

**A Community Remembers**  
**Interview: Royal Robinson 1 & 2**

Laura Browder: ...I think we are finally good now.

Royal Robinson: [Chuckles]

LB: Thank you for your patience.

RR: No problem.

LB: I'm not a real tech person and I've had to become a real tech person.

RR: [Chuckles]

LB: So it doesn't always come naturally. Royal let's start with a very simple question. Tell me something about how you grew up.

RR: Well...

LB: And tell me about your family.

RR: Ok. Growing up, um... I always considered myself as having a—a happy childhood. But, um, we—I was one of nine kids. So, we didn't have a lot. But, um, we had pretty much what we needed. Um, we—I remember we had to—or I had to work a lot around the house. Um, we had chores, as well as we, um - my brother and I, we—we worked a lot with my father. He had, um, he delivered wood on a truck throughout the—the neighborhood. That was part of his business, as well as he had a grocery store that we helped him in. And, um, so—but we also—we—we got a chance to play a lot. We—we ran a lot and I got a opportunity to play a lot of football and basketball and hide-and-seek and tag. But, um—and also, we, um—it was just, um... again, having eight siblings, um, we entertained each other a lot. And we were close siblings and we protected each other a lot. Um, we, um—we picked and teased each other but we didn't allow anyone else to do it [laughs].

LB: Now, where were you in the line-up of the nine [laughs]?

RR: I was the seventh. Um, there were, um, six before me. Um, there were six girls and three boys, and the last two were—were girls. I was the third—third boy.

LB: And you were in Church Hill, right?

RR: Yes. Uh, most of our life was spent in Church Hill.

LB: And where was your dad's grocery store?

RR: At twenty third and M Street. Um... it was called Robinson Variety, and...

LB: I know exactly where that is [laughs].

RR: [Laughs] Yes. It was—[phone rings]

LB: 'Scuse me, let me stop—

#2

LB: So it sounds like you had a pretty active childhood.

RR: Yes. Um, yeah, um—again, it was pre-computers, so [laughs] more things were physical. Um, communications, um, relationships, everything was more physical than active, so, yes.

LB: So what was Richmond like when you were growing up?

RR: Huh.... Um, I remember at the earliest, uh, Richmond, uh—I guess being a child in Richmond—a black kid in Richmond, I guess, um... I—I had a... um... I remember having a perspective—the *white* perspective, I like to call it, because, um, it was things like, um, when my mom and I would go places, we—we did a lot of things together as a kid also. Mostly on weekends. Um, when we downtown Richmond, I remember, um, asking, 'why do we have to ride in the back of the bus? Um... why can't we, um, drink from this water fountain? Um, why can't we use these restrooms. Um, why can't we eat at the counter in the—this restaurant?' And it was things like that that, um, stood out, and, um, it—it wasn't a—I don't remember being really sad about it, but very, very inquisitive about it.

LB: So this would be in the early '60s?

RR: Yes. Yes.

LB: And where did you go to school?

RR: Um... elementary schools we went to, um—we moved a lot [laughs]. Um, I went to, um, Bolder Elementary School over at Church Hill, um, at 25<sup>th</sup>—um, 26<sup>th</sup> and Leigh Street. It's now, I think, a retirement home. Um, and I went to middle school at Mosby Middle, and then I was bused to George Wythe for High School.

LB: But you're living in Church Hill this whole time, just moving around from place to place in Church Hill?

RR: Yes. It—it almost seemed like we moved almost annually. Um, literally. And that might be on the low side [laughs].

LB: What was that all about?

RR: I have no idea. Um, I just, um... I—I never asked the question of why we moved so often, but, um, I know, um... again, we... we never lived in a home as a child. It—we've always rented. And, um, I don't, um, I guess... I know that was a, um—I only had very few friends who actually, um—their parents were buying their homes, um... but, yeah, um, as far as school, those were the only three schools that I attended. And—I would have gone to Armstrong High School for—if, uh—if it wasn't for busing.

LB: So you finished eighth grade in '70? '69—

RR: Yes.

LB: '70.

RR: In '70.

LB: And that was the year that busing began.

RR: Yes.

LB: So tell me about that. Tell me about your transition from junior high school to high school, and what went through your mind when you heard that you were going to be bused?

RR: Um... I—I guess, um, there was a mixture of—of feelings and questions because I really didn't know what it all encompassed. Um, I do remember one thing I—that was a fear because I had a belief that—I knew that white students were smarter than black students, so... I was under the impression that I was going to be at a disadvantage going to this high school. I knew nothing about the high school in that it was a long way away and I didn't understand it prior to making the trip to the school. And, um, my—my transportation to the school, because the first year they started busing, Richmond did not have school buses, so we had to use the public busing system. And, um, which required that I took—caught the bus from Church Hill to downtown to Bro—on Broad Street. Then I had to transfer from Broad Street and catch a second bus to get to, um, Southside, um, where George Wythe was located. And I remember my father telling me, um—him knowing that we were going to riding public buses where adults and other people would be riding on those buses was to—to be respectful.

