

African American Burial Ground Project Oral History Project
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Antoinette Jackson (AJ): And so I'm with Mr. Ennis Davis and it is August 27, 2021. And we're continuing up with the African American Burial Ground Project, and I'm talking about, in addition to the three cemeteries in St. Petersburg: Oaklawn, Evergreen, and Moffitt, we're going to follow up with a discussion about the Zion Cemetery and issues in that area, and any information Mr. Davis may have for that area. So I'm going to ask that you state your name again, and your date of birth and who you are. And what is your relationship to this overall history of African American cemeteries?

Ennis Davis (ED): Alright. So my name is Ennis Davis, it's spelled Ennis, E-N-N-I-S, Davis, D-A-V-I-S. Date of birth is June 9, 1977, born in Winter Haven, Florida. What else? Did I get everything?

AJ: Yes. Yes, sir. So could you also again give your gender and ethnicity or nationality or race?

ED: Sure. So I am a black, African American male, black male.

AJ: Okay, alright.

ED: My family's been around in Central Florida for over a century now.

AJ: Yes. And then could you again state your family, your father and your mother's full names for the record, please?

ED: So my father's full name is Edwin Davis, Jr., and my mother's full name is Irma Lee Davis, but her maiden name is Vereen, which is V-E-R-E-E-N.

AJ: Okay, thank you. And so, as we were having a conversation about your relationship, and your connections to the cemeteries in the St. Pete areas and your family's history to that area, you also mentioned that your family migrated from the South Carolina area all the way over here to Florida. But you also mentioned Tampa, so could you give me the relationship between your family, how did they get to Tampa, the parts of your family that, you know, settled in Tampa and the connections, maybe, between Tampa and St. Pete in terms of your family history?

ED: Sure. So I guess Tampa is kind of tied to my family from two sides, probably more on my dad's side, I guess. St. Pete would be more on my mother's side. With my dad's side, the Davis family has always been more migrant type of workers prior to World War II. So my great-great-grandfather, Samuel Davis, migrated from Georgia after the Civil War. He would actually have been formerly enslaved at one point, married my great-great-grandmother in Live Oak, and by 1900, they would have been in present-day Flagler County within the Turpentine Camp. They had twelve kids at that point in time. My great-great-grandfather passed away somewhere in there, I don't know, his records just end, but the family resurfaces in Central Florida around 1905 in the Plant City area. And by that point in time, my great-grandfather was one of the older siblings, so he was also a migrant worker, and between 1910 and 1940 or so, the family, well, his family, specifically, found jobs all around Central Florida depending on where work was at. So census records just pretty much are capturing where they were at that year that the census was taken. With that being said, he had fifteen kids, and Tampa was the big city in Central Florida. So my grandad, who was born in 1926, he goes away to World War II, he comes back, and he also has lots of kids. So he's got, like, I don't know, twelve kids or something like that. I don't think we know the true number, probably never will. But my dad is the oldest of my grandad's kids on the Davis side. And my dad was born in 1945 at the black hospital, which was over in The Scrub in Tampa, was where he was born. And that's my grandad. My grandmother on that side, she always stayed in the Tampa area as well. And she would have been, oh, let's see, what is her last name? Well, she would have been a Greene. However, because her mother was sixteen and the daughter of a Baptist preacher who got impregnated by somebody from a family that was considered to be sinners and drunks, she was raised by someone else that was outside of the family, whose name was Miss Brown. And my great-grandad was a McClain, and the McClains were also in this Tampa area, so my family kind of just spreads out the more you dig into history. But over the years, because my grandad had a bunch of kids, because my great-grandad had a bunch of kids, they were all in Hillsborough County. Many have lived in Tampa ever since.

AJ: Okay. Does your family have any connection to Robles Park, any of those McClains and Greenes and Davises have any?

ED: I don't recall any family being at Robles Park. I do remember going to Robles Park as a teenager, just hanging out with people. I remember we had some friends, and we were going to go over to Tampa. One guy's girlfriend at the time, her dad was stationed at MacDill Airforce Base, and she was there with a couple of friends, so we were going to drive him to see his girl, and me and the other guy who was with us, we were going to be his wingman for the other two girls he was with. And that ended up spiraling out of control, so then we figured we were in

Tampa at that point, we might as well hang out with the other guy's family, since we were there. And so we went over to Robles Park, because he had a cousin who stayed there at the time. So I'm somewhat familiar with the area, and also, just remembered over the years, just going to go see friends and family in and around Tampa, going to the classic stuff like that, where we would be up in the general vicinity.

AJ: Did you, at the time you were hanging out, I guess as you described it, in Robles Park, was there a housing complex at that time?

ED: Yes.

AJ: And that's where you were visiting, or near there?

ED: Yeah, one of the guys we picked up had family in Robles Park, and so we went to Robles Park.

