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Julie Buckner Armstrong (JA): Okay. Okay, here we go. This is Julie Buckner Armstrong interviewing Corey Givens Jr. on March 29, 20—excuse me—March 22, 2021, and we are using the SquadCast software. So let's begin, Corey. I'm supposed to ask your name, and I've already said it, so how about you tell me your date of birth?

Corey Givens Jr. (CG): Sure, Julie. April 11, 1992.

JA: Okay, great. And were you born in this area, or where were you born?

CG: I was born and raised in St. Petersburg, fourth-generation native.

JA: Okay, excellent. And do you live here now?

CG: I do.

JA: Okay. What part of town?

CG: I'm in south St. Petersburg.

JA: Okay, excellent. And how do you identify in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender?

CG: Black. Male.

JA: Okay, very good. And can you tell me a little bit about your relationship to the history of any of these cemeteries under consideration, which is Oaklawn, Moffett, and Evergreen?

CG: Sure. I am a descendant of family members who were in turn in the original Oaklawn Cemetery. My family lived, we owned businesses, we worshipped in the Gas Plant district, so I

am a descendant of early, early, early St. Petersburg settlers. My great-great grandfather actually helped lay the Orange Belt Railway.

JA: Oh, wow. That's really interesting. So when you say "attended churches and owned businesses," what churches?

CG: New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, which was on 7th and—off of 7th and 15th street. And we owned a business there as well. My great grandmother had a tailor shop there, and we also had cousins, the Welches, who owned a lumber shop as well as a—gosh, what other couple of—dry cleaners over there.

JA: Okay, okay. So you say that you have family members who are interred—were they at Oaklawn or Moffett or Evergreen or a little—in different ones, or what's the relationship there?

CG: To my knowledge, we had family that was buried in the Oaklawn Cemetery.

JA: Okay, very good. And who was that?

CG: My great-great-great grandfather. So that's three greats.

JA: Okay.

CG: Anthony Givens. A great-great aunt, Dorothy Beachum, and a great-great-great uncle, Will Dukes, who was also the founder of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church.

JA: Oh, okay. Well, very good. So—and you went to New Hope Missionary Baptist?

CG: We attended New Hope, correct.

JA: Okay. And your great-great-great grandfather, AC Givens, was that the person who helped to lay the Orange Belt Railway?

CG: Yes, ma'am.

JA: Okay, very good. All right, I might ask a little bit about him in a bit. So, what do you know about the history of these cemeteries? Oaklawn specifically, but Moffett or Evergreen as well.

CG: I know the latter of the two, Evergreen and Moffett, they were sort of birthed after Oaklawn. Oaklawn was the original cemetery of some of the early pioneers and settlers of what they considered south Pinellas. You know, at that time, St. Petersburg hadn't really been annexed from Hillsborough County yet, so we weren't our own official city until the—until, I believe, 1902. But some of the early, early settlers of St. Petersburg were buried in Oaklawn. Now, a lot of times when you drive around churches in south St. Pete, whether it's Childs Park, Lake Maggiore Shores, or 13th Street, you see a lot of churches.

My church in particular, New Hope, which relocated as a result of the interstate coming in in the '70s—we relocated to a site off of 22nd Avenue South and 22nd Street South, where there was an old church with an old cemetery next to it. Now, a lot of people assume, well, since this is a black church, that must be a black cemetery. Well, that wasn't the case. Those cemeteries were specifically created for white parishioners who attended those white congregations, those white churches.

Now, blacks were buried in Oaklawn, Evergreen, or Moffett. Now that was mainly because it was close to a lot of the black churches that existed in the Gas Plant district. Well, what a lot of folks fail to realize is that St. Petersburg was a sundown city, which meant that it was segregated. You had blacks in one section, whites in another. And so most people who worshipped at these black churches that were located in the Gas Plant district wanted to bury their family members near them, so they buried in either Oaklawn, Evergreen, or Moffett. So that's the reason that a lot of these cemeteries came about.

Now, I believe Oaklawn was an integrated cemetery. From what I've heard, the others—Evergreen in particular was a segregated cemetery, so there were blacks buried in one area of Moffett and then you had whites buried in another. But the rumor is that present-day Tropicana Field parking lot—that's where the cemeteries once existed until urban developments started taking place and a lot of things changed.