LB: What had your junior high school been like by contrast – did you like going there? Was it a—a good place for you before you went to Wythe?

RR: Yes, my, um, junior high school was—was good. It was, um... It was kind of a... rough middle school because it was located—I went to Mosby Middle School, which was located almost in the heart of, um, Mosby Projects, so... back then, um... there were neighborhood territories [laughs], and so, it was a chance that you might have to fight your way into school or fight your way out of school. And so—but fortunately, um, I didn't recall that many incidents because, um... I don't know, it's—it all depends on how you carry yourself to whether or not they would bellow you. I mean, so... coming from Church Hill, having brothers and—and sisters, um, and having—again, being physical, I was able to protect myself so I didn't have—I don't recall—any incidents.

LB: But it doesn't sound like it was a very relaxing experience [laughs].

RR: No, it wasn't [laughs].

LB: [Laughs]

RR: So, it—it—it—it wasn't—I—I guess in going to getting the notice about going to high school, it—it probably was a relief as opposed to the two years at, um, Mosby.

LB: How did you feel about not going to Armstrong?

RR: ... I'm pretty sure, first of all, I was—I was upset. Because, um, back then, really and truly, in the black community, it was almost like there was only two schools to go to. Either Armstrong or Walker. And, um, so to—to be looking forward to going to Armstrong, and um, being able to go to the classic, um, football games that they had, rivalries that they had going on, um... And I remember my—my—I have a two-year-old—a brother that's two years older than me, and I was more concerned about him when we got the announcement because he had gone to Armstrong for two years. And he had to start going to George Wythe.

LB: And he must have been really unhappy about that.

RR: Well, it's ironic. Because for thirty years, I thought that. And we had a discussion about a year ago, and—and I was saying to him, "You know, I'm really sorry that you had to go to George Wythe." He said, "Why?" And I said, "Because you had gone to Armstrong for two years." He said, no, going to George Wythe was the best thing that happened to *him*. Because he had the advantage of comparing the level of education he was getting at Armstrong as opposed to George Wythe. And he said there was no comparison.

LB: That's so wild that you found that out thirty years later [laughs].

RR: [Laughs] Yes. And I'm still learning about me and things today also. I mean, that's just how it is.

LB: It's very true. I mean, your memories change. The way you look at things changes.

RR: Mm hmm.

LB: So when you look back at Wythe now, what do you remember? What do you remember about your first day there?

RR: Whoa. My first day there. Um... after the long bus ride, um... I—I remember just seeing... all the differences. I mean, everything was different. The faculty, the students, um... the—the interactions. Everything, it seemed like all of my senses were awakened, um, to try and take in what all of this meant – emotionally, um, physically, um, um... just seeing it and things like, um, the quality of the books, um... were so much improved... um, from the books that we got at the black schools.

LB: You mean the kinds of books they used or just the quality of the—like the paper, the binding and everything else—

RR: They were newer.

LB: They were newer. Yeah.

RR: Yeah. Um... I don't think I've ever gotten a book that didn't have—probably been used by 10 people before. And, um... at George—at George Wythe, um, the—the class selections, the, um, again... my vocabulary, um, where I would have been talking and using the term "boat," now "yacht" was a part of my vocabulary. And so, embracing it and just going with it and seeing what is. And a big part of the—the struggle with was, um, initially, was the, um – the newness for the kids coming from Church Hill and other parts of Richmond [clears throat] to be in classes with white students. And so, there were—there were fights and disagreements among the students initially. And even, like myself coming from Church Hill, there were struggles and likes and dislikes with the black students from Southside, because, again with the territorial stuff it's—that existed internally within races as well.

LB: So it sounds like there was a lot of jockeying for position.

RR: Yes [laughs].

LB: How did you work that all out?

RR: [Clears throat.] Well, I guess, first of all, you—you really, really have to, um... I have to thank my father. He, um, giving—giving you—having a foundation of who you are, uh, then you have a—a sense of, um, what you want, what you don't want, what you like, what you don't like. So... you can make the choice of saying, um, what classes you want to, um, attend, as far as electives, and um, not being concerned with what other people think because you're not trying to—you're not giving into

the peer pressure, you're—you're more focused on what 's best for you and your preferences.

LB: So you really started to carve out your own path there, it sounds like.

RR: Yes.

LB: Were you involved in extracurricular activities?

