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[Transcriber's Note: Interview begins mid-sentence.]

Andrew Huse: —misfit that way. (OA laughs) All right. Cool. So, we're going to—we're going to pick up at the beginning. My name's Andy Huse. It's July first, right?

Otis R. Anthony: July first.

AH: Yeah.

AH & OA: Two thousand nine [2009].

AH: I'm here with Otis Anthony and—well, first of all, thanks for coming in, especially on a day off.

OA: My pleasure.

AH: And let's—we're going to start at the beginning. You were born in Tampa, right?

OA: Yeah. I was born in Tampa, born to the folk who were into astrology. I was born to Leo parents, as a matter of fact. Both of my parents were born in August, one on the eighth and one on the thirteenth. And I was actually born August seventh. Now, I've got to tell my age, August 7, 1951, which makes me a very, very young man today in 2009.

So, yeah, [I] grew up in Tampa and I remember, when I was in elementary school, when they would ask you to fill out the application for "where were you born," and I—me being very detail-minded, even at that young age, I always would say Clara Frye Hospital instead of Tampa, Florida. (laughs) I didn't know you were supposed to put the city. And I would always put that down as an elementary school kid. But I find that interesting now, when I grew up, to learn that

Clara Frye Hospital was a historic institution in the African American community, the only place that blacks could go at that time, and pregnant mothers could go at that time. So many of the African Americans of my era were born in a segregated hospital.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: Yeah, that's significant. But by—and what did your parents do?

OA: Both of my parents were laborers. My father was a laborer. He worked in almost everything, but we liked to call him a terrazzo man because during that period in Florida, everybody had terrazzo floors, and they laid terrazzo floors. He both laid the floors on some jobs, and then he had to smooth the terrazzo. And once terrazzo was smoothed, it's the floor of housing, and it's beautiful. And then, everybody moved to carpet and put us out of business. (laughs)

So, my father was a laborer, you know, a jack-of-all-trades. He even drove trucks, whatever it took. He always worked. My father is the epitome of the working class.

My mother was a domestic. She worked in the houses of people on the other side of town, so to speak. And I remember, one of the people that she worked for were owners of B.B. Insurance Agency. That agency no longer exists in Tampa, but the owners of B.B. Insurance Agency, my mother worked for -she was a domestic worker in their house. She cleaned their houses. She starched and ironed all of their clothes. She took care of them, took care of the grandchildren when they came by, took care of the pets. She took care of everything.

And what I remember the most about that experience was that whenever they had old clothes, old magazine[s], old pots, old brooms, it didn't matter, they would send them home with my mother. And 80 percent of that stuff, even my mother would throw it out. (laughs) But she knew she had to, you know, be humble and take it and bring it home. So my mother was a domestic and my father was a laborer and I credit them, both of them, with teaching me the work ethic.

And we grew up in public housing, in Tampa. It was called North Boulevard Homes, located in West Tampa, prime real estate that the downtown developers would like to get right now. And—because, again, that's a segregated African American community in public housing, we were all poor, so to speak. And even our teachers, by society's standards, were poor, and our preachers were poor, and the postman was poor, you know, and the preachers were poor.

So, we weren't aware of the poverty. We were aware of the beauty. We were aware of the music that surrounded our community. We were aware of the laughter. We were aware of the fights (laughs) when they took place, you know. We were aware of the men coming from work in the afternoon, you know, with white dust all over their heads and all over their clothes. That was a common scene walking down the streets, getting off of boss man's trucks, you know. We were aware of that.

But, uh, we were also aware of beautiful times and backyard get-togethers where we had buckets—huge buckets of—ice buckets of watermelon, and we would skin catfish with pliers, and we would have little knives to eat our sugarcane stalks with, and, just, great get-togethers in the backyard.

And, of course, the center meal for every get-together, believe-it-or-not it wasn't pork. It was crab chilau [crab enchilado] (laughs) and if you had crab chilau, you know everybody on the block come by your house because they smell it cooking two miles down the road. So, Andy, when I grew up, on a Friday and Saturday night, you know, up until four or five o'clock in the morning, we didn't close the back door or the front door. We had screen doors and people flowed in and out through the back door and the front door and that was just a very natural way of living. And, if you wanted to come in and sit down, have a drink, have a laugh, and eat some crabs, you were welcome to whatever we had left in the pot. And it was that way with everybody in that neighborhood.

So, that's—kind of, like, sums up what my childhood was like.

AH: Well, for the uninitiated, what's the crab chilau?

OA: The crab chilau is a kind of pasta sauce for making crabs. It's like a tomato sauce—

AH: Okay. Like if an enchilado, that's what—

OA: Yeah. Yeah.

AH: —it was known as in the black community, right?

OA: Yeah. But, you know, it's a kind of Cuban-African-American way of doing this sauce. It's highly seasoned with onions and garlic and bell pepper and God knows what else. And you—once you slightly boil the crabs then you cook them further in the crab chilau before you serve it, and it's really good, across a plate of spaghetti. It was heaven. And, of course, buttered Cuban bread. (laughs)

AH: Okay. Now—and, then, would the crabs be left whole?

OA: Yeah. The crabs would be left whole.

AH: Okay. Gotcha.

OA: We clean out the middle. We clean out the middle but we have the whole crab, other than the middle. And, usually, it was blue crabs, blue crabs, none of this stuff we buy at Publix and Winn-Dixie today, you know. (laughs)

AH: Well, that's one of those dishes that cuts across all ethnic lines—

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: —and the city, too.

