

A Community Remembers

Interview: Philip Brunson

Laura Browder: ... And let's start with you just telling me your name and something about how you grew up.

Philip Brunson: Ok. My name is Philip H. Brunson III. I grew up in Southside Richmond, lived on Porter Street. Umm... I grew up, uh, went to a Catholic kindergarten. And from the Catholic kindergarten, I went to Franklin, um, Elementary School... and Bain=bridge Middle School, which is now a medical center, and then to George Wythe High School.

LB: What was your family like. Tell me about your family.

PB: My entire family, mother and father's side, uh, came to Richmond from Charleston, South Carolina. My mother's side of the family lived in the country part of Charleston. My father's side – I was actually able to trace—trace down my roots. Uh, my last name Brunson is German. And the Germans ran the ferries down in the Charleston area. And in Orangeburg, South Carolina, there was a township of Brunson, and a Brunson plantation. And that's how I got my last name. So my family just migrated from the South up here. Um, my mother and father went to Armstrong High School. They met in high school—

LB: Really?

PB: Yes. Uh, my mother went on to nursing school. Uh, St. Philips school of nursing. My father went to Virginia Union and graduated. Um, Virginia Union hired him. He became the director of financial aid and placement until he passed away.

LB: Did you have brothers and sisters growing up?

PB: Yes, I'm the oldest of five. Um, my brother who is fifteen months younger than I am, he's now deceased. My other sister [sic], he was also a music major—he graduated music major, Virginia Union. Uh, both of my sisters – I have one sister four years younger. Um, she finished Union. And went onto VCU, dual major, masters degree. My other sister graduated from Union. She's teaching now in the Beaumont boys' home. And my younger brother is in Augusta, Georgia, uh, with the military, but he's now in corrections, and um, still in reserves, got twenty-seven years in.

LB: Wow.

PB: Yes. And he—his son is actually in the military, as well, too.

LB: So there's a lot of military in your family.

PB: Yeah. Well my father is actually a K—Korean War veteran... Yeah.

LB: Yeah... you don't see too many of those anymore.

PB: No.

LB: Tell me about what Richmond was like when you were a child.

PB: Richmond had—had its pockets. Okay? Um, you talk about cultural diversity – it had its pockets. Even though I live in the 2600 block of Porter Street, a few blocks away, one dir—you hit Semmes Avenue. Course it’s a predominantly white area from there all the way down to the river. Um... like I said, my brother and I were fifteen months apart. So I was a toddler and my other brother, my mom was carrying him. Well, when she got to the bus stop – cuz back in those days, family only had one car. Okay? So, when she would go get on the bus, a man would pick her bags up and carry it to the back of the bus. Now here you have a young black female with two kids. But they would still usher her to the back of the bus. And this was in the late—middle, late ‘50s. Yeah. So, that’s how it was back in the day. But things changed.

LB: Tell me more about your neighborhood growing up. Who did you hang out with, what did you do with your free time?

PB: Um, the neighborhood was, um... Well, we had—our area was called, I guess, uptown. Then you had downtown, Blackwell guys. Uh, right in—we lived right near, we call it Fonticella Park. Uh, I guess the real name is called Carter Jones Park. So, our community would play against the guys in the lower community. We would—they would come on our playground, we would go to their playground. And it was like that. Uh, we spent a lot of time outside. Um, there weren’t a lot of activities, or places for us to go. So, my father was president of the, um, civic association in the neighborhood. My mother got involved in RCAP (?). And, um... trying to get the city to put facilities in the Southside area for the, uh, kids. So we hadn’t to go so far away. Um, kids would always come to my house to hang out and play. It seemed like the whole George Wythe basketball team actually played in my backyard.

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: Cuz we all lived within blocks of each other. And... it was fun growing up.

LB: It sounds really fun.

PB: Yeah.

LB: It sounds like everyone was kind of hanging out all the time.

PB: Oh yeah. Yeah, well... and see kids don’t play marbles today.

LB: I remember marbles...

PB: We would play, get together, give our marbles names—

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: ... you know. And just meet at somebody's house and shoot marbles. Um... the most of us in the neighborhood were in the boy scouts as well. Somebody's father buy a tent, put it up in the backyard, and we'd spend the weekend at his house in the tent in the backyard. So we did fun, crazy stuff that kids don't do today.

LB: That sounds great!

PB: Yeah.

LB: It sounds like a really fun way to grow up.

PB: Yeah. It was. It really was.

LB: So... tell me about how you or your family decided where you were gonna go to school. Was your family Catholic? And that's why you went to Catholic kindergarten?

PB: No, um... my family's actually Methodist. Okay? And, uh, but we went—that Catholic school's close. So we went to the Catholic kindergarten schools and actually learned a lot. But, um... there wasn't a choice of where we had to go to school. Um... I believe early on you could pick and choose. But then, I guess... when busing started, you know, where I live... well, see, everybody went to Franklin Elementary School. When it's time to go to middle school, most of my kids—uh, my friends went to Blackwell. I was told I had to go to Bainbridge.