RR: [Laughs.] Um, you could call it extracurricular. [Laughs]

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: But, I—I did, um, I—I was a, um, athletic trainer and manager for the—in the tenth and eleventh grade, um—the kids, they call it Water Boy. However, um, we actually—the coach had a—well, the city had a program where you could be trained and study and learn how to tape and the different medicines and, with the—how to handle the equipment, the washing and the caring for the equipment, and certain minor injuries and all. So, um, he enrolled me in that program, and I actually was getting paid to be a trainer for the city of Richmond. So, um, that was a—a nice perk.

LB: Oh, that's great.

RR: [Laughs.] So, yes, I—I did do that for two years, and got to meet a lot of the athletes, and um, again, talking about my vocabulary – again, I just learned 30, 35 years later, one of the ex-football players, he didn't remember me immediately and I told him that I was one of the trainers and [laughs]... his... his—what he said to me was, "Oh. You were that little cusser." [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs]

RR: So, I... So, evidently, I had a—a way with words back then wh—[laughs]—which was not too kind to some of the—the players. And I think, I think, in all honesty, I think, um, that was my way of defending myself, was the use of those words and um, I think that's what I had to use possibly in middle school as well. And I think, um, that helped. It's—amazingly, I—I only had, I think, one or two incidents at George Wythe and both of those were with other black kids, and um, I remember in one of the gym class, a guy was throwing the ball at me, hard, and trying to intimidate me and I wouldn't let him. But... I just stood my ground and... he ended up backing off.

LB: What are some of the things you remember most about Wythe? What were some real watershed moments for you there?

RR: One of the big things I did was, um, taking a typing class. Uh... and... also, um, I met my first girlfriend at George Wythe, Connie Tucker. And, um, I actually became a father at 18 and, uh, it was about four months after I graduated from high school.

And also, one of my other best friends was a guy named Frankie Stuart (?) who was the—the friend who talked me into going to summer school between my junior and senior year, and that's when I got the part-time job of working at the Federal Reserve.

LB: That you stayed with for another 30 years—

RR: 37 years. Yes.

LB: So you became a father – that must have been a—a *huge* change in your life.

RR: Yes. Um, becoming a father at eighteen, um – I remember talking to my father and he reminded me to take care of our responsibilities. And, um... it's, uh... it—it was quite a learning experience because to have that responsibility, and to embrace that responsibility eighteen was, um, quite humbling, and, um, I guess it gave me a—a new appreciation for the importance and the seriousness of life.

LB: I can only imagine. So were you – Tanya? Was the mother?

RR: Connie.

LB: Connie. So were you living with Connie and the baby? Or just, kind of supporting them financially?

RR: Supporting them financially and supporting, um... his name is Terrell, and supporting him, um, as a—as a father, um... So spending some time with him as well.

LB: It must have just been life-changing.

RR: Yes. Yes. But for the good. For the good. Because I—I think that, knowing that I had that responsibility, I think it made me more focused as a young man.

LB: I could imagine it did. And you – so you were graduating high school, knowing that you were about to become a father—

RR: Yes.

LB: You had your job lined up at the Federal Reserve at this point?

RR: I was working... I worked part-time that summer and then, um... became a full-time employee, um, in June – after, um, finishing high school.

LB: During this time that you were in high school, did you have any particular interactions with teachers or administrators or fellow students that stick out in your mind?

RR: Well, um, the coach who, um, enabled—it—it seemed like for some reason, um... work ethics were—were really important to me, and I know I got that from my father. But, um, it, um, Coach Booker, he was the—the, um, the teacher who got me involved in the, um, program, um as a athletic trainer, and, um, he—he was a very, um, instrumental in being a leader and um, I had very high respects for him as a person and a man... when I was in, um, high school.

LB: Did you have interactions with fellow students at this time that really stuck out in your mind? Did—did your circle of friends change?

RR: Oh yes -um... [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: It... outside of Frankie and Connie, um, I had... um... it was probably unfair how many opportunities of friendships and relationships that I was able to make at George Wythe. And—and I—I don't know, um, I—I would have never believed that I would have embraced all of the opportunities that—it was—it was just like a kid at a candy shop where you had a choice of just being there and friendships were made and... and there was no—it had nothing to do with background, but everything to do with character. And so it... probably after the first few months, I—I didn't see white students anymore. Um, I—I saw friends, I saw students, um, I just saw people. And so it, um... I—I... I can't say it enough that being bused by far was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

LB: It sounds like it completely opened up your world.

RR: Yes. That is - exactly. Um, it—it—it completely opened up my world and life began.

LB: So when you look at the before and the after, what your world was like before Wythe and then once you were at Wythe, how did your world before Wythe look to you? Do you know what I mean?

RR: Um, well, yes. Um... I don't...I don't think, um, when you really... when you know something, um, and you believe something, you... I mean, it's just like being in the first grade. When you're in the first grade, you're learning how to count, you're learning your ABCs. You don't—in the first grade, you don't know about algebra. And going from an all-black school to going to George Wythe, it was as different as 123 and algebra.

LB: So there were just so many more opportunities for you.

