
Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida
Oral History Project

Tampa and Hillsborough County

3-4-2009

Francisco Rodriguez, Junior

Francisco A. Rodriguez Jr.

Black History Research Project of Tampa

University of South Florida Libraries -- Florida Studies Center. | Oral History Program

University of South Florida -- Tampa Library

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/otis_anthony_ohp

Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, Francisco A. Jr.; Black History Research Project of Tampa; University of South Florida Libraries -- Florida Studies Center. | Oral History Program; and University of South Florida -- Tampa Library, "Francisco Rodriguez, Junior" (2009). *Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project*. 56.
https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/otis_anthony_ohp/56

This Sound is brought to you for free and open access by the Tampa and Hillsborough County at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

NOTICE

Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.

This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.

Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A31-00089
Interviewee: Francisco Rodriguez, Junior (FR)
Interviewer: Fred Beaton (FB)
Interview date: May 30, 1978
Interview location: Unknown
Transcribed by: Unknown
Transcription date: Unknown
Interview changes by: Mary Beth Isaacson
Interview changes date: December 9, 2008
Final edit by: Maria Kreiser
Final edit date: March 4, 2009

[Note: The Oral History Program did not receive the audio for this interview, only the transcript. All transcriber's notes were written by the original transcriber.]

[Transcriber's note: There is no formal start to this interview.]

Francisco Rodriguez, Jr. (FR): Let me say that I think the two most prominent influences in my life is the fact that I am a black Latin. That means a whole lots, because I lived in two cultures at the same time. Latin—maybe three—Latin, black, and American—and I saw prejudice in two areas.

My parents were Latin, both of 'em. They were born in Cuba. And they lived in Ybor City which, at the time, was just like—at that time it was just like as if a Cuban colony had been planted in Ybor City. The signs in the stores were in Spanish. The clerks spoke Spanish. We had the Spanish theater. The factories were all Spanish. And so I went to American schools only because there were no Spanish schools to go to. But I always think it was a blessing because I learned a little bit about how ambivalent you could be. My father felt that anything that was not Latin, you know, was no good. And, in a sense, that meant quite a bit to me because I saw how easy it is to have prejudice. Now, he was very prejudiced against anything American. But it was a benign sort of a prejudice. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't malignant or anything like that. He just felt that Cuban people were the most moral, the most intelligent, and were the most organized persons in the world. He felt that Americans were the most backwards and the most immoral people in the world.

So I lived between that sort of ambivalence. It disturbed me somewhat. I could debate with him, he was my father. It disturbed me because early in life I learned a great—I learned to develop a great deal of love for my school. And, of course, he always let me know that I was going to that school only because there was no other school to go to. Then, as I moved through school, I had a serious problem. I was not accepted completely

by the black kids because I was Latin, and certainly I was not accepted by the white kids—those that were out of school that I came in contact with—so I was always—I was always the victim of double-barreled prejudice; one of them was linguistics, and the other one was color. I think they played a great influence in my life because it made me very conscious—very, very conscious of the need for such things as self-expression.

For instance, I spoke, when I started school, and, oh—maybe way into junior high school—I spoke English with a heavy Spanish accent. And there were certain words that I could not pronounce and the kids would laugh at me. And so it made me very defensive. But the defensiveness made me very conscious of it and so I was always looking up English words in the dictionary and whatnot. I always carried a notebook around, any word that I didn't know I always—I always jotted it down and got the definition. I did that until I finished college and graduate school. It became almost an obsessive habit with me. So this is one case where I think that I sublimated the prejudice against me.

I finished high school at Middleton High School and I went to Florida A & M [Agricultural & Mechanical University].

Pause in recording

FR: I went to Florida A & M. I was a little lazy so I decided to major in languages. I already spoke two languages with some degree of facility. I was a good English student in high school for the reasons I already indicated and, of course, I spoke Spanish. Unlike many of the children of Latin extraction, my father made me read and write Spanish so majoring in Spanish was not a great difficulty. I added French on to that. When I finished college I came back to Tampa and I think I taught a year, and then I decided I wanted to go to graduate school. And that was the first time that I had one of the real—met one of life's real frustrations because I discovered how little and how poorly trained I was.

I went to the University of Pennsylvania with the intention of getting a master's in languages. And the fact that I was versatile in two languages meant little because I just couldn't—there was so many things they required that I hadn't had. And at that time Florida A & M was—I don't think it was even a good high school by current standards. And I jumped from there to University of Pennsylvania, and it took me quite a while to become adjusted to the pace. And I had the chance to make comparisons, and this was the first time that I realized how inadequate my education was.