JA: Exactly. Do you have any memories of what—this might have been before your time, but do you have any memories of what those cemeteries and the surrounding areas looked like before Tropicana Field was built?

CG: Yeah, way before my time. Way before my time. I think Moffett traces its origins back to, I believe, the 1800s. And that was even before the Orange Belt Railway came into existence. But I know that it was located on the western edge of the Gas Plant district. And I think Moffett was one of the first legitimate cemeteries for black people, where they could bury their loved ones, because again, you know, these cemeteries weren't integrated yet, so they buried them close to home. And home for them was the Gas Plant district, which before that was known as Pepper Town. So you had churches like Historic Bethel AME, Bethel Community Baptist Church, Greater Mount Zion. All of these churches worshipped in the Gas Plant district—Traveler's Rest [Missionary Baptist Church]—and so as a result, they set aside two acres, I think, in Evergreen for African Americans. And like I said, once the city condemned these cemeteries, I think in the late '20s or '30s, then that's when they began relocating the bodies and reintering them at Lincoln Cemetery, which is in Gulfport.

JA: Right.

CG: And like I said, there were such poor records kept at that time, no one—well, very few people were ever really notified where, or if, their loved ones had been moved to a final resting place that was accessible to them.

JA: Yes, and I know that this was before your time, but let me ask the question—and I thank you for that answer—let me ask the question in a different way. What do you remember those cemetery areas looking like when you were younger?

CG: Well, what I can recall is—I'm sorry, go ahead.

JA: Have you lived here all your life, or did you go away and go to school, or have you worked out of town before, or have you been here that whole time—this whole time?

CG: I've been here pretty much my whole life. I've only lived away for college, when I attended FSU. But again, a lot of the development that happened, happened during my lifetime, so I have very few recollections of the cemeteries other than stories that I've heard from senior members of my family. But what I do remember is the Royal Court apartments. That was a housing development for non-whites that opened in the 1950s, and it was around until the mid '90s, whenever they started construction for Tropicana Field.¹

So what I remember is that there was a lot of debris and rubbish that had been cleared from that site to make way for the present Tropicana Field parking lot. And it's said that that was Oaklawn Cemetery, where the Royal Court apartments actually once sat. And then there was rumor that, you know, where the—what is it? John Hopkins Middle School, where that currently sits, there was rumor that that was part of Oaklawn Cemetery. So I think a good land survey would do us some justice as to determining whether or not there are still bodies under that parking lot. But as of now, we only go by speculation and word of mouth.

JA: Right. Absolutely. So where did—can I get a little specific on where you lived when you were younger? Was it close to the cemeteries, or what was your address when you were a kid, growing up?

CG: Right. Well, again, I didn't live there, but my grandmother—she grew up in the Gas Plant district. She was right off of 9th Street and 5th Avenue, so she was close to where Webb's Plaza was. There was a school there back in the day called Davis Elementary, and that was the school where she attended, her mom was a teacher there, and they lived, worked, studied, and played in the same neighborhood. And it was said that you could be born and buried in the same place without ever having to leave, and that's exactly what happened to a lot of those early settlers.

JA: Right. Absolutely. Now, you mentioned before that what you knew mainly came from stories that were handed down to you from family. So, what are some of those stories, or rumors, or folklore, or ghost stories, or any of that, you know? I'm asking that in a very broad way. What are some of the stories you remember being told?

CG: Well, I remember hearing the stories about the peppers, you know, and how did Pepper Town come about. There was a rumor that my great grandmother had a garden the size of a football field in front of her house that was shared by most of the women who lived in that community, and they would grow peppers there. You know, it was very few things that could actually grow in such grainy soil, and peppers were one of the things that they were able to grow.

¹ Construction of Tropicana Field officially began in 1986, and the facility opened in 1990.

And she'd go across the street, and she'd sell them at Webb's Plaza, and that was how she made most of her money, which she used to put seven kids through school.

JA: Wow. Okay. So Pepper Town is called Pepper Town because of people growing peppers, correct?

CG: That was correct.

JA: Okay. What about any stories associated specifically with the cemeteries themselves?