AJ: Can you describe it at the time, the time period you last saw Robles Park or when you were growing up?

ED: At that point it would have been early nineties, so like '93, '94, somewhere in there. I had just graduated high school, so it would have been '95. Yeah, it's the projects.

AJ: Yeah.

ED: I mean, yeah.

AJ: Okay.

ED: Same old type of projects you see all over Central Florida.

AJ: Yes. So did you know then about the Zion Cemetery? Or when did you, have you heard of Zion Cemetery, which is one the cemeteries that they have found that Robles Park now basically sits over? Many of the buildings now sit over top of an African American cemetery: Zion. Had you heard about that, or when did you hear about it?

ED: So now, with Zion, I had never heard about Zion until it was reported in the paper. When it was reported in the paper, I looked at the sample amounts and oh, yeah, there's a cemetery there.

AJ: Yes, so I guess, you know, and have you spoken to anybody or know anybody who have any other connections to that cemetery, either through church associations, you know, living near in the area of Robles Park, any other person who you talked to, perhaps, that has said anything or had any conversation about Zion?

ED: So I never, being in Jacksonville, I never had—a lot of questions about Zion came up. I would just spiral over to conversation about, well, what about the cemetery over in Sanford? Whoever's town, whoever I'm talking to, they're always going that way. I've never had even that conversation with my parents. I know my parents would probably know exactly all the stuff, since they run these neighborhoods as kids too, so. And they would have been, their memory goes back to the forties. I do know that they would definitely know more.

AJ: Okay. I know you mentioned your church was 20th Street Church of Christ, did you, did they have any locations in the Tampa area, or any events in the Tampa area?

ED: Yeah, we used to go to, I want to say it was 29th Street in Tampa, which is east of this area. My brother stayed off of, used to be called Buffalo [Avenue], I guess it's Martin Luther King, [Jr.] Boulevard now.

AJ: Yeah.

ED: My brother, actually, would have been around this area actually, way back in the early nineties. You know, my ex-sister-in-law, they stayed in this area about five years or so, not too far from Robles, had a little house.

AJ: And again, as you think, I know you commented on some of the things that you would want to see done for the sites that have been paved over or built over and things like that. In the case of Zion, now having heard about it, you know, what would be some of the suggestions, I guess, in terms of what should be done with this particular site and then sites in general, like we were talking about in St. Pete, in terms of recognition?

ED: So every site I think you have to treat differently based on historical stances, unfortunately. You know, the St. Pete sites are parking lots, they're kind of easier to deal with. With Robles and Zion, you got the projects sitting on part of it, you got, like a, private business or something. Half of it may be on private property, actually, so then you start getting the property rights and all this stuff. But I think at the very least, when you've got a site that has been redeveloped with something sitting on top of it, you know, if you can acquire that piece of property, then we need to at least memorialize it. There needs to be some, you know, interpretive signage, or something to share the history. And to me, that's a minimum, that's a two-thousand-dollar thing, so we can't say that we can't afford to do that. But I think, long-term, the projects are publicly owned, right?

AJ: Yeah, federal housing in Tampa is city managed.

ED: Yeah, federal cities all put taxes in it, so, yeah. So now in the projects case and, you know, this is an older complex anyways, so I do know, at some point, they're going to redevelop this stuff, they should redevelop it, and when that takes place, this Zion property probably needs to

be green space too. That memorializes and honors the people still buried under the foundation of those buildings today.

AJ: Right. Yeah, and root cause of these kinds of things, as you—

ED: Same thing, racism. Yeah, I mean, look at what happened. I mean, even in my industry today, we still struggle with diversity, and largely because minorities work, historically, excluded from being able to go to schools with engineering programs or getting hired for jobs in the area. So even today, we don't have full representation, from a cultural aspect, of what happens in communities like this which leads them to sites like this being buried and redeveloped.

AJ: Right.

ED: I was just going to say, the more inclusive and equitable we can be with history and allowing people in the community to have a seat at the table, the better we will be. If we don't have that seat at the table, then we'll typically be the mule. So as Zora Neale Hurston said, "If you don't have a seat at the table, bring your own." So it's time for, I think, the community to bring its own to help memorialize some of these sites and dictate the future of what happens in and around it.

AJ: Yes. And could you reiterate, even in this circumstance, no matter where you are, what is the role generally, because I know church plays a big role in many African American communities and lives, so what is the role of the church in these types of projects?