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: It's all over the place. So—

OA: I should also say, too—I was talking about my mother. My mother also, at an early age, before she became a domestic, she worked in the cigar factories, also. And, so, she knew how to roll cigars, and she was an apprentice, and it was interesting how that talent was passed down by the old cigar makers who came over from Cuba, the Afro-Cubans, and then they taught the African Americans, you know, how to roll cigars. So, she worked in the cigar factories. We had cigar factories in Ybor City, but a lot of people forget that we had cigar factories in West Tampa, so I just wanted to throw that in there.

AH: Okay. Yeah. And, then, what about the role of church in your life, in your young life?

OA: Yeah. My family—I like to think that my mother and my father were spiritual, but we were not a church-going family. However, that did not keep me out of church. You would think that would be my ticket out of church, but because religion was such an important part of the African American community, and the black church was the, really, only serious gathering place and institution—it was both a place of spiritual worship, but it was also the social institution. So it was very difficult to avoid church.

I went to summer school, for example—I went to Seventh Day Adventist summer camp. And the way I honed my skills as a speaker and a motivational speaker, and getting in front of people and not being shy to speak, was because my neighbors (laughs) would see me running ragged on Sunday mornings with my jeans on, and no shirt, and no shoes, and playing ball, while other kids were in church. And they would snatch me up and make me go to church, and put me on a shirt and tie. And, on Easter Sunday, you know, I would have to give the Easter announcement, or do the Bible verse for Easter, or give the Easter speech. And, so, that was, sort of, like, my involvement with church at an early age. But we were not a churchgoing family like a lot of families, that's part of their tradition that you go to church almost every Sunday.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: Now, anything else before we get into school life, about your—about your young life?

OA: Oh. What can I think of?

AH: Like, a—

OA: My—

AH: Did you have friends in the neighborhood?

OA: Yeah. My—yeah, of course, yeah. What I remember the most, and I always, I often think about it these days, because there were people from my childhood who have probably spent the last thirty, forty years in jail. I get letters now from people who now know that I have a radio show and they'll write me something and say, "I've been in jail since 1970," and you know, it just blows my mind. But, yeah, God, that was quite a time. You know, we had—I had friends with strange names like Mookie-boy and Boo-key. And we had heroes that were good fighters, like Beanie and Carter and Monkey Boy.

We, um—the thing that I remember about my childhood the most is that we loved to play football and we loved to play basketball. And I was great at basketball and I loved to run the kickoffs (laughs) back playing football. And it was highly organized, but it was ghetto ball, you know. We would play the teams from Central Park Village, which was across town, and we were from West Tampa.

And I remember the fights, even the dances, early on, and the, uh—I remember being introduced to violence at a very early age. Because the way we grew up (laughs), when we fought, we fought as a gang. You rarely had an individual fight. The guys from West Tampa fought the guys from Hyde Park and the guys from Hyde Park fought the guys from West Tampa. And we fought the guys from Central Park Village and we played football against them. And, then, the dances at night, we had fights against them, you know. So, that's what I remember about my childhood growing up.

But, you know, I also recall that the black men, the young black men of my manhood, of my childhood, were, in a sense, epitomes of the story of *Manchild in the Promised Land*¹. When I think about—my best friend, his name was Greedy Man. (laughs) He was just a natural-born, superb athlete. Basketball, football, anything he touched he was good at. He was always on the first five for basketball, and he was always the halfback for football. But he was so courageous, I mean, you could have—five guys could surround him in a corner at night, after the dance, by himself and he just would stand and duke it out.

He was just fearless. That's what I remember about him. And I remember that about so many of the young black men of my childhood. And I can recall thinking that I had fear in me, you know, and that that fear served me well because it kept me from doing foolish things. But, at the time, I thought that they were braver, stronger, more of a man, than me.

And a lot of them had already gone to reform school. Ah, God, what did we call the reform school at that time? The reason I'm mentioning it, because I used to think—it'll come to me—I used to think that I could not be a man until I went to reform school.

But my parents had raised me too well. It was the—it was (laughs)—it was a contradiction to everything they had taught me. Yet, in my peer group setting, I was back there desiring to go to

¹ This is an autobiographical novel written by Claude Brown and published in 1965. The novel describes the author's childhood in Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s.

reform school so I could be seen just as tough as the friends in the neighborhood. But I mention this reform school because, in today's headlines in 2000, they are now going back in history and they're digging up graves surrounding this entire reform school². And the name of it will come to me.

AH: Is this the one up north, uh—

OA: Yes, it is.

AH: —this is in, um—

OA: As soon as you—

AH: Chattahoochee, or—

OA: Yeah. Well, Chattahoochee is where they sent all so-called the crazy black people³.

AH: Yeah. Now, this isn't the crazy one, but there was one—

OA: It was not the crazy—

AH: —for young—

OA: —it was one for young people.

AH: —and the *St. Pete Times* just did big exposé⁴—

OA: That's right.

AH: —on that.

OA: Well, when I saw that, I said, "My God. I spent half of my childhood desiring to go there, you know. I might have been one those that got disappeared."

AH: Sure.

² Referring to the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, formerly known as the Florida School for Boys. In October 2008, several men who were at the school as children in the 1950s and 1960s came forward describing how school employees had abused them. In 2009 the Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigated thirty-one graves at the school, identifying the persons buried there.

³ Florida State Hospital, located in Chattahoochee. The hospital has been investigated numerous times for mistreating patients, and was the subject of *O'Connor v. Donaldson* in 1975. It was also the subject of the 1989 film *Chattahoochee*.