CG: Well, I remember hearing stories of my uncle, who—he was a child in the 1950s, so this was as the Gas Plant district began seeing its decaying years. Again, it was—in the heyday, you know, it was a metropolis, a melting pot of different folks from all over the Deep South, who came to St. Petersburg to escape segregated Jim Crow laws. But my uncle, he recalled times when as a kid he'd be where the current parking lot is and he'd actually fall or trip or be digging in the grass, because they never properly, like I said, exhumed those bodies. And so a lot of rubbish was left behind for people to discover. And that's what happened, was kids who were just playing around would sometimes stumble across jewelry or old clothes that had been discarded or just left behind from a decaying corpse.

JA: Oh, wow, that's amazing.

CG: Yeah. Yeah, I can only imagine.

JA: This was your uncle?

CG: This was my uncle, so he's in his mid 60s, so again, this was a memory that he has from a cemetery that existed a century before he was even born.

JA: Right. And what's your uncle's name?

CG: His name is Carlton Anderson.

JA: Is he around still?

CG: He's—he just recently passed. We lost him this past September.

JA: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for your loss.

CG: Thank you. Thank you.

JA: So tell me about—so do you know when the people stopped using the cemeteries? I know that they were mostly abandoned by the '20s, but do you know why people stopped using them?

CG: Well, from what I gathered, I guess the city condemned the cemetery. A lot of folks had started using the cemetery as a dumping ground, right around the '30s, and I think by the '50s

there were still a few hundred bodies that remained in Moffett and Evergreen. But the city had condemned Oaklawn, I think, in the '30s or '40s. There were still some headstones that remained there, but, like I said, around the '50s, urbanization started taking place, and they decided we needed more housing units for low-income black families.

You know, they were—they had overgrown Jordan Park, and they needed somewhere for these families to live. And so residents of Royal Court began to take their stake right there, and that's where they planted and made a home for themselves and for their families. But for years, like I said, that cemetery sat there abandoned, and it was a dumping ground, pretty much. My grandmother said, in high school, after football games at Gibbs, they'd go there to do things that teenagers did in their free time. But it was always sort of a dumping ground or just a place to get into trouble, if you know what I mean.

JA: Right, right. So it sounds as if the cemeteries were not a place where the deceased were respected, but it was more of a marginal area, you know, kids playing, people dumping their garbage, things like that. Do you know—had any bodies been relocated at that point, or were they relocated later?

CG: I don't believe that those bodies were relocated until the '50s, which is when we got—well, when we purchased Lincoln Cemetery. I take that back; that was in the '40s when Lincoln Cemetery was purchased. And so I think after they condemned the cemetery—Oaklawn Cemetery—in the '30s, they started reintering some of those bodies in the '40s and the '50s. But from what I've gathered, up until the early '60s, which is when my dad and his brothers and sisters were growing up, there were still bodies that remained—somewhere between 50 to 100 bodies that were still there at Moffett and Evergreen.

JA: Right.

CG: So there's a rumor that there's over 4,000 unmarked graves in Lincoln Cemetery; however, there were over 5,000 bodies that were buried between those three cemeteries: Evergreen, Moffett, and Lincoln. I mean—excuse me—Evergreen, Moffett, and Oaklawn. So the question still remains, is what happened to the other couple of hundred bodies that were missing?

JA: Right. And I know in the '70s—as I understand, in the '70s, when they were digging up for the interstate, that some bones were found and supposedly relocated, but the history of that is really what we're trying to get at right now. So, what—

CG: It's very vague.

JA: Yeah. What do you know about the relocation of those bodies from Evergreen and Moffett and Oaklawn to Lincoln?

CG: Well, what I can say personally is that my family was never notified in writing [or] by word of mouth, whether it was from McRae Funeral Home—who at that time handled the bodies and did the funerals for most of the African American families of that time—between McRae and Creal Funeral Home. No one ever notified us, to tell us where these bodies had been relocated,

from this plot to that plot. No one ever told us, you know, “This is what you can do if you want to buy a new headstone for your loved one, and this is where their final resting place is.” So it was almost like we were blindsided.

JA: Right.

CG: We never had the option of choosing where we wanted our loved ones to be reinterred. It was sort of forced upon us. And when that happened, we still were left in the dark. Nobody, to this day, knows where my uncles, my grandfather, or my aunt—where their remains are.

JA: Oh, wow.

CG: Because again, there was no accurate record kept by the funeral homes, no record kept through the city or the county, so it was almost like a mass discarding of unwanted graves.