But I didn't get a chance to do too much about it because I came back to Florida, I taught school one year and next thing I knew I was in the service—the war broke out—and I went to the United States Marine Corps. I had a fear that being in the service, you know, I would become a savage, you know, by virtue of being away from civilization and whatnot, so in order to thwart that—to stop that from happening, I decided to read everything I could [get] my hands on. I was average about three or four books a day, easily, while I was in the Marine Corps. I think I learned more while I was in the Marine Corps than at any other time in my life.

The second great influence in my life was, after being in two campaigns with the Marines, I was sent to do garrison duty in China.

Fred Beaton: What year was this?

FR: In China? Nineteen forty-five. And I spent a year in China. And for the first time in my life I saw a different culture altogether, completely different. The Orientals are so different from us. First of all, in their philosophical outlook, in their ethics, and in their morals. I learned, first, that they were people that had moral codes that they lived by.

You know, in America we have moral codes and it's just something that we have written down, you know. A woman is a lady, but she might have two or three boyfriends, you know, while her husband's gone, and we think nothing of it. She may be a prominent person in the church or what have you. She may be a prominent person in the church and be the pastor's lover and all this kind of stuff. You know, this doesn't happen in China. In China, a woman is either a lady or a prostitute. It's just that clean cut. And for the first time I saw people that lived by a code even though they were starving, you know. And that impressed me.

Of course, there are many customs—fantastic. Their almost fanatic grasp on the question of courtesy was something else that impressed me. I felt that those two things, having been born in an ambivalent culture, Latin and American, black Latin and American, and then having lived in China—have had a long—have had traumatic effect upon my life. When I say "traumatic," I don't mean in a negative sense, I mean a very, very positive sense.

Let's dart back a little bit. Let's come back a minute, before going to the service. When I finished college I came into the school system here and I just—I found things that are terrible. I found that school teachers were treated like, you know, like slaves, almost. And I rebelled against it terribly.

FB: What were the conditions of the schools during this time?

FR: Well, the schools were separate and very unequal. And nobody even tried to hide it. You know, there was no question about it. Someone—if you'd ask for something they'd tell you, "Well, even Hillsborough doesn't have that." That means to say, you know, if Hillsborough doesn't have it, you can't get it. There was no question—nobody even tried to pretend as if the equality—

The teachers were paid differently. The white teachers got one salary, the black teachers got another salary. During my—while I was still teaching here, the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] filed a suit, and they made some kind of compromise which ultimately led to equalizing salaries. It wasn't quite that simple, but I don't know that we need to go into details for the benefit of the story. But there was still the question that black teachers were treated like vassals, almost.

There was one particular incident that always stayed with me. The superintendent had a secretary and she compelled black teachers to say "ma'am" to her. I don't mean expected. Compelled. She would tell you, "When you talk to me, you say 'ma'am'." And I recall that on one occasion she said it to me and I told her that I didn't use that word. We got into a hassle about it and I told her, I said, "Even though I think it's very, very bad English major, I'll say 'ma'am' to you if you'll say 'sir' to me." Needless to say, she probably—she almost had a stroke. And I swore then—at that point I was almost ready to go to the service, and I swore then that I would go to the service and if the Lord would send me back I was going to fight with every nerve and sinew in my body to do something about that condition.

And, in effect, that's just what I did. I went into the service and I changed my plans. I had planned to be a clinical psychologist and I changed my plan and I went back to law school. And when I came back, I think I taught just one year. I went to Howard University and got my degree in law. I think I filed practically—during those years, I filed practically every law suit that was filed in the state of Florida. I exposed my life to multiple dangers, which I don't care to go into. There's an article in the *Tampa*—in the *Florida Sentinel*, it came several months ago; you might pick that up and it goes into a lot of details.

FB: Well, can you just give us a brief summary, if you can, of some of the suits you was in?

FR: Well, the very suit that's still open right now, I filed that in Hillsborough County¹. I filed the one in Polk County. I filed the one in Miami. I filed the one in Escambia—no. No, Wilson filed the one in Escambia. In Jacksonville, they had their own attorney. But practically and mostly—see, at that time I was chairman of the legal redress committee for the entire southeast region. So practically all the suits carried my name. And those that I didn't try directly at least, you know, I was on the staff. It wasn't only school suits, we had—well, here in the city of Tampa we had suits for opening up the recreational facilities for blacks. At one time, you know, they didn't even have a tennis court for black people. There was no such thing as that. They had no swimming pool in Florida for blacks.

