

A Community Remembers
Interview: Robin Mines 1 & 2

Laura Browder: Ok. Robin, can you just start off by telling me your name and the date?

Robin Mines: Robin Mines. July 8th, 2012.

LB: Perfect, that'll just help me keep everything straight. So, Robin, why don't we start by you just telling me something about how you grew up.

RM: Ok--

LB: ... what your family was like, where you grew up, all of that stuff.

RM: Um, I'm the first born to my mom and dad. Um, we were born--I was born in, uh, Richmond, Virginia. We had a home on Southside where we lived with my mom's parents... at the time, um, on Midlothian Turnpike. Um, I was born 1958. So, um, I guess right at the beginning of the civil rights era... pretty much. Um, I had a really close knit family, a lot of relatives in the city. Um... pretty strict environment, Christian upbringing. Um, close neighborhood, we knew a lot of our neighbors. Um... very friendly environment.

LB: What was your family like? Were they from here originally?

RM: Yes--

LB: All of them?

RM: ...all my family's roots -- my mom, dad, grandparents -- all from Richmond, Virginia.

LB: Wow. So you go back a long time. Deep roots.

RM: Yes.

LB: What was Richmond like when you were a child? What do you remember about the city then?

RM: I remember, um, a--a lot of families... um, a lot of us--most of us went to churches. Even if it--we didn't go to church together, we still were familiar with each other's churches. Um... a lot of--mostly, um... a lot of p--the parents worked. Um, our schools were in our neighborhoods. Um, there wasn't a lot of violence. And back then I can even remember policemen bringing men home sometimes that were too drunk... cuz they couldn't drive so they just kinda bring them home and they'd go get their cars later. Um, I do remember a lot of, um... let's see, around age five or six, that's when I started noticing a lot of the racism in the city. I believe that was when, um... after President Kennedy was... assassinated. And then, um, Linden Johnson ran against Barry Goldwater. And that's when a lot of people got really nasty in the city and that's when I started realizing... racism existed, I think, at that age.

LB: What kind of incidents stuck out in your mind from that time?

RM: Uh, the high school kids that were on the buses coming from George Wythe High School, they would pass us by and we were, um, either going to school or leaving school. They'd throw things at us and call us bad names.

LB: What school were you at then?

RM: Franklin Elementary School.

LB: Ok

RM: On Midlothian Turnpike.

LB: Ok.

RM: It's now called Swansboro Elementary.

LB: So you really remember the racism first from the older kids--

RM: Yes.

LB: ... it sounds like.

RM: Initially.

LB: And it sounds like that presidential campaign really stuck out in your mind as kind of a turning point. Can you tell me more about that?

RM: Well, um, first of all, it--it... I was sure (?) shocked when I realized what assassination meant. John F. Kennedy, when he--that--that meant that he was shot and killed. Cuz our teacher initially told us--I believe she told us that day before we left school, that he had been assassinated. And I didn't fully understand what she meant. And I noticed--a lot of adults were sad in the community. Even--I noticed a lot of women crying. People were un--upset and angry. And then, um, President Johnson, I guess took over. Cuz he was Vice President at the time. And then, um, when he ran against Barry Goldwater... um, I don't know, people just were really angry, they didn't want Johnson to continue. They really wanted Barry Goldwater. At--at that age, I didn't really understand the republican/democrat-type sorta thing. But I knew that there was a lot of anger and a lot of concern over that collec--election. And people were really nasty to us. Um, white people, in the city.

LB: And you were really young then.

RM: Yes.

LB: I mean, you would have been five or six... at that time.

RM: Yes. I--I remember my mom letting me wear one of my favorites coats to school--was a dress-up coat. And it--we usually didn't wear that to school, we usually wore it to church, but I convinced her to let me wear it, it was a light blue coat. And an object was thrown from a bus and it burnt my coat. And I think that's why I've never forgot that cuz it hurt my feelings so bad and I was so upset cuz first of all, I thought I was in trouble... for getting my coat messed up, but... you know, as a child, that's how you think. But my mom was more concerned that I was ok... than anything. So I think that's why that stuck in my head so much, so long.

LB: I'll bet. Um... can you tell me more about your neighborhood and what that was like? You know, what did people do who lived there? You know, was there a place everyone hung out?

RM: Well--well, um, my community was segregated. It was--I don't--as a child, before we moved to our new home, I don't recall any other nationalities or races in my neighborhood. There was a barbershop called Hollit's (?) Barbershop that was owned by a black man, who was a friend of our families as well. He was--he's e--still exists there. Um, and that's where a lot of people hung out. Um, in front of my home was a bus stop. So a lot of people going to and from work would stop in front of my house and as a little girl I would always chat with all the people that at--were at the bus stop. Even though I h--hardly knew them, but my mom said I had to talk to everybody that came by. Didn't ever--hadn't met a stranger. Um... uh, like I say, it was more family-oriented. We knew people who carried the mail. Um, and back then you had the milkman... and you had diaper delivery and whatnot. Um, didn't know... I don't recall... knowing any black police officers when I was that young age. Police officers I always saw were--were caucasian... at the time. Um, it was a neat community, people kept up their yards. And like I say, everybody was friendly, everybody knew everybody to speak and wave and talk to everybody. Um... I don't recall a lot--too much--a lot of things going on in the community, but there--but everybody was nice...

