

CARROLL COUNTY THROUGH THE EYES OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE:  
JOHN LEWIS

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Interviewer: Patricia Mack-Preston

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*Tell us a little bit about your family as you were growing up as a young child. What kind of routines did you have, special days?*

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Well, when I was – first of all, I was born into a family of ten children, and I was number three from the top down out of the ten. My mother and father were hardworking individuals. My mother had a seventh-grade education. My father had a fourth-grade education. Course as you all know, back in those days, most African Americans of that time didn't really feel a need to further their education, nor was it readily at their disposal to have more advanced education. They felt that once you hire teachers, or something of that nature, that was about the only door for a professional, but even if they could have gone further education, their families and then the family \_\_\_\_\_, the family that we were in, they couldn't afford it.

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So, she had a seventh-grade education and he had a fourth-grade education, but you know with that amount of education, I can remember they were both very intelligent people. So, there's some validity in the fact that experience is a good teacher because, I think, common sense was probably the avenue toward their achieving. So, they had good common sense and they were well-grounded, and they worked very hard, very hard. My father was a sort of all-around individual. He was a mason by trade. He worked on a farm. He did mechanical work and things in this nature. I admired my father because he was very good at making a way out of no way, and I recall an incident. We were doing something to the house, and he needed a square. Well, I'm a little more fortunate than he because if you go up and look at my tool shed, I probably have ten squares, and so you know, but it's through him that I have what I have, and we didn't have – he didn't have a square, and he had a ruler and he took this ruler and measured off three pieces of lumber and tacked them together, and he made a square, a most efficient square, and he was this type of person.

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We raised as a youngsters. My mother worked as a maid. She worked most of her life at the Boyce Home in Eldersburg known as Strawbridge, which was a home for wayward boys. She worked most of her adult life there, and she, I recall, she used to walk over the hill, which was probably a mile and a half to two miles, right around two miles, across the field to work every day, and she walked rain, shine, or snow. Every day she plowed through it. She didn't miss a beat, and anyway, they were both extremely active when it came to work. Things like segregation and the lack of education just did not afford them

the opportunity of becoming rich people. So, we were – we actually lived in next door to poverty, really. We were brought up in the post-Depression era, and the Depression was a time when – or even the post-Depression era was a time when you could not go. You didn't have the freedom to go to the store, and running and picking up a loaf of bread like you do now, or you didn't have the freedom to run out and – or take the car over to the shop to get four new tires stuck on it.

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You didn't have these freedoms. You could only buy what the government allowed you to buy, and the government controlled this by issuing you what we term now as food stamps. They had another name for them then, but it was basically food stamps. It was rationing stamps, they called it, and you received so many stamps according to the size of your family, and in that category, we sort of got over on a lot of people because we had the larger family, but then you're feeding more people. You're taking care of more people, and as I recall, rationing was everything from bread and milk and bologna and sausage right on down to tires and things on an automobile. I remember back then we had – you could not go out because of war time and because of rationing. You couldn't go out and buy brand new tires. You bought retreads because all of the rubber and stuff was being used for the military overseas. I could also remember I started to work, really, when I was eight years old. We used to go out into the fields for Mr. **Armfeld Garsnell**, who was one of the big farmers in Johnsville, and we would pull watercress out of the corn fields, because tractor cultivating then was not a thing to be had in this part of the country.

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They used horses. So, we would – he would hire probably 10 or 15 kids and then put us in rows, and we would walk the rows and pull watercress and throw them in piles, and then the wagon would come along and pick them up and they would dispose of them. I also remember working – there was a weed that used to grow probably about three, three and a half feet high, and on that weed, there was a puff, and I don't see it any much more today, but there was a little puff corn. This puff corn held a silk-like material in it, and we used to gather up – collect these puff corns, and you sold them because they used the silk to make parachutes. We also collected tin cans. That was all for the war effort and stuff like that, but basically, we grew up pretty much in an impoverished family.

*Now, what were Sundays like at your house?*

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Sundays were like you got dressed in what you could afford to get dressed in. You know you didn't run to the closet and take all day to pull a – figure out what suit you were gonna wear. You had that one suit, and that one pair of shoes, and you had to put a little spit on them to make them look good or maybe a little oil, you know, and they might have a hole in the bottom with some cardboard on 'em, but you put on – that was your Sunday best, and you went to church on Sunday mornings, and church was a highlight at that time. It was a good time. You got to see people from the community, and then you got to meet people who would come in from other places to the church. So, church was a