⁴ OA is referring to the article "For their own good: a *St. Petersburg Times* special report on child abuse at the Florida School for Boys," written by Ben Montgomery and Waveney Ann Moore, which appeared in the April 19, 2009 edition. There have been several follow-up articles since the story first ran. As of August 2009, all may be read online at <http://www.tampabay.com>, the *Times*' official website.

OA: And I'm sure I probably have friends who went up there and got disappeared.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, you know, it's kind of tragic—

AH: Almost traumatized.

OA: —when you think about it.

So, you know, my childhood was full of sports. My father taught me to box at an early age and I was a serious student of boxing. So, even though I was not the type who would pick a fight or bully other people or be eager to fight, when I fought, I fought very well. And that's what everybody in the neighborhood knew about me, that I had fast hands and I hit very hard. And that was, sort of, my reputation.

And my other reputation was as a linebacker when I played football because I could tackle like all get-out, (laughs) you know. I don't care [if] he would be four hundred pounds, if he'd come up the line I'm going to tackle him.

And so, that's what I remember about my childhood. And it was, you know, it was tough. You had to be strong. It was beautiful. But the most important thing about it, for me as opposed to some of my friends, was that I was always able to make that social transition from my street life as a kid to the formal classroom life. I don't know why I picked up on that early. I knew when once I hit that classroom, to say "Mr." and "Mrs." to everybody. I knew to respect adults. I knew to listen. I knew that there was something valuable about education.

Some of my friends, even today, when we talk about my childhood, they'll tell me this. They'll say that when we were growing up, they always depended on me to be the leader. And I never thought about it like that until I looked back on it. You know, I was always the quarterback. I was the pitcher in baseball. I was always calling the plays.

I remember one night when all of 'em were talking about going to steal something, and I was trying to talk 'em out of it. And they decided they were going to go and break in this warehouse and climb this huge wall and they were going to steal something out of this warehouse. So, I remember being the one who'd lay out the plan so they wouldn't get caught. (laughs) You know, here's me showing leadership again. I wasn't going to show up and steal with 'em. But I done showed—I laid out the whole plan.

So that's kind of like what my childhood was like. And probably the most fun thing I can remember, before we close this part out, was that I used to love going into the Hillsborough River, not knowing at that time that the Hillsborough River is where they dumped sewage (laughs) during that era. I didn't know that was a sewage depository for the whole city. And I would go and I would crab. And I love crabbing, you know. And it was a primitive way of catching crabs because I would tie a fish head, just a fish head, to a long string and I would have a net, you know. And [I] will throw it out and just let it sit there. And when the crabs get on fish

head, we have to get them at a slow pace. You have to pull it real slowly to pull the crabs in, and then you scoop 'em up with your net. And then I'd take 'em on in the house and I'd boil them up. (laughs) So that was me and my polluted crabs and my polluted childhood. (laughs)

AH: Yes. Well, that sewage is great food for those bottom-feeders.

OA: Yeah. (laughs) How about that? (laughs) Bottom-feeder to bottom-feeder, right. (laughs) So that's pretty much it for my childhood, I guess.

AH: Okay. And, then—so, you talked about school being an easier transition for you, maybe, than some other kids.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: So, where did you start going to school and tell us a little bit about—take us through that process.

OA: Yeah. I—this is important because they—I went to all segregated schools in elementary school, junior high school and high school. But I attended Carver Elementary School, you know. And what sweet, sweet memories I have of all of my teachers and all of my experiences. I mean, I could practically name my—you know, my first grade teacher was Miss Broughton. I mean, these were my heroes. And my second grade teacher was Miss Clark and my third grade teacher was Miss Harris. And my fourth grade teacher was Miss Swain, with the beautiful knees. I just thought she had beautiful knees, even at that age (both laugh), I loved her knees for some reason.

And, you know, my fifth grade teacher was Mr. Culverhouse, who would—you know, when you got out of line, he'd discipline you. He had a huge board, like the fraternities use? But he was not mean, we would have to bend over on the desk, all the way over, and grab the desk. And he hit us hard. It was no mercy. So, we got the message quick (laughs) with Mr. Culverhouse, my fifth grade teacher.

And my sixth grade teacher was Miss Gibson. And my seventh grade teacher was Mr. Taylor, just a superhero of the community, a man who taught us the value of learning. So I remember all of that.

I can remember—I learned to read, and came to understand the joy of reading, not necessarily in school, but because I loved comic books. And it's interesting [that] I trained my brain to love reading and didn't know it. Because I loved comic books so much, I had this strange habit as an elementary school kid of walking around, and once I read a comic book, I would repeat the story to myself by writing in the air. So, "Spiderman did this and jumped off the roof. And Superman did that, and I'm just walking down the street writing in the air. And the old people would sit on the porch and just laugh at me. They thought I was a candidate to go to Chattahoochee. (both laugh) They'd say, "Either that boy is going to be crazy or he's going to be a great writer (laughs) or something one day." So, you know, that served me well, because I later became a ferocious—a vociferous reader.

So, Carver Elementary—I remember this was during the days when we had patrol boys. But our patrol boys were different from the patrol boys that you have today. I mean, if you act up in my school—and I was one of the patrol boys—and then a kid would cuss a teacher out, you’d never disrespect a teacher, okay? This was a peer group thing. We loved our teachers in the predominantly segregated black schools. I mean, they were everything to us. We loved them like they were our momma.

So, if somebody was crazy enough to cuss a teacher—and God forbid if they hit a teacher—and run out of their classroom, the principal would call the entire patrol force. And we’re talking about, like, twenty-five kids. And we would leave campus—we would track this kid like we were a paramilitary (both laugh) force. I kid you not. We were like a paramilitary force. We would track this kid and drag him out of his home and drag him back to school. It was just (laughs) that serious. So, in my elementary school, I don’t remember very few people ever disrespecting teachers when I was growing up, you know, that—because of the environment we created. I can’t believe I remember that story.