ED: So that's a complicated one, because, I think, what I see is that the role of the church has generally changed, or the black church has generally changed since desegregation. When Zion was present, when you could actually see it, the church at that point in time would have been the social center, the community center, it would have been the, you know, social anchor of the community that it served. The church isn't necessarily that today. Church attendance has declined all across the U.S. A lot of churches are just trying to survive. You've got to pay for that one-hundred-year-old roof on the building, because the collection plate isn't as thick as it used to be. And then a lot of people, you don't have to go to the church to voice your opinion on local politics, or you don't have to have a preacher be the leader of a community. Things have just changed. So I think the role of the church is the same role as the community at this point, and the greater community, that's the people who stay in the neighborhood today, that's the families who have loved ones buried in sites like this. They have to be at this transparent, decision-making table of what happens with these properties in the future. We can't rely on representatives in city hall, politicians, consultants, to do it for us. We have to allow for the community to be a part of this process early on, and continuously throughout the process. So I think it's largely the church at this point.

AJ: Yes, you make such a great point, and it also kind of shows two sides of a coin, because a church is at some points, as you also mentioned, are repositories of historical memories and data and then on the other hand, this is a concern in the present.

ED: Yeah, so I mean, the church is certainly a repository of information. It is certainly a way to get information out to people in the community, because even if you don't go to church, there's somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody who does go to church and that's a good way to get information out within communities that don't have a lot of representation or connection or influence at city hall or Tallahassee. But, you know, the repositories of information are the churches, the libraries, their colleges, their historical societies, even down to the property appraiser or even Hillsborough County themselves, the tax records. I mean, all these areas, the military pensions, military pay for headstones. I know my family, a lot of the research with a lot of my male ancestors, found a lot just from military records, from World War II, draft registrations that has the names of family members and where they were at or who their employers were at the time. And all those become the areas to dig for more research. So yeah, I think the church is important, probably not as important as it was for the overall picture in 1950, but certainly important from a historical standpoint and certainly important from the perspective of reaching out and engaging more people within the community.

AJ: Yeah, and the church has, I think again you're highlighting the church's role and prominence within a community has changed, it is a continuum of the ways the church was central, or not, to a community, so I think that bodes well to people who are trying to follow up on this type of history, or try to build from it. They have to really understand that those kinds of trajectories that you just, you've been describing.

ED: I think one of the things, especially with the church, well, really, I guess any entity, I always like to go back to the Sanborn maps, you know, for communities that do have Sanborn maps. Not all of them were big enough to have that, but the ones that do, just get the maps from a particular year, and just scroll down the streets and look at the names of places that are on the maps. And places that don't have maps typically will have addresses associated with them, and if you look at those addresses within public directories from that area, it'll tell you the names of some businesses, and the people who were there and those two things, combining those two things can connect you with, if those entities are still around today, how, you know, that can connect you with potential resources to detect that we may not have thought of initially. Just because we don't think it's associated with a cemetery or a community or a church, but their history may be also tied to some of these sites.

AJ: Yeah, so yeah, I think that, I mean, you've made such good points from starting with the St. Pete side and thinking about those three cemeteries specifically, but then just the history in general in relation to your family. And then even in thinking about Tampa, how, you know, somewhat, lots of these histories are similar, but then you have to focus on the site place in particular. Is there anything else that stands out from your family history? Both sides of the

family, all the kind of family names from the, did you say the Vereens? That's how you pronounce it?

ED: Vereen. Vereen is V-E-R-E-E-N, and from my side of the family there's more concentration of Vereens historically in St. Pete. And then my dad's side is Davis, and there's more of a concentration on the Davis side of the family in the Tampa area, Hillsborough County.

AJ: Right. And that's interesting, too, because the Davis name over in St. Pete side, there's the Davis Academy, there's schools, lots of history associated with the name Davis, also.

ED: Now, my guess is we all came off the same boat at some point in time, or we were acquired by the same plantation owning family and we likely all migrated to this area around the same time. So yeah, I may have Davis family in St. Pete as well, it's not a black name, so it was given to us from somewhere. It's an Irish name, actually. So, yeah, I mean, I probably have family related in the St. Pete, but they may be distant cousins that I just haven't made connections with yet.

AJ: Yeah. Well, I don't want to take up too much more of your time right now, and I thank you so much for all of the things you shared, lots of different things to follow up with and I would love to, hopefully, get the chance to see any of the obituaries that you mentioned that you had in your family records and those kinds of things. But is there anything else you want to say? Otherwise, I really just thank you so much for the interview.

ED: Anytime. Keep me in the loop on what's going on, because I think your work is very important and what you all are doing in the bay area is something that can be an example for other communities in the rest of the state to follow behind, because we have disgraced and desecrated, I don't want to say abandoned, African American cemeteries all throughout the country, really, not just Florida. So yeah, please keep me in the loop, and when I do visit my parents on Labor Day, I'm certainly going to go through those cemeteries and send you some information from the Tampa and St. Pete side.

AJ: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Ennis Davis.