good time. It was a learning time because you went to Sunday school, and that's where you kind of learned about different things in different parts of the world, and various parts of the Bible or Biblical settings. So, in being a poor kid from the country, who very seldom got outside of the Johnsville area, very seldom, these were all new things. So, you can appreciate the fact that when the statement somebody says, "Books will take you on a journey," because that's what it did for us. Books took us on a journey. We would travel. My grandmother, on my mother's side, lived in Baltimore, on Stricker Street, and probably about every other month, we would pack in the back in the car. My dad, at the time as I can remember, had one of the cars he had was a 1929 Buick, and it had a rumple seat on the back of it. Heater didn't work, and we put an old kerosene heater in the thing to keep warm, and we trekked off to Baltimore to my grandmother's house, and just for Marcus' benefit, it took us – we lived – it was 26 miles from my house to the grandmother's house, and it would take us almost an hour to get there when you can jump in the car now and run 50 miles in little less than 35 or 40 minutes, and so we would all go down to my grandmother's house, and I think my grandmother kind of – I don't think she liked to see my father come with that whole bunch of kids 'cause it meant she had to feed all of us, which most of the time she didn't, and we did that up until I was about 10 or 11 years old, and like my father, I was – I became very good with my hands, fixing things and repairing things.

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I think that's when my grandmother and I kind of parted ways because, when I would go down there, when I got there, she pretty much had a list of, "Come on, Junior. You can fix this. Oh, Junior's good with his hands. Come on, Junior, in here now," and then, you might get a little half a sandwich, you know, and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute. Come all the way down here, been here a couple hours. I've done all this work and I'm gonna get a half a sandwich." So, when I got about 10 – 9, 10, 11 years old, somewhere in there, I started telling my parents, "That's okay. I'll stay home. I ain't going down there," but that too was a learning experience 'cause we got to go in the city. Dorsey Whitaker, bless his heart, had a 1941 Buick and, on the Saturday nights, he used to take us to Baltimore to the movie on Pennsylvania Avenue, the Royal Theater, the Met Theater and the like, and every once in a while, we would go and he would take us to Baltimore to see somebody like James Brown and Red Fox or somebody like this. He would also –

*What about the movie theaters here?*

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Now, the movie theaters here because we couldn't go. We could not go, unless you went to the state theater here. You went to the balcony, and Sykesville had a little movie theater, and you couldn't go there unless you went to the balcony, but you see, I had a cousin. Well, she's deceased now and her father was white, a white man from Eldersbury, and she was older than we were, and she was a – not, I don't wanna say fat, but she was stocky, and a lot of times we would – I don't know how you say just out of devilment, we would go to the movie theater down in Sykesville and she'd put on this red, big, fur coat and this red, big, broad-brimmed hat, and have these bags, and we'd come along with these bags, and they'd say, "You can't sit down here," and she'd say,

“They work for me. We’re going in here and sit down.” So, we would go in and sit down in the movie, but you know what I learned out of that? I learned then that it doesn’t pretty much matter what someone puts in front of you. If you keep a level head, and you think a little bit, you can always find a way to get around it, get over it, or if you have to, you go through it, and I think that was kind of my signature through life, and things like not being able to go to the movie theater, not being allowed in certain parts of town, not being allowed in any decent schools. We went to the two-room schoolhouse there in Johnsville, which was Johnsville Elementary. Then, we transferred to sixth grade to the Robin Moten School up here on Charles Street, and we were limited to the things that you could do, basically because of your race, but being an impoverished family really was not all bad.

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What it teaches you, first of all, which is probably one of the most important lessons in life, and that’s self-reliance. You quickly learn that you got to depend on you to get you through, that to rely on someone else, that just isn’t gonna happen. To make it, you have to make the initial step. You have to put forth that great effort. Once you put forth that effort, then usually people, when they see you sincere about something, they jump on board, and they’re gonna give you help. It gives credence to the Bible verse that says, “God helps them who helps themselves.” Well, people help people who help themselves, too, and this was a lesson I quickly learned. So, therefore, I would always, when things – conflicts came up or when my parents, who were deathly, deathly afraid of segregation, they were deathly afraid of the white man, and when things came up like, “You can’t do this or you can’t go there. You can’t say this,” I kind of balked at it because I didn’t understand it. I didn’t want to accept it, and I remember things that stick out in my mind was they used to say, you know, “You have to come in the house. You can’t play in the yard.” “Why?” “The clan’s gonna ride tonight,” and you’re like, this is a nice, breezy summer day. School’s out. We’re playing in the yard. We’re 8, 9, 10, 11 years old. You don’t quite understand. Why do I have to go in the house, and who is the clan anyway? You know and if you don’t obey the white man, the clan’s gonna hind you, and if you don’t obey the white man, they clan’s gonna whip you.

