Um, so I wanted to start, start talking to you about your family. You talked about your family a little bit at the beginning of the last interview. Could you tell us a little bit about your family history, where you came from?

JW: Ok, where I came from. I came from Springfield, Illinois, born and raised there, 'til I was eighteen, then I came to Kalamazoo.

MJ: Where did your parents come from?

JW: Let's see. My mother came from a little town in southern Illinois called Shawnee Town, where the town flooded and they moved the whole town up on a hill. So that's where she was from, there, and my dad was from St. Louis, Missouri.

MJ: What brought them to Springfield?

JW: Well, [coughs] I'm not quite sure, except I think my dad moved to Springfield, with his parents, but then he met, my mother near St. Louis, cause Shawnee Town was close to St. Louis, and that. And he brought it back to Springfield and they lived there all their life.

MJ: You talked about being one of eleven children. What was it like being in such a crowded household?

JW: [chuckles] It was actually good. I was number eleven, and so I always had everything given to me [chuckles] and I was the baby of the family and so my mother never let anything happen to me and everybody had to deal with me. So I, I thought it was pretty good. It was a crowded household though.

MJ: Which of your siblings were you closest to?

JW: I really can't say. I was, I'm very close to all of my sisters and brothers. There was, I have five brothers and five sisters, and, and I was very close to all of them.

MJ: Do you have any interesting stories about them, or, or about your experiences as a child in that household, that you want to tell?

JW: Well, I can remember when I was a young lad back in Springfield, Illinois, when the polio was quite strong and so they put on a quarantine. So we had to stay in our yard and we lived in a duplex and there were eleven of us children on one side and there were nine children on the other side. So

when we got quarantined, we were all there in the backyard, so we continued to have life as we wanted [chuckles]. So we played all kinds of games and so, it really didn't affect us that much. But that was a fond memory though.

MJ: Was it difficult moving to Kalamazoo and being away from that huge family?

JW: No, it wasn't because by the time I was graduated from high school, the family began to thin out and move away and all. My, I had, most of brothers had moved away and my sisters, they remained there in Springfield, but the family had thinned out. So, when I moved to Kalamazoo, there was no one in the household but my mother and father.

MJ: What year did you move to Kalamazoo?

JW: In 1958.

MJ: Ok, what was your relationship with your parents like?

JW: I had a great relationship with my father and my mother. My father was the quiet type; my mother was very strong. She was a strong woman, and she ran the household. But, we had a good relationship.

MJ: What did your father do for work?

JW: My father worked, at first he worked on the railroad, and then he worked at Pillsbury Mill, which is, was located there in Springfield, Illinois.

MJ: What, what are some sort of foundational things that you think you learned in childhood, that you took throughout the rest of your life?

JW: I learned my faith in God, which came from my parents. My mother was a very strong believer, and I got that foundation there. I got work ethics from both of my family, but work ethics came cause my father was raising the children and working nights, and he, you know, you gotta go to work, that's it. So I got very good work ethics from them.

MJ: Could you talk a little bit more about how your parents related to religion, or how that came across to you?

JW: My mother was a very strong Methodist. We were at the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and she was very strong in that. So that was one of the rules of the household. Every Sunday you have to go to church. If you live in your house, you have to go to church, period. There was no if and ands about it.

MJ: What about your father?

JW: My father was kinda on his own, you know. He worked nights, so when he'd come home on Sunday morning, he was kind of a sometime, he didn't, he had a strong belief, but he didn't go to church that much.

MJ: Do you remember having any sort of specific conversations about race with your parents or your siblings?

JW: Not really. There was very little talk about it. Except I do know that Springfield was a town where everybody kind of stayed to themselves, and so there was very little said about it.

MJ: So last time you talked about Springfield having history of some of the worst race riots. Were you there for those? When did those happen?

JW: They happened before my time, but there was in history you will see that Springfield probably had one of the worst race riots in the country, you know, and I think they had a couple of them that were really bad.

MJ: When were those?

JW: Oh, I would say they were probably in the 30s.

MJ: How did you learn about those?

JW: My father talked about them. My father talked about that it wasn't good and so everybody stayed clear, tried to stay clear of it because it was just a lot of killing and rioting.

MJ: What lessons do you teach your children about race? Have you talked to them about it?

JW: I talk to them that, you know, we're always gonna be fair. I guess I learned that from all my mother's, my mother was a fair person and treated

everybody the same. And so, that's what I always treated mine, that it really is no different, that we're all God's children.