LB: What church--

RM: close knit...

LB: ...did you go to then and--and who was the paster, do you remember?

RM: At the time, I attended St. Paul's Baptist church. It was located 2600 East Marshall Street. Um, pastored by Reverend Art--Junior (?) Archer Mosby, at the time. He had been the pastor there for years, a lot time. Um, through my parents grown up and whatnot. Um, my great-grandparents were founders at that church. So, what--my family had been--members--a part of the church for many years. And we still are today.

LB: Wow. So that--that really is a tradition then. Do you remember Reverend Mosby or anyone else in church talking about the civil rights movement... as it evolved?

RM: Not much in church. Not much was sp--spoken of. Um... from what I can remember, just taught how we should behave and... um, but as far as... any type of, um, race relations or... no. I

don't recall.

LB: Interesting. Just kind of off the map, then.

RM: Yeah.

LB: Now, how did you and your family later on, moving forward a little, cuz you went to segregated schools all the way up to Wythe, right?

RM: No, actually. I went to segregated school up until it was time to go to seventh grade--

LB: Ok.

RM: ... which was the initial--when Richmond finally opened up the gates for busing. Um, and that was going to Elkhardt (?) Middle School, which was... uh, earlier located in Chesterfield County, but the county line moved. So Elkhardt became a part of Richmond -- uh, what they called an annex area.

LB: So that would have been around 1970 or so?

RM: Yes, that was 1970. My first year at-at El--at Elkhardt.

LB: And what do you remember from that time?

RM: It was a horrible experience. Um, the kids from my neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods, all the black kids, we were all, um, put on a couple of city buses, packed like sardines, um, no--not even standing room left, and we were bused out to the--to the c-- Chesterfield County schools and we were all afraid. I know I was. Because of, uh, Klan attacks that had occurred in my community when my family relocated from Midlothian Turnpike to Macran (?) Street, which is now the Swansboro neighborhood, after annexation when the county line moved. So we were unwelcome in the neighborhoods. So there were cross-burnings and shootings and whatnot. And so when they decided they wanted to send us to school, it was very nerve-wracking and we were very afraid.

LB: I can only imagine. Was your family one of the few black families to move to that area?

RM: Yes.

LB: So the Klan was really targeting your family then.

RM: Yes.

LB: Did you have any cross-burnings on your property--

RM: Oh yeah.

LB: Wow.

RM: And, uh, two weeks in--into our new, brand new home, our home was completely shot up, shotgun blasts, all over the front of the yard, windows shot out, the aluminum siding, whole section of the house was just bullet holes everywhere.

LB: I cannot imagine how your parents dealt with that and how they talked to you about that. You know, how they prepared you. What--what... what kind of discussions went on when, you know, your family moved and all the sudden it sounds like you had had a pretty tight knit community before then. And now suddenly you're in an environment where... your'e at risk.

RM: Mm hmm. Um, basically, my parents, uh, fortunately, they told me it's... not an entire race that's like this. That there's a few hateful people, ignorant. And--and we just have to be careful. Um... and not to look at every person... as being bad just because they're--you're being white, what have you. Um, so that's what they taught us.

LB: But how about specifically in dealing with the Klan threat... to you.

RM: Well, basically, my, um, parents just tried to protect us as best they could. You know, as far as transporting us wherever they could and always having an adult with us. Um, putting us in the back of the house to sleep in case they came back -- that sort of thing.

LB: So, you moved... and then how--how much later was it that you started going to Elkhardt?

RM: Let's see... We moved to our home in '66. So I was about eight years old. And then up until the 1970s when we went to Elkhardt.

LB: So there you were, packed like sardines on the bus, heading to school. what do you remember about being in the school, about your whole experience there?

RM: Well, um, mmm. First of all, we're afraid of the violence because of the hatred. And I can't speak for other kids but I know I was afraid because I didn't think I was gonna measure up in the classroom. Because we had this stigma of m--thinking that white kids were smarter than us. Um, that was was everybody thought anyway. Uh, so I was worried--really concerned about that. Um, and just protecting myself. Cuz I was always taught by my father to never start a fight, but don't ever let anyone hurt me. So...

LB: So he was really preparing you that way. How did your teachers at your former segregated school prepare you for integration and for busing?

RM: Well, you know, I don't think they really knew it was gonna happen. Cuz everything was done so last minute--

LB: Ok.

RM: It was never even... we never even... when we left our elementary school, I don't even

think we realized... we were going. At--at the time, I think we still w--thought we were going to Bainbridge School.

LB: Wow.

RM: Yeah.

LB: So it was really sudden.

RM: So, over the summer--yeah, it was a sudden thing. You know, this is where you're gonna be going--Elkhardt, oh my God. Yeah.

LB: How did the teachers act towards you?

RM: Mm hmm... unfortunately, there were--there were w--there were some that... were pretty hateful. they couldn't--I guess they couldn't go but so far, but it was pretty obvious how they felt about us being there. And then there were those who weren't like that. So it was a mixture.

LB: Were there all white teachers at that point?

RM: Pretty much. Yeah. At the junior high. Um... pretty much predominantly white teachers, because even--I think a year--couple of years before we got there, there were some, um, integration of staff, but it was really integration. It was like a couple in here and a couple people there--

LB: Yeah.