Second Interview – October 8th, 2021 St. Petersburg family/community focus

AJ: Okay. Hi, this is Antoinette Jackson. Today is October 8, 2021. I'm with Ennis Davis, and we're going to pick up talking about St. Petersburg and his family's relationship and connections to the African American burial grounds in the communities in the St. Pete area, around those burial grounds. And I'm talking about Oaklawn, Moffitt, and Evergreen Cemeteries. This is for the African American Burial Ground Project that has been underway for the last year. So I'm going to start out asking Mr. Davis to say his name, date of birth, and, you know, where he is at this point, where is he living.

ED: Alright, so my name is Ennis Davis. My date of birth is June 9, 1977. I grew up in Central Florida, but I currently reside in Jacksonville, Florida, and I work in Volusia County.

AJ: Okay, thank you. And how would you describe yourself ethnically or racially?

ED: I'm black. I'm a black male, my family is of Gullah Geechee descent, I guess that's how I describe myself.

AJ: Okay, thank you. And could you just give me a general connection or overview of what your family's relationship is in the St. Pete area, particularly around the cemeteries that I described: Oaklawn, Evergreen, and Moffitt?

ED: Sure. So my great-grandfather, Franklin Vereen, after the Civil War, migrated from coastal South Carolina to Florida during the 1890s through Central Florida, kind of following the railroads. And by 1925, he lived at 726 22nd Street South, in St. Pete, about four blocks west of Oaklawn and Evergreen cemeteries. He was a physician who operated a sanatorium on 22nd Street South, and he passed in 1925 there. I don't know where he's buried, I just know those cemeteries are four blocks away from where he lived.

AJ: Yes. And could you tell me who was it? Was it your paternal or maternal grandfather?

ED: So this would have been my maternal grandfather. My mom's maternal great-grandfather, my mom's grandfather.

AJ: And with that thing, could you tell me your parents name, both your mother and your father and then your mom's maiden name?

ED: Sure. So my father's name is Edwin Davis, Jr., he was born in Tampa at Clara Frye Memorial Hospital and he grew up in Plant City, Florida. My mother's name is Irma Lee Vereen Davis. She was also born in Plant City and grew up there.

AJ: Okay. And her parents, your grandparents on your maternal side, since that is where your great-grandfather is?

ED: So my grandparents on my maternal side would have been Elbert Vereen, Elbert Franklin Vereen, who grew up between Plant City, St. Petersburg, and Winter Haven, Florida, depending on what family member he was staying with at that point in time. And then Christine Bennet Vereen, the Bennets worked from Georgia, I guess during the late 1890s, early 20th century, worked a lot in turpentine back in those days, kind of made their way from Georgia into Brooksville, Florida all the way into Plant City, which is where much of the family still resides today, as well as Tampa and St. Pete.

AJ: Okay, thank you. And could you tell me your own memories of that area where the cemeteries are located, and that includes Tropicana Field and that location?

ED: Sure. So my dad, during the 1960s, attended college briefly at Gibbs Junior College at 44th Street South. I guess during that time he attended church at 20th Street Church of Christ, which is not too far away from where those cemeteries would have been. Robert Simmons was their preacher at that point, I guess during the sixties and even when I was a kid, we would travel and visit that church a lot. So I just kind of remember the neighborhood from the eighties and the nineties, kind of attending that church. They had a big youth group, and the church I attended with my parents in Winter Haven, Florida, also had a big youth group. So whenever they'd get together and do different types of events with different congregations around Central Florida, that was one of the churches we would always go to. So I just remember crossing Howard Frankland, I was being kind of fascinated with the big, long bridge, and Tampa Bay. And then I remember when the dome was under construction, it was kind of fascinating seeing something that big kind of pop up, there was no baseball team or anything like that. It was kind of this sentiment that if you build it, they will come, type of thing. Even though they didn't come for a good little minute after the dome was built. And I remember the neighborhood just from when we would attend these youth events. Sometimes you'd have these competitions like basketball tournaments and stuff, so we would go to neighborhood parks around and participate in events like that.

AJ: And could you describe, other than the Tropicana Field, what else that you remember seeing in that neighborhood? In that particular neighborhood with the cemetery and Tropicana Field, what else was there at the times that you would go back and forth?

ED: Oh, yeah. I mean, there was this seldom used railroad line that ran through there, so that was always fascinating to me because I wanted to see if it was ever used. So when we'd go through, I'd look around to see if there were boxed cars and things like that on it. I remember, you know, once you got off of, I guess it was Interstate 275 and as you're going into the neighborhood and you're passing Tropicana Field, I guess if you're on 16th Street South and you go under I-175 and I remember the middle school on one corner, John Hopkins, Campbell Park was a big park that was on the other corner, and then we got to 9th Avenue South, is where we would normally make a, I guess going south you would make a right going back into the neighborhood where the church was at. I remember Jordan Park, which is like a public projects or public housing on 22nd

Street South. I remember the stories around Manhattan Casino that old-timers would talk about, or Mercy Hospital, which was a black hospital further south down the street, which is where my great-aunt used to stay, a few blocks away. And Wildwood Park also was near, this had to be 28th Street South, somewhere in that area but Wildwood Park was one of the parks we would go and have these tournaments at back during the eighties and early nineties.