But I went on to Just Junior High School. And the most important thing I remember about junior high school is, you know, we were poor—I remember when, maybe, I had three pair of pants that I wore all the time. I can remember wearing yellow, faded socks cause one day I got a new pair of beige pants. I always wanted a pair of beige pants. And I got some brown shoes, and I got a yellow and white starched down shirt. And then I had to find some yellow socks, and I couldn’t afford no yellow socks. So my momma found some old faded yellow socks, but they didn’t have any rubber in the band, so they’d always fall down to my ankles. So, I can remember getting rubber bands from school and rolling them up in the top of my socks. And I had to pray all day that (laughs) they didn’t fall down.

And the reason that was important was because I was, like, a great dancer. Even when I was in junior high school, I was a good dancer and I really continued in high school. So, I’d get to dancin’ anywhere. You’d get on the side of the school, and somebody’d get some music going and poppin’ their finger and doo-woppin’, I would get to dancing, Okay?

So, that’s what I remember most about junior high school. And I remember that the high school kids—I was so popular because [of] dancing and stuff, that the high school kids came and recruited me in eighth grade, to be in a boys club, gentlemen’s club, at the high school. And they told me early on that I was going to be one of their candidates when I got to high school. That’s how well known I was in junior high school. So, by the time I got to high school, immediately, I became the ninth grade president of the freshman class.

You know, I don’t where any of this is coming from, interestingly enough. Again, I came from a laboring family. We had very few books in our house. There was rarely any reading going on. And I don’t know why I was so hungry to take on a leadership role. But I was president of my ninth grade class. I was the junior class president. I was president of my student government in high school.

And I did, in fact, join that boys club. It was called the Continent Boys Club. And we would actually wear shirt and tie, nice grey pants, shined black shoes and blue blazers to school. And it

made us very distinguished. We were like a fraternity, you know. And all the women loved us, you know, and the football players beat us up. (both laugh) But the women loved us.

And the other thing that's most memorable about that time was the fact that this was during the time when the community was considering—the school board was considering how to manage desegregation. And I was part of the Class of 1969, and as the leader of—the president of student government—I would lead my school to go predominantly white schools. It was an experiment then. They would come to our school, a predominantly black school, and spend a day and go to class with us. And we'd go to their school, spend a day and go to class with them. And then there would be a huge assembly where all of the white kids at the white school get to see us on stage and we would talk about our experiences, our high school, our band, our student government, and what life was like in our school. And they would do the same thing when they came to our school.

And the reason that's so memorable for me was because the black teachers and principals, this was such a huge step for them, that they would call me into the office, they would tell me, "You've got to dot every (laughs) 'I,' you've got to cross every 'T.' Your shirt has to be crisp, right, no wrinkles. You have to go and represent our community. This is our first chance, and you've got to be our leader. And don't embarrass us." They put all this pressure on me.

And so—but that's what the experience was like, because the adults in my community understood the importance of integration and desegregation. They knew it would come one day. And it was very important that we demonstrate, by our behavior and our dress and our capacity to articulate, that we were ready for it when it came. So, this was a big thing for us.

And this was also true of television. Rarely would you see local African Americans on television, unless it was associated with crime. And one of the most positive things that happened during that time, we had a dance television show where all the high schools, the white high schools, got to go once a week and be on this dance show, you know, similar to the Dick Clark kind of show.⁵ And the black segregated high schools were never invited. And the year that I was president of the senior government, 1969, was the first time we were invited to go onto the white dance show.

And, so, what was serious about this is that we could dance. (both laugh) Okay?

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, people had never seen that kind of dancing on TV, but our administrators held us back. They wouldn't let us truly boogie and get down. All right?

AH: All right.

OA: You know. And we used to laugh at the way white kids danced, and we said we were going to go in there and show out. But they wouldn't let us show out, (laughs) okay. We had to be very proper and appropriate.

⁵ *American Bandstand*.

But one of the reasons I remember it is because, at a certain point doing the segment in the television show, they have to interview the president of the student government from the predominantly black high school, and I was the president of the student government. And no one had ever seen that before. So that kind of [will] tell you what my high school days was like. I mean, pep rallies, the days of Blake [High School] versus Middleton [High School]—that was the core of life, of social life, in Tampa. Blake was a predominantly black high school. Middleton was the predominantly black high school on the east side of Tampa. Blake was on the west side.

And we had these types of high schools in every little town in Florida. In Polk County, where I work now, for example, they had almost—I think they had, like, five different predominantly black high schools, you know. In Orlando, in Sarasota they had Booker High, and in Orlando they had a predominantly black high school, (Jones High) which I can't recall. And we would play them in sports.

So, I remember how important it was, the rivalry between Blake and Middleton, and the pep rallies—I mean, the pep rallies for us were so memorable. It was almost like a religious (laughs) experience. They let us out of class about ten o'clock in the morning and we partied the rest of the day in the gym, and we'd introduce the football team, and we'd jump, and we'd shout, and we'd dance down the aisles, and we would—well, we would be built up for the game.

So, on Friday night at eight o'clock, at Philips Field, segregated field where African Americans could play football on a Friday night, in Tampa, all of black Tampa would show up and support their teams. And it was a true rivalry, and it just defined life.

We had Dad's Clubs and support groups, and alumni groups. It was just wonderful, you know. That's what I remember about high school.