RR: Yes.



LB: During this time at Wythe, did you see examples of good leaderships and examples of leadership that wasn't so good?

RR: Fortunately, I did not get a chance to see bad leadership at—at George Wythe, um... But I—I—I was seventeen when I went to work at the Federal Reserve, and I was eighteen when I started working there full-time, and I—I really got the opportunity to see bad leadership there in the sense of, when I was eighteen I was interviewed for a full-time position, and the gentleman, uh, when I went into his office, he looked me straight in the eye as soon as I sat down, and he said to me, "You know the only reason why I'm interviewing you is because I have to." And I remember looking him in the eye and I said, "Thank you." And, um... he was a white gentleman, and... I—I was really grateful that he did tell me that, because if he hadn't, I probably would have accepted a job working for him and I would have probably worked at the Fed for six months as opposed to 37 years.

LB: So did you go work for someone else at the Fed then - how did that happen?

RR: [Sighs] Ok. My Fed tenure. Um... I was—I was—it was such a blessing. George Wythe was the first miracle, and... that summer program job was a second miracle. When I went—again, re [?]-during that summer job, it was set up where you went to summer—I went to summer school six weeks, then I went to work for the Fed for six weeks. I was going to be... um, delivering supplies and stock throughout the building. So I did not know if I had to wear a shirt and tie or whether they were giving me a uniform when I went to work. So I—I dressed in a—a sports coat, a dress shirt, dress pants, and when I went in, the supervisor - he was James Taylor - he took me around and showed me the stockroom, the warehouse, and... what it—um, the job would entail. And he looked at me and he said, um, "Tomorrow when you come to work, how 'bout wearing a tie?" This was in 1973, and so, I reached in my coat pocket and pulled out the tie and said, "Where could I go and put this on?" And I *know* that me coming there with the tie - because my job lasted for six weeks. So, my job ended on a Friday in August. And Monday, the following Monday, I got a phone call asking if I wanted to come back and work part-time the remainder of the summer. And I know James Taylor had everything to do with that. And so I got a—when I went back—so I said yes, and I went back and I started working that Tuesday. And I was working part-time in the kitchen, washing pots, scrubbing floors, and I just wanted to work [laughs]. And it was a great opportunity, and then upon starting back to school a month later in September, the manager of the cafeteria offered me a part-time position after school from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. working in the cafeteria. So I worked my senior year, um, part-time. And then, um, I got a—a full-time position upon graduating from high school, which was called a messenger position, which, we delivered mail. And—which was an interim, um—sort of like an interim position where as a messenger in delivering the mail and also you actually filled in when, like, um, secretaries, and, um, clerical, um, people were out, they would let us fill those positions and staff those positions while they were on vacation or out sick or something. And, then that's when I was in that position when I interviewed with the gentlemen for a, um—a—a—an—an advancement, uh, to—

because again, the messenger position was kinda sorta a temporary holding spot for other positions. That's when my typing skills that I took at Geroge Wythe came into play. Because I could go and fill in for secretaries and other clerical positions – with my typing skills.

LB: But that first interview was with the guy, right, who said, "I'm only here because I have to interview you?"

RR: Yeah.

LB: And you didn't take that, right? So you were able to stay in that kind of temporary messenger position until something else... came up?

RR: Which was about two weeks later.

LB: It's perfect.

RR: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: Yes, by September of that year, I had gotten a—a position as a computer operator trainee. And, um, worked my way through that to Computer Operator, Lead Computer Operator, um... a Shift Supervisor, and then eventually Manager of the computer room.

LB: So you really were able to have a lot of mobility there over the years.

RR: Yes. Yes.

LB: Now, during this time that we're talking about, what kind of changes did you see taking place in Richmond? You know, cuz you've talked about when you were little and going downtown and asking all those questions of your mother...

RR: Well, I—I remember the, um, things were changing and, uh, we—noticing that we were able to... elect a black male mayor in Richmond. And then we eventually even elected a black governor in Virginia. So, um—and to see where, um... the same—some of the same stores that... had separate restrooms and water fountains, as a young adult working in downtown Richmond, um, I was able to go to those same stores and had the privileges of, um, being treated much fairer as a customer, and to be able—I remember, um, one of my goals as a—a young person was to—to be able to get—Thalhimer's and Miller and Rhodes were the—the big department stores back then, and, um, to get credit cards at those stores, because of me being an employee at the Federal Reserve was very, um... amazing, as a—a young black man in Richmond back in the, uh, early '80s, or, no it was still '70s then, late '70s. So, um, you could—I could see that the mid-sets and the behaviors and the laws and the

people... and again, but I think, um, it still – in order for changes to happen, you have to be willing to do your part to, um, encourage change. Um, if you carry yourself in a positive manner like my father taught me – about being respectful, being mannerable, um... um, it comes back to you. And, um, so I—I know, all of those things, uh... adds to how—how you view change, because even with the interviews that we did earlier, um, this year, I heard some things for the first time, as well as I heard and saw some—still hurts. And, um... And that was kind of surprising to me somewhat. But, um, I—I—I owe a lot to my father, uh, about, uh, how you have a stake in what happens to you as well as what doesn't happen to you. So, um, and so, yes, it was changing, and I was embracing the change, and—

LB: How were the changes talked about in your home? ... Growing up?

