

Interviewer: I would love for you to start off by just saying your name and where you went to high school.

Gray: My name is Robert James Gray, Jr. I went to John Marshall High School in Richmond, Virginia.

Interviewer: So tell me something about how you grew up and tell me about your family.

Gray: I grew up in Richmond beginning about 1954. I was born in Richmond in 1950 and was immediately taken by my mother overseas because my father was stationed in the service. So my first four years were in both France and Germany. So when I got back to the states I couldn't speak English 'cause my mom was busy teaching dependent children how to speak English and left me at home with a nanny who was speaking to me in either French or German. So I didn't speak English when I got back here. Kind of interesting. My father was a professional photographer for the Army. So I've got a lot of pictures that probably a lot of families don't have in that era. I've got more pictures of me growing up in France and Germany than I do of growing up in Richmond. Although I've got a lot in Richmond too. But it was interesting for me to see a very diverse community in Europe and coming back to the States to a very segregated community, which was the case in 1954-55. But life in Richmond for a kid in that generation, in that decade, was one that was really centered around community. My life was formed by the parents that who had kids my age within walking distance of my house. Wasn't a lot of getting on the bus and going over there or getting in the car and going over there. It was a lot of what was in walking distance for me. And I was fortunate 'cause I think that if one had to categorize my neighborhood and my lifestyle at that time I would probably be viewed as being of middle class background. Most of the people that lived on my street were professionals. One I remember, Mr. Broadnax, who was a photographer and Mr. Eggleston, who owned a hotel. There were a number of teachers, Mr. Piked [sp?] was the Executive Director of the Teachers Association of Black Teachers. So it was interesting. I mean we had, we had, I would consider the block I grew up on to have had a number of college graduates from as a part of that neighborhood. And that coupled with the fact that there were a lot of other members of the neighborhood who weren't college graduates and had only gone as far as high school. But we lived together in a way that each respected the other for what they brought to the table in terms of their experience, their learning and their willingness to be good neighbors. I worked for the neighbor across the street, Mr. Boone, a foreman with a brick laying company. He gave me a job when I graduated from high school and I worked on the U. S. Post Office that is on Brook Road. I helped build that. And it was as a result of being employed by him and his company to do work after I finished high school. And then two doors down from me was a home for orphans. So there was a person who received money from the state to house a number of children who were wards of the state. So it was a foster home down the street from me. So I mean it was an interesting and also the other part that I think was interesting about growing up there was we had a park called Battery Park. It was a congregation center for all of the kids, and it was walking distance. It helped build the community that we lived in.

Interviewer: Tell me more about your family. Did your father stay in the service and did your mother keep on teaching once you returned to the States?

Gray: My father, yes. My father at the time we returned to the States, had another nine years or so in the service. So he had completed about eleven years at that point. And had another nine to go. He was about half way done. He did twenty years. He retired in '63 I think. And interestingly enough, he was having a hard time finding a job, because he was a photographer. So it was where do I work? And so he struggled for a while. He eventually, he was a high school graduate, he didn't have a college degree, he went back to school and got a college degree and ended up working for the Afro-American Newspaper and did photography work for them and then applied for and was hired as the Executive Director of Richmond Urban League. And he did that for about three or four years as I can remember. So maybe '58 or so. No wouldn't have been that. But at any rate, something like that. And then he went to A. H. Robins. And it was interesting because one of the board members on the Urban League Board was an executive for A. H. Robins and said you ought to come and work for our company, I think they would want you to be there, and so he arranged for my father to have an interview. And my father was hired there and retired from A. H. Robins. So he's had two careers: one in corporate America and the other in the service. Sort of a unique situation. He was manager of Community Relations and Corporate Givings.

Interviewer: And it must have been an interesting time to be at the Urban League as well.

Gray: It was. Actually it was a, I remember my father being involved with other community leaders in trying to help rebuild housing, and increase the housing quality, quality of housing stock for those who were coming out of and into the work force and trying to achieve middle class status.

Interviewer: At a time when urban renewal was taking place as well.

Gray: When it was taking place is exactly right. And so there were, he was part of a couple of projects that focused on housing for younger families and to help build neighborhoods that had been hurt by the loss of the shift in population. Because blacks were leaving the city to go the counties. The whites left the city to go to the counties the first half of the '50s and early '60s. And then from the '60s to the '70s the blacks were leaving the city to go to the counties because they thought there were better opportunities. And so this idea what do we do in terms of trying to energize and to create opportunities for those who were staying in the city meant that we had to start thinking about different housing opportunities for them and their families and create communities that were sustainable.