AH: Okay. And by this time you were—you were—you weren't playing football anymore.

OA: No, no, no. I—as a matter of fact, I played football up to about the ninth grade, but I was playing basketball, and I played basketball up until the eleventh grade. And I was on the first five, actually, you know? I was on the first six, but then eventually I'd been made the first five. I really love basketball.

But interestingly enough, my senior year I just dropped basketball. I think about that now. I love basketball more than life itself, but instinctively, my principal came to me and said, "We have the opportunity for the first African American student to work at a predominantly white bank downtown, Tampa. It was the bank that's on Franklin St. before it became Nations Bank [NCNB, North Carolina National Bank]; it was (Exchange Bank) or something like that. And I had the opportunity to be the mail clerk.

Oh, this was a big deal (laughs) in my community, that I had the opportunity to become the mail clerk. And they wanted to send me. And I can't believe I agreed, because I wanted to play basketball my senior year. And, so, I didn't play basketball because I had to leave school early to

get to my job. I had to wear a suit and tie every day. And that was my first real introduction to the white world and the world of business.

And I actually had the opportunity to go all over the bank—I walked through the bank vault delivering mail. Never saw that much money in my life. I went by all the vice presidents and the bank officers, and these were all white, there were no blacks at all working in this bank except, I think, we had, maybe, one custodial person. I was, like, the only black person working in this bank anywhere. And I just got a chance to observe organizational culture, business culture—I learned something about business and social etiquette by being there.

So, by the time that I went to college, you know, I think I had a leg up on a lot of the kids who came from neighborhoods like I came from. And it was all quite by accident. That's the amazing thing I think about, when I think back on it. These things, these opportunities came along, and for some reason, you know, I had the instinct to take advantage of each one of the opportunities when they came along.

AH: Yeah. Well, and giving up basketball is a big sacrifice.

OA: Yeah. That was huge. That's not even normal. I can't even understand why I did that. (both laugh) Basketball was normal.

AH: Now, wasn't there an opportunity in a department store, too?

OA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's an interesting story.

AH: Yeah.

OA: We—

AH: Cause this is kind of along the same lines of busting you out of your shell a little bit, right?

OA: Right. Right. Well, again, I must've been about eleventh grade or twelfth grade. The Maas Brothers downtown was a very popular department store, particularly for whites. African Americans—if they had enough money, they could go in there, but we didn't go in there that much. But it was considered really upscale to us. And my senior year, I think it was, or my junior year, they decided to put the leadership of each of the kids—of the high schools—at least a couple pictures of kids who'd accomplished a great deal through their leadership skills in the windows of Maas Brothers. So, they would display one school, maybe, for a week, and then another school for another week.

And finally, it became our time. And it was a very progressive decision, at that time, for them to display the leadership of a predominantly black school. And I'm talking about—I'm not just talking about a normal picture. They had these real photographers that come to our school to take these incredible portraits. I've still got this portrait at my house. Well, this thing, it must be at least four feet high. Okay. And it must be, at least, five feet in length. That's how big this picture was.

And they took this huge picture of me and, maybe, maybe one of the majorettes from my school, if I could remember. And we were displayed for a week in the Maas Brothers window, and people just loved it. They just thought it was most incredible.

Now, that's one kind of display. The other kind of display (laughs) was, when I was growing up, we had a group of young black people who wanted to establish a (coughs)—excuse me—who wanted to establish a modeling troupe, and they thought that they could be models. And they were really into this. And, when I think about it, it was a beautiful thing for them. They were all from the housing projects.

And there was this gay guy—in the black community, by the way, gays were not talked about. They were almost accepted, because they were, like, part of us. And this gay guy who had come out of the Marines, he was built, and he was strong. He was sharp and he could probably (laughs)—beat up anybody else in the community. But he wanted to be a model, and he set up a modeling troupe. And one of the most incredible things I ever witnessed in my life was that one of the downtown merchants found this out and had them to come and act as mannequins, live mannequins, in a downtown store window (laughs) in the middle of downtown Tampa, in this huge window. And the first time I saw that I just thought it was unbelievable.

At the time, I had no sense of race and a real feel for the meaning of segregation, or, for that matter, prejudiced behavior. I didn't view it like that. But I just knew, instinctively, that there was something really inhuman about what I was witnessing. But he would place them in the windows, and it could be, like, four or five of them in the window at the same time, in various positions. And they would hold that position for hours and be like live mannequins. And this merchant thought this was a great idea to advertise his business. And these black kids from the projects, who really just thought of themselves as getting the opportunity to be real models. They didn't know that they were being exploited and laughed at and made a fool of, you know, by that side of town. They loved it and thought it was a great opportunity, but you know, I'm sure that there were preachers and leaders in our community that were totally embarrassed by this display. So, yeah, that was a very interesting experience.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: Okay. So, uh, so anything else before we leave high school behind that you wanted to mention?

OA: No. Uh, you know, other than the fact that the leaders, the principals, the administrators, the teachers were so patient with us and really cared about whether we learned. And there was no such thing as suspending us out of school, and there was no such thing as expulsion. You know, I can't remember any kid ever got kicked out of school completely. And they are the persons and the people that really made a difference in our lives.

And the most incredible thing about a segregated educational experience is that you had the

opportunity to experience success. I can't begin to tell you how important that is, but I saw it in my daughter who attended a predominantly black college. The African American kids who went to predominantly white colleges, a lot of them, during my era, came out of that college experience very scarred. A lot of the black kids who left the predominantly black high schools during my time, the few that there were, who went to predominantly white high schools, came out very scarred and with a poor view of the educational experience.