Sometimes I'm amazed at how little our young people know. One day I was going out to play tennis and I mentioned it casually, and I was shocked to know that some of our young people didn't know that at one time, you know, we couldn't use the Davis Island tennis courts or the Cuscaden. As beat up as it is now, we couldn't use that. Let me see, what other? Well, none of the facilities, because at that time they didn't have any—any swimming pool, any public pools, that could be used by blacks, nor any public tennis courts. Incidentally, tennis is one of my loves, but we played on a—from time to time somebody would put up a tennis court. It was usually a private club. And you could tell that it was because it was really—it was a very poorly constructed tennis court, but we made it along.

¹ Manning v. the Board of Public Instruction of Hillsborough County, Florida.

And I must confess that the city of Tampa did not offer much resistance. You know, they just offered nominal resistance. I guess to more or less satisfy the reactionary elements. We filed suit. We went through the motion of going to court. The judge had to enter a degree against them. They did not appeal. And that was about the size of it. In St. Petersburg, they did appeal and we went to the Fifth Circuit, but we won in both instances there. The school case, well, it's still rolling along here, you know.

I also filed a school case in Sarasota. I filed a school case in Miami. I filed a school case in Polk County. I filed a school case in Brevard County also. And I don't say this with any bitterness, because I really enjoyed—I'm a fighter at heart for the things that I believe in. And while from a standpoint of remuneration I, you know, don't think—I was barely paid for my work. I enjoyed traveling and trying cases and this kind of thing.

Then I had quite a hassle with criminal cases. I tried a stack of those. In many instances I got some hopeless cases, you know. Usually I got—by the time I got a hold of the case, a—there's a case where a black man was accused of raping a white woman and he had confessed two or three times and all this kind of stuff. And we had to go in and see whether or not the confession was forced, and the conditions and all this kind of stuff.

Pause in recording

FR: Then I became also involved in Community Action. I was the director of the Community Action Agency for oh, two or three years. And the Community Action Agency was quite an vehicle for helping the poor, and that always includes black people. Unfortunately—I don't know whether you are aware of what they call the green amendment. When it passed into the hands of the county, it lost a lot of its private impact. That's when I dropped out of the picture. And that, God, brings me up to date. At present time, research director here, and I'm director of the prep program at Tampa Urban League. I am a minister of the church. And, oh, I also lecture to a class in civil service. A little sketchy, but that's—brings you up to date.

FB: Okay. How was the—were there any problems dealing with immigration of, say, black Cubans to—?

FR: No. No. Oh, that was a thing of beauty, because there were no immigration laws. You could go down—the ships through Port Tampa, what we call Port Tampa now. And almost every other Sunday you would go down and look at them comin' in. (inaudible) Actually they were a new colonizing group. There were no immigration barriers or anything of the kind.

FB: Okay. What were some of the conditions of, say, workers in the labor system during this time?

FR: Well, now—if by Latins, you mean, all Latins did just about the same. Latins, with very rare exceptions, did the same thing, in that they were either cigar strippers or cigar makers. My father was a cigar maker, one of the best they had here. My mother was a

cigar stripper. In fact, this was one of the important things in their lives. Somewhere in the thirties [1930s] they started coming out with the machines and it destroyed the Latin colony because that's all they knew how to do. So they had to start leaving by droves. And they started going to Philadelphia, to New York, and other points north.

FB: Okay. How about the culture of the black Cubans, with their relationship to other ethnic minorities?

FR: All right. The culture—if by culture, you mean—sometime we mean that, but the word "culture" perhaps doesn't have the restrictive meaning that sometimes we give. But let me say this about them: they were a far more literate group, a far more learned group than the black Americans. They had their own clubhouse², and just about every other Sunday they had programs in which they had speeches and recitals and things of the kind, and their own system. It was part of the—and the entire colony would attend. Unlike the black Americans, where if you gave a recital it was just an esoteric group that would attend, with the Cubans this was really part of the entire colony. Add to that they had their own little theater and they were constantly giving plays. And some of 'em were real—there were plays taken from some of the best Spanish literature.