Interviewer: And your mother was also very active during this period, wasn't she?

Gray: Yes she was. She had a very unique career, I think, among all of her peers, whether black or white. But she was a librarian and then became an administrator and then after integration she started working as an educator-advisor to schools through being a supervisor and consultant within the school system. Eventually built environments for schools and created learning spaces and did things like that to the point that somebody said you need to do this at this school – all these things you've been doing. So she was tagged for the idea of creating a model school. If you could do it any way you wanted to do it, Barbara, how would you do it? And so she went to John B. Cary and created a model school.

Interviewer: Both my kids went there.

Gray: Oh did they? And so the idea, and she engaged the community in ways the community had never been a part of public education and had companies donating. I think she had CSX donate a caboose and they put that in the back of the school and had local business people come and participate in learning experiences with the kids so that they could see what businesses were around them and how people got into business. So it was a really different approach. She personally trained her teachers. I mean, she said you come in with certain skills and when you leave you will have more focused skills on how to really teach kids. So she was a very hands on educator and loved her teachers and loved her children.

Interviewer: So you were really positioned to see and experience a lot of changes that were going on in Richmond at this time. Tell me something about when you first started noticing changes in your neighborhood and in the city.

Gray: Well I think it's hard to separate change from what was happening nationally and locally. There was the change in the whole structure of society back then. So after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and a number of states were working to try to figure out how best to meet that responsibility, there were others like Virginia saying, "no we won't either, we will try to do everything we can to resist that." And so Richmond and Virginia, I think, were positioned – it could have been different, but the state through its political leadership was positioned to sort of lead the resistance against integration. Harry Byrd and the Byrd Machine and others who were part of it, you know felt very strongly that this idea of integration was just not going to work. So they resisted. So closing schools in other parts of the state was a significant issue. I remember the concern that was expressed about that. But an even more difficult problem had to do with voting. And the poll tax. All of that was under scrutiny by the courts and by the Justice Department and being challenged by civil rights lawyers. There was an organization formed by Milton Brooks, Fergie Reed and Bill Thornton called Richmond Crusade for Voters in the mid-50s. And their work was to be sure that blacks in this community understood the value of their vote and that they had to participate and that they had to fight for that right. Even if there was a poll tax or even if there was a requirement to know some part of the constitution or other sort of tests that might discourage them from voting, they had to do it. They had to go vote. My earliest memories had to do with being part of that organization to educate the community. I remember putting flyers in people's door that the Crusade for Voters had prepared to advise residents that there was going to be a community meeting. We were going to talk about this issue and that they had to attend. Then we had the sit-ins by Virginia Union students, and that was organized in part by the Crusade. So all these things I think were happening not only in the country but happening in Richmond so we got to see all of that. I got to see all of that. I was a little bit too young to do the actual sit-in, but I was commissioned to go out and do flyers and be part of the community outreach that caused people to be more informed and better aware of their rights and to go out and vote and to organize around the idea that we needed better education, better jobs, better housing.

Interviewer: So clearly this was something you were talking about at the dinner table all the time it sounds like.

Gray: Yeah, I don't think it was so much dinner table conversation. I think we always talked about what was going on, but what I remember more about dinner was really family time. I mean this was not so much, it might have been going on in some homes that it was a lot political discussion, but I don't think it was that much political discussion going on at my family table as it was what did you do in school today and did you do your homework is what I remember. It was more personal accountability than what the Governor of Virginia was going to do.

Interviewer: So how did you and your family decide where you went to school?

Gray: We didn't. It was decided for us. I mean when I grew up it was segregated, and so I didn't have any choice what school I was going to. But that changed in middle school for me. And the school I would have gone to had the schools not been integrated in the 60s would have been Benjamin Graves which is on Leigh Street. But I ended up going to Chandler Junior High School on Brookland Parkway as a result of integration. I think at the time that I went there, I was maybe the third class to have integrated. It integrated in '61 or '60, and I went in '62. And so maybe 30 kids, 30 black students, in the class. The same was true when I went to John Marshall. You just graduated with that class and went to the next class. It was, you know, you felt isolated. And you felt made to feel, not made to feel, but you felt like an intruder. This wasn't your school, this was somebody else's school you had been told to go to. And so you never really owned the experience. You just participated in it. And it wasn't your school it was somebody else's school you happened to be attending. Now there were teachers who I think made a genuine effort to see past that and to try to help every student achieve a different understanding of the reality. There were also teachers who could care less about having you there. They made it known by the way they talked and the attitude that they had. And there were kids the same way. There were some kids that said you know, "I don't have anything against you, happy you are here, hope you succeed," and "I'll be your friend." And there were other students who were probably saying whatever their parents felt, and said, "I don't know why you are here, we don't like you, and you should leave."