JA: Why do you think that happened? The way that it did?

CG: Honestly? And if I can be honest, Julie—

JA: Yes.

CG: I think it was because of race. This was—remember, we’re talking—this was the, what, the middle of segregation here. We’re talking the ’50s and the ’60s, so blacks were still considered inferior to their white counterparts, and so I think it was just a matter of, This is a black body. Nine times out of 10, because the bodies have been here for a couple of decades, loved ones no longer are around, or they no longer care. And I think it was just simple—simply a matter of race.

JA: Right.

CG: These were African Americans, and therefore, the city had no respect for those deceased. That’s what I think it came down to.

JA: Well, I believe you absolutely, and I hear that. My question, I guess, is that since the McRae Funeral Home sort of spearheaded this, as I understand it—it was Mr. Monroe McRae, and also, you said Creal was involved in that as well?

CG: Mm-hm.

JA: And these are both, you know, African American funeral homes. I can see if it’s the city, but what—I’m trying to get at the funeral homes that handled it. Did they not keep records? Like, did they not chart their work, and what might have been going on with them?

CG: Well, again, the funeral homes handle the burial after the funeral. But these bodies were reinterred 20, 30, 40 years after they had been laid to rest, so at that point, the ball was no longer

in the court of the funeral home. The body was in the hands of, you know, the city of St. Pete because they owned the cemetery.

JA: Okay. Oh, and see my understanding was that the actual physical work of relocating the bodies was handled by McRae and Creal, but you're saying that—

CG: Now, that could be right. I did not ever—I've never heard that, but you could be correct, Julie, and I may be wrong.

JA: Yeah. So I'm not sure. I don't know the answer. That's just something that I thought or believed with the case.

CG: Got you.

JA: Yeah, so it—

CG: Yeah, from what I had—what I have known from just my conversations with March Bell, who currently works at McRae Funeral Home, was that they had no dealings with these bodies once they had been reinterred. Now, McRae Funeral Home at one point managed Lincoln Cemetery.

JA: Right.

CG: And it was my understanding that once the bodies had been relocated to Lincoln, McRae came up with the ledger to help family members find those bodies that had been identified and relocated.

JA: Okay.

CG: But again, if they had never been identified to begin with, prior to being removed, McRae Funeral had no knowledge or no way to specify what body belonged to who.

JA: Right. And do you know if—and I probably—I am going to interview Mr. Bell at some point. Do you know if the funeral home still keeps that ledger, or has that ledger in their records?

CG: They do. And that was why I—again, once I got old enough to be interested in history and the history of St. Pete, one of the things that I did immediately was to try find out where my family had been reinterred. Because again, my grandmother didn't know. She didn't really know where to start. So I reached out to McRae Funeral Home, looked through their ledger, and was never able to find the names of any of my deceased loved ones. Which made me wonder, well, had they been reinterred?

JA: Right.

CG: And that ledger, I think, is very helpful, but again, it's very vague. There's a lot of question marks, you know. There's baby so-and-so, or a 91-year-old body but no name.

JA: Right.

CG: So there's a lot of vagueness on that ledger, but it also helps connect a lot of dots, because I was able to find family who had been removed that we were notified about. But then there were family who hadn't been moved, and we hadn't gotten any notification that they were or were not.

JA: So I know you said that your family didn't get notification during the process. Do you know how you or they found out about bodies being reinterred? How did they learn of that?

CG: Just word of mouth. I'm not sure of—again, that was before my time, so I'm not sure if there was something put in the paper or if people just heard that there was development that was going to be taking place here at this site on 16th Street, and as a result, bodies were going to be reinterred at Lincoln Cemetery. I'm not sure what happened. You probably have to ask March Bell or someone who was around at that time. I just know that once they did—like I said, there was one aunt that we were notified about that her body had been moved. Her name was Cora Young.

JA: Okay.

CG: We had found out that she had been moved, but again, we had three other family members that were buried in that cemetery, and we never got any word on them. So that led us to the question—because Aunt Cora died later, you know, was her body moved and we were notified only because there was a record of where she had been buried? Or was it because these other people died so long ago that they just figured, okay, out of sight, out of mind? Maybe they've forgotten, and so we don't need to tell them. Because there was at least a 30-year gap between those passings. And so I just wondered if maybe we found out about one aunt because she passed more recently than we did about the other family members who passed decades ago. So I'm not sure what the mindset was or how they went about notifying families. I just know that it was sporadic, and it was not consistent.