RR: A lot of things were talked about around the dinner table. Around looking at the news. Um... so, it was pretty, uh—having the one TV and everybody gathered around it and talking and seeing what was going on, um, and... it—from a child's perspective it looked very, very... sad, sometimes, especially, um, hearing and seeing all the assassinations, um, with John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King. And so you see, um, you hear your parents talking on one hand about these nice people, good people, trying to improve things, and then, you hear about them getting shot. And so, as a child, you... you're wondering, "do I want to be good?" Um, so, um, those types of things are very, very visible, and... [laughs] talking about finding out things, um, later on – I've, as an adult, I recognize that I had a fear of dogs and people asked me why or 'where did it come from, have you been bitten?' And in reading different, um, Civil Rights books and looking at newsreels and, um... I believe that my fear of dogs... stems from watching the news back then, and seeing dogs being put on... men, women, and children during demonstrations and protests, and... I—I truly believe that's where my fear of dogs came from.

LB: Those were some terrifying images... at the time.

RR: Yeah.

LB: So your parents were really engaged in it, it sounds like. They were really talking about it, you were all watching and discussing and reading the newspapers...

RR: It was more TV news as opposed to the newspapers, but, yes, we—we did discuss, and having older siblings, um—being able to ask them questions, as well. And hearing what was going on and what they were seeing.

LB: What do you remember as the big turning points for the community back then?

RR: ...Well, see I think, um, also, with busing, there was a lot of, um—I think the term that we used was "white flight." Um, the housing in the city, or the availability of housing changed for black families. And, um, so... living conditions improved and, um, so—it was just so many changes going on, and so, uh... with strong enforcement

of—of, um, Civil Rights laws, um, people being treated fairer, um, so... you were able to—to have the opportunity to do more things, and to—to go more places. And, um, I do remember—also, I guess I was probably seventeen—I think that was probably the only time my friend Frankie and I, we—we were living over Southside at the time, and I think I only lived there for probably a year and a half. And he and I chose to ride our bikes over to—to Byrd Park. And we were riding through Oregon Hill – yeah. [Laughs.] And, again, we were ignorant to Oregon Hill. And we were, um—I just remember kids running down the street hollering “niggers, niggers.” And people were running out of the house, and they were joining in and people started throwing things, and, I remember one—one young gentleman had a chain and Frankie and I, um, we decided to... to get off our bikes and walk them, and kinda sorta had our bikes between us and them. I think one of us was on—had a bike—we were between the two bikes, walking up the middle of the street. And, um, it—it was nothing but the grace of God, because I think bottles and things were being thrown at first and then, um, I remember there was, like, a, um, a bar. A couple of older gentlemen came out the bar and were saying derogatory things, and... Frankie, he was a little bit more hotheaded than I was. And I had to calm him down and tell him, “Just keep walking, keep walking.” And so we just kept walking and nothing hit he or I, and... we were just dumbfounded that, um, on this side of the street, or—or a couple of streets over, we’d been on many times, and a couple of streets ahead, we’d been on many times. But this little pocket of these—these couple of blocks, that simply because of the color of our skin, um, that type of hatred was pretty evident.

LB: And that was early ‘70s by then, right?

RR: Yes. Yeah, it was—it was, like, ‘70... ‘73.

LB: I’m sort of amazed you—you both got out of there in one piece. It sounds so intense.

RR: It was [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: Um, I—I—I think, um, I think... because we didn’t run... um, I think... I don’t know what effect that had on them, uh... but I remember our—I distinctly remember getting off the bike. And... cuz some reason, it seemed like... with the bikes between us, they—they just kept the distance, um, and... I—I—I still know it nothing but... the protection of our faith that got us through that.

LB: Oregon Hill still seems like a scary place to me – even now [laughs]. I can’t imagine what it was like then.

RR: I’ve driven through it a couple of times, and... it – no, it’s nothing like it [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: I—I—I think I—and that's—that's one of the things that I look forward to doing is, I would—I need to walk down that street – again.

LB: ... I think that would be a great experience, actually. Walking down that street, so many years later. In a very different time.

RR: Yeah.

LB: Do you remember any big turning points for the school, during the time you were at Wythe?