Interviewer: Can you share some memories you had of your education during this time and maybe some interactions with fellow students or teachers or administrators that stand out for you. And you can roll all over the place, elementary, junior high, high school.

Gray: Let me go get some water, I've got a tickle in my throat. Do you need any water?

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Gray: I think my experiences sort of break down into three areas. One are the friends that I grew up with the community that I lived in. And my community remained segregated through high school. So I stayed in the same community I started in. And no one else but people of my race were in that neighborhood.

Interviewer: And you were right around Battery Park?

Gray: I was right around Battery Park. Right. Just because we had integration didn't mean the whites were gonna move into my neighborhood and I didn't leave my neighborhood to move into a white neighborhood. So that is an important aspect of it that throughout my entire public

education, I lived in the same community. So those were our friends and are our friends today that I had. Now having said that, the second group were people, were kids that I did go to school with and interestingly enough while we were friends in school I wouldn't say that I visited anybody's house to have dinner or asked to go on a trip or went to their side of town to play ball or anything like that. So the experience in school was a limited experience. But cordial. I will tell you today that one of the people I'm working with closely in one of the projects that I'm doing, is somebody that I went to high school with who is white. And go to know him better after we had all been through school and had jobs. And it's true with others that I went to high school with who are white who I've gotten to know better and are closer to now that I was in high school. So that experience while not beneficial then as been beneficial subsequent to that. And the third area is – are the teachers. And there were some teachers who I think really worked hard at trying to make it a positive experience. The first principal that I remember is John Madden at John Marshall who I think made a very conscious effort to make that a pleasant experience for all of us by being fair to everybody. I think his demonstration of fairness was important. And I think I saw it in some of the coaches that I had. So sports, while really not open to everybody 'cause you couldn't have too many blacks on a team because it might upset some parents, those that did participate and the coaches that were there, I think tried very hard to be fair about their responsibility. Other than that I mean I don't think there was a lot of integration of the sort of [03:28.8] groups like the Key Club and the High-Why [sp?], those things. I mean they might let in one person or two, but there wasn't this effort to sort of get everybody involved.

Interviewer: So many people I've talked to talk about sports and their experiences on teams during the integration period. What sports did you play?

Gray: Well, I ran track in high school. But we had, and to that extent, track was a little bit more diverse than the other sports because it invited and had opportunities for more people to participate. So you had the football coach, the basketball coach and the baseball coach all participating in track. Because there were so many different events in track. So you just had more exposure to the different coaches. So that was my sense of fairness from that experience. But there was still limited participation in some of the other sports. Basketball you couldn't have but so many kids on the team. And I think there was a limitation about how many black kids you were gonna have on the team at that time. You just couldn't have half and half. It just wasn't going to work. But that was the reality of the time that we grew up in.

Interviewer: Now during this period can you think of any really great examples of leadership that you saw in your community, your school, nationally, wherever you want to take that question, and some examples of leadership that maybe wasn't so good.

Gray: Well now let's see, growing up, it was a little hard to really separate good leadership from bad leadership. I just think we were fighting with the notion that society's values and standards had changed. And I think people were fighting to preserve old standards and old values and people were fighting to instill new standards and new values. I don't know if there is a bad or a right way to do it or whatever way to do it. I could tell you that when I think of Oliver Hill and Sam Tucker and Spottswood Robinson and Henry Marsh and Doug Wilder, you know, they were fighting for achieving a fairer standard, a standard of inclusiveness and of the opportunity to participate for all of us. And they did a remarkable job in a very difficult state. And, you know,