JA: Right. Okay, I hear you. So, what was your family's reaction, or what was your reaction to learning about the cemeteries being covered over by the parking lot, by the interstate? Yes, what was the reaction there?

CG: Well, you know, between urban development and the city's quest for Major League Baseball, it almost felt like the city had chosen profit over preserving history. And for me, I was jaded, I was disgruntled, I was upset when I read about this. You know, the same team that I loved seeing play here at the home games was the same team that basically destroyed the final resting place for our black community. And I don't want to fault the team, because I don't think it's the Rays' fault. I also don't want to fault urban development, because I don't think it was necessarily Royal Court's fault. But it was—I think the blame has to go on those who were in leadership at that time. Whether it was the county or the city, someone could have taken the onus of doing their due diligence, doing their homework, surveying the land. I know at that point, there were no instruments to go out and to do that, but they could have done as much homework as possible to notify the families of those who were buried there, so that way we could have had

some peace, some solace in knowing that, okay, our loved ones now rest here, versus wondering where they're resting at, whether it's under a parking lot or at Lincoln Cemetery.

I think there could have been a lot of confusion that would have been settled had there just been some sort of communication. And I think that is what was missing, was the communication component. And as a result, a lot of families, like I said, were like mine. They were blindsided, and they were left in the dark. It was a grave situation.

JA: Right. Yes, absolutely. So, what do you think should be done today? And I had sort of a two-part question, but how do you think that the people who were buried and reinterred, or even not reinterred, how should these people be remembered? So that's one part of the question.

CG: Well, I think we should pay honor to them—definitely give honor to the memory of those folks, as well as the memory of the legacy that was built there in the Gas Plant district. I'm happy to see that we do have some folks in the Florida legislature that are fighting to make sure that there are dollars dedicated to preserving our history and honoring those lost cemeteries, like Zion over in Tampa. But I also want to make sure that we preserve it so that it doesn't repeat itself.

JA: Right.

CG: You know, if we honor that history, then my children and my children's children have a vivid image of what came before them, and therefore they're not bound to repeat that history. And when I say repeat it, they're not going to wash away or bulldoze or knock down the history of Pinellas County, because that's what makes us St. Pete—the fact that we did have these cemeteries once, and the fact that these were the folks who fought in the Civil War. They fought in the War of 1812. They fought to create the place that we know as St. Pete. That's what they all worked to do. And whether they had rich legacies that they left behind, or rich families that they left behind, I think we should do our due diligence and make sure that they have a proper final resting place, and that there should be some sort of memorial erected in their memory. I think that's the best way to honor their legacy and their memory, is by making sure that we have some sort of a pillar erected there on that site.

JA: And so you think the—let me just clarify. So you think that, first of all, we should do our due diligence to find out who is buried where, right? Okay.

CG: Mm-hm. So survey the land.

JA: Survey the land. Okay. And second, that there needs to be some kind of memorial or marker or pillar or something like that on the Oaklawn and Moffett and Evergreen sites—or at Lincoln, or at both?

CG: I think it should be at both sites, specifically speaking, at the present-day Tropicana Field site, only because that was the original cemetery site. And with the redevelopment of Tropicana Field taking place, we can make that request known to those developers that are looking to be selected for the principal redeveloper. I think if we communicate that fact, that, hey, in your

proposal, make sure there's some element of history there that gives nod or makes mention of the fact that this was once a cemetery, and that there are, or could be, bodies still lying under this parking lot. I think that's very important moving forward, is that we honor that history. Now, whether it's at Lincoln or at the present-day site of Tropicana Field, there needs to be some sort of marker or monument erected to make sure that folks know what took place at that site.

We just did a marker a few weeks back honoring John Evans, who was lynched on 9th Street in St. Pete back in 1912. Now, again, we don't anticipate that he still has family here, but we wanted to make sure that his legacy was memorialized, that folks remembered this happened. This happened. And so we're honoring the legacy of John Evans so that nothing like this happens again. And I think that's important with these cemeteries, is that we honor those cemeteries so that future cemeteries don't go and fall by the wayside and become lost.