RM: When it came to, you know, putting, uh, African Americans in Chesterfield County, or surrounding counties.

LB: And I'm just trying to get a picture because... you know, I've heard of Swansboro, but never been there. How many kids were there and what would you say, were there a few black kids or a lot of black kids? Was it like half and half?

RM: In the Swansboro neighborhood?

LB: Well, no, at Elkhardt when you started.

RM: Oh, at Elkhardt. Oh boy. I'll say... we made up, uh... maybe a third of the population. *Maybe*. The black kids. Cu--because it was two... like I said, two city buses of us... and there... had to be at least thirty to thirty five yellow school buses of white kids from the...surrounding coun--from the county. So that was the ratio.

LB: So you were really--

RM: So it was pretty scary.

LB: ... in the minority.

RM: Yeah. And--and a lot--like, in--in just as the teachers, some were hateful, some weren't, we had some students who were hateful and some who weren't. So you just kinda had to sort through... those who were. And then, you know, as time went on, um, of course I h--made friends with some white kids and got to know each other. And, um, quite a few of them realized the things that they had heard and been taught were wrong. And we got to realize why some of them thought some of the things that they thought, it's cuz they were *taught*. You know?

LB: From the cradle.

RM: Mm hmm. So it was pretty crazy.

LB: So were you involved in any extracurricular activities during this time?

RM: Yes, when I first got to Elkhardt... uh, I was in the band.

LB: What'd you play?

RM: Sa--uh, I started out with the clarinet, but I switched to saxophone. And I tried tuba--I used to try everyth--French horn--I--I used--I wanted to try it all. I was just that kinda kid. Um, sports-wise, they didn't really have anything with the girls. I really enjoyed phys-ed, and um, started experimenting with field hockey--I had never heard of it, I don't think, until I got there. Course, before that, we used to play basketball, football, and baseball with the guys, c--growing up.

LB: Yeah, so far before Title IX, right?

RM: Just before--it was just before it.

LB: Cuz I remember Title IX coming in and that was such a big deal.

RM: Yeah.

LB: Cuz before that -- nothing. So, are there any particular interactions that you had with fellow students or teachers that really stick out in your mind? From this period?

RM: Um... in junior high? While I was at Elkhardt?

LB: Yeah, and then we can move on to Wythe.

RM: Ok, um... I have to say my--my experience with my band teacher there... um, his name was Mr. Schindlebeck (?). I guess that was his name. That was a good experience. He pretty much--cuz we were--it was a music-type environment and he just saw us all as music students and... you know, we had this common bond. Um... I had a teacher... Ms. Roberts... who was a English teacher who was kinda hateful. Who said some hateful things to us. She was English

teacher. And then, you know, that kinda caused you to shut down so that--hurt you. As far as learning. I think during that whole period, I just kinda... barely hung on. Just to escape, just to survive to get outta there. I don't--I don't think much learning went on.

LB: What were some of the things that you did, you know, just mentally, to keep yourself going through this period? Because, you know, that's such a tough time of life anyway [chuckles].

RM: Right. Going through that age. Yeah, you know, junior high is already tough, yeah. Um, I don't know, I guess, being quiet... just kinda... trying not to say much. Um, keeping my ears open. Um, I relied on a lot of what we learned in church. Um, just wanting to get through it, and--plus, I had parents at home that--I couldn't get into trouble. So I got the strict mom and dad so, you know, I had to behave myself. Then I got to school--I'm--you know, I'm supposed to get better grades, but it's tough, it's hard. It's hard to focus, it's hard to concentrate. You know, because you--you're trying to fit in... um, not only with your peers but you're trying to fit in with peers that are totally from a different world than you are. You know, and then you got--for the first time you got teachers that are... hateful. Cuz y--that--you know, I had teachers on a pedestal. I always just thought they were just terrific -- the greatest people ever. And so that just--I was kinda crushed. You know... by some of the, um, attitudes that were presented towards us. But I did have a good experience with the assistant principal, Mr. Farmeyer (?). Um, I had an experience where I got into an altercation with a black girl because she was picking on a white girl who was a friend of mine, and it was for no reason. And... trying to get her to stop, we ended up in a fight. The crowd comes running behind us, we're all, you know, and we end up in the restroom and the next thing I know here comes the--the principal, and... they take me--myself and the other young lady to the office. He's gonna suspend us. I look at her and she looks at me and I tell him, "Mr. Farmeyer, it really wasn't a fight. We were wrestling, everybody thought it was a fight. And next thing you know, we had a crowd around us." And his--I will never forget the look in his eye, he just kinda looked at me [chuckling] and he smiled. And he said, "Ok, so you weren't fighting." And I said, "No, sir, we weren't fighting. We were wrestling. And everybody thought it was a fight and everything just got out of control." And I knew he knew.. that that was not the truth. But he kn--be--becasue we were able to look at each other and comprise and work it out... he--he realized that we weren't bad kids. And he let us go without suspending us. He said, "I'm gonna let you off the hook this time, but I don't want to see you here ever again for fighting." And he never did.

LB: That's great [laughs].

RM: That's a story that sticks in mind, I'll never forget it. I guess he figured if I was that creative-- [laughs]

LB: Absolutely [laughs]... You gotta work it out, right?

RM: Oh yeah.