Another phenomenon—and I call it that for want of a better word—was the so-called "reader." In every factory had a reader. He was a person who sat on a high chair in the middle of the factory floor and would read the newspaper to the workers so the workers could hear what was going on. This was before the days of the radio. And, you know, he would read in Spanish—read the news, what was going on. You had—I think you had maybe two Spanish papers then. I think those papers have been combined now. One of 'em is still, I know, is still in existence. And this fellow would read to them in the morning, read the entire paper, including the main news from the front page, the editorials and what have you. Then in the afternoon, when they come back from lunch, he would pick up a novel and read as far as the day would extend. And then the next day he would pick it up from there.

It was interesting because it would produce all kinds of anomalies. See, if you could imagine a woman like my mother who only went to third grade and yet she was acquainted with such novels as *Les Misérables* and one or two other pieces of national—one or two other pieces of literature of international import. So when you take—we have a habit of saying "culture," meaning, of course, some of the refinements of life. If that's what you mean by culture, they were way ahead of most of the blacks at the time.

FB: Okay. Are you familiar with any of the labor strikes that occurred during this time?

FR: Oh, my God, yes. Oh, yes, because I suffered from them so much. My father was a labor leader, a tremendous orator, you know. The thing that hurt us so much was that the last big strike they had he was very visible; he made speeches and what have you. And then when the strike was over, he was a marked man. They hired everybody back but him. You see, that was the weakness of that labor movement then. And, of course, that

² Sociedad la Union Martí-Maceo.

compelled him to leave here and go to Philadelphia.

The strike movements—you see, they didn't have unions, as such. Well, let me put it that way: they didn't have unions in the sense that we have today, in this high organized sense. If they wanted a better salary they'd get mad and get together and say, "We're gonna strike." And somebody'd get up and say, "Comrades, let's go, we're going." And, you know, Latins are very, very vocal, and they always had some loud person to stop 'em. They would actually go home. And then somebody would act as spokesman and maybe they'd get—if they wanted, ten cents more, they'd get five or six or something. Maybe, never quite that good. But they would single out—and this is where it was very weak—they would single out leaders and get 'em some way or the other. In my father's case, it was that he never—he didn't get—he was never employed at his same level after the last strike.

FB: Okay, now, what year did the majority of the strikes occur?

FR: My father left here in thirty-one [1931], and that was the year of—because there was a big strike. But the strikes that we're talkin' about now were in the late twenties [1920s]. This was almost endemic. You know, they'd walk out at any time that things weren't too—

FB: All right, now—

FR: But they didn't have a union movement as we know it now.

FB: These strikes were because of low pay?

FR: Low. That's about all. That's about it.

FB: Okay. What effect did, say, [José] Martí or [Antonio] Maceo have on the community?

FR: Well, I can only give you what my father gave me. That's before my time. And I hope that you will be able to ask him these questions. But I can say this much to you—and I hope you ask him the same questions—there were two people that were very, very effective here, and so little is known about 'em.

There was a black woman called—her last name was Pedroso, P-e-d-r-o-s-o³. Put that down so you can ask my father, you won't forget it. It's a shame how things have a—And she played a very, very important part in rallying the local people to the defense of the Cubans in Cuba. I think I know—I can't remember her first name. My father would remember that, even though he's in his nineties now, but he remembers all these things. I'll try to arrange a date for you to seem him as quick as possible.

³ Paulina Pedroso. Pedroso and her husband owned a boardinghouse, where Martí stayed when he was in Ybor City.

And, of course, Martí made Tampa one of his bases of operation. The park on Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue was one of his places where he spoke and where he stopped. One of my relatives used to live right there, right in that same house until it was torn down to make the park⁴. He was the great apostle. He was—it was a duo. Maceo, who was a black man, and I would like you to look up—

Maceo was the action man. Martí was the apostle, the speaker, and what have you. Maceo's exploits would almost equal a double-oh-seven and they really happened. It wasn't just a novel. He was a fantastic guerrilla fighter against the Spaniards, such things as crossing the line in disguise and all this kind of stuff. I've toyed with the idea of writing a non-fiction novel about him. He was shot, I think, about—he was shot something like fifteen or sixteen times before they finally killed him. My father could give you, again—I have the books—You know, I'm kind of lazy and I've never gotten around to it. I have all kinds of dreams of what I'm going to do but I never got around to it. My father could give you the details.