LB: Cuz of where you lived.

PB: Yeah. But then they started the busing in the middle of that, and even though Bainbridge school was... between Hall and the river, they would bus kids on the city bus, not the—we didn't have yellow buses then—on the city bus from Oak Grove and Amphil, and those were mostly white kids coming to Bainbridge School. And all of us closer around had to walk to Bainbridge School.

LB: So how old were you when—when, uh, busing started?

PB: ...

LB: What year would this have been?

PB: ... I wanna say '67? '68? ...Because the fall of '69 to '70 is when I went to George Wythe.

LB: Ok.

PB: Yeah.

LB: So this is just when you were in junior high – kinda, the tail end.

PB: Oh yeah.

LB: How did that work out, those first years of busing at Bainbridge? What do you remember about the school?

PB: It was... different. Um... going from elementary school which was predominantly black—

LB: Mm hmm.

PB: ... and then going to Bainbridge School which was predominantly white. And their—their rules were different. They had.... Before school started, the kids couldn't intermingle. You had a boys' side and girls' side.

LB: That's a little strict.

PB: Yeah. Oh, it—it was very strict. You know, and a lot of us weren't used to that. We were used to... getting together, playing on the—on the yard before scho—the bell rang to go in, but we couldn't play with our friends—'Well, I'll see you after school,' or something like that. Yeah.

LB: So it was kinda much more controlled.

PB: Very s—very.

LB: What else do you remember about it?

PB: Um...

LB: Did you like school?

PB: I did. I always had fun in school. Yeah. Um, always liked my teachers, but... I guess the teachers had... were going through an adjustment period, too. Cuz they had to deal with, uh... young black kids when they're... used to... teaching, you know, white kids. And... I guess we had a different way of doing things that they weren't used to. You know? Just like we had to... get used to, uh, certain directions that we weren't used to taking. So it was kind of a give-and-take thing.

LB: Which—which directions, which things are you thinking of – different ways of doing things.

PB: Uh, just not being able to communicate and sep—the boy-girl separation was the big thing.

LB: Yeah.

PB: The—that was—

LB: At that age! That's huge.

PB: That was really odd to us when we had done it from first through sixth grade—

LB: Yeah.

PB: ... Yeah and you get to seventh grade, then it's, "Well, no, we're separating you all. Guys here, girls here." You know...

LB: That's a little weird.

PB: Yeah.

LB: You know, I was talking to, uh, Valerie Perkins last week and she remember that when she went to Franklin, it was almost all black but there were a few white kids there, and she couldn't figure out why. Do you remember that?

PB: Yes—now, Franklin... from what I can remember, was a white school and it changed over as well—

LB: Ohh, ok.

PB: ...just before I went there.

LB: That's why. So they were just a few white students who hadn't gotten into white flight.

PB: Probably. Yes.

LB: Ok. That makes sense now. Cuz I was curious.

PB: Now, the same thing happened when I got to high school – it didn't happen that much in middle school. Maybe because I guess they were bringing them in, from the areas to the school. I guess they didn't have a choice. And a lot of them, where they were coming from, could not afford to go to private schools. High school was different.

LB: Tell me about high school.

PB: My first year of high school—

LB: Would this be '69, you said?

PB: The fall of '69. There were so few blacks, you could count us in the hallway. Yeah. You—you got to look for us. You know? That year... um, a lot of tension. Um, bathroom fights. You know, you didn't go to the bathroom by yourself. You know, that kind of thing. My situation was a little different. Um, my being in sports... and, uh, I was in ROTC. So I got to mix and mingle with a lot of the—the white guys. I got to know them so I didn't get bothered as much. But there

were a lot of fights. Within the first year, by the fall of '70, the school had changed over. Like... 85% black. It—it's—it was just... unreal

LB: Instant.

PB: Yes. It was just unreal.

LB: What was ROTC like at the height of the Vietnam War?

PB: Um...

LB: Had you joined because you were interested in going into the military at that point?

PB: Well, I—I have a—I would look through my father's photo albums and seeing his pictures. My—he was a—a sergeant in charge of the artillit—artillery unit in Korea. And he would tell us stories about how his unit got cut off. Temperatures over in Korea were six—thirty-six below zero and things of this nature. But, seeing his pictures, uh, sparked my interest in military. So, I act—joined the military when I got into, uh, George Wythe. Yeah.

LB: And what was ROTC like in those days? At Wythe?

PB: It was very... strict. As a matter of fact, in those days—ac—I actually still have my sword, my saber from those days and I have the GWHS inscribed on the—on the blade. I have the whole case. But, we actually patterned ourselves behind West Point.

LB: Wow.

PB: We actually wore the gray blouse—the gray wool blouse, the gray wool pants... the purple sashes with the white... webbing and the br—gold... brass plate in the front. So we wore all of the West Point, um, dressings for a couple of years. And then they changed over to the, uh, the junior ROTC and we wore the military green... Yeah. So it was very strict.