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I remember the story about one of my father’s brothers who was beat to death by some white folks, white men down in the Sykesville area, and the men were never – they were never charged, and several other incidents of that type that occurred back in the day, and nobody white was ever charged, and our parents would tell us these stories, but even then that I was defiant and the fact that no, I’m busy playing. I don’t know who this clan is, but I don’t wanna go in the house. I don’t know who they are. I don’t care who they are. I’m playing, and I have a right to play. I have a right to play in my yard. It’s not like I’m in somebody else’s yard. I’m in my yard. So, I have a right to play, and these types of things just didn’t sit well with me, and from that early age, I recall one night my father worked at Bethlehem Steel, and he worked at night. It was just about dark. My mother herded everybody in because the clan was gonna ride, and I guess I’m probably about 11 or 12 years old now, maybe 13, I don’t recall, and I got real angry, and my father had an old Aubrey Johnson shotgun, and I thought, “Well, they can ride tonight if they want, but

if they stop here, it's gonna be trouble," and I snuck the gun out of the house, and I went down on the front porch, and I sat with the gun across my lap, and it was loaded, and I thought, "If they come, if they stop here tonight, either I'm going or they're going, but somebody's leaving," and I was bound and determined that I wasn't gonna sit still, and that this simply had to stop, because I was having an awful time trying to conceive of the fact that you're telling me that these people don't like me because of the color of my skin.

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It just doesn't make sense that you should – but then the Bible says that men are created equal. The Constitution says that we are created equal, and we should have equal rights to the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, but you're telling me that somebody's telling me that I can't have A, B, C, D, or E because of the color of my skin. You're telling me that the white man says that I'm dumb, I'm stupid, that I stink, and I'm dirty, but all that what little I can find out about slavery was yes, we had a right to be – at that point, we had a right to be dumb, stupid, and stinky because number one, we weren't then allowed to get an education. So, then if you don't get an education, you're dumb. If they don't give us soap and water to wash, of course you're stinky. You know these things, but I had soap and water. I could wash. I had shoes and they have had holes in the feet to put on my feet, you know. I went to school. I was learning. So, you know, none of this in this equation came together for a boy of that age or anyone commonly thinking. None of it made any sense. So, that particular night, I just grew hostile and I said, "Well, hey, if they come tonight, either I'm going or they're going, and if I got to go, I'm going to take somebody with me," but they didn't ride. My father came home about 1 or 2:00 in the morning, smacked me upside the head, and wanted to know what I was doing sitting on the front porch with that old Aubrey Johnson, and it was I don't know what would have happened if there had been five or six of them because I only had – it was only a single shot and I only had one shell. I had three in my pocket, though. So, I have – and you know, I tried to explain to him what I was doing, but he didn't – he said, "Boy, you gonna get killed. You're gonna get hung. You can't do that. That's not what it's all about."

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The law is the law, and they control the law, and I said, "You know, they control the law only because we let them control the law." At some point in time, some of this has to change.

*So, tell us about you're going through school, elementary through – what do you have – junior high, then the high school. What were some of your favorite memories? What were some memories that really taught you, and really shaped you as a young, black man, and moving into – I know you're moving into the Civil Rights movement, but what is its during school time that shaped you and gave you that character that you needed to confront the things that were about to happen later in your life?*

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Well, the first thing that stands out in my mind is, in school, sports. Like any young male, I worshipped Joe Lewis, Jackie Robinson, these people. I saw them as a way out,

as a way to get away from this sector of life, and at that time, I'm thinking if you go over here like to New York or the big cities, things might change, not realizing until later in life that those problems existed over there too, but at least they lived, what we thought then, was the glamorous life, and I wanted to be a baseball player in the worst way, and I remember a guy came to a school, a young, white gentleman I can't recall his name, and he wanted to teach people how to play the guitar completely free. He was going to front us the guitars and all, awfully nice man and quite sincere. That's when you learn, at that point in time, that not everybody white was a clan member, and that not everybody white is a bad person. So, you have to take people as individuals, and this man offered us an opportunity to learn to play the guitar, and a lot of other guys did. So, you had a choice. You could stay in at recess and learn to play the guitar or you could go out on the field and play baseball.

