

**Laura Browder:** Your name and the date as a way of getting started.

**Michael Paul Williams:** Michael Paul Williams. November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017.

**LB:** And with that can you tell me something about your childhood, how you grew up, your family?

**MW:** I was born in Richmond, Virginia. Grew up in—what we called back then, and this would be the early 1960s—the West End. And everyone looks quizzical when you reference this part of town, in the city of Richmond, as “The West End,” but it *was* the West End. It’s now called Byrd Park. I grew up a half a block from Fountain Lake, “Boat Lake,” as it’s alternately called. And it was wonderful. Wonderful, idyllic kind of childhood.

My mom was the second black person to move on that block, that particular block, in the 1950s. My mom was a Korean War widow whose first husband was sent off and died in Korea while she was pregnant with my older brother. She purchased a house there, was the second black person to purchase a house there. And as she tells it, several months later it was an entirely African American block. By the time I gained any awareness as a kid it was an all-black neighborhood. Adjacent Randolph was all black. Adjacent Maymont was all black. That’s what I knew.

We lived there, I lived there, until 1967. This was around the time construction of the downtown expressway started a couple of blocks away... shaved off a chunk of Byrd Park. My mom said, “No, I can’t deal with this.” And so we moved out to the suburbs, to... basically Glen Allen, right outside of Glen Allen—the real Glen Allen. Again... not this fabrication that we have today where we’re calling places like Innsbrook, “Glen Allen.” This is around the Henrico, Parham Road, Mountain Road area.

**LB:** Mhm. So how old were you then when you moved?

**MW:** Let’s see... do the math... nine years old.

**LB:** Okay, so where were you going to school then?

**MW:** I... my first year of schooling was at West End Elementary School, Richmond Public School, with the [00:02:51 unc. Junior Farmer?] It’s a building that looks like a castle. It’s still existent. The school’s been closed for decades. At one point I think they made an attempt to turn it into the sort of housing... maybe senior housing or... it didn’t work. We see successful attempts at that at places like the old Robert E. Lee School which is fairly nice condo building. But West End being right above the expressway—that didn’t really work too well. But yeah that’s where I went. Started school and it was an all-black elementary school and we are Catholic. My parents... My father was Catholic. My mom, when she married my dad, converted.

Just a slight digression—my father was the food service director at Virginia Union University. My mom decided to go back to school—being a widow and all—and that’s where she met my dad. The rest is me. They were Catholic and so they decided: “We’re going to send our kids to

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Catholic school. My brother was also at West End. So we were moved over to Cathedral... what was then Cathedral Elementary School. My life sounds like a graveyard of schools.

**LB:** Where was Cathedral Elementary?

**MW:** Cathedral is located... was located... a few blocks from the church that still exists—Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. On Floyd and, I wanna say, Brunswick?

**LB:** Mhm.

**MW:** Like a block behind Lamplighter.

**LB:** Yeah!

**MW:** And it's now actually owned by VCU. I think both Cathedral, the elementary school and what was then the high school, which would've been Catholic. Cat-a-corner. In that block. Are both, I think, owned by VCU now. VCU, we now know, is the college that ate Richmond. But even back then it was absorbing properties. But, yeah, that's where I started first grade. That's when I first became... began to get an awareness of race... in the lead up to me goin' in the first grade there. We had visitors—we were still living in the West End/Byrd Park—the Dunn's, including their son Keith, who was my age and would also be going into the first grade. Keith and I were introduced. And Keith and his family lived in Maymont on Georgia Avenue. Listeners know Maymont I guess, adjacent to Maymont Park, same name. Even in my little six-year-old brain, I could figure out what was going on. It was like, "Okay, we're going out into white world. And our respective parents want to make sure we're gonna be okay. It was very implicit that Keith and I were to look out for each other and support each other. If you really look back it's kind of a horrible thing to put on a six-year-old. It's like... "We're sending you to war and this is your bunkmate! And you're to kind of look out for each other as you go out into this brave new world." That was that. We went into the first grade. My first teacher, Sister Michael Maria, guess I'll always remember her name because it was part of mine. She was a very sweet woman. My second-grade teacher was Mrs. Halloran who contacted me decades later when she was teaching at Binford to come speak to her class. So that was really cool. My teachers could not have been nicer. I do remember getting paddled very early on. I guess that's a Catholic school tradition. I could not tell you to this day why. I guess it was just like, "We gotta break him in." I don't know. I talked after they rang the bell for recess demanding that we be silent? I don't know. But thick paddle. Corporate punishment old school stuff.