LB: It sounds like it.

PB: Yeah.

LB: And what sports were you playing?

PB: Um, my first year, I went out for football. And I realized I was... too small. So I started running cross-country, and ended up being the co-captain of the cross-country team. And an indoor-outdoor track, I ran the 800-meter, and the mile.

LB: And so you must have been out competing all the time against other high schools.

PB: Oh yeah. All the time. Yeah.

LB: Did you play all the different high schools in the city?

PB: And some of the county, we, um... well, of course, back then we were called the Capital district. And there were seven high schools in the city. And we did run, uh—and compete against all seven of those. There were a few outside the city. I believe they'd call it Colonial District, like... Manchester... um... Douglas Freeman. There was one school far away—Amherst.

LB: Mm hmm.

PB: We would compete against Amherst... Collegiate... St. Christopher...

LB: So you really got to see all different kinds of schools and educations. What do you remember about the meets? Cuz... I know a number of people have told me that that's where things got sometimes... tense? Or intense?

PB: Yeah, I mean... some schools, you had your regular school rivalries.

LB: Yeah.

PB: And then... there were... I want so say *silent* attitudes. So I can remember running across country meeting against one school. Uh, George Wythe cross-country of course ran through Forest Hill Park and part of Riverside Drive. So part of it is wooded. And I can remember running against some twins from another school. And they would get past me, hook me with their elbows so the other could get by, and there's a lot of—

LB: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

LB: Lot of that stuff.

PB: Yeah... So... yeah.

LB: What are some of your memories of—of your education at this point, what stands out in your mind when you think of those years at Wythe?

PB: Mmm... [pauses] You had different... types of teachers. There were some that really embraced what was going on. And a lot of—some teachers actually made you feel like you were their friend. I had other teachers that made you feel like you were in college. In other words, they would come in, put an assignment on the board, and this one particular teacher – was a science teacher, not gonna call her name – and she would read the newspaper. And because of that, I really didn't like that particular course. But, yeah, she would come in, give us an assignment. I guess she didn't want to be bothered with us. And that time, the school's predominantly black. And she was a white teacher. And... that's how it was with her.

LB: She was just doing her time.

PB: Pretty much. Yeah. But there were other teachers that really embraced what was going on and we felt like they were—they were our friends, and we would laugh and joke, have fun. School's—school's fun for the most part. It was fun.

LB: Tell me more. I mean, when you close your eyes and think about '69 to '73, right? At Wythe? What pops out, what were some big turning points for you?

PB: ... Um, let's see... [pauses]... Well, with me.... Like I say, I really excelled at in the ROTC part of it. And being able to... do things, coming from a black neighborhood that you thought you'd never—would never happen to you, as far as, um... exceeding at certain areas and getting medals. Like, I can remember one medal I got from a predominant white organization. And my picture was in several newspapers, was called the... The Daughters of Confederate Revolution or something...

LB: The Daughters of the Confederacy.

PB: Something of that nat—yeah. I got an award—

LB: United Daughters of the Confederacy, that's it.

PB: Yeah. I got an award from them. I got a medal.

LB: [Laughs] What—I... what was the medal for?

PB: Umm... was military excellence or... cuz I got—I got several that year... I may even have the newspaper he—somewhere... I'll have to look at the medal again just to say, but the fact that I got that when the people presenting it to me were all white females – middle-aged and elderly white females... I'm like, "wow." You know, that's... all I could say was "wow." And my parents were there, the principal was there, the commandant was there, and... to me, that was a big deal. Eh—but I never thought anything like th—that would happen to me.

LB: Yeah, I—I mean, I couldn't imagine that it would have, even a few years earlier.

PB: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, when you read and you said, "The Daughters of Confederate Revolution..." being black, you say, "Confederate? Why am I getting this?"

LB: [Laughing] I know.

PB: [Laughs] Just mind-boggling, but I was glad to get it. Yeah.

LB: So, ROTC was a really big part of your life, it sounds like.

PB: Yeah, it was. It really was. I actually came my senior year, um... I was [p___?] commandant of that corp (?). So I—had—was able to rise to the top level.

LB: Did you go on to join the military afterwards?

PB: No I didn't. They came after me hard, but I, um... I went and studied music for a while after that, so... I didn't go to the military.

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: But it had heavily influence on my brother, cuz... the brother that was fifteen months younger than I, and my brother who is nine years younger than I, both went to George Wythe, both went into the, uh, ROTC. Uh, my... youngest brother actually joined the military and he's still in the reserves. Yeah.

LB: So, there was a lingering influence there.

PB: Yeah. Yes, there was.

LB: So... tell me about some other turning points you had while you were at George Wythe. Things where there was a definite before and an after. Do you know what I mean? Like, life-changing moments.