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Well, of course, I chose to go out on the field and play baseball. Now, I wished I learn to play the guitar. That was one of the things that opened my eyes to the fact that change had to be made. So far, as learning was concerned, learning – we were not given the best opportunity to learn because we were not given the best of equipment. We had books that came from white schools. A lot of the pages were missing. So, the teacher would have to skip over them, and a lot of times the teachers had to improvise. A lot of things that we learned in those books were basically about white people. There was very, very little, except about slavery, and demeaning things about black folks were in those books, and we learned later on. I questioned that, too, because outside of the rim of the school, you would hear various stories about African American folks, well like Joe Lewis and Jackie Robinson and these people – what's her name that played tennis? **Wilma Rudolph**, and these people you would hear about them, and you're thinking, "Well, wait a minute. Why is none of this in these books?" You heard about these great labor movements and things that blacks were involved in, and you're thinking, "Why is none of that in these books?" You heard stories about inventions by a number of black folks, and how patents were stole from black folks, but then how a number of black folks, their patent – Booker T. Washington, these people, Dr. Robin Moten, but you wonder, "Why is none of this in these books?"

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It wasn't in the books because the white folks didn't print it in the books, and they didn't print it in the books because – well, you didn't understand it then, but they didn't print it in the books because it was a systematic system to keep you dumb and stupid. So, if it wasn't there for you to learn about, you didn't know about it, and if you didn't know about it, you're ignorant to the fact. As long as you're ignorant to the fact, you remain under the segregationist control.

*Now, what were you teachers like?*

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The teachers were extraordinary. Like I said earlier, they had to improvise and there were teachers like Kersey Jones, Miss Reed, Miss Butler who, God bless her soul, was

still \_\_\_\_\_, Mr. Dotson, Mr. Crawford here in Westminster. These teachers had – a lot of times, the material that we did learn about things in the outside world, these teachers took it upon themselves to get this kind of stuff for us. Now, there was Miss May Prince, who worked in the school system as she taught at Robin Moten, but she, along with Miss Grimes, and Miss Mamie Dixon, were responsible for us later on, but especially for the time we got to the sixth grade in high school, to get a lot of decent material from which we could learn, and Miss Grimes, of course, was a white lady, and Miss Prince was black, and of course you know Miss Mamie Dixon, but these people were – they were, literally, the three of them were responsible for us getting a lot of, what we termed at that time, modern learning, and you begin to learn things about, like I said, Joe Lewis and these people.

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You not only heard Joe Lewis on the radio, but you begin to – you're able now to sit down and read about Joe Lewis, learn a little bit about his life and Jackie Robinson and these people, you know, and then along comes, a little bit later in life, along comes Dr. King. You learn about Dr. Ralph Bunch. There was Thurgood Marshall and these people, and you're saying to yourself – well, I'm saying to myself, "Wait a minute. These people, they're calling them Civil Rights leaders," and when I first heard the term, I really didn't know what it meant, and I had to get deep into it to find out what's going on. What's this all about? Well, I learned that these people, you know, white folks were calling them agitators. Black people were calling them heroes, because these were the people who were willing to stand up and fight for what was rightfully ours, and I think that, coupled with the fact that we did not have the proper things to learn from, we weren't getting the proper things from the books that were given us. These were the things that – plus, I wanted badly to become a professional athlete, and early on, I knew that I couldn't just go out there and hit that ball. I had to know something about things around me. I had to learn how to handle myself, but I did learn early on that some of the black folks in the business, especially the music business, were literally being taken to the cleaners by white folks, and this rubbed me the wrong way you know.

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So, basically, that coupled with the fact that I started learning about people, like I said, like Dr. Ralph Bunch, Thurgood Marshall, and so forth, a whole bunch that can't come to my mind right now, and a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ Harriet Tubman. We learned about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, and how she was going from the Eastern Shore and like, wait a minute. Eastern Shore is just down the road from us, and then you begin to question, "Well, did Maryland have slaves?" Yeah, Maryland had slaves. Eastern Shore's in Maryland. Did Carroll County have slaves? Yeah, Carroll County had slaves because Carroll County's in Maryland, and these things start to all come together in your mind, and you decide at this point. Well, I was hostile about it when I was younger. I'm now 13 – 12, 13, or 14 years old. I'm in the high school, and as time went on, I became more determined that I just couldn't settle, and I'm trying to remember what slave said it. I was thinking about it the other day, and he said – I have to look it up, and he said, "I'd rather be dead and in my grave than to live my life as a slave," and the more I learned

about slavery, I became more determined that I just couldn't – I would not have lasted. They'd have killed me because, you know, I couldn't have lived that type of life.

*Now, what kind of events did you participate in, in the Civil Rights movement, and can you just tell us a little bit about that?*

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Yeah, but let me take you back a ways. While in school, school was not the only thing that influenced my desire to become an active member or to become an agitator so far as Civil Rights was concerned. About eight or nine years old, Mr. Bill Hudson came to the school, and then he started to call in parents, and said he wanted to start a Boy Scouts troop.