If you notice, the Cuban club here is named Martí-Maceo, the two of them. Maceo was the fighter, the guerrilla fighter, the leader of the troops. Martí was the man who rallied the people, you know, with his speech—which his speech making—speechmaking ability, and all these things.

FB: Okay. Were blacks involved in labor strikes, and if so, at what level?

FR: Oh yes. Yes. I think that they were. The labor strikes were not, as I've said before, they were not strikes in the unionized sense of the word that we use today. They just got together and said, “Well, damn it, we're not gonna work anymore. You know, we don't like the prices,” and what have you. And there were some—always, there were some blacks that were involved. It would be insincere to say that there was no race prejudice among them, but it was nothing like what we've known here in America. There was a consciousness. I know—you know, they knew a black man from a white man. And they knew sometimes that they had to abide by the local rules and what have you, but there never was, you know, this cancerous group intolerance that we have known in America. My father was a leader, and there was no question as to his racial identity, and there might have been one or two others that stood in the—they were considered black and that stood in the position of leadership.

FB: Well, lookin' at your life and your career and your experiences, you was also affiliated with the NAACP, right?

FR: Oh, yes. When I referred to those cases—

FB: Right.

FR: —they were done under the auspices of the NAACP.

⁴ Martí Park, which was the Pedrosos' house was located.

FB: Oh.

FR: Those cases involving—those school cases, practically all of 'em were done under—now, the criminal cases were not. It may well be that—I think—I'm trying to remember now, it's been—there were so many of them. It may well be that the NAACP assisted me in one or two criminal cases out of many, many cases, too many to remember. But in all of the school cases, this was a matter of NAACP involvement.

FB: Okay, how was the leadership structured in the NAACP at this time? And by that, I mean, how was the structure then?

FR: The NAACP in Tampa—the best leadership the NAACP has had was under a man named Norman Lacy. That was before I was even in the legal department. I was yet a teacher and going to law school. And there was a terrific fight for the control of the organization by two factions. But that fight was stimulating. And you couldn't even get—you had to come early to get a seat. You had to come early to even get a seat. Today—Since that time the NAACP has been oratorical, but they just don't seem to be able to get off their feet. They can't raise monies.

[Transcriber's note: Tape begins to fade and lose audio intermittently.]

(inaudible) give a good grant or something like that. But really we haven't had—compared to other communities (inaudible) missed (inaudible) you know, (inaudible) being back (inaudible) but compared to some (inaudible) recipient and all that. But you know we're not (inaudible). Tampa has had a poor NAACP (inaudible) Bill Fordham was state (inaudible) for the NAACP (inaudible) and he did a very good job. (inaudible) did a very good job as state president. I (inaudible) to see him as local president. We haven't—it's not anyone's fault, that I can think of, I don't know (inaudible).

Side A ends; side B begins

[Transcriber's note: The intermittent cutting out or fading continues.]

FR: He was a very patient man during some very trying times. He was a good caretaker president. I don't think that he had the vision or the training to be a good administrator but he kept the organization together. He was, you know—but what we really haven't had during the time that I have been able to observe it now—before my time, years ago, there was a man named (inaudible), who was a (inaudible). That was before my time. I don't know (inaudible). But now the one man that I thought kept the organization going beautifully and made it exciting—oh, God (inaudible)—was a man named (inaudible).

FB: What year was this?

FR: It must have been in the very early—

[Transcriber's note: Tape has cut out for a fairly long portion of this interview.]

—from what I hear, and I hate to move on hearsay, but it smacks of the truth. The NAACP has bogged itself down in red tape, and what have you. It takes so long to process a complaint and things of this kind. What you really need is a strong, independent, legal redress department with an attorney, who would either be paid or who would have his own money and wouldn't worry about the money. We've been very, very poor at raising money. And, you see, what we don't realize is that—

Okay, I'm sitting here talking to you right now. Well, this does not affect—the time that I'm using now does not affect my salary. But if I were working for a fee, that would be quite different. If I were working for a fee right now, it would mean that whatever it is that I'm not doing I'm going to be behind in my work. Well, that's the same thing that's true with an attorney. He's working for a fee. And when he's trying an NAACP case, there's no money coming in. He's not there. The NAACP here has never realized that. And they never raise money for lawyers and things of the kind. So they had an option either to raise money for a lawyer or find a lawyer who had his own resources and who loved the work enough to do the work for nothing.