MJ: From your perspective, how, what has your children's experience of race been, in the present?

JW: I don't think they've had any problems with, with the white-black situation. My, my children just kind of floated through life and Kalamazoo got better and when they came along. And, of course, my first born was 1962, so basically we had a lot of stories that were told, but we, they weren't really involved in it.

MJ: So they're out of school now?

JW: Yes, uh-huh, my daughter, I have three children and all three are out of school.

MJ: So they went to school in Kalamazoo?

JW: My, they went to high school here, to grade school and high school here. My oldest graduated from Western. She has a Master's degree, and my youngest, she went to Eastern Michigan. She attended Eastern Michigan. And my son, he went to Central Michigan University.

MJ: So you were talking about how you volunteer with kids at Lincoln Elementary School, right?

JW: Yes, it's a paid position. It's not volunteer, but yes. I work there with children.

MJ: Why do you do that?

JW: To have something to do, and I kinda like it. When I first started, it was just to, so I could fill up some time. I was retired and I needed something to do, but after I got there and started working with them and they really are interesting specimens, actually [chuckling]. You hear all kinds of stories and all kinds of things and so I really love it. I love them and I love working with them.

MJ: Can you tell us a story about one of the kids or a fun experience you had?

JW: Well, they, I can tell you one just - I had a, the fourth-grader on yesterday, as we took them outside and they were going out to play, or to do some activities. She just came up to me and she said, "Mr. Washington, I need a hug today." [chuckling] So, after giving her a hug, she took off and went with the rest of the kids and I actually didn't see her anymore that day [chuckling]. But, that's just the way they are. They grow on you.

MJ: Why do you think they're so interesting? What is it about them that brings you, that brings you there?

JW: Oh, they, every one of them has a unique personality and some of them are slow learners and some of them are fast learners and they're really - some of them are so smart that you really can't believe that they're only in the fifth grade or that they're only in the first grade. But some of them are slow, so you have to, you know, even when they're outside trying to play, you try to get them to do the math while they're outside playing. You know – “how

many is that? How many on the field now?" And so forth.

MJ: Mm-hmm. So moving to living in the Northside neighborhood. Can you tell us about some of the experiences you had living there? What was it like sort of on a day-to-day level?

JW: Well, living, living on the Northside wasn't, wasn't a bad experience for me, because we were, we were in an ethnic neighborhood. All, everyone around us was black, and so we, we—and those days there wasn't the violence that you see now, 'cause everybody knew everybody, and when we all went to one or two churches, everybody knew that you go to church. We worked. That, that was the difference, mainly in where you work, and, so but uh, basically it was good. It was real good to live around people of your own color.

MJ: So people's, people's jobs were pretty diverse in what they did?

JW: Yes, uh-huh. At the, at first in Kalamazoo particularly, there was the paper mills, then the city of course, and then there was the guitar factory, and, and the paper companies, particularly they, they hired a lot of people, and, and there was the automotive, Checker motors. There was a lot of people that worked in and so it was kinda diverse. College was not the stress thing in the neighborhood. It was just mainly get a job. Jobs were plentiful. You come outta high school, there was a job waiting on you.

MJ: Did you not like anything about Northside?

JW: I loved everything about it. The only thing that I, that I could say bothered me about the Northside was that I had to go to work at midnight. I was doing a job that nobody liked, and so it kinda, kinda wore on me.

MJ: Can you tell me any specific stories about how, about how that job affected your relationships in Northside, with your family, or your friends, or your neighbors?

JW: Well, yes [chuckles]. Being a police officer in Kalamazoo, at that time, you would go to arrest someone, well you knew them or they knew you, and it would be kinda tough. So you'd say, well, tomorrow morning I'm gonna meet that same person or his family on the streets, so it made it really very difficult.

MJ: So you talked about how people had pretty different jobs, but they all go to the same churches—

JW: Yes.

MJ: What were some other things that sort of brought people together - whether it was places, or experiences.

JW: Well, the, the Douglass Community Association was a gathering place, where, at the time, my early years, we played basketball, and they had a gathering, where they had pool tables and they, they had a soda fountain area. Soda was kinda the area where everyone went, at some time or another.

MJ: And you talked about in several of your jobs and other places how people of different races didn't really mix. Would you say that that was true of that neighborhood as well?