LB: So... when you think back on this era--and I--I feel like I still keep wanting to talk about Wythe cuz I know so much happened there... whe--when you think of your time at Elkhardt and later on, your time at Wythe... were there any examples of really good leadership that stick out

in your mind?

RM: At Elkhardt, not really... Um, no, everybody just kinda was struggling and kinda in their own world, just trying to survive. But then we got to Wythe, things changed a little bit. Um, I think a lot of the kids... have gone through the initial desegregation of schools and a lot of kids realized there're some things I know that won't--when I got to my high school, there had been a, um, something that we weren't aware of until--I wasn't aware of until later. This speech that was given by some... um, I guess he's now a NAACP member or something. Um, I can't think of his name.

LB: You mean Sad Alamid (?)?

RM: S--yeah.

LB: Yeah.

RM: I guess he'd given some really awful speech. But, see, the kids from Elkhardt, that had come into Wythe, we didn't know about it. Is the--but the kids who were ahead of know--had known. And, um, so that was an example of some awful leadership. You know, but... but when we did get to George Wythe, um, the teacher balance racially was a little different. There were more black teachers there. Um, there were some really good... um, white teachers as well. Um, they treated us right. I never got treated bad by any teacher at George Wythe. Um, I never got treated racially ignorant by any students at George Wythe cuz by the time I--like I said, things had changed a lot. And by then I had a lot of white friends as well and I got along with everybody.

LB: So you got there, what, in 1972?

RM: Yes. When I got to George Wythe.

LB: And so by that point -- had your neighborhood changed to the point where you weren't--

RM: Ohhhhhh. Oh by then, most of the white people had left.

LB: Ok. So you had that--

RM: ... the neighborhood.

LB: white flight

RM: We had white flight.

LB: ... turnaround.

RM: Oh yeah. And then, also a lot of the students had gone. We still had--had a pretty good portion... when I got to Wythe. But a lot had left. And then as the years went on, a lot more. It almost became a black school... pretty much.

LB: Did Elkhardt change during the time that you were there?

RM: Mmmm... somewhat. A lot of white kids left there, too. Because, like I said, that became the city--was annex area.

LB: Yeah.

RM: So a lot of--um, my s--my--eighth grade year, which was my second year at Elkhardt, a lot of the white kids were gone... There were still quite a few there, but a good many were--you could tell the difference, the shift. Because then--

LB: And the teachers were still all white, though.

RM: Yeah, and we started getting--we--had gotten a few more black teachers in. A few more. And we're had--now had yellow buses to come to school on. We weren't stuffed--packed on those city buses anymore. It's crazy. So then we had school buses that would actually come pick us up. And we had a--problem where they wouldn't send enough buses... cuz we still were packed on but then they started working that out as well.

LB: So you were seeing just tremendous changes in your school and your neighborhood--

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: ... at this point.

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: Cuz it--it sounds like the Klan was really active in '66 when you moved in.

RM: Oh yes. Very.

LB: Did they stay active? Do you--do you have more memories of the Klan in your neighborhood, or... did that kind--

RM: After--after that first... when we, you know, first moved in. I'd say for maybe a few months and then they finally went away. And we didn't see them anymore but right around the corner, there were, like, a couple of bars on the corners where no blacks were allowed. And so you just kinda had to be careful, you know, passing through that area. So, they were still around, but, you know, not so much in the neighborhood cuz most of the people that had moved out--there were a couple white families that remained... still. And they were really friendly with everybody... and they didn't have a problem with, you know, predominantly black neighbors.

LB: So your neighborhood changed, Elkhardt changed--

RM: Elkhardt changed.

LB: And then you went to Wythe--

RM: Wythe.

LB: Tell me about that time.

RM: Um... by the time I got to Wythe, I had some pretty low self esteem... After going through what we'd gone through. Um, my grade crashed... they were way different. But then I got to high school, and the atmosphere was a little different and... and, you know, like I said, I always had my parents on me. You *will*... [laughs] get an education, you are gonna do what your'e supposed to do, so... Um, by then, I--like I said, I was in the band. So marching band. Um, went out for sports teams. Initially I got cut from the basketball team my first year, but then I ended up making it my sophomore year. Ended up on track team, I ended up on the field hockey team... um, student government. Um...

LB: ROTC...

RM: Jazz band, stage band--no, I didn't go into R--I didn't--actually...

LB: Ok.

RM: ... I didn't--I didn't--uh, advance gym because of the sports. I played all three--I played three sports. Track and field, as well. Um... just got into all kinds--drama club, yearbook staff, I was elected Vice President of my senior class. You know, so things started looking up for me. You know, um... and like I said I had a mixture of friends, different races. I never had a problem with that. At--at Elkhardt, I went through some... some... problems because some of my friends didn't understand me, how could I be friends with white kids. You know, but I--it's like, whatever. [Laughs.] You'll--you'll figure it out.

LB: That's a lot to navigate.

RM: Yeah, it is. It is.

LB: But it sounds like at Wythe, all that got a little bit easier.

RM: Yeah, it did. It did.

LB: And you were just... super involved in everything.

RM: Right. That was my way of surviving in school cuz my--I wasn't--I didn't feel like I was that great at--I was not a *poor* student, but certain subjects, I--I struggled with. Especially math because I got behind. You know, junior high, like I said, it was like a gap, like, nothing... went in... you know. But, I survived. I maintained [laughs].