Now, I happen to be one who did not have resources but was crazy enough to love the work. And I suffered from it, too, in later years. That's—this is one of the things that actually ruined me, because one day I looked around and my work was behind and somebody had reported me to the bar association. I turned my back and my office help had forged checks. Money was missing. Just pandemonium. And when the entire panoply jumped on me, you know, the NAACP didn't come to rescue, or anybody else. You know, I had to go out there and foot it alone. And every now and then they called a lawyer, and he says, “Now, what'd you have,” you know, and tell 'em, well, he wants money. Well, he has to. Because you still have to feed a family and what have you. And the local branch has never realized that.

FB: Okay. What single incident propelled you to run for office (inaudible)?

FR: Hm?

FB: What single incident—?

FR: Prepared me to run? You mean, prepared me?

FB: Or propelled, or—?

FR: Oh, propelled? Oh. Well, let's see, I ran for—I ran for city councilman here. And I ran for the judgeship. In neither instance was I particularly interested in running for office. But because I felt that I had not prepared, I didn't have the resources, or what have you. But when I was approached to run for city representative—that's what they called 'em then; they didn't call them councilmen.

FB: What year was this, now?

FR: Now you've got me. I need to go back to my notes for that.

FB: Just (inaudible).

FR: Oh, yeah, it had to be the fifties [1950s], late fifties [1950s]. Several groups—I had a labor group behind me. I had a group called the Young Adults for Progressive Action that said, “Well, Rod, we need you. You've got to run.” This, that, and the other thing.

FB: Was the Longshoreman's Association?

FR: Um-hm. This was a white labor union. And they did furnish some of the finances. I think that even though I lost I think I did some good. I was able to go into a lot of white areas and campaign. And I think that many, many whites, for the first time, met a black man who was articulate enough to stand before them without trembling and to be able to set forth certain issues, you know, without getting frightened, and what have you. I think that helped. It presented a different image than they had of the black men. So I think—

FB: Okay, well—

FR: —from that standpoint, but from no other, I don't think.

FB: What's the import of politics? What do you think is the single reason why it has taken so long for us to elect a black official in Tampa?

FR: Well, there are two things. First of all, the way that the districts, the fact that you run at large, makes it very, very difficult. Because the only way that a black could run, or win, would be for him to get all of the black votes plus the—plus making some kind of deal with some white block. He's got to do both of those. See he doesn't run—You know, how it goes. He runs every—you run at-large for practically everything. But at-large it image than they had of the black means that you've got to run—you've got to win Interbay, you've got to—you know, all these—all these solid white sections and—all these bastions, you know, of white supremacy. So you've got Interbay and all these sections. You can't make it. In fact—

And, in fact, you know we don't have a strong electorate as it is. But even if we had—if we had every black man registered, which is almost impossible, a black man couldn't win just on the black vote. He would have to get the black vote and some kind of block of white votes. Okay, he would get the black vote and then he can go out to the university where you would expect some number who would vote, not on race, not on the man's race, but look—who might say, Oh, well, let's give a black man a break or something like that. He could find that also among certain Latins that would say that too. He could find that among some intellectuals and what have you. But he would have to get a solid black vote plus a block of whites. And we haven't had that here.

We came close to having that in the case of Warren Dawson when he ran. And I feel that

I contributed to that, [James] Hammond contributed to that. All of us who have been running all along have little by little built this up. But now—Right now there is a case in west Florida, I think it's west Florida, yeah—that they're contesting that law again. Now, if you have Tampa divided into districts, you see, well, blacks would get a majority, say, in any district that would encompass Belmont Heights and a small white district. Okay? Then all you'd have to do is get all of the blacks in Belmont Heights and you've have it in. But we haven't had that. Not to mention the fact—

That's number one. Now, number two, of course, is the fact that we are very, very indifferent. Very, very indifferent. I'm getting ready to do a paper on just that in one of my courses at the university. I'm taking a course there. You see, we are giving our young people a chance to cop out on lot of things that we do. We keep talking about cultural bias. We keep talking about, We don't have this, we don't have the other, when in reality—I don't know whether you heard Jesse Jackson Sunday or not—but you should have. Every black one should. Jesse Jackson said, "If a nigger can get out there and throw a basketball, if he can run through a line, you see, on that same diet, he can pass a course because that takes more energy. That takes even a better diet." And we are actually giving our kids a cop out. And we've got to stop that.