when you think about Lewis Powell who worked with Oliver Hill to make sure the schools weren't closed in Richmond, because he had been on the school board in Richmond and recognized that that was going to be counterproductive to everybody's interest. You know we just, you know Eleanor Sheppard, the first woman on the City Council, made a very passionate plea for a fairer standard. And you know, a guy like John Madden, who was principal of the school – I think at the end of the day we were a community that fought the old school and the conventional wisdom of not letting people in to we can't stop this. This is trying to get toothpaste back in the tube. It's not going to work and you've just got to keep going forward. And you had City Council at the time trying to annex, to dilute the black vote. And that was not a very good thing. And you had the Mayor of the City, [Meryl Crow?? 08:40.0], and others who were making negative comments about why we should, why we can't afford to have blacks in politics and it would just destroy any effort to grow the city and to keep it viable. So I don't think any of it to surprise to anybody, but it was fascinating that cases like the Richmond case would end up in the D.C. circuit court – you'd have a judge like Spottswood Robinson making a decision about the case, who was a native of Richmond saying "nope things change. We're not gonna let this happen." Curtis Holt, who became a plaintiff in the case of redistricting and fighting the fact that you had to have fair voting districts. Henry Marsh becoming the Mayor of Richmond at a time when you needed to demonstrate that blacks could lead the city, and he was a very powerful leader and took a form of government that was designed to have a weak mayor and became a strong mayor notwithstanding because things had to get done and things weren't going to get done unless there was some leadership, so -

Interviewer: Must have been an amazing time to be in Richmond.

Gray: Yeah it was. Because we didn't vote for a while. There was like this period of time that it was under scrutiny by the justice department so everybody was locked in for like five years or so. But everybody since the change, everybody knew it was going to be different. There was a lot of confidence I think that it was going to be better, that change was going to occur and it was going to be better.

Interviewer: So how did your parents talk about all of this at home?

Gray: You know, I think that from the standpoint of growing up in this period of time it was all about education. I mean my father and my mother said the great equalizer is going to be education. You have got to do well. You've got to study hard and you've got to keep going. If you do that, it will be your best chance at securing a place in society that will be beneficial for you and for the opportunity to grow and to be prosperous.

Interviewer: So what were some of your personal turning points then while the civil rights era in Richmond was taking place?

Gray: I don't know that any of it was tied to that.

Interviewer: Doesn't have to be.

Gray: I just think there were moments in my life when, I don't know that I had any moments growing up that I got this sort of aha moment that I got to do something or not to do something. I

think I was focused that I had to keep going to school and that finishing college was not even a question about whether you would do it or not just when are you going to do it. And then after college, graduate school was an opportunity that I thought I had to take advantage of as well, just to continue to have the credentials to compete in this society. So going to law school was something I had been exposed to through Oliver Hill and Doug Wilder and [name Leonard Lambert] and others in my community that held leadership positions, Henry Marsh, that caused me to say you know what I should be one of them. So I went to law school. But it was because of the images and the stature that those individuals held and the esteem they were held in in my community.

Interviewer: So you must have known some of them personally.

Gray: I did. I grew up, I mean Oliver Hill's son was a year older that I was, and I grew up in his house as much as I did my own.

Interviewer: So you really had those models very clearly laid out.

Gray: Very clear. Very clear.

Interviewer: What do you see as the turning points for the community during this period?

Gray: Well you know I think that the annexation issue was a turning point. I think going to districts versus at large elections was a turning point. I think Doug's election as a Senator was a turning point. I think Henry's leadership as a mayor was a turning point. I think Oliver Hill and Sam Tucker and Spottswood Robinson's work on *Brown vs. Board of Education* – all of that was clearly a turning point. I think Richmond, and the black leaders in Richmond, played a national role on the way our country has evolved through their work in our community.

Interviewer: And one that is under recognized, don't you think?

Gray: Oh I do. I think you know everybody says, "well, you know, Doug Wilder was the person elected Governor of African descent in the country." And you say to yourself, "yeah but it was in Virginia. It was the capitol of the Confederacy." So I do think it was under appreciated but very significant.

Interviewer: What do you think some of the biggest turning points in your school were doing this point? Either Chandler or Marshall.

Gray: I don't think there were any really moments that stand out in my mind that were significant. I think we were so new to this process that everybody was working to sort of keep order. And just trying to keep things going. But I don't remember any particular assembly or any particular sporting event or anything. I remember going out to Varina to a track meet and seeing a sign at a service station that said "Do you wanna save this land? Join the Klan." And I saw a big cross in the back that hadn't been, was obviously going to be set on fire, but hadn't been at the time. But I don't remember anything in school that was significant. Although I tell you this, I remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated, I think a group of us had asked to look at the funeral during school, we were denied that opportunity. So we boycotted the

school. And of course it caused the superintendent to call the authorities and we had a big deal. But you know protest was something we understood and we knew how to protest and we knew how to do it peacefully. So the leader of the free world at that moment was Martin Luther King and to be denied the opportunity to express and view the country's remembrance of him we thought was not the right message to send. So we sent a message of our own.