LB: Now I've got a daughter who's twelve so, you know, I can see sometimes when things are

just not going in. Right? It's like... the lights are on but no one's home.

RM: Right.

LB: You know? Um... how did the changes going on in Richmond at this point discussed in your home. Because, wow, what a time of change.

RM: Yeah, and then my parents also reminded me of how far it had come... from when they were... my age, and how things had changed quite a bit. Um, but--

LB: What kind of stories did they tell you?

RM: Well, about, um, when they used to clean homes, and people would, you know, throw money, and--certain parts of the house, or jewelry or whatever to try to set them up to see if they'd steal it. And... um, how going into back doors and, you know, at people's houses where they were cleaning. Um... shopping downtown where you couldn't try things on. You had to buy--pay for it as it was. Um, certain places where you weren't allowed to eat at the counter. You know, things like that that they had to go through growing up. And they just encouraged us to... get an education because you gotta be two or three times better than your white counterparts. Um... and God forbid don't break the law cuz you don't want anything on your record, cuz the--once you get that, you're screwed... you know, um--and basically trusting God. That's what we were taught.... you know?

LB: Do you... remember any big... turning points--personal turning points that you went through during the civil rights era in Richmond?

RM: Hmm, personal turning points.... [Pauses] Well, um, going back to, um, towards the end of elementary school was when, um, Martin Luther King was assassinated. And that--I--it seemed like that took so much out of the communities. Like--like the wind just got kicked out. Like you just--I think a lot of people gave up hope.... You know, it was like, oh my God, if they murder Dr. King, well... [laughs]. Then you know, where's that leave us, you know? Um... that--I--I don't know ho--what words to describe it, but it changed... the communities, big time. Changed people's mentality. it's like, a lot of people just kinda just said, pff, what's the point.... Um... also I remember during the--af--during that time when--during that age, we had good city leaders. Um, Henry L. Marsh, we had Claudette Black McDaniel... you know, different people like that, but then later on, I think it--it changed. Um, I think the political leaders became more interested in filling their own pockets and their own interests... and the city started... falling by the wayside. And we see the result of that today.

LB: Do you remember... the sit-in's... you know, the--the protests in front of movie theaters.

RM: Mm hmm. Um... w--[laughs], uh... it wasn't necessarily a protest but we were at a movie theater once and standing in line to go to the theater... and for some reason the police officers and their dogs... came after us. Um... and I don't--I don't know why--what--if they were after somebody in particular, but, you know, all of us ended up being threatened by them. Down on Broad Street at the movie theaters, that's when we used to go a lot. That's when the city was

really thriving, you had Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads downtown. Um, Woolworths and all those--Murphy's and that pla--and, we had several theaters -- the State, the Town, the Lowes (?), the Colonial Theater, as well.

LB: And you were in line for tickets?

RM: In line, in line--well, we had already gotten our tickets. And we were in line waiting to go in. And these police officers--they happened to be walk--just walking by. And next thing you know, the dogs are growling at us and... and I don't know--I can't--I can't remember what... why, you know. But it was just kinda scary. Just something that I never forgot.

LB: Yeah, I'd imagine that so much was going on in Richmond during that point, so much must've been changing -- quickly.

RM: Yeah. And I remember mostly the stuff I saw on TV. I think I--as a kid, we were sheltered a lot. My particular--me and my sisters--were sheltered a lot from a lot of things. You know, people--they'd talk but not a lot in front of us. Um... and like I said, most of it was on TV, I would see things on TV, people getting beat up and... sprayed with hoses and... even kids... you know, people going to jail, and, you know all the marches and things going on. and then at the same time I remember the war... That was scary. You know? Um, I remember thinking I'm just so glad I l--you know, I've.... at one point you think, I'm glad I don't live in one of those--other countries, but at the same time I'm here and... I'm--somebody wants to kill me just because.... You know, so it was just kind of a weird growing up.

LB: It's a lot to process.

RM: Yeah. And--and I'm gonna tell you, the truth--I--I can--I don't think--I--we thought we'd live to be adults.... A lot of us.

LB: I mean, the level of violence... has gotta be so tough to live with, day to day.

RM: Mm hmm. It is. And you know, just like, um... recently when we were talking about this 'stand your ground' issue with Trayvon Martin? And I said, well, that's interesting because... I still have anxiety today when I see--if I see two white men in a pick-up truck with a confederate flag... I have anxiety. But I'm not gonna freak out and get a gun and a say, "well, I better kill them before they kill me." You know, I know better than that. But, you know, I can understand how people can... you know, cuz things from your past stick with you and they affect you. And when it--when it happens, I just kinda smile like, wow, what a trip. That's still with me [laughs].

LB: But I... it's a part of you, right?

RM: Yeah.

LB: So your personal--so the community, the turning point was really the assassination of Martin Luther King.

RM: I think so.

LB: Did you have any big personal turning points... during this time?

RM: [Pauses.]

LB: You know, just moments when you clearly remember the before and the after?

RM: Um, well, before... Dr. King was assassinated, I had hope. And--and pride and--and thinking things would get better... that things would turn around, that we would--this was--this is actually gonna--and then when he--when he got killed, I thought, "Pff. There it is. It's never gonna change." But I still, personally, didn't make it--let it change me, and how I felt about people and--and m--and my fi--my personal fight. But I still, inside I kept thinking... there's no--it's just hopeless. To be honest, yeah, I did think it was hopeless.