JW: Yes, uh-huh. In the, in the black neighborhood, which wasn't totally black at that time, we were, we were in the, it was, it was still, it was still a mixed neighborhood, except they weren't, they weren't together. Everybody knew everybody, but everybody went their own direction. Now that generally, [chuckles] when you go to church there was nobody white in the church.

MJ: But you lived—there were some white families that lived in Northside as well?

JW: There were some white families still living there, yes.

MJ: Were, was everyone friendly to each other? Were they, did they just kind of avoid each other? What was, what was the situation between the families?

JW: They were, they were, kinda, I guess you would say they were friendly because everybody knew everybody, and the kids, the kids were growing up together, their children, and so it kind of just, kind of a melting pot, so to speak—

MJ: So would their kids play—

JW: —but you stayed to your own self. Pardon?

MJ: Would their kids play together? Or would it, would it be pretty much just a total separation?

JW: They were, they were okay when they were going to school, but generally after school they went their way, and the white went their other way.

MJ: [coughs] Going to your experiences as a police officer, can you tell us exactly—not exactly, how you said you broke up some of the protests at the Union, the occupation of the Union at Western, right?

JW: Mm-hmm.

MJ: Can you sort of explain how that happened, or what you physically did?

JW: Well the, it was a black action group which had taken over the student union and they had barricaded themselves inside, and then course, we had to go in and take the union back by just forcing our way in. Of course the negotiations were there, but we, we were able to get inside without a lot of, of knockdown-drag-out fighting, but we were in riot gear.

MJ: Did you end up arresting those people? What, what was the sort of outcome of that?

JW: The outcome was, was basically the leaders of the black action group came downtown, but I don't think there was any charges ever filed against them.

MJ: Mm-hmm. Before, before that operation, do you remember any—did it seem just like another thing you had to do, or was it special that people were talking about and maybe disagreeing about?

JW: I'm, I believe, I'm not sure what caused the action. As I said before, the campus life and city life was separated. It wasn't like it is now, where they

mingled in with each other. It was, it was like what went on on the campus, the city, people in this town did not know much was going on up there. So why they, the takeover, you know, I've heard there was some problems, but not, not being for sure, but we went in, as to, to regain control. Because course the campus was in the city of Kalamazoo, but they had their own public safety officers there, but they could not do what we did. They didn't carry any type of weapon or anything.

MJ: Were there any other protests or demonstrations you remember on Western Michigan's campus?

JW: No, that was the only one. That was the only one that, that took place.

MJ: As a police officer, were you ever involved in breaking up any other kind of Civil Rights protests in Kalamazoo?

JW: Yes, [laughs] a couple of times there would be the type of a rock throwing and bottle throwing incidents, and this would happen basically, most of the time it was along Patterson Street, right there at Burdick and Patterson. When the paper mills would let off of work the cars would have to go through that area and that's where all the bottles and the rocks were thrown at those cars coming through and we would have to go down and break up the crowds that were throwing rocks and things.

MJ: What did you do specifically in those situations? How did you break up crowds? How did—what was it like to be there?

JW: We would go in, and you know, naturally we, we had to arrest those that we could catch, but it, the crowds would break up when they would see us marching down the street in riot gear. Lot of them would run, and we probably couldn't catch them. We didn't catch a lot of them, but the ones that we did catch, they, of course they were for destruction of property.

MJ: [coughs] Going to the protest at Van Avery, the drugstore, can you tell us a little bit about what it was like to be there, who was there, how many people?

JW: Oh, I would say there was probably twenty people on the picket line, male and female. We, we were there walking in front of it. It felt good, because, like I said, it wasn't because they wouldn't serve you. It was because they wouldn't hire, and that was, they, they just would not hire anyone.

MJ: Did that—while you were doing that, did people cross the picket line? Do you think it was, it stopped people from entering?

JW: Yes. It did. The people were afraid to go across the picket line and go into the drugstore.

MJ: What was the organization of that protest like? Who organized it? How did it happen?

JW: Well, the NAACP formed it, and then we were, at that time, I was a member of the NAACP, and we did, it was formed from the officers of it, and we...marched.

MJ: How long did it last?

JW: I'm uh, I can't be for sure. My memory doesn't tell me, but I believe it was a total of three or four days.

MJ: And do you think it was successful? What, what were the outcomes of it?

JW: The outcome was that Van Avery's closed their doors. They, they refused to hire anyone, and people just stopped going to the store, and they just closed their doors and closed up, and the drugstore moved out.