PB: [Pauses]... there was a period where in, um... well... let me talk about (?) violence and drugs. It's everywhere and it was even in schools back then, too. Um, the biggest thing back then with kids was smoking marijuana. I think, well—in the black neighborhoods, it was the marijuana thing. Uh, I think that most the white kids, it was, um, popping pills. Mmkay. Because my f—father was—my father was also president of the PTA, so... I couldn't get in trouble cuz everybody knew that I was Mr. Brunson's son. But I actually knew what road I wanted to travel, and I watched some of my friends go down the wrong road. Um... I guess that was a turning point, I mean... I actually—I watched them go downhill... So...

LB: That's gotta've been hard.

PB: Yeah, I mean, you talk about you growing up with somebody from age 3—cuz a lot of the kids that I met in the Catholic kindergarten were with me at George Wythe. Okay? So you're talking almost my entire life—

LB: Wow.

PB: ... of being with these kids. Yeah. And that—that's the joy of being from the same neighborhood and going to the same school. Even now, uh, I'm preparing—cuz I'm treasurer for my class reunion—we're preparing for our fortieth reunion. And these are the same kids I went to the Catholic kindergarten with.

LB: That's so crazy.

PB: Yeah.

LB: Was that kindergarten integrated? Or was it all black?

PB: It was, um... It was integrated and became all-black because of the neighborhood.

LB: Right.

PB: But the nuns were... nuns from Italy, some—they would come and go from Italy, back and forth, and they wore their long black robe and head attires (?)—

LB: Wow.

PB: Your old-school traditional nuns.

LB: Very old-school.

PB: Yeah.

LB: So it sounds like watching your friends change—

PB: Mm hmm.

LB: ...particularly during that volatile period—

PB: Yeah.

LB: ...had a big effect. What else do you remember? What were some of the big events at George Wythe?

PB: Um... Game Day and pep rallies... were really huge—I mean, th—they made a big to-do about it. They would block off our sixth period and everybody'd just go to the gymnasium, and—there's a big hoopla, and... you know. L...lifting the spirits for the game type-thing. People—students seemed to come together at that point. Where they may not outside of that, when it came to that aspect of a fellowship, everybody came together.

LB: Sounds like sports was just super important there.

PB: Yeah. And there were other groups, um... I was in the Human Relation Club for a small period of time. Because of the sports and the ROTC, they consumed a lot of my time and I wasn't able to get into the Chess Club and spend more time in Human Relations or the, uh, Student Government Association, like some of my other co-workers. Uh, coworkers – classmates. But, um... there was a lot of bonding outside of that, c... just from being in the neighborhoods. I think, um... another thing that helped me along with the crossover, black-white transition – I carried the newspaper in the afternoons after running track. And my newspaper route spanned from my house to Semmes Avenue to Riverside Drive and further up Semmes Avenue, which is a predominant white areas. And some of the same students that went to George Wythe... okay? So where am, most of the black kids stayed in their neighborhoods, I got to meet

and mingle with some of these kids from carrying newspapers. And I carried my newspaper route for five years.

LB: Wow.

PB: Yeah.

LB: That's a long time.

PB: Yeah. So I got to mix and mingle with these kids for a long time, which I think really helped me grow, mentally. Yeah.

LB: Because you were just... you were moving in a lot of different worlds, it sounds like.

PB: Yes, definitely.

LB: When you were at Wythe, do you remember an example of really good leadership that you saw, and leadership that wasn't so good? ... Could be at the school or in the community. You know, you can take it wherever you want to go. Or even in the nation, you know.

PB: Well, when I say examples of—of good leadership... I have to go back to my father. Um... we could be living in Landover or East Lansing, Michigan. Um, by him having the job of financial aid director and placement... placement is when he would go and find jobs for graduating seniors. Whether it IBM, Xerox, Polaroid. Well, we have a picture of him and Mr. Polaroid back at the house. He went up there, and Mr. Polaroid offered him a job. He turned it down and said he had an obligation to the students at Virginia Union.

LB: Wow.

PB: Which were—which *is* a predominantly black school. So, his obligation was to see that these kids got an education and got jobs. To me, that's... my biggest role model.

LB: And it sounds like you're doing the same thing now with kids at Wythe.

PB: In the mentoring program, yes.

LB: Yeah.

PB: Yeah. Yeah. So.

LB: That's great. Did you see leadership that wasn't so good? Can you think of any examples of that?

PB: [Pauses.] Not directly in my circle. Um...

LB: But even beyond your circle a little bit, you know, when you think back...

PB: Yeah, I—I'm thinking of, um... I can recall some instances of teacher-student interaction that was not appropriate. Um, there was a gym teacher who was, uh, transferred to another school... for—male gym teacher—for having inappropriate, um... touching with a female student. Okay? Uh... as a matter of fact, that gym teacher, I still see him today. His son is actually, uh, playing in NFL. Yeah. Um, we had a female teacher to eventually—well, she was in a relationship with a student when he was a senior... of course. They end up getting married. You know—to me that's not a good example to set for other...

LB: Although, it seems like things were so much looser then.

PB: ... Yes. Yeah.