RR: Oh, yes, um... as the football trainer, um... we, um, we were a team, um... we did—again, we—I guess—and this was early, this was early into the school year because football season... but this may have been the second year that I was at Wythe. I was a trainer and, that was the second year. Because, um, we were probably—George Wythe was probably one of the, um... we were in—integrated school, however, George Wythe schedules that they played, they played a lot of the schools outside of... outside of the—the city. And plus, we played the city schools that were predominantly black. So, we—we were kinda sorta almost a—a 50/50, or we were probably—probably 60/40, black to, um, white students. And, so, I—I remember going to go a football game at City Stadium, and... some of the, um, students from the other school – I can't remember which school it was, one of the inner-city schools, um, were trying to, um, fight some of our white teammates, and I think we surprised them when we defended our white teammates, because they were our teammates. And, um, I think... think that was the unique thing about George Wythe is that, um, we, for some reason, we—we saw things differently. Um, we wanted—we wanted it to work. And—and it did.

LB: Were you there when Sad Alamid (?) gave his speech?

RR: I'm afraid so. And, um, it was one of—it was definitely... yeah, he—he came and spoke at—at our, um, baccalaureate. We, um, we was in the auditorium, and it was really... I was embarrassed to be black that day. Um, I never felt so sad for my white classmates and uh... he was just teaching and speaking hatred and I guess I was—I was surprised... I don't know how he got to come, um... But I w—I was—I was saddened that he was there, what he was saying, and that, um... I totally didn't agree with what he was saying, and the... and I know it wasn't true with the students that I had had the pleasure of going to school with for the past three-and-a-half years. So, um... I—I don't remember, but it—I believe... I remember some of the students walked out. And I can't remember if I walked out or not. But, um, I think I did. Because it was—it was just—it was—it was just as mean as it was when I rode my bike through Oregon Hill.

LB: Yeah, he had a very – still does, I guess – a very strong viewpoint at that time.

RR: Yes, and um... But I, again, I—when it comes to things or people that I get the opportunity to experience and... when I see that it—it doesn't have a positive, um, purpose, I just choose consciously to disassociate. So after that, I—I chose to... not spend or waste time on that gentleman.

LB: I get that [laughs]... So those were two of the big moments that you remember?

RR: Yes.

LB: ...At Wythe? Were there any others?

RR: Um... graduating [laughs]. Um... I was a—I was a... above-average student, but I did not like school [laughs]. School was a requirement. Um... I did—I don't—I didn't like the structural learning environment. Um, I—and I'm learning more now where, if school had offered more of a... shorter curriculum, shorter lectures, where if you got it, you—you stayed until you got it. Once you got it, you could go, I probably would have gone to school for the rest of my life. But, to—to just sit and... everybody learn the same way, the same time, the same—it—that doesn't work for everyone. And, even today, I—I know that, um... I'm much better in doing as opposed to just sitting and hearing and hearing and hearing. And, I mean, so, um, it was very, very exciting when, uh, I knew that I was only days away from—

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: ...walking across the stage. And twelve has been my favorite number for so many reasons [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

RR: And so, that—that—that was definitely a—a—a great day to graduate from high school, and to get the opportunity to work that year of high school. And to be able to, um, to purchase the yearbook, the pictures, and my class ring, and to—to—to be able to do that for myself and for my parents, um, to take some of that responsibility off of them, that was—that was great.

LB: They must have been very proud of you.

RR: My parents—yes. But they weren't... they weren't real vocal or affectionate. Um, they weren't huggers or—or kissers, and um—but, um, that wasn't something that—when you look at parents of that time, that their times were so much tougher, so, they weren't—it wasn't of (?) and piece and parts of their generation. Um, I'm a hugger and a kisser [laughs]. And so... again, um, so I... I didn't come out from being their child feeling like I missed it... because I—I just believe that, ok, if that's something that you know and something that you desire, you can do it now. And so... but, again, I learned from my brother. He needed it. And he missed it. And kinda sorta, to this day, resents it. That he—he wanted more time with my father. But

again, I think I was fortunate because I had him. So a lot of the things that I didn't get from my father and the support and the—the—the time, and the, um, company, I got from my older brother. So he filled that role for me. But he didn't have that role for himself.

LB: Yeah, and, it's always so funny to me how in the same family, different kids experience it so differently.

RR: Well, um, that's what I found out about, um—I think one of the questions you had was about, um, background – dealing people of different background. And that's what I found out is that, um... background is, um, relative. Um... within family, you have different background. Even coming from the same person and the same house—

LB: It's so true!

RR: You see it different.