MJ: What was, what was their rationale for closing? Did they give one?

JW: No. Just that they [laughing] didn't want to hire any black people at that time, and that it wasn't very popular.

MJ: The drugstore wasn't?

JW: At that time, for their, their action.

MJ: Do you remember? Were people excited after that for—after achieving something, or what were people like after hearing they closed?

JW: Well, I don't think there was like jump-for-joy type of excitement, but I think it was the, the thought that actually we did, we could make a difference.

MJ: Do you remember any of the—any other moments like that in your history in Kalamazoo?

JW: No. I know that, I remember the, picketing city hall, but I can't recall just exactly what the outcome was, but I think it was because the city wasn't hiring a lot of people at the time and that did make more people get hired with the city.

MJ: You were part of that protest at city hall?

JW: Yes, mm-hmm.

MJ: What was that like?

JW: It was okay, picketing. We was back and forth. We had to keep moving back and forth in front of city hall, but that was just a simple protest for, to make people wanting to get more employment going on.

MJ: Would you say that there were a lot of those protests, maybe that you weren't involved in across Kalamazoo, or would you say that there were just a couple of those big ones?

JW: Oh I would say that there were a lot, but there were a number of protests that I was not a part of, yes, uh-huh. Once I came working with the, the city couldn't take part of those type of things.

MJ: So as an, an employee of the city you weren't, you sort of weren't allowed to—

JW: —take part in protests, yes, mm-hmm.

MJ: Did you know of any city employees who would take part in them, or would

sort of do it on the side?

JW: No, [laughs] most, mostly everybody wanted a job.

MJ: [cough] Were you at Western Michigan University when Martin Luther King spoke there?

JW: No. Um...

MJ: Do you remember that happening? ? We've been doing some research, and I think he spoke there in the '60s.

JW: I, I can't, vaguely can, I can remember that he was there, but no. I wasn't, I wasn't part of that. I, I remember, if you can remember Rap Brown and, and those guys who were the, opposite of Martin Luther King. They believed in violence. They came to Western, he and, then, and they spoke, and they were, they were part of a huge crowd. I believe the black action group had brought them there, to take action, and tell them to pick up your rocks and throw them at the tanks when the tanks come in so forth, but never took part in any of that. I was there and listened to them though.

MJ: So you, you went to hear them speak?

JW: Yes.

MJ: So what did you think about their, their ideas?

JW: Uh, I thought it was a little bit, you know, I never did think that throwing a rock at a tank was very my ideal of [laughs]. But it, you know, they, they

made, they made a lot of sense, except I believe in the way Martin Luther King was going, the nonviolent action move, rather than taking violence.

MJ: Did you say there was a big crowd there listening to them?

JW: I would say there was a big crowd. It was held at Miller Auditorium, and it was pretty much full.

MJ: Why do you think people were so interested in what they had to say?

JW: At that time, the Civil Rights movement was very strong, and it was this group that was coming in from the South that was, that wanted to take action any way you could, and then there was the nonviolent group that was coming in, and those, those type of people had a kind of a - people were just interested. We didn't have the, type of, of uh, of news that we, we have now. We didn't have the CNNs, and, and the different news castings, so the word of mouth was basically everything, so you wanted to hear what was being said.

MJ: Why did you think people were attracted to their sort of brand of Civil Rights, as opposed to Martin Luther King and the nonviolent one.

JW: Well, I think that people felt, I think that people actually felt that, that you had to, you could maybe force your way in. The thought of being nonviolent was a slow movement, and people, you know, you had to rely upon them, but I think that being with this thought that if we do something to get your attention, shake you a little bit, then you, we might get your, your, some

action quicker, but...

MJ: You didn't agree with that though?

JW: No, I believe in, I believe the nonviolent way was the best way, even though it was a much slower movement. It would, it would have actually, and it did bring about change.

MJ: Why do you think that was the better option?

JW: Well, I, I thought it was the better option because most of the time when there was violence we, we jump, we wrecked our own neighborhood. [laughs] The violence, if you remember in most of the riots were in our own neighborhood, and the fires that burned our own homes - burning houses that were in our neighborhood. They may not have been ours, but those were places that we lived, and so, I, I feel that going the other way of the private protests, going to city hall, peacefully getting things done, at least you didn't tear up your own neighborhood.