LB: And you would have been... about ten?

RM: Mm hmm. And then--and then I r--I r--when I read about psychology at that age... you know... significant things happening at that age can really have an affect on you.

LB: Yeah, it changes the way you look at the world.

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: For a long time.

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: Do you remember what happened at school? When--when Reverend King was assassinated? Was that the big turning point for people there? ... Cuz you would've... you would've been still in elementary school, right?

RM: Yeah. I was still at--in elementary school, and I just remember us talking about it on the way to school... that next morning... and how sad everybody was, and angry and... talking about, you know, the responses from the adults... how they were--it just--it seemed like it just broke us. I don't know, like the straw that broke the camel's back, as they say. It, you know... really deflated the community.

LB: A lot. How do you think--you know, growing up, going through all of these different experiences of growing up in a really--sounds like a really stable all-black community, moving to a white community and having, you know, the Klan be burning crosses on your lawn, going to Elkhardt, going to Wythe, you know, seeing all the changes in Richmond... and being part of them -- how do you think that shaped who you are today as a person?

RM: [Pauses.] ...Umm... it's made me... more of, um, like--I, uh, try to see people for who they are.... Um, everybody has a clean slate with me. Because I realize there's people from all

different walks of life, people from all different type of situations. Um, everybody's gone through something different. And you can't put anybody in any box. Um... I think, um, the reason I give most--give people the benefit of the doubt, because of my experiences. Um... [pauses] and I... I don't know, I'm the kind of person, I love all--appreciate all cultures. I'm--I hate the--the separatism, the segregation eh--that's practiced here in Virginia... And so, I'm--I don't know. Let's see... [pauses]. I'm--I'm on this kick now where whenever I fill out something and they put down, you know, your race--d--the different races or other, I put "human." [Laughs.] So, see what they think about that. [Laughs] Marinate on that one. Um... I just--I don't know, I just love people. And I just wish people would get it, that we're all the same. We're all connected. That we can all learn from each other. Um, it's--it's not a--a race difference, it's a culture difference. You know, like, decorations and foods and dances and music and... you know. Different things like that. That's--that's the only difference and those things could--should be shared and celebrated and, you know... we could learn and grow from each other, but...

LB: And speaking of music, if you had to put together a soundtrack from your--from that era for you, you know, that kind of illustrated your life -- what would it be? What songs would be on it?

RM: Mmm... "What's goin' on" by Marvin Gaye. "War." Um... "Tears of a Clown," Smokey Robinson. Cuz a lot of times, you'd be hurting, but you just smile anyway and.... Umm... "Give Peace a Chance," John Lennon. Um, "We Shall Overcome." ..."Bridge over Troubled Waters." ... Hmm... "Everyday People." [Pause] Back then... [pause]... I th--um--that pretty much kinda sums it up.

LB: It's a great soundtrack.

RM: [Chuckles.]

LB: [Chuckles] So much great music from that time, too.

RM: Oh yeah.

LB: Are there things that you'd like the generations of kids growing up in Richmond today to know?

RM: Mm hmm. That, um... that we're all the same, that we're all connected, we are human beings. Um, we all need to work together. Cuz if we don't... um... and it doesn't matter what neighborhood--that you're not a product of your environment. Just because you, you know, are lacking certain things growing up doesn't mean that that's you or that that's the way you have to live the rest of your life. There's always better, and--and stop--quit with the separatism, the separation.

LB: Are you--do you think there're things that Richmonders learned as a community back then that we're in danger of forgetting?

RM: Do I think there is...?

LB: Are there things that we as a community need to particularly remember, that you think we're in danger of forgetting? You know, things that happened then.

RM: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Um... forgetting that the priority is, as far as kids are concerned, um, in our education system, I think we're forgetting what that does. The--the long--the, uh--the long-term effect... from that, um, of not working together. Um... [pauses]. We're forgetting what's--where segregation le--leads. I think we've--we've already forgot here, in this area. [Laughs.] Short-term memory.

LB: It's true.

RM: Yeah.

LB: Although, you know, I've talked to... a lot of African Americans who felt that when integration took place, they lost a lot. In terms of their communities.

RM: [Pauses.] It's hard to blame it on that. You know, I hear that, too. But, mm hmm. I think the pride--like I said when Dr. King went dead--was assassinated, the black community itself changed, it had nothing to do with integration. The black communities changed i--in itself. Um, the--the--some--somehow... um... it ke--but I think it--what happened is it--the timing of de--desegregation and everything, it kinda made it--look, seem like... that.. that was the cause of it, but, you know... I--I disagree.

LB: You think it was more the--just the level of violence?

RM: Well, the--the--the violence and the poverty--

LB: Yeah.

RM: Combination of things that were happening in the community.... Um... was a--is a contributing factor. Um, I think--I think, um... trying to p--thinking that you're gonna lose it--lose something, that fear, I think that was a big part of it. Instead of, you know, growing with it. You know, trying to hold on so tight and--

LB: Yeah.