But our educational experience was one of frequent and constant success. And so, the great thing about success is that it's contagious. If you're accustomed to being successful, no matter what setting you put those kids in later in life, they're going to aspire to be successful. It makes you competitive, you know. It makes you very determined. And that's the way I lived my life as a young person, so that, by the time I went to the University of South Florida and came out of high school, even though I was not academically as well prepared as I should have been for the experience at USF, I was accustomed to being successful and I refused to fail.

AH: Yes.

OA: So, that was the importance of the experience.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: I'm going to save—save what we've done so far, here.

OA: Okay.

AH: And what time do you have?

OA: Okay, I have—

Interview 1, tape 1 ends; Interview 1, tape 2 begins.

AH: All right. So, you graduate high school in 1969, right?

OA: Yes.

AH: And [can you share] any memories about that, about graduation, the ceremony, anything?

OA: Oh, yes. It's interesting you would ask that, considering just this weekend I attended my fortieth (laughs) high school graduation anniversary for Howard W. Blake High School, Class of 1969. So, you can imagine, we spent the weekend, you know, reflecting back on the great memories. We also sung part of the school song. It goes something like this here. (singing)

Blake High we'll always love you
And we'll serve you faithfully.

We'll honor and protect you
With our hearts eternally.
Our hearts are always with you
Cause you know we love you so.
We'll always sing the name Blake High
Wherever we may go.

(laughs) And I can remember—after all these years, I couldn't believe that I (laughs) remembered that.

AH: Must've been all those pep rallies.

OA: Yeah, (laughs) must've been all the pep rallies.

So, we were talking about, again—

AH: Graduation.

OA: Oh, graduation, yes. Yeah. Graduation at the predominantly black school is a serious, dignified and special moment, you know, incredibly special moment. We may have had kids who didn't make it because they got involved with the criminal justice system. We may have had young ladies who didn't make it, you know, because unfortunately they ended up pregnant. But to make it to graduation in the predominantly black community was a huge deal. And for some kids, the parents didn't necessarily expect them to go to college, and for them to graduate, it was really huge. Sometimes they would be the first even to graduate high school in their families. So, this was a pretty big deal coming out of the African American community. And the entire community made this a very, very special experience.

And I can remember, we had great role models, the man that stood out the most in my mind in Tampa, his name was Big Jim Williams. And we had these coaches—on the west side of Tampa and on the east side it was Coach Bill Bethel, and Coach Abe Brown, you know, who is very popular now as an evangelical minister. I can remember Big Jim Williams saying to us that “What you are to be—” I cannot believe I remember this speech (laughs) from high school—”What you are to be, you are fastly becoming every day, what you are to be.” And he was so right about that.

I had a very unique class of students. [As] a matter of fact, one of the kids from my graduation class went to M.I.T. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] We remembered him and talked about him this weekend, because we would study so hard trying to pass an exam or something, and he'd be reading a comic book in class and he'd always get the A. (they laugh) So, he went to M.I.T. And I had friends that got the chance to go Howard University.

It was very important to go to the predominantly black colleges, Howard University, Florida A & M University. We had band members who went up there and became part of the band at Florida A & M University and Bethune-Cookman College, and Edward Waters College in Jacksonville. These were the predominantly black colleges in the state of Florida. And, so, we all looked

forward to those kinds of experiences. That's why it was so unique, and so unexpected, when people like myself, coming out of public housing—my parents had no money to send me to college—when I got the opportunity to go to the University of South Florida.

AH: Yeah. How did that come about?

OA: It was very interesting. It was almost like a social experiment, which was an interesting experiment, by the way. The government at that time had pretty much opened the federal coffers for education. This was, like, probably, 1969, on the heels, I suppose, of the War on Poverty. And so, a lot of money was poured into education. The predominantly white schools were starting to get some of that federal aid. And I assume now, looking back, they wanted that federal money. But part of the agreement for getting that federal money was that they had to improve the number of minority students attending their universities.

And I had no idea of this larger world that was taking place trying to create more diversity on university campuses. All I knew was that coming out of my small community, I had fairly good grades. I was an honor student and I had very strong leadership qualities, and that is what they were looking for. They were looking for students who would come here and survive the academic rigor of the University of South Florida coming out of what they knew to be academically inferior schools, you know—not schools that were inferior in terms of their emphasis on learning, just materially, academically, those schools were inferior.

So, people like myself were selected from little towns in Florida all across Florida. And, so, when I came here I probably came here with the first group, I would say—I'm going to estimate, maybe about fifty-seven of us, the first group. By the time we grew to our sophomore year there may have been 125 of us. But the idea was they brought us all into a room and they told us that it was a sink-or-swim proposition. They said—they didn't provide us with any academic support. They didn't give us that much assistance on finding our way around the university. They didn't tell us how to go to the library, I'd never seen a library like this in my life. You know, they didn't tell us how to use the library. They pretty much told us to mind our behavior, and that we were on our own, and they wished us well, and they wanted us to succeed.

But what we didn't understand at the time—and now it's my perception—is that once they got the money, (laughs) I don't think they particularly cared about whether we succeeded or not. And I don't think this was unique to the University of South Florida, you know. It was nothing unique about what they were doing, compared to other predominantly white universities across the country at the time. You know, they wanted to get federal money. They can say that they admitted so many students so they qualify for so many dollars, and so after that, we were on our own. They had no idea, you know, what we would eventually become and what we would attempt to do.

AH: Sure.

OA: Please, yes, your question.

AH: Well, it just seems like today there's so much more emphasis on retention—

OA: Right.

AH: —on graduation—

OA: Yes.