AJ: And do you remember the Perkins House or anything right near Campbell Park, in that area?

ED: So I don't remember the house, specifically. I mean, I would have been, you know, ten, twelve, something like that. And, you know, I just remember the feel and sense of place of the neighborhood. It really was, once you got, it was like a no-man's land north of Interstate 175, and once you got south of that, you got back into the neighborhood that still existed. And just from my parents, they would always talk about how all the black neighborhoods around Central Florida were much more vibrant during the sixties and fifties when they were growing up, and how that kind of changed after desegregation and the Civil Rights Act. So knowing that, you could see it as you drove from the interstate into the neighborhood.

AJ: Yeah, what were some of the more vivid things you remember your parents saying about their experience in that community? You described after getting off of the interstate and going back to your church, any kind of things stand out to you, things they would describe? I know you said desegregation issues or the transition to desegregation, but any other vivid memories or visuals?

ED: My dad attended Gibbs Junior College, I guess this would have been in 1964, right before it transitioned into St. Pete Junior College. Then he transferred up to Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. But he spoke about how, you know, vibrant 22nd Street South was. You know, one of his favorite restaurants to eat at every Thursday night was called Geech's Bar-B-Q. And he talked about how Mr. Geech was well known for mustard-based barbecue sauce, and like every Thursday he had to get his barbecue from there. So that was pretty cool, listening to that.

AJ: Yeah. Did they talk about your great-grandfather at all, or any family discussions about your great-grandfather and his, you know, relationship to St. Pete within the family that you could remember?

ED: Not specifically. Well, I guess this is related to St. Pete. So my great-grandfather was born right after slavery, I guess, 1872. And his mother and his older sister were midwives, so my great-grandfather was a doctor. I consider him to probably, likely, have been more or less a root doctor, just because if you were black around that time, you weren't allowed to go to a college and get a degree and do all this stuff. So what's interesting to me is that if it's his mother who was a plantation midwife, and the midwife of the people in the community, they say then, it seems like that's a skillset that was passed down to him and his sister that he brought with him to Florida. Well, my grandfather was born, Elbert Vereen, that would have been Plant City at that point in time. And the family talks about, you know, how proud they were to have a black doctor

that was my granddad. My uncle still has his medical books and records, and he had a practice in Plant City for a number of years during the early 1920s. I don't know what happened there, my uncle kind of mentioned he was ran off, if you want to put it that way. And so, whatever the case, he left Plant City and was ran off to St. Pete, and that's when he settled on 22nd Street. And so that would have been around 1924, so he wasn't there long before he passed, but at that point in time in history, if you just were looking at the Sanborn maps, it seems like that particular area of St. Pete was just starting to develop back in the early twenties. And so he was one of the, I guess, one of those early residents along that stretch, before it really became this trip that we know from the Chitlin Circuit era. Interesting, though, he did stay next door to Elder Jordan. I found that to be pretty interesting just because Elder Jordan is who Jordan Parks is named after and he ran the Manhattan Casino. So them being neighbors and my great-grandfather being a doctor is pretty exciting. You've got to have something to do with the people that the neighborhood's well known for, their buildings and things like that named after his contemporaries now.

AJ: No, that is exciting. And your uncle who has the books, perhaps some of the medical books, who is that uncle, and is he still in Plant City?

ED: Yes. That's my uncle Solomon Vereen. He basically has got the house where my grandparents used to live before they passed. So yeah, I think he travels between Plant City and Atlanta, Georgia, which is, he had a business there for a number of years, I guess still does. You know, he also went to Florida A&M, but he kind of knows everybody in the family. He started off with a t-shirt business, that he would go sell t-shirts at HBCU football games, classics, things of that nature. And it progressed to a point to where he's selling everything from t-shirts to barbecue to pom-poms and real estate development, a lot of things. So it's been cool to see his career kind of progress through the years, from the mid-eighties to now. But he keeps up with a lot of, he has a lot of what's left, he's got a lot of the possessions from my great-grandfather.

AJ: And is the house of your great-grandfather still there in St. Pete that you know of?

ED: No. Unfortunately, it's a classic kind of color of law type thing, where my great-grandfather's house and practice would have been, is now under what is currently Interstate 275. So urban renewal pretty much took out the portion of the neighborhood that my great-grandfather's house was at.

AJ: And do you know where your great-grandfather was buried?

ED: That I don't know. So I just know he died in 1925, I know the cemeteries were active at that point, but I have not paid to dig into the death certificates and records in Pinellas County yet to determine what cemetery that would have been.

AJ: And fast-forwarding to the current project that we're talking about, when is it that you first learned about the cemeteries Evergreen, Oaklawn, and Moffitt, and their being built over and

erased by the Tropicana Field parking lot and the interstate? When did you first learn about all that?