RM: ...thinking that you're gonna lose it, that y--you're not--you're not throwing it away because... your values are off-keel--off-kilter. You know? I don't think integration caus--you know, weakened our culture or... disband the black community, or -- no. Hmm mm. Drugs. Poverty. ... Um... violence. That sort of thing. Peop--the African Americans stopped growing. It's like there were some--it's like some s--body hit a ceiling. You know, just like with education, all the sudden it became wrong to get your education and be smart. Are you kidding me? When we were in sc--in school, oh my God, we wanted to be the 'A' students. You know, you--and you wanted to--you'd be ashamed to not graduate with your class. It was unheard of. You know, if--if people fell behind, they scrambled and went to summer school and got those courses in. Cuz they wanted to march with their class. But somewhere along the line... and it had nothing to do with

integration. ...Nothing. And all of a sudden, black became--was supposed to be something, um, hip or ignorant or... no. You know, I have a pro--real problem with that. Why--why--why this reversal? Why--why is it because you--you're intell--you can, um, articulate and you're intellectual, that it's being *white*, it's a *white* thing? You know, where did this come from, what is that? That's fear to me. It's another form of fear.

LB: I'd imagine your perspective must have changed, too, a lot... when you joined the Air Force and you traveled so much.

RM: Well, yeah, well, I was raised by a marine. So my mentality was a little bit different than some of the kids in my community... anyway. But then, um, joining the Air Force, for me, helped m--build my confidence. Um...

LB: Did you join right out of high school?

RM: No. I went to college. I went to Norfolk State initially. I was recruited by Mount Ida Community College in Massachusetts. But fear caused me not to go. Massachusetts. Are you kidding me? Going to Massachusetts, gonna get *killed*. You know, I'm thinking Boston, c--you know, I was like--

LB: I remember seeing Louise Day Hicks on TV screaming every night in those--those shots of the s--the school buses being attacked cuz... you know, I grew up in Rhode Island, so--

RM: Ohhhhhh.

LB: I--I remember that very vividly growing up.

RM: Yes.

LB: How intense Boston was.

RM: Yeah, so I was scared to do. And I--and to this day, I w--I regret it. I wish I had gone. But... I ended up going to Norfolk State. It was a black college. It was not the right place for me. Isn't that funny. It's just so wrong for me. It was just all wrong.

LB: How so?

RM: I ended up miserable there. Because it was so narrow. It was so... and that wasn't me. Because I was into all kinds of music. You know, I had white friends. Um, I didn't... I--I wasn't like your typical, you know, you--you know, your stereotypical black person, that people t--you know, try to put you in a box. And--and by going to that school, I was putting myself into a box. But, you know, hindsight, you know, you don't know. And fear. Like I said, fear caused me not to go to the other school. And fear of the violence, fear of not measuring up. ... So I better run over here, and--where it's safe.

LB: But then you got out, you joined the Air Force--

RM: Oh yeah. Got to see the world. Meet so many different people from different places, learned so much about myself. You know, realized, wow... I can do anything, you know, I felt--felt more confident about myself. And--and I wasn't afraid to travel different places anymore. I want some of everywhere (?).

LB: What did you end up doing after you left the Air Force? [Dog begins whining.]

RM: [Dog in background] Um... initially I came back to Richmond. And it was *horrible* here. It was--when the crack e--ack--epidemic had broken out.

LB: Like the early nineties?

RM: Mid--actually late eighties.

LB: [Dog begins to bark.] Late eighties. Yeah. I didn't move here till '94 and I remember in Church Hill, it was so intense.

RM: Yeah, it had gotten so bad. And so it was--and things--

LB: [To dog] I know...

RM: [To dog] Shh shh shh. Ok, come on. Good grief. Can't ignore her. That's for sure. Come on... [Pause] Pretty soon I'll have my fence up and my doggy door, so, she can--

LB: [Laughs] come and go at will.

RM: Mm hmm. Um... we were...

LB: Richmond in the late eighties. You came back...

RM: There were so many people strung out on drugs. The violence was unbelievable. Um, and I thought, you have gotta be kidding me. This is crazy. So I left. And I--run into some friends in Georgia, hung out there for a while, then traveled out to--out west. And ended up staying out west for a good while, between Arizona, Utah... I really liked it out there. Of course it wasn't... you know, just--like... all black culture. You know and--like I had... friends from all different kinds of, uh, countries and races and everything. And so I liked that--better. A multicultural environment.

LB: So what brought you back to Richmond finally?

RM: Well, my family. My mom's getting older, my father's passed away. Um, my sisters kids, they're growing up, and... you know, just kinda being here with the family. Even though I'm not particularly crazy about Virginia. Cuz--to me, not much has changed here. The--the culture's still the same. So, cuz I recently was in Minnesota, I really love Minnesota a lot.

LB: Except the weather? [Laughs.]

RM: Well, I don't mind the weather so bad. It g--it can get kind rough, but... I don't mind it so bad. It's worth it.

LB: Robin, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wanted to talk about?

RM: [Pauses.] Um... no, I just--I just think that, um, a lot of people don't take the time that they need to process what they went through as far as, um, you know, racial violence, or--any kind of issues they happen to go through. Uh, releasing the past and really--really seeing it for what it was and overcoming it, and... Um, I think that to--and to the young people today, they need to process it and see what it--what it--you know, really--see it for what it was. And--and not take it on as... it's--it's not you and it's not the young kids now. None of you had anything to do with that. But--but how you act now and go forward -- is what's important.