AH: —you know, and it sounds like they'd just accept you, they get the money, and there isn't a lot of accountability after that.

OA: Yes. That's right.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm-hm. And so, it was a very serious and a very painful cultural shock for us. The academic rigor was really stressful for me and for a lot of my fellow students. And we had students, African American students, who would sometimes lock up in their dorm, and the next thing we know we didn't hear from them anymore. They had packed up their clothes and went home. We had kids who had nervous breakdowns, okay? We had kids who just got high. They would just get high all the time. It was just too much.

But, on the other hand, we had a core of us who—like me, for example. One of the churches in my community sent me off to school.

AH: Yes.

OA: And they put me in front of the whole church and they told me to go and represent them well at this predominantly white university. And don't let them down, you know, you're representing us. And so, when I got here and found that it was very difficult, and I was failing courses (laughs)—my first semester I'll never forget as long as I live. I think I got four F's. (laughs)

AH: Wow.

OA: My first—we had—I don't know whether you have semesters or quarters now, but everything was in quarters then.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, my first quarter at the University of South Florida, I even got an F in P.E. [physical education] You know, as an incredible athlete as I was, (laughs) I got an F in P.E.

So, they were not trying to encourage us, okay? They wanted to let us know, "Either you cut it or get out. I'll never forget that one of my teachers—my English teachers early on wrote something on my paper saying something to the effect [that] this was one of the worst pieces of writing she'd ever seen in her life, in red [ink]. I remember the story of one of my teachers thinking that

she needed to civilize us, so she, you know, she was going to give me an F. But she asked me to come to her office, and when I came to her office, she told me to kneel and pray.

AH: Yes.

OA: And because I kneeled and prayed with her, I got a B (laughs) in that course.

AH: And I remember you mentioning the contents of that prayer before. I mean, what, you know—tell us a little about—more about that cause it was incredibly demeaning.

OA: Yeah. Yeah, it was. The whole idea was that it was kind of like the missionary with the Africans in the jungle, so to speak, and she was acting as a missionary and she felt that we needed to be civilized. And the way to civilize us was to introduce us to the Christian way of life and that all of our problems would be solved—of our tribalism and our nativity and our jungle ways—if we just would become religious and pray. And, so, this must've been her perception of us in the class throughout the entire quarter. So, at the end of the quarter, when she was about to give me an F, she gave me an opportunity to come to her class, and to kneel and pray.

And the prayer was very demeaning, you know. I know it was something about “Save this Negro from his way of life” and all of this kind of stuff. It was really that kind of thing. And, although it was insulting to me, and I put up with it and walked out of there and didn't remark at all to her that it was all an insult to me, I knew instinctively. I didn't even have that much of a political awareness at that time, or cultural awareness, my first year here at the University of South Florida. But, again, instinctively I knew there was something wrong about it. But I didn't say anything, and I got a B out of the class. (laughs) And at the time, I needed a B real bad. And, so, yeah, that's the kind of experiences I remember having.

But I also remember the liberal professors, who were trying to teach directly on the question of race, and going to their classes, and feeling motivated and reinvigorated by what I was hearing in the classrooms. And we had one professor—I wish I could recall his name. I do remember Miss Judith Ocshorn she was one of my favorite professors. But this other one was also one of my favorites. And he was very dramatic, the way he'd demonstrate how black people were treated by the police, you know, and the injustices facing black people in this country. And he would do it so strongly, I think it scared half the class, and he was scaring me. (laughs) But he drove home the point. You never forgot it. You know, I had classes like that.

But I also had very dull, cold, impersonal teachers and impersonal classes. And I had never experienced education that way. They would give you a syllabus, they'd tell you about the assignments are for the rest of the quarter, they'd tell you, you have to read so many books, and by when. Nobody monitors you or check on you or follow up to see how you're doing. And at a certain point they very coldly give you an exam, or a quiz in class for it, and move on to the next chapter and the next book. And I had not known that kind of education before.

And I remember thinking that this is very painful. It's a painful way of learning. And, then, it was also during a time when the university obviously had an overflow of students coming, whites, black and everybody. And, so, we would have these huge classes in the auditoriums. And

it was hundreds of kids in this auditorium and one professor lecturing. And somehow, you got a book or you got a Xerox copy of what he's talking about, and you never got to meet the professor. He never knew you personally. And you'd go home in your dorm and you'd study, and you're supposed to pass this class that way. And I had never known that education could be that cold.

So, for me, and for a lot of us, it was a very cold and strange experience coming out here. But it was also beautiful. It was beautiful, the relationships—like, for example, we were forced to share dormitory rooms with whites. And whites were forced to—forced to share with us. It was part of a social experiment. And so, this was part of the mandate, and I'm really glad that it happened to me.

Looking back on it, I thought, "Oh, my God. I'm going to have to be on my best behavior all the time, (laughs) da-da-da." But it was interesting. I'm in a room with one of my roommates from a suburban background, and one of my roommates was from a rural background, but they were both white. So, one of them listened to Jimi Hendrix and rock [music], you know, and the other one listened to country music. And there I was in the middle. I had the middle bunk, (both laugh) listening to James Brown (laughs) and soul music. So, you can imagine us trying to negotiate (laughs) the music in there.

But those are very important social experiences, cause we had to negotiate, you know, various things. I'm sure that they were unaccustomed to going into a shower with a black person, as I was unaccustomed to going into a shower with white folks, you know. So, it was a very strange time.

I remember the first time I became conscious that whites made a distinction between whites and Jews. So, people would point out to me people in the dormitory who were Jewish.

AH: Okay.