LB: It is so true. And when you talk about your childhood with—do you talk about it with all your siblings? And are you still in touch with all of them/

RR: Um, all that's living. Um, again, I think, um... Civil Rights and that time... I was really fortunate to be the seventh child. Because having older siblings, I think, um, things of that time and stress and, um, pressures on the parents, I think hit my older siblings harder than myself. Um... my oldest brother, he—he was in the Korea war, and... I, um... I think, um, there were things that he saw there and did there that effected his life and he ended up having a more, um, abusive life for himself with drugs and—and the pressures of the times. Um... he ended up dying, um... from his drinking and drugs at... mid-fifties. Um, had a sister – the third oldest – she ended up dying in her late 30s, similar lifestyle. And then I had a third sibling; she died around 50, similar lifestyle. And so, um, seeing their choices and behaviors and... I think, um, that helped myself to—to learn from their mistakes. And so, um, by no mean am I trying to say that the Civil Rights *did* that. But, you know, that... that is some of the things and *how* people choose to deal with, um, those unfairnesses and lack of opportunities, and not believing in themselves and believing what's being promoted. And so, it—it was—that was tough on the family.

LB: And it sounds like you were just... there at the right time... to maybe escape some of the worst of it?

RR: Yes.

LB: And you had the temperament, maybe, that was a little bit different?

RR: Yes, to all of the above. And—and I think, again, coming from the same father, the same mother, um... I think, um, you can give the same advice to the—to the

group, and the interpretation, the embracing, the following, it's all subjective, you know? And so, um, you have a father say "Don't do this." And one said, "Ok! I'm not gonna do that." And some said, "Psh. What does he know?" And it's—it's that different. It is *that* different. You know, where one would say, "He mean, he won't let us do anything." And the other one said, "He's applying discipline for my protection." And that's how different growing up in the same family can be. And—and that's one thing, um... uh... listening, and—and asking why, um... And I think, um... too often we don't ask why, and learn that this is for my good.

LB: I think that's really true. When you look back now, on all of these events, how do you think they shaped who you are now?

RR: Hmm. Well one other—I—one other event that happened was my father, he died at 61. And I was 25 when he died. So... it really, um... I felt like, um... I really—that's when I truly, truly, um, embraced the, um... the mindset and the—the embodiment of being a man. Um, seeing my father die and he had had heart conditions and he was a heavy smoker and drinker, and, um [clears throat]... So, again, it's—it's... listening and wanting to learn and, um, wanting to grow, and wanting different. Um... hearing my father and mother argue from time to time, not knowing what it's all going on, but knowing that that is a behavior or a... that is an event that I prefer not to be part of my day, my home, my life. And so, I—I was—I was really fortunate to be able to... I—I still believe that it was fate, destiny, for me to see, to hear, to learn, and to [clears throat]... to choose differently, because I—I think with the deaths, I think, um... I've been given a ministry of, um... comforting people, and—and dealing with bereavement, and during times of death, and um, so... I think all of that was—was part of it.

LB: That's a real gift to have – to be able to do that.

RR: Yes... [pause] It wouldn't have been my first choice [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.] How do you think all of those experiences at the time changed your community?

RR: [Long pause] Well, I think, um... you mean change the community...

LB: Well, however you defined your community.

RR: Well, see, again, even as—as you grow and learn, your community changed. Your community expands. Um, because my community at one time consist of a mother, father, and eight siblings. Um... when I went to high school, my community—and—and my community before that was pretty much Church Hill... Then my community encompassed Southside and George Wythe and... I mean, my community went from home to almost like the UN. So, community now was more inclusive and... again, I think that's where we as—we as people, we have to continuously as we grow, then our community grows, and our tradition and our



culture grows. I mean... because my culture is all of that. It's not what I started out with. It's all of what I've experienced now.

LB: So the way you look at people from different backgrounds now is... must be very different from how you grew up.

RR: Yes, it's—it is—it is strictly focused on their character.

LB: Royal, if you... could tell the kids growing up in Richmond anything today, what do you think they need to know?

RR: Huh. Ask why. Um. Because... again, we start—those kids are starting with the cultural and the traditions of their two parents. Their two parents only know what they know. They only can give them what they have. So when they ask their parents why... preferably their parents would explain to them why. When they deal with... other friends and neighbors and ask why. They get to learn about their culture, their traditions. So, they grow. Um, and, when we have the opportunity – when kids have the opportunity – to express their thoughts, their feelings, their desires... their future, their lives become unlimited. And I—I would—I would strongly advise kids to—to ask why.

LB: Do you think there's anything that we as a community are in danger of forgetting that we need to remember?