LB: I don't mean that in any positive way, but just... It seems like that stuff kind of went on more back then.

PB: Yeah, and—well, you know, you're coming out of the '60s into the '70s.

LB: Yes.

PB: And the teachers... you have to look at their ages and where they're coming from, and... so that's—that's probably why. Yeah.

LB: Were there any interactions that you had with fellow students or teachers or administrators that really stick out in your mind?

PB: Positive or negative?

LB: Wherever you want to take it.

PB: Yeah. Um... the principal back then... um, and... he has been to some of our functions lately, too. But, I—I—I think he was a bit... culture-struck. I don't think he really knew how to interact with the black students. Uh, he would make himself very scarce in the hallways. When you saw him, you could look at him and see that... he was scared or intimidated. You know, and it's just his whole body language and demeanor. There was the other principal – the assistant principal, who was black – who walked down the hall, “Hey, how ya doing,” smiling, greeting everybody, black, white. So the—you could really see the difference, you know. And eventually I think, you know, he was moved somewhere else, to a different location. Yeah.

LB: Did you have any interactions with your fellow students that really stick out in your mind?

PB: [Pauses]... Um...

LB: And, again, you can take that in any direction you want to go.

PB: Well... this one thing, um... when I became a senior--actually, it was the start of my junior year... Juniors and seniors, a--a small group of us got together. And we invited s--uh, a few... sophomores and--and we formed our own choir. Okay? And this was an accapella choir. And we would meet at each other's homes just to practice throughout the week. And mind you, during that same time, I had my own band. Okay?

LB: What was your band called and what did you play--

PB: You know, because of that era, it was called Blessed Blackness. Okay? And there was a song out called "Blessed Blackness" that we used as our theme song. James Brown wrote that song. We actually had to write him a letter and get permission from him to use it as our theme song, and he granted permission.

LB: Wow.

PB: Being a sophomore or only a junior, senior in hi--in high school, that was a big deal.

LB: I'd say.

PB: That was a big deal. And, uh, we did pretty good around the state, playing for different functions, openings, and things of that nature. But our accapella choir... we would start out early Sunday morning, we would sing at one church's opening, we would leave there and go to another church... and catch the end of that morning worship, and then we would go to another church for evening services, and sing--and sing there, so... I mean, it wasn't every Sunday, but when we did it on Sundays it was back to back to back and we just enjoyed doing that.

LB: That sounds like a great, great time.

PB: Yeah.

LB: Were you the singer for Blessed Blackness, too?

PB: I was one of the singers, yeah. Back then I was singing, um, mostly baritone and bass. Um, my voice has changed now because... twenty years ago I got a throat injury in martial arts... which kind of damaged my vocal chords, my voice box, a little bit. So that's why I sound a little bit raspy now. But my range would go from... a high bass to alto -- my range was very wide.

LB: So, if you had--had to put together a soundtrack for your life from this period, what would be on it?

PB: Oh, man. Definitely James Brown. You could use his music and entertain an entire party with fast and slow music. Um... oh, man, I could think of just--I'm--I'm visualizing right now--so many album covers just flashing through my mind.

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: Um... The Whisperers... Uh, I'm thinking all the songs we'd hear on Soul Train. And... back then, a.m. radio was a big thing. You know. I used to listen to... now, you had two black stations on a.m. radio. WENZ and WANT. But I would also go and listen to WLEE. Okay? So I would listen to some of the white music, the Benny and the Jets, and some others [laughs]... song, back in the day. You know... All the other songs (?) are flashing through my head right now.

LB: [Laughing] that's fun.

PB: Yeah.

LB: So music was a huge part of your life.

PB: Oh, definitely. Definitely.

LB: And... tell me about... how some of the changes--cuz Richmond must have been changing so much... right then. How were these changes discussed in your--[dog barks].

PB: Um... the changes going on in Richmond, you mean?

LB: Yeah, or the changes going on in the country, you know.

PB: Um...

LB: All of the above.

PB: Ba--back in--back in the late '60s, I mean [dog barks], that was during the time when... Martin Luther King, uh, was shot, and there were race riots and fights. I can remember [dog barks] being on Hull Street... and... at the old Manchester Bridge, which was an iron bridge, on the south end of that, there was the Confederate Angels headquarters. And... I can remember--

LB: Was that a biker gang or something?

PB: Yes. [Dog barking] It's a bike--it's a biker gang. Let me...

LB: Yeah...

PB: [Leaves for few moments] This was a biker gang, um, located on Southside of, um, the Manchester Bridge. And at some point--I forget exactly what year it was--but the police department made a raid and found homemade bombs and everything, but... I happen to be on Bainbridge Street during a period of time when they were going up and down the street during one of the race riots. And they were actually beating people with chains, and... they--it was kinda bad.

LB: So that was, like, late '60s, early '70s?

PB: Yeah. Late '60s, yeah. Yes.

LB: I haven't heard much about the race riots going on in Richmond at this time. Tell me about that.