*Now, who was he, just a member of the community?*

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He was from White Rock, yeah. In fact, his son William and Gary Hudson still live down there. All of them, same community Sidney Shepherd was from, and he said he wanted to start a Boy Scout troop. So, he approached us and when he said it, I thought, "Ooh, a Boy Scout troop." I'm thinking, "What in the world is a Boy Scout?" So, I had no idea what the Boy Scouts were either. You know, so I – he talked a little bit about it, and had some pictures and things. I saw these, at that time, white boys standing there in their uniforms saluting the flag and, you know, with the badges and things on and I'm thinking, "Hey, that's cool." You know, so I went home and told my mother and father, but I said, "You know, I wanna join the Boy Scouts," and course, I had to explain what was going on. Well, as usual in our family, when you started talking about doing something, the next subject was money. How are we gonna pay for it, and of course, you had to have the uniform and you had to have your books and things, and he explained all of this to us. So, I said, "Well, I'll figure out a way to do it." Of course, at eight years old, I'm working. I'm making a penny an hour. So, you know, I'm getting rich, and of course, about 9 and 10 and 11, I'm working for Mr. Willie Talban in the evenings, cleaning out his chicken houses, and then by 10 or 11, I'm working on my cousin's farm. So, I'm now making a little bit of money.

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So, I said, "Well, you know, I'll get the money. I'll pay for the uniforms." So, we had our first Boy Scout meeting, and you know, I thought, "Whoa. This is great," because now you're learning about the Boy Scouts, and that there's boys all over the world that are doing this thing, and we're gonna go camping, and we're gonna get out of here. I'm gonna see some other part of the world, and so I – between my little job, and back then, we used to take the pop bottles back to the store and you got, with the small bottles, I think we got two cents. For the big bottles, I think we got a nickel, and I started gathering up bottles along the road, which people just handily threw away. Well, there was money in those bottles, and I throw them in my little plate on my bicycle and take them to the store and cash the money in. Between that and what I made at work, I made enough money to get my Boy Scout uniform, and I remember the first time we put

that bad boy on and we all \_\_\_\_ at the school. Let me tell you something. You couldn't tell us we weren't bad. We were bad, and that night, Mr. Hudson and Mr. Jim Green was the Assistant Scout Master, and they said – there was about 25 boys, and we need a Troop Leader, and all of us looking like, “What is a Troop Leader?” I thought, “Wait a minute. That's the guy in the book.” He's actually third in rank to the Assistant Scout Master. He's the guy that goes out there and drills everybody and you know, comes down from the top. So, I'm learning what authority is. It comes from there, the Scout Master to the Assistant Scout Master to the Troop Leader to the troops, you know, and I'm thinking, “Hey, that's cool.” So, they said we're going to vote. We're gonna do it democratically. Uh oh. Another new word. What's democratically? What's the democratic process?

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So, now we learned when the question came up, and they taught us what the democratic process was. You do it by majority vote, and that's what we did, and we had little ballots. You wrote down who you thought, out of the 25, should make the – should be the Troop Leader. Well, lo and behold, when they announced the winner, they said, “John Lewis, you the Troop Leader,” and I'm like, “You're talking to me?” You know, and I'm trying to figure, “Well, why did they choose me? What do I have that's special? What do I have that's more than these other kids – 24 kids have,” and I said, “Well, why me,” and Mr. Green said, “Because your peers chose you.” He said, “That's the democratic process.” So, I'm thinking, “Okay, fine.” I don't have the guts to bow out of this, and my knees are shaking so bad. I don't know whether it's my knees or my heart pounding because I have no clue how this goes, but he took me aside, and outside of the meetings, he taught me what to do and how to do it, and I became very good at it, and the boys respected because the one thing he said to me was, “You learn to treat people like you want to be treated. You learn to respect people in order to get respect,” and that stuck in my mind, but he also said, “You're gonna have to stand fast on what you believe in. Don't ever let anybody sway you especially,” but he said, “Make sure you're right and you stand fast on what you believe in, and you're gonna have to do it with your troop, as well as you have to do it in life,” and that got me through.

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That's when I look back over it. That's when I recognized or felt like I was some sort of a leader. I don't know what. I didn't know where I was going from there. All I knew is that is was a **motivative** thing. It's this thing happened to me, and it gave me that boost that I needed. It gave me that confidence that I needed to actually face people, to stand up to people, and that was one of the highlights of actually growing up along with the educational thing. Life, from there on, just started snowballing from one thing to the other.