**LB:** So were you and Keith among the few African American students in your grade?

**MW:** Yeah. There weren't many of us. Probably one... Probably a couple maybe in each grade tops. It went first through eighth grade. Very much a minority. I've written about this. This was 1964 when I was in first grade. We had... we're having a presidential election. And of course, you're a kid. Just as you don't know a whole lot about race, you don't know a whole lot about politics either. But I knew I was for Johnson, obviously, because my parents were for Johnson. I mean what did I know about anything. But I knew he was the president. Kennedy was the first

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president I had awareness of, but I knew... I knew about the assassination. And all of the stuff. Those are my earliest memories, the assassination of President Kennedy really.

**LB:** What do you remember of that?

**MW:** It's weird what... it's not so much the assassination. Although I knew he had been killed. He was the first president I was aware of. So President Kennedy has been killed. But then it was just like I'm not sure if I actually saw it on television. But my memory tells me I did. It's like: "Okay we all knew the players. Okay Lee Harvey Oswald killed president Kennedy." And then you know: "In very real time Jack Ruby kills Lee Harvey Oswald." Like—television. You know you're like five years old, six years old, you know you're like, "What in the world?" We started making games of it as kids. We were like... First the game was "Lee Harvey Oswald in the Electric Chair." Then the game became "Jack Ruby in the Electric Chair." It was just a very strange time and that's what I remember. That kind of thinking. Plus I remember we had some sort of commemorative memorial book on the assassination of President Kennedy and everything else. Jackie Kennedy was in the book. She was like my first crush. I'm like, "My god, this woman is beautiful." She had on something and I'm like, "Wow." Like as much of a crush as a five or six-year-old could have.

But, so, of course I'm in first grade and Johnson is president and he's running against Goldwater. I remember thinking, "It's weird. Everyone else—like for the vast majority of everyone else in this school—all the white kids are for Goldwater!" I'm like, "Goldwater's gonna win! There's no way Johnson could win because everyone's for Goldwater." And then Goldwater got his ass kicked. It was just... you know... even as a six-year-old I was just, "Wow. That was weird." I mean it was maybe the biggest landslide in presidential history. It was just really strange. Just trying to process that as a kid. I'm like, "Woah." So probably didn't go over too big that Goldwater got blown away because also around this time I remember being around the schoolyard and hearing some of the older kids saying this poem... song... "In 1964, my father went to war. He pulled the trigger and killed the nigger and that was the end of the war."

I didn't know a whole lot but I knew that didn't sound good. Years later when I could kind of work it out in my brain I was like, "Wow that was deep." Because we were fighting a war in Vietnam and we were in the middle of the Cold War... but the real enemy was black people. Years later, when I was in college, we were reading *Native Son* by Richard Wright. There was a scene where Bigger and his buddies are like... very early in the book... they're like playin' pretend, just fantasizing, you know. I think the chapter was intended to dramatize just how big their aspirations were and how small their reality is. They started pretending to be certain things and one of them, they said, "General!" which that was the cue for one of them to start becoming a U.S. Army General. And they just pantomime and go into all these things. And it ended up being like, "General!" you know, "Come back here!"

"But I can't!" you know, he's telling the president, "But I can't President, these communities are raising sand!"

"But we got these niggas over here raising sand and that's the real problem."

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And you know it's just like going back to childhood: we're the real enemy. I mean... I will never forget that. I guess that was the first time I'd really heard that word used in that way. Maybe I'd heard it in my neighborhood among other black kids but... It was very mixed experience. I had some fond memories of the school. The teachers were nice. Most of the kids were nice. But I'll never forget that. And then the school closed. After my second-grade year the school closed because they had built St. Mary's parish out in what is now the West End, out on Gayton Road, and all the kids left except for basically a few of us. That was my first experience with a certain manifestation of white flight. Even as a kid you're processing these things. You don't know what to call them but you know what's going on. "Okay all the white folks are like gone and there's not enough of us left here—which were the black kids and the white kids who were still living in the city.