JA: Right. Do you think that there should, in addition to the marker—do you think that there should be some kind of memorial service or something like that? And I'm also—this is again a two-part question, but I'll ask the first part first. I won't get ahead of myself. Should some kind of service or ceremony go alongside that, and if so, what might it look like?

CG: I would love that. I would love to see a memorial ceremony, or a service, whatever we choose to call it, just celebrating the legacy but also memorializing them. I want to see families, descendants—I want to see them invited to join in. I want to see folks who weren't around, you know, people my age. I want to see Millennials, Generation Z-ers. I want to see those folks there, too, so that they can learn about that history. Because again, you perish from a lack of knowledge. And if you aren't educated on the history of your people, if you aren't educated on the history of your community and your city, then how else are you going to better serve that community? How else are we going to better, I guess, preserve the history of that community if we don't know the history?

JA: Right.

CG: So I think a service memorializing that and memorializing those three cemeteries, but also a service where we can educate others on what took place at that site would be very, very beneficial, not just to those of us who are alive today, but to the future generations that come after us.

JA: Who do you see as being responsible for that kind of effort? For marking, memorializing, et cetera?

CG: Well, you know, I don't want to point fingers and say it's any one person's job, but I think as a community, it's all of our responsibility to come together and to make sure that we do the best we possibly can at honoring that legacy and honoring the history of that site. Whether it's USF, you know, through a historical society like ASALH [Association for the Study of African American Life and History] or the NAACP, I'd love to see all those parties come together to make sure that this is as successful of a memorial tribute as we can make it, because what I've found is that the city kind of just wants to gloss over this. The city wants to almost act like this didn't happen.

But if we hold them accountable—I think there’s power in unity, so I think if we unite together to not only erect a memorial, but to hold our elected officials accountable in ensuring that there are no longer any bodies lying under that site, I think that’s the best that we can do, is if we come together and not operate in our own silos. Because what I’m finding is that there are different groups who are interested in this, but everyone’s kind of doing their own thing. I’d love to see us come together to make this a collective effort.

JA: Right. So how do—and I agree with you—how do you think that cemeteries in the future, after this, should be protected? Because I’m also seeing that protection as part of the honoring of the legacy and the memorialization. But in a cemetery, say, like Lincoln, how should that be protected in the future?

CG: Well, prime example, Lincoln Cemetery. You know, I’m happy to work with the young lady, Vanessa Grey, who’s leading the effort to preserve that site. Because right now—I’m not sure if you’re familiar with it, but there’s a clouded title on that site. So the deed has brought confusion as to who is the owner of Lincoln Cemetery. So again, if there’s no owner, then chances are there’s not going to be any stewards that are going to maintain the site. So Vanessa, myself, and a few others, we volunteer our time to go out there and to cut tree limbs, to cut grass, to dig up unearthened headstones that have fallen into the ground. We take our inexperience, and we put it together to try to do the best that we can to make sure that we preserve that site.

But again, we aren’t getting help from the county. We aren’t getting from Gulfport or from St. Pete. It’s us pooling our monies together, making sure that we preserve the history of that site. Now, what I’d love to see happen is, again, I’d love to see the state legislature pass a bill that would create a direct funding source to preserve lost or historic cemeteries. That would be ideal. It would ideal if the city of St. Pete would dedicate a certain amount of money into making sure that we preserve that site, or even the city of Gulfport, whoever. I think we need to make sure that there are monies and dollars in place, as well as a governing body to ensure that, again, history does not become lost and it doesn’t go unkept.

We’re finding that it’s very hard to maintain a cemetery the size of Lincoln. But again, if we have the support there—and when I say “support,” I’m talking financial support as well—it would be a lot easier. And that’s something that we’ve struggled with. We’ve struggled getting the county to support us on maintaining the site. We’ve struggled getting the city of Gulfport to waive fees that they’ve incurred on us for overgrowth of the site. So there’s a lot that goes into maintaining a historic cemetery, and I would love to see the state, as well as our counties, step up in assisting us to do that.

JA: You know what? What you’re saying really gives me a window into what might have happened at the Oaklawn site—or Oaklawn, Moffett, and Evergreen—what might have happened 100 years ago, for example. And imagining how difficult it is today to maintain a site like that, what it must have been like 100 years ago during the heyday of Jim Crow, you know.