PB: Um... Like, I said, had its pockets. Um... there were a few fights at downtown Broad Street. Um, I kinda stayed away from over there during that period of time. Um... stayed in the Southside area, that's why I was able to see the--the biker gangs and what they were doing. And, um... you know, y--even in, um, running cross country for George Wythe... we would--we had a ten-mile route we would run for practice at the school, which went from the school down Semmes Avenue, across the Leigh Bridge, through Oregon Hill, around Two Lakes Byrd Park, back across the Boulevard Bridge, down Westover, back to the school. Even running through Oregon Hill, if you were black, you picked the speed up. And you didn't run in the back, you kinda, you know, got through here kinda quickly. So... yeah. It's kinda bad back then.

LB: It sounds pretty... pretty tense--

PB: Yeah.

LB: ...throughout the city.

PB: Yeah. It was.

LB: Was your family concerned about you being out and about, running through Oregon Hill or any of that?

PB: ... I don't think I told them about that. I mean, later on, I told them, but at that time, I didn't tell them about that. I mean, we were all in a group, black, white, we were running together. Comments were made to us, but we kinda ignored it, didn't address it, didn't--just--went about our business.

LB: Now I have to tell you, one of the things that you said when we had our big group interview-

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PB: Mm hmm.

LB: ... that really struck me was that you were into some of these secret Black Panther Party meetings.

PB: Well, yes. Um... they were holding Black Panther meetings secretly on the campus of Virginia Union. And I found out about it... from some upperclassmen at George Wythe. Cuz they were all... maybe two years older than me. So they were more into the '60s stuff than I was. And they had mentioned--I think I went to maybe two meetings and I was, like... just not for me. And I didn't go to any more.

LB: What were the meetings like?

PB: [Pauses]... It... in my mind, it was more negative than positive. I mean, the goal was to unite all the blacks, you know, come together as one... uh, maybe to stand up for what we believe in... that type of thing. The way they wanted to go about it... To me, it was more destruction. Um... I could see people getting hurt. I wasn't trying to get hurt. That's why I went to two meetings, then I stopped. Um... some people stayed in it, but there's--as you can see, the Panthers kinda fizzled out pretty quickly. Um... I think one of the main reasons they fizzled out is because... they made their presence known everywhere they went, unlike the Ku Klux Klan. You know when--where they are when they put their robes on. Other than that, you don't know who they are, where they are... Course with the Panthers, they would wear their rainbow colors. They always wear--had the fist up in the air and they would, you know, identify themselves in public. And I think that's one of their downfalls. I think, um, it could have been something positive, if it had different leaders, or the mind-set was a little different, and they went about a different work.

LB: Yeah, they had their day, but...

PB: Yeah. They just went about it the wrong way, I think.

LB: Were you involved in other political movements during this time?

PB: No. Mm mm. I kinda... kept to myself, stayed out of it.

LB: Yep, I could see that... Now, what do you think some of the turning points for the community were, during this period?

PB: Mmm... [pauses]... I think keeping... well, when you look at cultural diversity, the mind-set of the... city politics were to... as a matter of fact, a city councilman was quoted in saying this, that all blacks needed was a little piece of rental property. Yeah. And, um, the neighborhood where they had houses, they wanted to build... stick in little apartments here and there, all over the place, and um, my father and some other people were instrumental in stopping all of that. So, we're in--up and down

Bainbridge and Forest Hill, they were able to keep those houses and areas as neighborhoods and not apartment neighborhoods. Um... uh... my parents, uh, and RCAP tried to get a... YMCA over here for us in Southside cuz there was actually nothing over here for us. They promised us and they did put a YMCA over here. But they put it far south in Chesterfield and we still did not have access to it. So... they kinda [laughs] duped us on that one. Yeah.

LB: RCAP was pretty active then, wasn't it?

PB: Oh, definitely. Yeah. Yeah. And my mother--my mother and father did... my mom would work at nighttime, eleven to seven. Dad would work during the daytime. So there was always somebody available if kids needed some assistance. But during the day while we were at school, Mom was active with RCAP. Okay, so--and she was on the committee and got things rolling. In the evenings, Dad was involved in... the civic association and doing things in--in that area. So...

LB: What kind of organization [cell phone rings, followed by pause]... What kind of an organization was RCAP, and I'm asking you this because I want you on tape explaining it so I can... integrate it into the transcript. Cuz people outside of Richmond won't know.

PB: I'm explaining to the best of my knowledge. Like I said, I was young then. Um... RCAP was made up of predominantly blacks. Um... It was equal rights. They're trying to get certain programs in the neighborhood for black kids that the white kids had. Okay? Um... I'm trying to think, we had a lot of activities, we would go to campgrounds and things of that nature that we were--well, I was exposed to it because I was in the boy scouts. But a lot of the kids who weren't in boy scouts weren't able to do that. Um, they even had, um... tutoring for kids. Uh... they just brought in a lot of different... social programs that weren't available before RCAP.

LB: Was it city-wide?

PB: It became city-wide.