**LB:** And the black and white Catholic churches were still separate at that time in Richmond, right?

**MW:** They had just desegregated. As a young kid I was attending St. Joseph's in Jackson Ward. That was the black parish. Don't have a lot of memories of that. But just a few. Right around the time I started Cathedral, that's when we started attending Sacred Heart. St. Joseph's eventually closed and was torn down. My mom and I were talking about this the other day—wasn't very welcoming at Cathedral, the church. She couldn't recall any conversations that were had among parishioners. It was just we went to church and we came home.

**LB:** And were there not a lot of other black families in that parish?

**MW:** No. Still aren't.

**LB:** Yeah.

**MW:** I mean, well, today it's weird because it's basically VCU Catholic Church. So you don't really get a sense... especially... during the summer it seems kind of empty. But I don't really get a sense of exactly who constitutes the heart of the church.

**LB:** Yeah, it's confusing. Because there's so many different kinds of events there that it's hard to get a sense of who's at the core. Right?

**MW:** Yeah. Mhm. But yeah, we... the churches desegregated. We belonged to Cathedral. When the school closed, the few of us that were left, white and black, were, I think, sent by the diocese to attend St. Benedict's. Because all my old schoolmates at Cathedral who were not going to St. Mary's went to St. Benedict's.

**LB:** What was that like for you then?

**MW:** I didn't like it as well as I liked Cathedral. But other than that it was... I mean these are pretty much the kids, most of them, or many of them, that I'd gone to Cathedral with. So it wasn't a huge adjustment. I ended up somehow getting kicked out, at the end of my sixth-grade year. I could give you the explanation. I was told by the principal that... By this time we'd

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moved to the suburbs. And as I said earlier, my parents weren't really feeling Cathedral anyway, Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, the church. So they switched parishes and we became members of St. Paul's in Ginter Park, on the north side of Richmond. I let slip that we no longer... my family no longer belonged in Cathedral parish and the principal at St. Benedicts said, "A ha! Well, then you can come back next year." I don't think... I think she viewed me as a troublemaker. That's kind of how I processed it at the time. Seems kind of arbitrary in hindsight. I wasn't heartbroken to leave the school. But I did think this was kind of funky.

So we tried to get into St. Paul's. Which you know, again, this is the late 60s, there's a lot of racial drama. The desegregation still hadn't really taken. My mom was like, "Okay, well we've been members of this parish a couple of years. We want to send our kid to what was then St. Paul's Catholic School, parochial school." It's now All Saints as a result of a merger between St. Paul's and St. Elizabeth's but I'm getting ahead of myself. She got a correspondence back saying the school was overcrowded. She kind of called BS on that really. It was like, you know, "Okay..." type, type, type, type... "Racist!" You know, "Don't hand us this. We pay dues every week and blah blah blah. No. We not buyin' it. This is racism." And the next thing I know, the pastor of the church is walking up the driveway and we're sitting in the living room and we never had company in the living room so I knew it was serious. But he wouldn't budge. I think, frankly, the school was transitioning in a way that they didn't... fill in the blanks: "The parish is becoming blacker. The school is becoming blacker. We gotta stem this tide." I ended up at St. Elizabeth's which was a school in Highland Park. St. Elizabeth's Church, the parish of Tim Kaine still exists. The school sits behind it, decaying as it has for decades. It's blight. But yeah, that was my school in seventh and eighth grade and that was a trip.

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**LB:** What was that like?

**MW:** The first day of school. You know, it's always a proving ground. So I walk up on the first day. New school. Startin' all over. It wasn't the comfort zone that moving to St. Benedict's had been because I didn't have any of my friends from first grade coming with me. I'm standing on the playground and one of the kids, who turned out to be one of my friends, and also African American, started chatting. And then like about a half dozen of the white kids came walking over and, you know, the body language was like... hostile. The tallest one, the biggest one, was like, "What are you? A Yankee or a rebel?" This was seventh grade.