*I'm gonna stop you right there for a second. Okay, what were some of the events that you participated in, in the Civil Rights movement and what would you say are some of the most important points that you gained from that?*

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Some of the – well, a long, long time ago, we had and we developed in the county what we called the County Human Relations Commission, and I chaired that for a while, which was probably one of my first things. We did dip into a little bit of the Civil Rights issues back when I was in the Boy Scouts. We got into some of the Civil Rights issues, and we did go out into the world. If I might digress for a minute, we did go out into the world, and we met a lot of other Boy Scouts. In the area of Civil Rights, our community was predominately black. I'm gonna back up for a second, but just outside of our community, this side into the lower side were white youngsters, and you know as youngsters, we got along fine. It wasn't until these youngsters became adults that they no longer wanted to participate with us or deal with us on the same level as they. We played baseball together. We played football together. We did all kinds of things, you know, and as I got older, we started – and in the Boy Scouts – we started dealing in the Civil Rights issues, and as I got into my teens – well, first of all, what really happened was I quit school when I was 16, and I did that because I had to help support the family, and I got into the work force, and the work force is really – the main work force is where you start to really face discrimination, and then we started to talking amongst ourselves, and we got together, a group called the Carroll County Human Relations Commission – myself, Bernard Jones, George Collins and several others, Dr. Phil Benzell, Dr. Jones and his wife, Ira Zepp, Dr. Bill David from the college, and we started the Civil Rights movement.

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Just prior to that, I started talking through the Union Street Church about some of the problems, and I, on my own, Clarence Dorm and I. I remember the first activity actually I got into was a demonstration in front of the Carroll Theater. There was Clarence Dorm and myself and about eight or nine other people. I can't remember all their names, Shirley \_\_\_\_\_, Virginia Hughes, and some of these people, and we demonstrated in front of the Carroll Theater on behalf on Civil Rights because the theater, as you know, was segregated downstairs. You could only go upstairs and sit. We learned that the gentleman lived in Talson, I believe it was, in that area. He owned the theater, the Carroll Theater. Across the street from the Carroll used to be a state theater. They closed that down, and he had several theaters around the country. So, our goal was to get the theater integrated. Well, lo and behold, some people, some powers to be at the college, talked to the Baltimore Colts and got them involved, and that's when things made a major change in not just Westminster, but in the county. Along with us forming the Carroll County Human Relations Commission and I started to work in back then, and by this time I'm married now, and I started to working with Congressman Parren J. Mitchell, and I was at a function in Baltimore, and I don't recall exactly what the reason was, but I met Congressman Mitchell, and then we had a Men's Day at our church. I was in charge of the Methodist Men's Program at that time. I was also Chairman of the Administrative Board, and on that Men's Day, I got – Congressman Mitchell and I just seemed to click, and he was a Civil Rights advocate, and he supported a lot of what we were doing out here, and he came out on a Men's Day and he spoke to us, and then from that day on, we were in constant contact as to what to do and how to do it, and we went around the community.

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Basically, what we did, in simple terms, was we when we had a discriminatory problem, rather than – well, let me put it this way. My first reaction was I noted in other problems of Civil Rights discriminatory or segregation – segregated areas, confrontations came out, people burning down, people rioting, people getting killed, people getting shot, and the last thing I wanted to do was get somebody hurt, and most of the time whenever there was a confrontation to be made, I set myself up as a sacrificial goat, and not – believe me, not because I'm brave. No, believe me, that was not it. I'm a big chicken to heart, and as the old saying goes, it's better to be a live chicken any day than a dead hero. So, I bore the blunt of the confrontation, but rather than – I noticed that rather than going at it in a confrontational manner, we had to find another way, and it was I termed back then as, and still do, I used the back door approach, and what the back door approach was, let me give you an example out of many of 'em. One that stands out was Frock had a swimming pool, and that pool was for whites only. Now, I had done this before with a couple of restaurants and other places in town, but Frock's just stands out as an example. I went over to Gene's because we used to have activities at Gene's place, dances and things. So, I went over to Gene one day and he was sitting there.

*Who is Gene?*

00:44:17

Gene Frock, used to own Frock's. What's that Gene? Bond Street? Yeah, on Bond Street, and it's now a senior center, but then it was Frock's. He had a big of a farm-type thing, but he had this big hall. You could have dances and parties and things there, and he also had the swimming pool, which basically, I know right now, was the only swimming pool in this area, and I just walked in one day. I called him and I said, "I wanna talk to you," and I went over and we sat down. I don't like beer, but that was the day I drank beer. He said, "Come on. Have a beer," and I'm thinking, "Okay, that will lead into this conversation." So, we sat down and we drank a beer or two and we talked, and I talked him into, just quietly, integrating the pool, no press, and that's the way I try to do everything, as quietly as possible. I found that when you did things nice and quiet and easy, and when you ease things into the public, when they realize it, it had already happened, and after it's already happened, you have no recourse. You can't say it doesn't work because it's been working. You're just noticing it, but it's already working, you know, and we did this with the pool. We decided one day, no press, and we just picked one day when I took my boy because now I'm married. We took the boys down to the swimming pool, Dr. Benzell and a couple others from the Commission. We all went to the pool. We went in the pool. The white folks never batted an eye. They kept swimming. The kids got in and swam. It was no big mystery.