ED: Okay, so I'm an urban planner by trade, and history is a big interest of mine. So I've looked at Sanborn maps and things like that for a number of years in different cities, once I figured out what those were and once I got access to them. And so, I mean, it's not just St. Pete, you can really do this in almost any city that's got a black neighborhood or old church or something like that. There's probably a cemetery or something nearby, and then in the Sanborn maps, they are there. So before, I guess, a lot of this went big, you notice it, but I've just kind of seen it all across the state at this point. And you recognize that it's a part of our story, just being a black male or a black resident in the South, a sixth generation Floridian. And hearing the stories of my grandparents, my great-uncles when they were around, my parent's generation, they tell you about this stuff from what they remember from the forties and fifties and sixties, which is more than I've ever heard in any public school history course. And they lived this stuff. So I knew about some things and with the cemeteries in St. Pete, they have the Sanborn maps. So when I was looking for my grandfather's property, they pop up, they're there.

AJ: And so, what comes to mind when you hear the phrase "African American burial grounds" and remembering, in this context?

ED: To me, I think what pops up is it's well overdue. These are ancestors who, through blood sweat and tears and sacrifice, have pretty much gave their lives or allowed for my generation to be where we are today. If it wasn't for them, you know, these neighborhoods wouldn't exist. Some opportunities that we have today would not be around. So it's kind of sad when you see, you know, a loved one that has been buried somewhere and that cemetery is paved over or a building's sitting on top of it, or something like that and not acknowledging the souls that are six feet under. So anytime, you know, this is a remembrance project to me, is something that suggests overdue, justified, it can help share the history of the community with people today and generations of the future. And I truly believe to succeed in the future, you've got to know where you come from. I mean, that's just very important.

AJ: Yeah. So what do you think should be done in the present, regarding those cemeteries now that more folk know about them and redevelopment and new development is being considered for that area? What do you think people should be doing about the knowledge of the past in those cemeteries that used to be there?

ED: So, I think once you know better, you do better. And really, I mean, we should've always known that these were there, and older people in the community do know this, but were disenfranchised enough to not have enough influence to stop it. I kind of look to Lemon City Cemetery down in Miami-Dade County as a good example. That's another example of a black burial ground in the 1920s that by the 1940s and fifties was paved over and redeveloped. And it didn't come to light until maybe the twenty-first century, when the site was being redeveloped again, that human remains popped up in the construction site. And at least there, what they did is

they put up a historical marker to talk about the history of the cemetery that was there, and how it was developed and told the story of it being desecrated which is important too. You've got to know, and the truth is the truth, whether that hurts or not. And then, that site was also designated as a local historic site in Miami-Dade County, and it was pretty much preserved as a kind of memorial garden or park with a memorial that features the names of the people who were buried there, that they could actually track their records down. So, you know, I think that's a good way to honor a desecrated site. I mean, if you know it's a cemetery, then maybe redevelop the ones in the area but you don't have to create a poltergeist kind of situation. We can honor the past and honor that site, even if the headstones aren't there anymore.

AJ: Yes. Could you spell that cemetery in Miami-Dade County you're talking about? I didn't hear it clearly.

ED: It's Lemon City. L-E-M-O-N. Yeah, Lemon City. My bad, that's my southern ebonics in that accent you hear. It happens, I'm a sixth generation Floridian from the deep south, not the tourist part of Florida with flamingos and neon lights. No, I'm from the real Florida. Yeah, Lemon City Cemetery, I guess that's Little Haiti, that little area off of Northwest 71st Street near Interstate 95 is where that cemetery is at.

AJ: Okay. Thank you. What do you think accounts for the fact that these three cemeteries, Oaklawn, Moffitt, and Evergreen, particularly, are more broadly built over, erased, or just now having people talk about what happened? What do you think accounts for that?

ED: You mean, why do I think people talk about it now and not, you know, thirty years ago?

AJ: Yes.

ED: I think times are changing. Quite frankly, I think some segregationists are dying off and there's newer generations that, you know, race isn't the taboo thing it was, you know. I know we still have our issues in the country, and sometimes events can happen that can seem like we haven't changed a lot, but I talk to my parents, and they're like, "Hey, I can tell you about how it was in the fifties, it's not the same now." So I think as time has gone on, there are more people who recognize the wrongs that have been done in the past, and there are more people with the courage to be vocal in correcting and acknowledging those mistakes. That's why you see several communities now going back and changing their zoning ordinances, because systemically, public policy was set up against communities like this, and because public policy and local government was segregationist, in general, is why the cemeteries are what they are today, under expressways, under asphalt, under buildings. So I think it's just been a change in terms of the number of people who are pushing for equity, inclusion, and diversity.