"What?!"

"What are you? A Yankee or a rebel?"

So, okay, I'm like not the swiftest person in the world but I know the Civil War's been over for more than a century and I kinda figured out what this was about and I knew damn well I wasn't a confederate so: "I'm a Yankee." That probably got me off on the wrong foot. I felt like, for the next two years, I was constantly reliving the Civil War. A lot of these kids were from Mechanicsville. Which is a place where you will feel like you're constantly reliving the Civil War. There were tensions.

**LB:** And was it very very predominantly white at that time? Or was it getting a little bit more...

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**MW:** Well... St. Elizabeth's was different. Unlike Cathedral and St. Benedicts, St. Elizabeth's was located in what was a decidedly black neighborhood. Highland Park had pretty much transitioned by then. I recall one classmate, nice, nice, girl, who still lived in Highland Park like a block or two from the school but it was a predominantly black neighborhood. And... it's like these were the kids who at the time, maybe, you know, they didn't have it like the families that basically built St. Mary's. So we still gotta go to Highland Park to school, from Mechanicsville. You have this school that's maybe 2/3 white, with the majority of those whites being suburbanites, a tiny percentage being the white kids who still lived in Highland Park and environs, and a third black. Which is, in Catholic School, the blackest school I'd ever gone to—percentage-wise. There are gonna be tensions. These are real clashes of culture.

**LB:** And this was by then the late 60s so...

**MW:** By now we're like early 70s... 1971, '72.

**LB:** So what was going on in Richmond at that time? What do you remember?

**MW:** I didn't... All of the politics of that time kind of went over my head. The annexation, I now know, was taking place. In 1970 the city annexed a chunk of Chesterfield basically to get a bunch of white folks to stave off black political power. Not the usual reason you annex, I think. I think it's usually more of an economic reason than: "We need white voters!" So that was happening. For those who don't know, what ensued was a law suit launched by Curtis Holt, a public housing resident, if memory serves, that resulted in Richmond not having local elections for seven years. Which John Meeser [00:22:47 sp?] tells me is unprecedented on a national scale. Also happening at this time, which I was very much aware about, was bussing. Around this time, you saw all these bumper stickers pop up: S.O.S. and S.O.N.S. standing for "Save Our Schools" and "Save Our Neighborhood Schools." What schoolhouses [00:23:15 unc.] I didn't have a complex understanding of it, but I basically came up with, "Well this is just white people don't want to go to school with black people." That subtext was very much a part of our dynamic 'cause we were about to go to high school. So that was a part of our conversations.

**LB:** And how did you decide where to go to high school?

**MW:** Like I said, by then we'd moved out to Glen Allen. Henrico. It was a brand new... not a brand-new subdivision, but it was a subdivision that had been built by an African American developer, Middleton G., who was later murdered in his home. My brother had gone to Benedictine. I wasn't really enthusiastic about that for a couple of reasons. A. Got kicked out of St. Benedict. Yeah, it'd be a chance for a reunion but also I'd seen him polish his shoes and shine his brass every night. And I was not... I'm like, "This is not me on a number of levels." I would not survive there. I'm not that person. I'm not that disciplined. Maybe it was a byproduct of, "Okay... he finished in 1970. Okay. Maybe when he goes in... there are still maybe some residual ambivalence about the Vietnam War." I'm looking at high school in '72 there was no more ambivalence on any... you know. Un-uh [No]. You know, he lost his dad in the War, this War is stupid. They're still draftin' people. I'm trying to figure out... I ain't goin'. You know, Muhammad Ali was... you know. It was just like nah. The whole military thing was not that

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appealing on a number of levels in the subtext of Vietnam and black power movement and all that. But then I just didn't feel like polishin' shoes and shinin' brass for the next four years and taking orders and... It's the same reason I didn't join a fraternity in college. I'm just not built that way to just do whatever someone says and take some abuse. I don't sign up for abuse.