RR: Yeah, we... we forget that... everything that we have – especially when I look at me, um... uh... it is... it is very, very serious that... family members, um, friends, strangers, um, they died so that I could—I could be sitting here talking to you. When I was a child, I would be killed. For just sitting here talking to you. It wasn't allowed! And so, I think we—we—we are so at a point at a point where we're forgetting the—the seriousness of the privileges, the rights that we have today, the cost that they came with. And... I think a lot of people my age, um, have, um... compromised to the point where they're not instilling in their kids, in their grandkids that respect for self and others are important. Um, communication that we do today, um, is so... vague and impersonal... to the point where, I mean, we're emailing, we're texting. The quality of communications has changed, and I don't even own a cell phone. I refuse to—to get on Facebook. Um, I—I—I don't wear a watch. Um... we—we need to get back to being present. Doing and focusing on what we're doing for that time and that point. And embracing it. I—I went—the only pictures I took on that three-month—that—that month vacation is of the Grand Canyon. But, it wasn't for me because when I go, I want to be present and just mentally and spiritually take it all in, and just... because when you do that, you got it. And you can go back and pull it back up at any time you want. And I—I—I really, really, really... I—I'm afraid that we as people... we—we are getting—we're allowing technology to—to rob us of quality time, interpersonal time, and just, um, talking to each other. Um, couples don't even talk. They're emailing – in the house with each other. They're—they're using their—their phones, and... my wife and I, we've learned that it is really, really

hard to communicate effectively, even when it is just the two of you because the perspective is different. You know? W—you sitting there, me sitting here; there's things you can see that I can't see. There's things I can see that you can't see. And so, if I don't commit to this time to share with you and talk to you and care enough about you to share with you what I see, and then care enough to care about what you're saying and see, then we're really not communicating. So, to—to really... step back and appreciate how we got here, and then start enjoying what we have. I mean, it's... [pause] It's so easy to—to complain and to want and that's one of the reasons why I was fortunate and blessed enough to be able to retire, is because trying to live closer to need as opposed to want. And there's a million things I have here that still is way out of want than need. But the more you try to do that, the more you can accomplish.

LB: I couldn't agree with you more.

RR: [Laughs.]

LB: Thank you so much, Royal. Is there anything that I didn't ask you?

RR: Ahhh....

LB: ... that you were thinking about?

RR: [Pause.] No, I—I think... No, the only other thing that I was gonna say, um... I mean, and it—we were talking about, it's like voting, and—well the—the point also that I was talking about, um, about asking 'why' questions. Because I—I heard an analogy one time where, um, someone was saying that this lady, she—she was taught to cook the Christmas ham – I don't know if you've heard that. But, um, she was giving the instructions to her daughter about cooking the Christmas ham and she said, "And when you put it in—before you put it in the pan, you have to cut the bone off the ham." And daughter said, "ok." And then the daughter said, "Why do you cut the bone off the ham, mom?" And she said, "Well, Grandma, she always cut the bone off the ham." "Well, did you ask Grandma why she cut the bone off the ham?" She called her mom and asked her and, mom said, "You don't have to cut the bone off the ham. I just cut the bone off the ham cuz my pan wasn't big enough for the ham to—[laughs]—with the bone." And—and those are the things that I'm talking about, is that we're doing what our parents did because they did it, but we don't ask why. And—and it's something as simple as that. To whether or not we choose to change and do it differently. And, um... and, again, the—the right to vote, um... um... I don't—I don't think people of my generation have talked about it enough. And be examples of it enough to how important it is to vote. And, again, um, you know... if—if we really shared the stories about... people dying so that we can have these privileges and rights. And, again, like we're sitting here talking today. Um, to be able to love the person of choice, to be able to go to church and—and attend the church of your choice, and the right to—to learn, you know, to the freedom and the—the privilege to have the opportunity to learn, and... I—I think we—we take too much

that has been, um, precious, um... privileges that comes with living in this great country for granted, that, um, we—we don't embrace it, we don't share it, and we don't look at how much we can—can give back. Because we—we are, we are very fortunate, very blessed to have so much, and to live in such a great country. And, we're all... we are all immigrants. And we—we don't realize it, that we are those people that we're talking about. And the more we embrace each other, the more we care for each other, that's—that's what it's all about. And... I mean... the incident of riding down the street and someone calling me a nigger, as opposed to being hanged - there's no comparison.

LB: It's always so amazing to me... to keep in mind how much things have changed in a lifetime.

RR: Yeah.

LB: I mean, it's one thing to know the dates and to read the dates, and another thing to sit down and talk with someone like you who has seen such an incredible amount of change in half a lifetime.

RR: And it's—it's—it's... it's funny because, uh... but... I—and I don't think we realize that it wasn't that long ago. And, um, I think that's the piece that, um, we don't sit with it long enough. Um, and, why we're—we're afraid to talk about it. Because I—I—I think it's—it's very much needed. Um, because, like I was sharing with you earlier, we—I was surprised to hear there are still thirty-five-year old hurts that people are experiencing today because they haven't talked about it. And, I mean, you—you cannot ignore it and expect that it'll go away. Um, looking at it, addressing it, and—and... feeling it, and—and... it's—it's no different than grieving, and a lot of people when you look at—when you—they look back at their life, there's been a lot of choices and decisions that has been made that has been effected by those unaddressed issues that is still there.

LB: I know. And it's those issues that are making the choices for them.

RR: Yes.

LB: I think that is so true.