AJ: And what recommendations would you have for people doing this type of work, in terms of the approaches they should take, perhaps in locating or finding out about this, and how should they be supportive of these types of initiatives?

ED: So one of the big things I would say, and I guess I would be considered more of a public historian because my educational background isn't in history, it's in architecture, you know. But oral history is a real big thing to me, I know even with my family, if you looked at preservation and history from the traditional perspective, the things you would hear from people, academics sometimes can turn that off, because you can't verify or fact-check this. But there's some cultural semantics in the way that terms are used and the things that people describe. But what I found out, if I listen to my elders in the community, I can match up what they say with records and maps and I can document all that stuff. Names may not be spelled the same, sometimes there may be nicknames, and all that type of stuff or people may not know the exact location, but they can give you a general area of what they remember. That's enough to track down stuff. In an area like St. Pete with Oaklawn and Evergreen, it's much easier to track these sites down. But I also look at some of the rural communities up in Nassau County, which they're also working with FPAN to track down these rural cemeteries from the nineteenth century, early twentieth century. And a lot of it is word of mouth, and then going out and looking at these sites, because there are a lot of sites we don't have Sanborn maps from. We have sites that aren't surveyed on a master site file and this type of stuff. But there are older people in the community who remember, Hey, my grandmother is buried here, or in 1940 I remember this. And so I think that the biggest I would say is transparent community engagement and interaction. Whatever we think we find, just take it back to the older people, especially some of these older churches, a lot of these cemeteries are associated with a lot of older congregations. And sometimes they have records on this stuff, old obituaries, names, things that of that nature. So I think, really, just interactive ways to engage with the local community in a way that, traditionally, municipalities have not. It's not, Oh, we're going to have a meeting at city hall at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, or 6 p.m. on Wednesday. It might be we need to go to this community on Saturday at 10 a.m. because they're having fish fry. So it may be something as simple as that, or we need to go over here when this church is getting out and be a part of this revival or whatever. But you need to meet the community where the community is at, and if you can do that you can get oral history and drill down a lot deeper than most of us realize.

AJ: Right. And I think you make an excellent point because, again, I agree that oral history is working with people and communities that have a lot of the information we later confirm with GIS or GPR and all those types of things. So I totally appreciate that comment. I know from your own family, you said you had a chance to maybe talk to your parents, and they had some records and things like that. Could you kind of give me a discussion on the types of documents your parents have in terms of confirming a lot of what you're saying they have, personal artifacts and things like that that add to the story that's typically not used or utilized by planners or municipalities?

ED: Yeah, so I mean, I've got some stuff and they've got some stuff. I think the biggest benefit in my career, especially when it deals with black communities in Florida, is most of the black communities in Florida have always been intimately linked together through a variety of means, whether it's been through religion or the industries that people have migrated from. I come from

a family of migrant workers, so they're all connected to all these older segregation era black communities. But my parents have kept obituaries of family members and friends that date back to 1950s and sixties. So I know when I first started my research on my own family, that was like the perfect spot, because I know in my family, everyone had a nickname. And the nickname's not what's on the obituary, necessarily. And a nickname doesn't show up on the records. So having those obituaries and being able to see real names and the names would actually give a generation before them, they would give those names, names that we don't think about today that's been lost over time because of all the people, most of the people who attended those funerals are no longer with us. So that was the main thing. So like my great-aunt, Manda Mims, also stayed in this neighborhood, moved to this neighborhood in 1932 at the age of fifteen. And this is all out of her obituary, it's got her whole life story, it's got the pictures and everything. So, you know, she attended the Pentecostal Temple Church of Christ and God, it's got a longer name than that, but it was a Pentecostal church that was on 22nd Street South, as well. And, you know, even in her obituary, it talks about the gospel programs that she was involved in, and singing in groups such as Mighty Clouds of Joy and Chicago Soul Stirrers, which Sam Cooke was a part of that. Or the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. So I always like this type of stuff, because when I first looked at this stuff, it had nothing to do with black cemeteries. I was actually doing some history on the Chitlin Circuit. So having those names linked, I was able to find sites from that, but I think it's still applicable because even in that document she had fourteen kids. So there's fourteen more names of people in the neighborhood. If you trace this stuff down, even family members that I might not keep up with because I've got a big family, probably still in the neighborhood. So fourteen kids back in that era, track it down another generation or so, there's probably a lot more descendants still within the vicinity, walking distance of these burial sites.