So I told my mom... Plus we had... They had just built... Hermitage was the high school in the district where I would be attending public school and they had just built a brand-new Hermitage. It's got a little age on it now, but this was like a Taj Mahal back in the day. It was far and away the most impressive local high school. I'm like, "Why wouldn't I wanna go to this brand-new school with my friends? I don't want to go to school with a bunch of guys." Even though to talk to a girl would be like a bridge too far actually, to have a conversation, much less to have a date. But just, "Nah, let's try something different." So I told my parents I don't wanna go to Benedictine. They capitulated. It's like part of them... (they'd never admit it) part of them was like, "Okay we don't have to pay tuition. You do you." I think part of them were maybe... They would say, back then, "Well, your brother needed the discipline. Your brother needed this." I think maybe my thing was less urgent and where school was concerned up to that point, I was pretty much okay when left to my own devices. I had been like a standout student. And then by about the eighth grade I was like a student who got by okay without a whole lot of effort. I had stopped applying myself. Probably thought that was cool. So I ended up at Hermitage.

**LB:** And how was that?

**MW:** It was a huge shock to the system. Because it was just... it was the largest school in the area back then, I think, enrollment-wise. I'd never gone to a school with so many students. The sheer mass of it, the sheer volume of people, was intimidating. Again, I was the new kid. I had grown up with the kids on my block but I'm this Catholic school kid. I'm kinda... maybe naïve, and just kind of different. Maybe you have to go Catholic schools, parochial schools, to understand, you know, how it feels different when you're in a public-school environment.

**LB:** It seems very different.

**MW:** Yeah. Religious education... they try to hammer a lot of values into you so you're gonna behave a certain way. And you're not gonna act out because there are consequences. And then you go to public school and people are actin' out. You're meeting all kinds of people. It was kind of a shock to the system. You kinda picked up on eventually... yeah they're really not.... You don't want us here. You know. They're ambivalent about the whole desegregation thing too. It hadn't been that long. When you're a kid you don't really think about it but they'd only desegregated a few years ago. So we were kinda maybe the second line, not on the front lines, but the second wave of pioneers.

**LB:** This would maybe be around what maybe...

**MW:** This is '72.

**LB:** So bussing had just started?

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**MW:** Yeah. There was a very real thought that people who lived where I lived would be going to Kennedy. All that played out in the courts. After bussing didn't work within the city of Richmond because white folks got out of Dodge, Judge Mehrige decided, "Well the only way to make... achieve... any reasonable desegregation is by making a refill school system." Really, in other words, pretty much like other places like say Raleigh-Wake, North Carolina, or Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina where you don't have these independent cities with their own school districts. That's when people really went crazy and it died at the court, Supreme Court.

**LB:** So how did all this play out within Hermitage when you were there and within your circle of friends? And circle of not-friends?

**MW:** Obviously I'm very accustomed to going to school with white kids. So that was the least shocking part of it. Kind of frankly dealing with white kids attitudes and finding my white kids that were cool and that I would have warm friendships with. Kinda feel a little out of place. I guess the way I found my way at Hermitage was through athletics. I joined the basketball team. When you're part of an athletic community, that's just an entirely different world. Pretty much that's what got me through and how I came to define myself through high school.

**LB:** So that was your main thing, during those years, basketball?

**MW:** Well I was on the basketball team in ninth grade and tenth grade year—I was on JV. Tried out for the varsity team and I got cut. And that was like... for like a day that was a big thing because everybody was shocked. We had a scrimmage and I was the leading score on the scrimmage. And so I was confident I'd made the team. I had been a starter on the JV team. And obviously I'm not that tall. You can see that my future is not in basketball. And I'm sure that's part of what the coaches were thinking. I got cut and all my friends were shocked. There were rationales offered... By then I was running track and field. It was evident I was much better at track and field than basketball anyway. I heard, secondhand, "Well the coaches thought, well, you had track and field to fall back on. These other kids did not." Maybe there was a feeling I would not be as happy just to have made the team and sit on the bench. 'Cause I was just gonna sit on the bench. Ended up being the manager, the statistician for the team by like senior year I think I did that. Junior year I had to let it kind of, let the hurt kinda go away. And then senior year I just kinda, I mean come on, who was I kidding. I mean I wasn't... I could've. I could've played and contributed and done well enough, but we were like a losing basketball program anyway so...