00:46:12

The next day, the press got a hold of it, and it was a – they tried really to make a big to do out of it, but like I said, it had already happened then, and now some people, and Jones will say it, that we caused Frock to close the pool, but we really didn't. He had said that day when we talked that he really didn't know how much longer because of his health and his aids, how much longer he was actually gonna maintain the pool. He also told me some inside scoop that actually\_\_\_\_\_ at that point in time, had in the plans that they

were going to open up a public pool, but he went on and did it, and things worked out fine. That was one of many ways, many times that we went through the back door.

*Now, what happened with the movie theater? What were the results of that?*

00:47:16

Like I said, the Colts came in.

*How did they give in or what exactly did they do in the process?*

00:47:29

Well, they threatened to start boycotting things downtown if things didn't change downtown. Now, you know even today the organization swings an awful lot of weight, and spends an awful lot of money. So, I don't take credit for that. I give all the credit for that to Baltimore Colts, because little by little, things downtown started to change, you know restaurants like Shark. One night we went to Shark. We decided to go into Shark and they refused service there. Well, about the time we were gonna file suit, that's when the Colts said, "Hey, unless things start to change, we're going to pull out of Westminster. We're gonna pull out the college." Between the college, with this influence, and the Colts, that helped to start changing things in the county, okay? We were – I was into the, well into the Civil Rights movement trying to desegregate restaurants and dealing with discriminatory actions in the school, especially since my youngsters now were entering into schools under the new integration rules, and it was like almost every other day I was at the school because my boys were into a fight because somebody's calling them a name and this kind of a thing, and it just got to a point where I just was at the school so much, until I think they posted a guard looking out for me because the time I got to the principal's office, they knew I was coming, and I became the – after integration in Carroll County schools, I became the first African American to chair PTA. I was president of these middle school PTA. I was also became involved in the first African American to join the all-white Westminster **Jayzees**, their organization.

00:49:37

I was there until I was actually too old. I served two terms as Vice President, another term as – let's see, first Vice President, first Vice President, and then I was Housing Chairman also for a year. I also became President of Hope Incorporated, which was a low-income housing. Hope stood for home owner purchase effort. We started out taking houses and remodeling them, and then selling them to low-income people. Course later on it got into – we bought up all the Union Street and redeveloped that. By that time, Bernard was Chairman of the organization. I developed a youth group at the church called the Carroll County Pioneers. They – we did Civil Rights work. We went to the poor people's campaign in Washington and helped with that. Prior to that, I had been – a bunch of us had gone to the march on Washington, which in itself was certainly an inspirational thing, and it was one of those things that gave me that – it was like an explosion in me 'cause when you got there and you saw this mall filled with 2 or 300,000 people, and they were all marching to the beat of the same drummer. If I live to be 100, that will be the highlight of my life. That was – it was breathtaking, and I try to tell

youngsters like him you had to be there to appreciate it, and from there on, then we went to – they passed Public Accommodations law back in what? '64, I believe it was.

00:51:36

When I was Chairman of the Human Relations Commission, and we're all sitting around deciding that we should go to Annapolis, and we should speak on behalf on the Public Accommodations law. I think Judge Wentworth was Senator then. I'm not sure if I have that correct, but anyway –

*What was the Public Accommodation? What were they –*

00:51:55

Public Accommodations law meant that they were passing a law to give you equal rights to motels, restaurants, and non-privately owned things like bar and stuff like that. Now, private bars and private clubhouses were not included in it 'cause they later came into the fall because they were otherwise losing business, but that's what the Public Accommodations law was. You didn't have to drive from Baltimore to Georgia without – you could now stay in a motel in this thing, and we were concentrating on the state of Maryland, and so we went down to Annapolis and we met with the Congress people, those and the Senator went and whoever else was in charge went. In that moment, they said, "We think you all should speak on behalf of the Public Accommodations law." Well, we went just mainly to observe. We had no intentions of speaking. So, Phyllis Scott, Bob Scott, let's see, I think Phil Benzell, and several others. Anyway, we sat right there in one of those rooms and we wrote a speech, and then they said – this was one of these other times I got drafted, and they said, "Well, who's gonna give it," and everybody turned and looked at me, and I'm like, "I don't think so. Not before the General Assembly, the complete General Assembly. No." Then they said, "You don't have a choice. You have to give this." So, I thought, "Okay. Alright. It would be totally unfair of me not to do this 'cause this is really my fight, not theirs," and we – they called me and we went out and rushed it and everything and they called me, and I had the speech, and I had read over it and read over it and read over it, but when I got in front of the mike, something happened, and that little voice said, "You don't need this speech. You already know the story because you lived it," and that's what I told.