LB: It really struck me when everyone from Wythe was together in a room, you know -- fifteen, twenty people. How intense it was for some people to be remembering this stuff--

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: and talking about it, maybe for the first time in a long time.

RM: Mm hmm. But it--it--I mean, I was--I was... I was surprised, too. Um, because when we--when I first initially, um, met up with them on the Facebook page... I don't know if I told you about that, but a couple of the people were kind of weird... You know, cuz we mentioned the George Wythe Alumni Association that I started. Cuz I realized the mess that's at the high school now. You know, they--they need our support, big time. And that's why we started the organization. And some of the people who're on the Facebook page are... acting as if--they... accused us of having some agenda or whatever. And I thought the Facebook page was for us to reunite and let each other know what's going on. And that's--what I did. And, you know, I got some really weird... um, s--comments from people. And I thought, hmm, wow, this is weird -- really something. And some of the people that--they weren't present at the group, they haven't been around, but... some of the comments they made, it's like they're still living back then. And I thought, wow, this is interesting, I'm in my fifties, you gotta be kidding me. Come on you guys.

LB: [Chuckles.]

RM: No way. But, just like, um, the Delrossi (?) -- the cheerleaders? When--when I first got to high school, I just thought they were so adorable. Twins! Cuz I always admired twi--I was--I... had this thing for twins anyways. I always wished I had a twin. And I just thought they were just so cute and so nice and... I remember some of the other girls, I used to always say hi to them. I never really knew them that well cuz they were older. But I always looked up to them and thought they were really cool kids. And, um, when... Janice -- when we all got together, she said, "I always thought you were so pretty." And I thought, "... Are you kidding me? I thought I was ugly." My self-esteem was... Are you kidding me -- dark skin? That--no. Somebody--you're not pretty. Are you kidding me? And when she said that to me, I thought "*Wow!*" That just really

completely blew me away.

LB: Yeah, just--it seemed like there were so many... moments that I knew I was only understanding a little part of what was going on--

RM: Mm hmm.

LB: ...cuz everyone there had so much history together, but...

RM: Mm hmm. But it was nice that--I realized they recognize me for being one of the friendly people--

LB: Yes.

RM: And one of the people that got along with, you know, as far as--I--maybe, I mean--I'll say a good student, citizen-wise. A good citizen, in school. So I'm--I was glad that they remembered that. Cuz that's something that I've always strived to be.

LB: Yeah it seemed like... I don't know. Patricia and I just thought it was so... great seeing everyone together for the first time in, you know, thirty-some years.

RM: Mm hmm. We had all been--had a big reunion. Think they may have mentioned it, where the--the class of, um... was it sixty...nine? To seventy... '69 and '79. Yeah. It was a huge reunion, out in West Henrico. And it was really nice. A nice classy event. And just seeing some of the people--people who came from out of state, all over.

LB: Wow.

RM: Yeah. Was really nice.

LB: I'm really hoping that... as part of this, we could do a group portrait of everyone who was at Wythe together who--who I interviewed for this cuz I just think it would be... great to see.

RM: It would be. And I--and I--I think w--it... the city--would say a lot to the city about, look. You know, a lot of you th--you know, have these opinions and... you know, thoughts about Richmond, but there are people here that, you know, really... have good hearts. And--and--and have the right peace of mind to want things to be together and want things to be right. You know, in spite of... those that don't.

LB: Robin, do you have any... friends or people you knew back then, black or white, or Native American, or whatever background, who you think I should interview as part of this project? [Pauses.] Cuz we're gonna be choosing twenty to twenty-four people. And when you've got a group that small, I just want to make extra sure--

RM: Ohh, yeah...

LB: ... they're the right people, you know? And that I'm including a lot of different voices.

RM: Mm hmm [pauses]. Mmm, my friend Patricia Woodberry -- she was Patricia German.

LB: Let me...

RM: She's a school teacher now. And I think she would be, um, a good person to, uh, interview.

LB: Can you tell me about her?

RM: Um, honor student, always. Um, and she... Pat... we're both brought up in a Christian home. But I'd say Pat was more of a radical... than I was. Um, so that she'd have a--some--m--other perspective, maybe.

LB: That would be great.

RM: From... that's why I pick her. Because--

LB: Is she still here in Richmond?

RM: Oh yeah.

LB: Oh good!

RM: She's a school teacher here in Richmond.

LB: Where does she teach?

RM: [Sighs.] Oh, wow...

LB: [Chuckles] I'm sorry, I feel like the interrogator here.

RM: No, I'm trying--I can't--think of right off what school she's... teaching at. ...Cuz she's been at a couple of... elementary schools, I think. I think she's still on elementary school level.

LB: Yeah, my kids went to John B. Cary.

RM: Her name is Woodberry.

LB: Woodberry. W-O-O-D, or?

RM: Mm hmm... E-R-R-Y... Let me let her in--

RM: One thing I, um, failed to mention, when we were in schools, our parents were very involved... in our education process. They were active in the PTA. We had boosters clubs for our athletics and our band--bands as well. Um, and... y--teachers were--our parents were at teacher-parent day. If one parent couldn't make--if both parents couldn't make it, at least one parent was there. So that's one thing I wanted to, um, to include. That parents were very much involved in the educational process of kids... during my entire school--my--school career.