**LB:** How was track and field?

**MW:** That was good. That was a much more natural fit. Back then, I don't know if this changed, back then the first thing, the 70s, the first thing any coach, especially a football coach, wanted to do was make you cut your hair. And conform to all these rules.

**LB:** What did your hair look like back then?

**MW:** An afro. Not a huge one, but an afro.

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**LB:** Yeah, yeah just sort of middle of the road.

**MW:** Yeah, yeah. But I mean I... you know... I mean back then if you cut your hair... if you did have an afro, you I mean that was... fitting in is important for an adolescent. And you stick out like a sore thumb when you, you know. And I think maybe they... it was like a military kinda mindset. We were gonna break these kids down by making them cut their hair—in the 1970s. You could do that now and it wouldn't be a big deal. But... back then, "Let's make them geeks."

Track and field, the whole vibe was a lot more relaxed. There were no haircuts. You gotta lot of crazy guys that weren't really into the football thing. It was a lot of fun. I had a lot of success. I enjoyed it a lot.

**LB:** Were you on the school newspaper at that time? Had you gotten into journalism already?

**MW:** I didn't... I think I started writing for the paper like junior year... senior year. It wasn't immediate. I think maybe the last couple of years. Maybe my last year. I don't know. It just seemed like something that would be fun to do because I like to write. I certainly wasn't thinking of it as a career.

**LB:** When did you start thinking of it as a career?

**MW:** When I was in it. Yeah, I mean. Why would I think of newspapers as a career? There weren't any black people hardly at all in the Times Dispatch or the News Leader. One of my best friends is Bonnie Winston, I don't know if you know her?

**LB:** I know the name.

**MW:** She's the editor of the [Richmond] Free Press now. Bonnie was the first full-time African American reporter here at the Times Dispatch. Bonnie's one year older than I am.

**LB:** Wow.

**MW:** We had a prior staff, her [sic] name's Cyd Cassese [00:35:28 sp?] who... it's like a Norman Mailer kind of tale. He was discovered by one of our staffers. I wanna say it's Carol Cass who used to be our movie critic. She would go to the prisons to volunteer. Pretty sure it was Carol... maybe it was someone else... but... and have writing classes, and found this person who had talent and don't know all the particulars but long story short he ended up writing here on work release.

**LB:** Wow. And this was in the 70s as well?

**MW:** Mhm. Early 70s. And Cyd ended up having a long career. He may still be there for all I know at Newsday in Long Island.

**LB:** That's interesting. And not what you'd expect from the Times Dispatch or the News Leader, back then.

**MW:** Well... it's complicated. I could very much see the Bryans doing that. It's complicated.

**LB:** Yeah, it is complicated. I mean what year did you start there?

**MW:** I started in 1982.

**LB:** Ok. So at that point was there a huge division between management and writers in terms of political outlook or world view?

**MW:** As in our editors? Or what?

**LB:** Yeah. Primarily editors. But also publishers.

**MW:** I guess you... This is not a unique description of the institution and the Bryans, but *paternalistic*? With all the... and I mean that's not an entirely negative... D. Tennant Bryan was like the guy from this very old Richmond wealthy family who knew all of the employees by name. It was very... you know. "Hey Mike." And "Hey Tennant!" You know, there were no... there was no... I remember when I interviewed for the job, I called Alf Goodykoontz, who was then the executive editor. Mr. Goodykoontz, he winced. He was like, "No, please, please Goody." So it was... the environment was very egalitarian. In that way... it was probably less rigid and less formal than most work environments.

**LB:** Just because it was a newspaper.

**MW:** Yeah. And I'm not even sure all newspapers operate that way. I suspect that they do. It's just kinda how we roll. But I didn't sense... But Goody would like take us... I was on... I started out from the [00:38:28 unc. state-desk?] did a nine-month internship before they hired me. And then I went to our Williamsburg Bureau, and as part of the Bureau we would be like brought into Richmond once a year to have a state desk meeting. This is when we had bureau system. Seems like a million years ago. It's hard to imagine now... that we had this vast empire. We would go to the downtown club. Not sure that still exists. It was in one of the high rises. And Goody would treat us to lunch and it would start with Bloody Mary's and end up with... we were following his cue... start with Bloody Mary's and end with rum raisin ice cream. Which just sounds... horribly gross now that I think about it. But we all, you know, when in Rome. It was just a different era. Newspapers were a lot more profitable. It was a license to print money basically. We had no problems.