Interviewer: So many people I've talked to think of that assassination as a turning point for Richmond as well.

Gray: Well, it was a turning point for the country. But you know I think you can argue that it was a turning for Richmond as well. But it changed the country forever. It just, it's like a 9/11 event, which we see as a turning point for recent time. I mean you know he was, he was, his leadership was instrumental in mobilizing an entire country to see a different side of its reality, of its future.

Interviewer: How do you think your experiences have shaped who you are today? You know growing up in that time and that place and that community?

Gray: It was very sobering. I think that I understand what it means not to be fair. What it means to be biased. How you can harm somebody not physically but emotionally and intellectually and scar them deeply. And so I have always thought it important having had that understanding and had that background to always work to improve society's view of its community and the people who are in it.

Interviewer: It certainly sounds like it shaped you professionally in the direction your career has taken.

Gray: Clearly.

Interviewer: How do you think those experiences changed your family?

Gray: I've been lucky I think to have had a family who has embraced change as far back as I can remember. I can remember many of the families whose kids I grew up with didn't have white visitors. We had white visitors as long as I can remember. Partly because I think my parents they just were able to reach across the race line and make genuine friendships. So it was interesting. I think I benefited greatly from their willingness to be progressive and to be open and to see people for who they are and not be intimidated by that.

Interviewer: It seems very unusual for that time.

Gray: It was unusual. It really was.

Interviewer: How do you think that experience affected your relationship with people from different backgrounds?

Gray: Very much so. I think I'm one of the least judgmental people you'll meet because of that. I'm very sensitive to the fact that everybody has something to offer and you need to look for it sometimes. It's not apparent always. But honesty and compassion and opportunity are critical to



success for those who have less than I do. So I always try to make a way for someone and be respectful of someone regardless of who they are and what position they have. Because they've got something to offer of value.

Interviewer: And unlike most people now, you grew up in a community of people from all different classes.

Gray: I did. I did. From all stratas of my socio-economic condition. And that wasn't true of the white community even then – because we had stratified by then. But it happened in our community because we all had to live in the same life.

Interviewer: Are there things you would like the generation of kids growing up in Richmond today to know?

Gray: Yeah. I think that we've lost a little bit of this notion of respecting other people for who they are and what they have to offer. I think we entered this sort of cycle of – not completely by the way, I don't think this is a general statement that applies to everybody – but because we are in a social media frenzy right now we've seen a lot of negative expressions of hurt and harm to each other that has gone viral and we wonder what our society is about right now. And we are the leaders of the free world and we've got a responsibility to lead it at a very high level and that starts with community and starts with family and starts with neighbors and showing that respect and being kind to one another and supporting each other as opposed to tearing each other down – is a value in America that we need to retain and promote and that goes from the classroom to the highest levels of government, and we are not seeing enough of that as we move forward. I mean politics are always going to be politics and people are going to have to disagree and that causes decisions to be formed in a more thoughtful manner. And I applaud what we've accomplished in that regard. But you don't have to hurt people personally and you don't have to create a level of distrust and lack of respect for people that then hurts the process of being able to lead in a very open society. Part of living in an open society and living in a democracy is that the process is shaped by the leadership of those who are in the positions of power. Unless they are statesmanlike and unless they are respectful of the values that have brought us to this point, we hurt ourselves in how we look not only to those of generations that are coming up who try to emulate us, but to the rest of the world, where we still hold the moral compass of how things should go.

Interviewer: Do you think there are things that we as a community in Richmond are in danger of forgetting?

Gray: Well I think everybody that's always a risk that you could forget lessons learned. I like the resiliency of Richmond. I like the fact that we are steeped in the history of this country. I mean to really understand this country you can learn all of its successes and faults by understanding the story of its communities.

Interviewer: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that's on your mind?

Gray: No. I do think this, I think Richmond is a city with great potential. And like any organic society and community, we continue to try live up to that potential that we have. And I think we

do better sometimes and we don't do well others. But I think on balance we are a very strong community. When the rest of the country has suffered in great ways economically and catastrophically in terms of disasters, we have been a fairly resilient community and have stood with each other when times that are important. I think we have a bright future.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Gray: I hope that helps.

Interviewer: It helps a lot.

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