And then over the years they have collected images. So I have pictures of my relatives who are here from the 1920s. I have taken the information from oral history and I've been able to track down or find military records and Freedmen's Bureau type records, death certificates in certain locations. I know with my great-grandfather, for example, his World War I record had his mom's name listed on it, and that's how I found out who my great-great grandmother was, and it had a location, and I was able to track that down and find out exactly where they were buried and was able to visit that historic plantation era cemetery up in South Carolina. So I have a lot of that documentation, and then comparing that documentation it gives you city locations, names I've been able to look at, Sanborn maps and before Sanborn maps, I look at public directories which would give you the address of that person. So I've got scans of his name in St. Pete, 1925, "this sanitorium" written in big, bold letters. I've got the name of the lady who lived with him, she's in there too. Oh, yeah. And from that, I was able to go to the Sanborn maps and track that down, and see where the house was, where the property was at and then overlay that with current maps to see how the interstates kind of wiped that out. So I have a big collection of records, but a lot of it starts off with really those obituaries that they still have on file, and then older pictures that they have in their scrapbooks, and from that and talking, I've been able to track down a lot more documentation.

AJ: Yeah. So I think that's a good lesson for other people, again, doing this type of research and for people even on this project, on how to expand the network of people that are associated with these cemeteries. So thank you for that information. And I look forward to seeing some of those documents. Could you spell Mims? I know it's M-I-S, I'm just trying because I know people—

ED: Yes. M-I-M-S and she ran, her and her husband ran the Mims Sunrise Market at 2161 and a half, 14th Avenue South, in St. Pete for twenty-three years.

AJ: Wow. And then you mentioned your other, was it your great-grandfather Elbert, or?

ED: Elbert.

AJ: Yeah, could you spell that? Because I don't know if it's Albert or a different?

ED: So Elbert is E-L-B-E-R-T. Elbert Franklin, just like his father, Franklin Vereen.

AJ: Okay, thank you.

ED: And he grew up between Plant City, St. Pete, and Winter Haven, which is in Polk County.

AJ: Okay. And one quick more thing for the record. Where in South Carolina did your people migrate from? I know you mentioned that quite a bit, and Gullah Geechee, which is another place that I am very familiar with that area anyways, but where?

ED: So Vereen, I guess I'll give you a quick little story, so Vereen is the French, or the Anglicized name of Varin, V-A-R-I-N, which the enslaver would have been French Huguenots. So this whole area, Horry County, South Carolina, which is present day Myrtle Beach, but Horry was the family name of the enslaver's wife. So they came into Charleston, he married Horry and they were given this land, which is now Horry County through inheritance. And so there were coastal plantations that the family owned and Little River, South Carolina, Myrtle Beach, North Myrtle Beach. But, I guess after the Civil War, and really, I guess when Myrtle Beach started to transition into a resort community, many of the black descendants ended up in little areas away from the water, across the intercoastal waterways. So a lot of my descendants in the cemeteries are in Wampee, South Carolina. That's W-A-M-P-E-E and visiting enough, I can tell you. Gullah Geechee thing are places that are isolated and have been able to retain African culture. I can tell you, there's some roads up there now, but you can imagine, there's Waccamaw Swamp on one side, you got the Atlantic Ocean on one side. Oh, it's isolated, yeah. It's isolated, so you can definitely see how things have been retained. I mean, even then, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor does extend into Florida and I can even still see things in my Vereen side of the family, these cultural traditions and talking about haints and stuff like that. My mom talking about, "I had a dream about fish, somebody's pregnant", all that type of stuff. It still pops up even today.

AJ: Yeah. I can talk to you a whole lot about that, but I won't go further on that tangent, but I just wanted to close the loop on that. So as we end this, do you have any other thing you want to add or say that I haven't asked or that you want to make sure is part of this discussion today?

ED: I mean, really it's for my own edification. So I mean, you guys are doing great work. How can average people like me, can help with these endeavors, especially when it comes to burial grounds that aren't necessarily in the Tampa Bay area, because we've got this issue all over the state.

AJ: Yes. For the short answers I have, the Black Cemetery Network, so if you got out to that website, there's ways for you to register sites that are being found anywhere in the country. And to put up information that helps tell those stories. So that is a place that is kind of a repository that we're establishing as part of outreach for this project, to take in, like you just asked, how do we get other people involved and learn from what they're doing. So go, I would say, the quick answer is the Black Cemetery Network as a site to register any kind of findings or stories or information you have, so go out there. And then for this project, the African American Burial Ground Project, you know, just reach out to me and we can always use additional people to do more research, more interviews. So I would be happy if you would be interested in doing your own research on behalf of the project, following this basic protocol. And that would help us build an oral history database, because that's what we're doing is creating an oral history database and a digital story map for this particular project. So those are some quick ways that people can help and you specifically to help, so I thank you for asking.

ED: Most definitely. I mean, lots of people who want to get involved, lots of people who know history about certain types of sites, but they just don't know how. So I can definitely take this information and I can actually help here and there. But there's also a number of people out there I think I can share the information with to make your guy's jobs much easier as well.

AJ: Thank you. And I thank you again for taking the time, and I look forward to continued conversation with you, Ennis Davis, thank you.

ED: All right, I appreciate it.

end of interview