Now, I am not saying that we shouldn't defend them if they are mistreated in the schools or what not, but let's be sure they are mistreated. Let's not start talking about—But, first of all, I take the position that I don't need the love of my teacher. I just need that teacher's instruction. I'll get my own love. You know, I'll take care of my own love life. I don't need my teacher's love. Let me get the instructions. And I think the black people need a type of, like any minority, a type of Spartan existence. And when that—we're not doing—we're not cuttin' it. Because I feel that—

For instance, I went out to class and they had some—some rap session with a superintendent. And in this rap session they had about five black kids—and when I say "black" I mean because that is now a racial designation; the kids weren't really black, they was quite light-skinned—and their questions were so intelligent. They were so well-prepared. Well, why were these kids well prepared? I refuse—I absolutely refuse to buy this thing about "they came from better homes," and all that kind of stuff. I have seen kids come out of huts and make straight A's. I've—You know, I knew a kid that had a Ph.D. at twenty-one and his father was a moron. And I didn't see where his mother had a lot of sense either. Right out there in West Tampa. He teaches at some university. You wouldn't even know that he come from Tampa if you saw him. Right here from Tampa. These same students. Same students. Willie George Jeffer. Willie George went to school with all these kids right here. Right along here somewhere. Dunbar, Booker T., Middleton. And he went somewhere. I don't know where he went to col—I don't know where he went to college, I think Florida A & M or somewhere. So I refuse to buy that.

Now, I am not saying that we are going to turn our backs and say, Oh, get it, I got mine. But what I am saying is that we've got to stop coddling our children. That's not right. Carl Rowan said the same thing. And I heard Jesse Jackson. I was glad to hear him. I said, "Well, I'm in pretty good company. Because I've felt that I'm almost alone here, locally,

you know, a black child can do anything.” And somebody say, “Well, he's cultural bias and—” this, and that, and the other.

FB: See, the problem we've been having with the interviewing, Mr. Rodriguez, when we go out and we'd be talking to some of the teachers—they think the problem is that they come from inferior families.

Pause in recording

FB: We've had some interviews with teachers that have said that the reason that the black kid is not doing well because he's from a low background. The parents wasn't this, the parents wasn't that. And I don't particularly agree with that.

FR: Now that has—That has some merit. I don't believe that you can work calculus if you haven't mastered algebra. But I believe that you can master algebra, you know, if you tackle it. I don't—See—I'm not saying that you shouldn't raise these questions, but what I'm saying is that you should sit on these questions. This is what I'm saying.

For instance, now, I can understand—I'll tell you the experience I've had. I teach a course which is designed to help black young men to pass the civil service examination so that they might apply for the position of fireman and police officers. Okay? They come in. And as soon as they find out that they have to work—that what we're going to do is train them in some of the things that they're going to have on the examination—but they still have to work—the enrollment drops, right after the first day. We've got forty-five students Monday. Meets twice a week. The following Wednesday the enrollment is twenty-five, the next Wednesday it's to fifteen. And by the time we finish the course if we—we're doing good if we have seven. They do not want to work. They are hoping that we know—that we have come across some gimmick—some gimmick that we can say, See, you do this little trick here and you'll pass the test. And, no, we don't have it. What we can do is we can drill 'em, say, in words, phrases, and that's one of the problems.

But, no, I don't think that we can go around saying, Let's not recognize—oh, yeah, we have to recognize it, but doing something about it does not mean—recognizing it does not mean sitting on it. And this has been my argument. Otis and I used to fight like cats and dogs about that. And right at this same office here, we—this used to be his office—and because—and I can understand how you can get carried away. Because if you have—if it's a love in your heart, you see, you tend—you are quick to defend.

You know, I have—I daresay—I guess I have—I have five children, and I'm proud to say that all—that four of them are scholars. I've got a boy that worked for the Internal Revenue [Service]. I've got a daughter that's doing graduate work in speech pathology. I've got another daughter that works for the art department of Sears. And, see, I never knew what it was to tell my children, “Pick up a book—study your lesson.”

But I haven't told you the whole story. I've got one more left, and he's not doing anything. He's my youngest. And you see, when the other kids were growing up—he's a boy; he

was very close to me, always under me and what have you, and I first started typing out his work for him. Show him how to do this, how do it—ended up doing most of his work for him. And Andre is the one child that I have that is not a scholar. And I am to blame.