MJ: Did those more violent sort of protests happen in Kalamazoo too? You talked a little bit about bottle and rock throwing, but anything besides that?

JW: There were, you know, there were naturally a few fires, but basically, they were abandoned buildings, abandoned houses, but the, the biggest riots were not in Kalamazoo.

MJ: Where do you see the legacy of Civil Rights now?

JW: Well, I see that it has brought a lot of change. It's brought about a lot of

more education. People are being educated. I think that with the, the election of, of a black president it has brought about that people, that we aren't somebody that people can be anything that they want to be. That thought that you could be anything is really there in the minds, so I think that the Civil Rights movement - the fear that I have is that some, it's not, the history of it is not taught in the schools, and so a lot of our younger people don't know the struggles that went on, and we kinda let, let things go.

MJ: Pulling off of that, where, where do you think you still have to go in Civil Rights in this country?

JW: My thought is that we, we still, we still have to go for total acceptance, you know, that we, we are not just black Americans, but we're all Americans, and until we're just, everybody comes on one cord, that we're Americans regardless. That if you're born here, you're an American, whether you're black, white, Latino, or whatever, you're still Americans, and drop all this, and just be one, in unity. Unity has to occur before America can be totally strong again.

MJ: How do you think we can get there?

JW: [chuckles] I think that, I really, I really, that I really don't know. I, I really feel that with the, with Obama being there is, that's, that's the number one step, and I think that people are recognizing that everybody is, is somebody. Like, now you walk down the street, even if you go outta town, you go to Chicago, you go down to Atlanta, even when I go to my hometown in

Springfield, people just automatically speak now, because it's more and more that we're all, all one people.

MJ: Coming from your religious background, do you think that influenced your, your belief in equality or Civil Rights? Or do you see that as part of, part of getting to that unity?

JW: I, I believe that religion has probably the longest way to go, cause it's still where white people go to white churches and black people go to black churches. I believe that, that change has to come and eventually will, but I, I think that it has to, we have to get there somehow, but that's religion, and that's probably the longest way, that's the furthest part that we are.

MJ: How do you think that, that you can bring those different uh, parts of religion closer together?

JW: That's, if I knew that I'd probably run for president myself next year [laughing]. That, it, I don't think anyone really knows how to do that. You know just, it, you got Baptist churches working with just Baptist churches, and Methodist Churches just working with—even, even in, in the black community you got, churches are just separated, you know, by denomination, and I think that sooner or later they're gonna have to all come together.

MJ: From your life experience um, as a black man, do you think there's, there's—is there anything that you'd want to tell a white audience about your experience of race in America? Maybe something they haven't heard,

or something...

JW: I don't think there's anything they haven't heard. Uh, they've probably refused to hear them, but um, I think that if they, basically uh, I, I really don't know what I would tell them, except that they, get to know your neighbor whether he's white or black. Get to know your neighbor, and realize that there's no supremacy, there's no supremacy, there's no supreme beings.

MJ: Is there any story or experience that you would like to share that I haven't asked you about, or that we haven't talked about?

JW: [chuckles] Uh, no, I think that uh, there's, there's nothing that you haven't asked me about, except uh, I do know that, in today, if you, if you look at today the schools in Kalamazoo, particularly Kalamazoo proper, they're um, you, you, you, the school of choice is probably the thing that is not going to help integration, because white people are going to go to the school of their choice, and of course we've always had this thing where there's, there's um, you feel better in numbers, so you go to these schools, so Kalamazoo public schools where you've got two high schools, where you've got Norix and you've got Central, the, the total, they're mostly black simply because the school of choice means that white folks can go to Mattawan, they can go to Comstock, and they can go to the Catholic schools, and until you get back to this where if you live, you go to school together, and everybody play together, live together, educate together, and pretty soon maybe they'll be religious together.

MJ: Is there—I keep asking you this, but how, how do you think we can get there? Do you have any insight? I mean, you've worked in schools. How do you think we can bring children together like that?

JW: Um, it has to start at home. It still, you know, it's, that's one of the things that had to begin at home. The, the prejudices begin at home. I think that you have to bring things where equalism begins at home. Your parents have to teach their children that everybody is somebody. Everybody is good, and everybody is bad. And, and if it doesn't start at home, we're never gonna get there.

MJ: Great. Well, I think that's all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much, again, for being a part of this.

JW: Yep.

MJ: It's been really a pleasure

JW: Thank you.