LB: But it started Southside?

PB: Mm hmm. Yeah.

LB: And it sounds like your parents were pretty instrumental in the early days--

PB: Oh yeah.

LB: ... of getting it going.

PB: Well my parents were... coming from the South, they're big into education. I mean, ev--even my grandparents went to college. My grandmother was a schoolteacher. My father was a... um... math major. And back then--especially down South--the high school you went to had the same college name. Yeah. So... But, yeah, they were big--really... uh... big on... what's the term I'm looking for. Um... elevating, uh, black people... mentally and socially.

LB: And so RCAP was kinda the center of all that.

PB: Well, when I look at it now, I mean, I didn't--I--was young, I didn't think about it then, but... It looks like RCAP really focused on the lower income and--and... kinda like, you know, 'let me--let me help pull you out the ditch.' You know what I mean?

LB: Yeah.

PB: That type of thing.

LB: So... what do you think some of the turning points were for the school?

PB: For George Wythe?

LB: Yeah.

PB: [Pauses]... I think a--a--adjusting to the, um... the racial balance, the changing from black to white. I think... cuz I can remember certain instances, the police coming up there to control fights and things of that nature. I think, um... [pauses]... between my sophomore and junior year, things really mellowed out... I mean, the race stuff stopped, the fights... Well, then you had neighborhood fights, but it wasn't racial fights.

LB: Yeah.

PB: Okay? Things really mell--mellowed out, but... just like, uh, one of the, um... my classmates said at the big meeting at UR... how the school population just dropped. Within like a year, year and a half because, uh, the whites were either going to the county or going to private schools. And, I guess, during that period is when things really mellowed out, and... you know...

LB: It seems like Wythe was integrated for about five minutes.

PB: ...Yeah.

LB: [Laughing] You know?

PB: I'm telling you. From... I was a freshman in '69... [counting]... was it '6--no it was '70, cuz I graduated '74. But -- within a year, year and a half, the school just flip-flopped -- black and white. And then--then everything was fine. It just mellowed out.

LB: That's Richmond for you.

PB: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And, back then, Church Hill, the Eastend--I mean, of course, you know, we had kids from Church Hill being bused to George Wythe.

LB: Like Royal Robinson.

PB: Right. Church Hill had 60,000 people living over there, in just that one area of town. And it's nowhere near that now.

LB: No. It really isn't. I've been there seventeen years.

PB: Ok. And you know.

LB: Yeah. I do. It's like a village [laughs], you know?

PB: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. My grandparents used to live in the 500 block of 28th street. And there was a plaque on that house last time I saw it for being historical neighborhood--

LB: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

LB: Yeah, we were over on 33rd and Marshall for a long time.

PB: Ok.

LB: And now we're on Libbie Terrace. So, its...

PB: Ok. Yeah, up there where that--505 North 28th Street. Yeah.

LB: Yeah. I know exactly where that is. Now... how do you think your experiences growing up shaped who you are today?

PB: Mm. [Pauses] First of all, having the parents that I had... um, grown up in the church... um, having a strong martial art background--

LB: Did you start that early on?

PB: At eighteen. Yeah. At eighteen. And, uh, as a matter of fact, I got into martial arts cuz there were.... So, all the guys at George Wythe -- and they were two years older than me... um, there were seven kids in this family. They're--they're a--a black family. Their father was a lieutenant colonel in the army and his fath--his parents my parents were friends. And that's how I got into martial arts. But having, um, those backgrounds, um... carrying newspapers from the ages of eleven to sixteen... um, actually being in the white neighborhoods, um... learning how to work for money and not beg for money. Cuz I would go back to them and clean their yards, clean the gutters, stack wood... do odd jobs in their neighborhoods, their homes. Um... kinda all--all of that kinda shaped me a little bit. And then after getting into high school, being with these kids and seeing some take a left turn, um... has kinda made me who I am now. And even now I try to... I tell kids, uh... be careful what you say cuz once the words roll off your lips, you can't take it back. You know in martial arts classes, I'll tell kids, never let your emotion overcome your thinking. Use this first. Okay? So I--I try to... shape them as much as I can, or just throw little tidbits out there. And the reason I say tidbits, because with my oldest son, who's 34 -- when he was two... well, I'll get home, do my martial arts. And when I'm at the dining room table studying or doing something, out the corner of my eye, I'll see him kicking and doing certain things. So I've learned in my classes, well--especially with little, young kids, you show them a little bit and then you cut them off. They don't get bored with it. And they come back to you and ask you for more. You show them too much--they get bored and they don't wanna see anymore.

LB: [Chuckles.]

PB: So I--I--I've learned how to dish out my message. Yeah.

LB: In little palatable pieces.

PB: Yes.

LB: How do you think those, e--experiences at the time changed your family? You know, with both your parents being so active, and... you know, your four siblings.

PB: [Pauses] I think it gave them a stronger drive to do what they were doing. Um...

LB: Can you say more about that?