00:54:14

I told that story. I told it just like it was the way I had lived it, and the place stood and applauded, and I'm like, you know, you turn around and look and you go, "Who are they talking about? Are they applauding me? What did I do?" You know, but anyway that was another one of the highlights. After that, we go on up now to the school system. We needed somebody on the Board of Education, and someone said, "Well, John, why don't you go up?" At that time, it was an appointed Board by the Governor, and they said, "Why don't you go for it?" I remember, I'm trying to think what her name was, it's been a while ago, the names escape me, but anyway, she and her husband were also on one of the commissions, and they said, "John, why don't you go out for the Board of Education?" I said, "I'm not equipped to handle the Board of Education," but you see I quit school at 16. I then went back and got my GED. I had then gone to Morgan at night

for two years, but I just didn't feel that I was equipped to do the job, but I said to myself, "Well, if nobody wants to do this, hey, I've jumped in with both feet before. I might as well jump in again," not having any clue that the Governor, who was Marvin Mandel at the time, was going to pick me to serve on the School Board, but he did. Well, boy, pardon my French but all h-e-double l broke loose. The segregationists came out of the woodwork. They did not want me on that Board and years earlier, I had gotten into a fight and had a simple assault charge against me.

00:56:15

Well, they dug that up and blew it out of proportion. I had criminally – well, you'd have thought I'd murdered somebody. Went down, talked to Marvin Mandel. Him and I sat back in the Governor's office and he said, "Well," he said, "We got two choices, John. I'm gonna give it to you and if I don't give it to you, you're gonna leave here tonight and find me somebody else black to do it." I said, "Well, if I can't find anybody else black to do it, I will do it." He said, "You're gonna do it if I have to give you police protection." So, on the way home, I called Bernie, and I said – told him the situation. He said, "Oh, good Lord," and I can remember his exact words. "I don't want them digging in my past," he says. I said, "Well, look," and this is about 10 or 11:00 at night. I said, "I'm coming by your house. We're gonna have to do something," and so him and I sat down and we said, "Well, who can we get?" We said, "Richard Dixon." So, we called Richard, and in the beginning, let me explain this. It really wasn't about me being on the Board, anyway. Important thing was that an African American got on that Board. I didn't really get – it could have been Mickey Mouse, as long as he was African American, and he got on that Board. So, it really wasn't about me. I also learned another valuable lesson in life. If you have to do a job, and you feel that you're not quite qualified to do it or you think you know somebody who can do it better than you, you support that person and put him out there, and I told Jones, I said, "You know, Dixon is better qualified to do this, and so are you." I said, "You both got degrees from Morgan." I said, "And Dixon has dealt in finances and business."

00:58:12

So, we talked to Dixon, and we had to coach him 'cause he really wasn't up to it, and we coached him into doing it, and we put him on – he decided to do it, and that's how he got on the Board of Education 'cause from there on, he went up 'cause he was good and very good at what he did, and he was much more qualified than I was at doing the job, and he did an excellent job of it, and he – course as you know, went on to become a member of the House of Delegates, and then went to become State Treasury, and as the old saying goes, the rest is history, but my life in the area of Civil Rights isn't over. It still goes on. What I would like to do now, I would like to sit back and be able to coach young people or to support them to go out there and do. I would like to retire and from my job, when I do retire, I would like to just go around and teach young folks, talk to them about black history, talk to them about slavery, talk to them about the people who died in the struggle. Take people, like we go every January, and we go on a Civil Rights tour down through the Southland, and we been down – we went to where \_\_\_\_\_ Everest was killed. We've been to Dr. King's church. We've been all through that area. We've met people who – they attempted to assassinate in Mississippi, one gentleman who still has two machine

gun bullets lodged in his brain were there to – I would like to be able to tell young people that story. That’s how I would like to conclude this, my life in the arena of civil rights, but so far as me asked to stop fighting, no. That will be my way to fight ‘cause the youngsters need to know that it takes years to build, but only seconds to tear down, and they need to know about the times of reconstruction stuff like that when we once had, and we quickly lost.