**LB:** It's so hard to imagine now.

**MW:** Yeah.

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**LB:** So can I take you back into two parts of your world that I'm really interested in. One is black Catholic Richmond, 'cause I feel like that's a story that is so rarely told. Right? Anything that you could tell me about that would be helpful. In a city where most African Americans are not Catholic, right, belong to the Baptist church or some other denomination. It must've been

quite a subculture in some ways. Especially at a time where the Catholic Church was changing so much with Vatican II and all of the other things that were happening.

**MW:** It's funny. I mean I'm married to a Catholic, a black Catholic. Bonnie, my dear friend, is a black Catholic. It seems like I know plenty of black Catholics, but yeah. Comin' up I stuck out like a sore thumb. I remember the kids in my neighborhood would tease me because they knew somehow, they found out my teacher was Sister Michael Maria. So some of the older kids would call me "Michael Maria." I had to... the worst part was the uniform. I had to wear this Catholic school uniform, the blue slacks, the white shirt, and the plaid tie. That did as much to alienate you as anything. But I think the kids went relatively easy on me. It wasn't traumatic or anything. I didn't... My mother had been raised Baptist. When we'd go home to North Carolina, we would end up... often for funerals sadly... I would have experience in the black Baptist church. And having been reared Catholic, I felt not terribly... I was kinda out of place. If you're used to services that are very quiet and contemplative, the shouting and the music. You know. It can kind of throw you off. I mean I've come to enjoy those services much more. Especially the preaching. Because the Catholic sermons can be a tad... understated. But I remember feeling very much a minority being a black Catholic but it wasn't like I was gonna convert to anything else. I knew... I mean I knew that Lew Alcindor, basketball player, was Catholic before he converted to Islam and became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Even then, it's funny what you kinda conclude when you're young when you really aren't sophisticated. But I'm like, "The black Catholics live up north. And this is a Southern thing where I don't have as many black Catholic friends." I don't profess to be a great Catholic at all. I'm like a once a month church-goer now.

**LB:** That's pretty great compared to...

**MW:** Maybe I'm giving myself too much credit. But I mean yeah. People would probably roll their eyes like, "Yeah when was the last time we saw you in St. Paul's." But my mom always like... she almost pulls the George Sanford, "Oh," when she sees me at church, "What are you doing here?!"

**LB:** Did your [00:43:33 unc. affordance?] of Vatican II reverberate through your...

**MW:** Yeah. The Catholic Church seemed... I loved it. Remind you again, I'm a kid. I'm like... the church is a lot less scary now. I didn't know what they were saying. It was kinda creepy to be honest. They're talkin' in Latin and the priest has his back to you and it's... you know. It's like... No. So yeah, I welcomed them.

**LB:** Did the political radicalism of the Catholic Church in other areas of the country... did that happen here as well? Because I remember growing up in Rhode Island as a twelve and thirteen-year-old and knowing radical nuns, right who were always out on the picket lines for the United Farm Workers or some other cause. Did that happen here as well?

00:44:40

**MW:** Those aren't my memories. You know it was a big deal when we had a black mass. Not like a no, no. You know, "Let's nurse not the occult." When you had mass infused with African American culture and music. That was big. And this was something that started happening in the late 60s/ early 70s, where they started to acknowledge, "Oh we have people of other cultures

here! Let's acknowledge them." We had a black... St. Paul's struggled with segregation. The big thing was the sign of the peace which was incorporated in my childhood as part of the ritual where you shake hands and we offer each other the sign of peace and you would turn and shake hands and there's..... that was a lot of drama. It's like, "This white person was shaking my hand, alright! Okay. You won't look my way. I see what you about." It was just—yeah. There were white folks who were not trying to shake your hand. Like, "The hell are you doing in here?! Get out!" I mean... you're gonna [00:45:27 unc. burn?]....

END TIME: 00:45:28