CG: You’re right.

JA: There's just an added layer there, so—

CG: You're right, you're right. If it was hard for us now, imagine how hard it was then.

JA: Right. Now, in terms of maintaining, protecting, memorializing, I'm going to ask a different sort of question, and then I'm coming to the end of the question set here. We're trying to ask everybody we talk to the same sort of questions. But do you know or do you have any burial practices or rituals in your family or in the community at large that you feel are important and should be maintained? So I know the cemeteries themselves are important, but what about the rituals surrounding those cemeteries?

CG: Yeah, um, rituals. So one of the things that's common in our family is family plots. You know, we believe that if we raise our families together, we should rest in peace together. And so one of the things that has been common for our family is, like I said, the family plots. So whenever Royal Palms Cemetery North began burying black families in the '60s, we went ahead and we purchased a plot out there. And that was where I think my great grandmother—she was the first person in the family buried out there.

So again, one of the rituals or practices that we find common in our family is family plots. Now again, we had a plot at Oaklawn, but that was quickly disheveled and unrooted because of the development that took place there at that site. So I think it's important that folks are able to continue their legacies and continue family burial practices, and if that is a family plot, then we do ourselves a disservice by allowing developments to come in and to demolish those cemeteries, because what they end up doing is uprooting the final resting place of a lot of families. So that sort of put a dent into the legacy of our family, is when they broke up that cemetery, they broke up our family's final resting place.

JA: Right. Yes. Wow. That's very powerful, and I appreciate your thoughts on that. So is there anything else you want me to know? This is an oral history that will go in the archives of the University of South Florida, and we're also trying to create a story map of these cemeteries. So, you know, are there any—anything else you want me to know, or anything else you want to emphasize that as we move forward in trying to record this history that's important to share?

CG: Yeah, I just think again, you know—I think we should hold our elected officials accountable. Make sure that through urban design and historic preservation that they do all that they can to make sure that this site is maintained, preserved, and it memorializes those folks who did call this their final resting place, because there were people, like I said, who fought in our founding wars. Whether it was the Civil War or the War of 1812, there were people who fought in those very wars buried in that cemetery, and again, we don't know what happened to them.

There's rumor that the first black settlers of St. Peterburg were buried there—Mr. [John] Donaldson and Miss [Anna] Germain. I'm not sure if you've heard that piece yet, but they do say that the first black settlers of St. Pete were buried in Oaklawn. So, like I said, there's a lot of history in that cemetery. There's a lot of history on that site, the Gas Plant site in general. But I'd just to know, have we really unearthed all the graves that laid under those—what they called “the twelve acres.” Out of the 86 acres that we're getting ready to redevelop, have we put forth the

concerted effort into making sure that all bodies have been removed? That's the only question that I have. If the answer to that question is yes, then I'm at peace. But if it's no, then I still have some question marks. I think the time has come to hire a surveyor or an archeology company to find the answer to that question.

JA: Right. Agreed. Now, I've never heard that term, "the twelve acres." Does that refer to Oaklawn, or all three of the cemeteries?

CG: All three. That was all three cemeteries. They sat on what they called twelve acres. And like I said, they say that that twelve acres stretched as far south as John Hopkins Middle School. So that would be under the overpass of the interstate, past what they call Campbell Park, right up to the track at John Hopkins. They say that was Evergreen Cemetery.

JA: Okay.

CG: Again, I don't know, because I wasn't around, but some folks that I've talked to that were around have said that that cemetery stretched from the present-day Tropicana Field parking lot all the way down to John Hopkins track.

JA: Wow. That's a—

CG: Yeah. So that's a good twelve acres if you think about it, at least.

JA: Right.

CG: Yeah.

JA: Okay. Well, Mr. Givens, I really appreciate your speaking with us today, and I will certainly be in touch again as the project moves forward, because I would like for us to, in general, stay in touch about the process of remembering and honoring these cemeteries.

CG: Yes. Thank you so much for the opportunity, Julie. I really appreciate it. And like I said, I look forward to hearing back and seeing this project come to fruition.

JA: Okay. Thank you very much, and take care.

CG: Thank you. You do the same. Have a great day.

JA: You too. Bye-bye.

CG: Bye-bye.

End of interview.