So I know whereof I speak. There's no difference between his mind and the rest of the children. The rest of the children were on their own. I never said a word to them. Occasionally they might ask me a question, we might sit and discuss it. But, no, they were (inaudible). Oh, I think my oldest son, I used to check him over his Spanish or something like that, but never do his work for him. But my son is—see, it's something else, too. When my son was in fourth grade, we worked with him and tried to encourage him to study. So we sent him to Williams Elementary School and he was going—he was in my sister's class. And my sister is one of these old-fashioned persons, you know. She told him, “If you don't get your classes, I'm gonna beat your butt.” He made straight A's that year. As soon as he left her class, he came down again.

So I feel that we've got to do something. I haven't quite—and, really, you know, I like to write, but I like to say something when I write. And I haven't quite put my real hands on it. I've (inaudible) quickly in the next two or three days. But I'm very, very concerned about what we're doing for our children. And think we're really coddling them too much. I think we're giving them too many outs. I think we keep tellin' them, “Well, you know how it is, your culture is deprived, and this, that, and the other—”

FB: What is your opinion on this literacy test, the school literacy test?

FR: The same thing. I must be very frank with you: the parts of it that I saw, I can hardly think that it was, you know, rigged up culturally against black people. They've got problems about hamburgers, you know, and things like that—the kids know about. I can't see that. But I can see, also, that a lot of our kids are just not ready for it. I really wish that they had—and I worked very hard, too. I've worked very, very hard to get them to postpone the deadline. I wish they had postponed the deadline and given all the kids a little more time to work on it. I didn't want them to change it. I wish they had. And, you know, there's a move still afoot, and we wrote letters and did everything else. I still think we should have done that. But I don't think the test was—I think that the things that were on there a twelfth grade child should know. And I think that if they had—well, I think that on the next go around you're gonna see such a difference. Such a difference. I think some of those kids are gonna—some of those black kids are gonna tear that test up on this go around. I think so. I think they're going to straighten the margin out, almost—the next go around.

FB: Okay. Well, the last question, Mr. Rodriguez, before we close the interview is what do you think—or, what direction do you think Tampa will have to take, politically—particularly the blacks—say, in the next decade?

FR: Boy, that's a loaded question. For number one, I would like to see more black representation in all areas. And, incidentally, I hasten to add that I don't want more black representation so that I would have more favors. I don't need any favors. I think I can

make my own in life, but I'd like to see everyone else make theirs. But I think our young people need an inspiration. I think we need a black viewpoint, on the County Commission, on the City Council, what have you. Okay?

Number two, I think we ought to—we need to do better in the area of jobs, but we've got to do better in the area jobs preparation. Job preparation. I told you a few minutes ago that I've been teaching some classes, and I wish that I had been taught, also. In other words, I wish that before I had gotten a hold to these classes—I think I did a good job, incidentally, but I don't think did enough. I wish that before I taught these classes that I could have met with a committee of experts and we could have designed a curriculum to meet the needs, meet the needs—I think we need some evening classes that are designed to meet what people need, not necessarily what someone has said is the curriculum and this, that, and the other. Here's a young man that wants to be a policeman; well, I should be able to get a curriculum that goes directly to that. You know? I think we've got—

You see, the thing that is bothering me is not the extremely backward person or very smart persons because we can take care of those. If the very, very backward we know that we start from the ground and up—we have to say, “Okay, he's a manual laborer.” That's all. You know? But that man in between there that, you know, that just can't get it together. Now, if he's very, very smart, he's gonna make it. Now that's the man that's fooling you, that very smart fellow. You can go down town and he's got a job. And you say, “Oh, man, how are we doing?” Fine. Why, look it, when I was a kid you couldn't see that. Here you got a black man. But he is just such a small percentage. It's this cat right in here, he ain't gettin' nowhere.

And this is really what we've got to work on. We need—we moved really more imagination. We need to get a corps of educators that you can take handcuffs off and they can design a course. See, right now I can't teach what I want to teach. Okay, I'm trying to get some young people into the police department. Well, I can't teach 'em that. It's nowhere in the curriculum, and therefore, there's no money for it. I can teach 'em some little things. I can teach 'em what's listed on there. And so I've got to slip in the class for that. And we need freedom.

I'll tell you something else I think we need. I think we need some private capital in the field of black education. See, if we can get some people to actually work, and work creatively, and not be stymied by meeting state requirements and all this kind of stuff. I really do. I believe that very, very strongly. I may sound like a dreamer, I don't know, but it's worth trying. Things are so bad that they are really worth trying.

FB: Okay.

End of interview