PB: Well... like I said, both of my family's from the south. And... let me start with my father. Um... seeing the thumb down on the black race for so long, I guess he felt like his obligation to see that... black people were elevated to a different level. And that he was in a position to do something about it. Even now, I mean, next week I'll be fifty-seven. Um... I still run into people, and they find out my name is Brunson, Philip Brunson III. 'So, your dad used to work at Union?' 'Yeah.' 'Man, let me tell you something. That man kept me in school.' I mean, he could pull strings and find... money to keep these people in school. I mean... I--people have tried to forge his name on documents and then people at the Council of Higher Education would look at a document, said, 'That's not Mr. Brunson's signature.' You know? He was just that... in tune, but... he was really really into elevating black people. My mother was.... more into seeing that we had the same privileges and opportunities. Okay? Uh, that's why they would reach out and try and find whatever programs they could find for the... underprivileged, I say. Okay? ... They just wanted equality. That's all.

LB: How do you think the experiences of that time shaped your community?

PB: ... My community was very tight. Just like I said, um... all of George Wythe's basketball team played in my backyard. Uh, we were a tight community. And, um... on the kids level, we were tight. On the adult level, it was different. Because--like I said, my father was in charge or president of the civic association, there were black and white on the civic association, and even... they had some common interests. Okay? Um... They could see where things were going. And they want a certain way, they wanted to get along, and they did what they could do to try and get along. Kids eventually are going to get along. One way or another. Even in our little groups, we fight, next day, 'hey, man, how you doing?' But the, um--I think--everybody found way to make it and make it work... eventually. It didn't happen at the beginning but eventually.

LB: How do you think all of those experiences shaped... your relationships with people from different backgrounds?

PB: I have no problem whatsoever... I mean, even in my police career, um... so I was a police officer for a twenty-six years. I was a detective for eighteen years.

LB: In Richmond?

PB: Yes. Yeah. And, um, I would work everything from homicide to narcotics to--I mean, you name it, I've done it. I've been deputized with every federal organization probably except the CIA. But I have no problem going into Windsor Farms, dealing with people. I have no problem going into Oregon Hill, and... I give a prime example... I was in the street crime unit working a... it was technically a robbery -- shooting -- in Oregon Hill in one of the little neighborhood

bars, pool halls... In my unit there were only eight people. Three of us responded to that shooting and we were all black. The guy that was shot was white. When he saw us, he was almost--he was shot in the leg, bleeding like I don't know what. His first statement was, when he saw us, I said, "Hey, who did this, what happened?" He said "Get these niggers from around me." ... I'm here to help him. And... though he know the ambulance attendants that came to help him to stop him from bleeding was black... [Laughs] So I guess he dealt with that, but... [laughs]. What are you gonna do? [Laughs.]

LB: I don't know.

PB: But, um... I don't know... I don't know...

LB: Are there things that you'd like the generation of kids growing up today to know? [Pause.] Growing up in Richmond?

PB: Definitely. I think the generation of kids today need to do... need to... do more with less. They don't appreciate what they have. You know? They have everything. They have... toys, electronics, they have this, they have that. We didn't have that. Like I said, we played with marbles. We played with a deck of cards. You know? Um... things were so tight back in the day, I can remember my father counting out thirty-five pennies so I could have a lunch at school. Kids today just have too much. Um... I do some traveling, um... I probably been to Jamaica five times... If all kids could travel to Jamaica one time, they would appreciate what we have here. So I think today's kids need to do with less.

LB: Are there things that you feel that we as a community need to particularly remember that we're in danger of forgetting?

PB: [Pauses] Well, just... morally, just... do as un--to others as you want done to you. We don't--I think we've lost respect for people. For one another. Especially younger generations today. They don't even respect themselves. So... if it were my way, things would be much more strict like it was when I grew up. And, it'd be more respect.

LB: When you see the kids at Wythe today that you're involved in mentoring and you think back on your time growing up there, what do you think about?

PB: [Chuckles] Uhh.. I look at them, like, 'what are you doing?' [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: You know. I--I wo--I just like to turn... I wish I had a camcorder back in those days to video us and could show it to them. You know? Um... usually when I get around a group of guys... young guys... I ask them, "What kind of music you listening to?" I said, "Ok... what are they talking about? Ok." Said, well, back in the day, we wouldn't let those words roll off our lips. I said, first of all, when you're talking to a young lady, you got her attention by how you looked. Then you kept her attention by what came out your mouth. You didn't call somebody a bitch or a ho. First of all, you say that to a woman back then, you'd be picking teeth up.

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: You know. But... I--I would turn the hands of time back and I wish I w--show them a glimpse of what we did back in the day. And the respect we had for each other, the females, other people. Yeah.

LB: Well, thank you Philip. Is there anything I didn't ask you? That you'd like to--to say or talk about--

PB: I can't think of anything but I know as soon as you leave, I'm gonna think of something.

LB: [Laughs.]

PB: [Laughs.]

LB: Well, thank you so much.

PB: Ok.