OA: And I had never really thought about people being Jewish, and then it reminded me of my grandmother, because my grandmother believed very strongly in religion the way Jewish people saw religion. And so, she didn't put the emphasis on Jesus Christ as the savior. She saw Jesus Christ just as another prophet. And nobody in the black community understood that that's the way I was brought up (laughs) and how I thought about Jesus Christ, cause, you know, I would never tell anybody that. But my grandmother was my greatest influence on religion.

And so, I always grew up praying to God, and my whole life I had some difficulty understanding why everybody in the African American community prayed to Jesus. I thought you were supposed to pray to God and Jesus was the son of God. But, you know, that's just one of those things.

But, back to the University of South Florida. It was a coed [coeducational] experience. Oh, my God. The black community is so conservative. In predominantly black colleges, there's no way they would allow men and women to live together in the same dormitory.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Okay? Sometimes they wouldn't even let them sit together in chapel, in assembly. So, you can imagine coming out of a predominantly African American community and having coed dorms—oh, man. And, I tell you—I've got to tell you one funny experience. My freshman year, as part of my attempt to try to integrate, I made all kinds of failed attempts at integration, on down to my penny loafers, (laughs) which never worked out, you know. (both laugh) I looked stupid to the white people, and the black people laughed at me. Everything I attempted to integrate was a failure.⁶

But I remember they would have the panty raids. I hadn't heard of panty raids before, you know. And, I—and, so, some white kids told me, "Oh, it's all part of a tradition," the white guys in my college dorm. And we run through the dorm da-da-da. What I didn't know is that no black people ever run through (both laugh) the coed dormitory snatching white girls' panties out of their drawers. Nobody told me to be aware of that little (both laugh) racial factor.

AH: (laughs) Yes. Yes.

OA: So, that was quite an experience. When I come busting out of that dorm—now luckily enough I didn't have anybody's panties in my hands, cause I was too unlucky and too scared to grab 'em. But it was the craziest thing in the world that I would have even attempted to do that. But everybody said that was the thing to do. And I wanted to do what the guys were doing, to fit in.

AH: Sure.

OA: So, that (both laugh)—I had forgotten about that. (laughs).

AH: Oh, man. Well, you know, this is—as much as I hate to do it—

OA: Okay. We've got to cut it off there?

AH: —this is when we've got to stop. But I think it's a good point to stop at, because what I want to get into next is, you know, your experiences in Africana Studies—

OA: Oh, yes.

AH: —and then how that would really change the—

OA: Yeah.

AH: —the direction of your life in some ways.

⁶ [Transcriber's Note: OA added after the following after the interview as an example - totally ignored at rock concerts on campus.

OA: Yeah. Because, you know, much like the African experience in America, in general, we always took the raw material of our experience, and we'd re-fashion it into something meaningful. And so, as a result of us being here and having such a degrading experience on the one hand, we converted that experience to something profound. And we'll talk about that next time. Okay?

AH: All right. Thanks, Otis.

OA: All right. Hey, thank you, man. (laughs)

AH: It was fun.

OA: All right.

end of Interview 1, begin Interview 2.

OA: —very natural and a part of his normal life (inaudible), you know?

AH: Yup. Okay. All right. Well, it's, uh, it's July sixteenth. I'm back here with Otis Anthony, and, we're continuing our interview. And now, when we left off last time, it was kind of at a critical point for you, cause we had you at USF and, you know, all the pressure had been coming down, and you had some unpleasant experiences with your teachers—

OA: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

AH: —and so, everything seemed to be coming down at once and the pressure was on. So, let's talk about how you kind of worked out of that.

OA: Yeah. (laughs) USF, I tell you—again, I remember that—when I graduated from USF, I remember thinking that I was still using the term “cultural shock,” (laughs) because it was a cultural shock, you know. But again, for a young kid like me, coming out of public housing, [I] probably had lived within, probably, a ten to fifteen mile radius my entire life, you know, with the exception of the times when the federal government programs would come in and take us to Weeki Wachee Spring and Sarasota Jungle Gardens, and you know, that would be the only times we got a chance to get out of those communities.

So, coming to USF was a real blessing for me in a lot of ways, I felt. And one of the ways that I worked through this experience, to be quite honest with you, was the fact that I just felt that it was such a great opportunity and I did not want to let my community down. I did not want to let my parents down, and I did not want to let my former teachers down from the old segregated Blake High School.

So, I'll never forget that I decided that my real problem was that I did not know how to study at a college level, and that I would have to force myself to learn how to study at a college level. So, I found a place in the old library on the fourth floor—the top floor of the library, actually—in the back in the corner in the dark (laughs) and had one light over that desk. And I lived in that corner

in the back in the dark, it became my second home. And I just went at it. I had to improve my reading skills. I had to improve my writing skills. I had never read so much material before in my life, you know, just to do one assignment. But I stuck with it and I stuck with it for four years, and it changed my entire life.

Now, what's fascinating is that, um, during the course of all of this, I took on a leadership role, you know. I was part of the black student union, and I began to see the world a little differently. I think—I remember one of the poems I wrote- that said that it took me coming to college to understand that I came from a dysfunctional community and a dysfunctional (laughs) family, because I never saw it like that. Cause in my background, in my family, though we had our problems and our issues and our grief and our losses, we had a wonderful time, you know. We had crab chilaui Saturday nights, and we, you know, we just knew how to enjoy one another. There was always music and laughter surrounding my house, in my neighborhood.

And I often think about—that's one of the things I miss about living in a suburban community now. They're so impersonal. You walk down the street and you don't hear music. You don't hear life. Nobody comes out to greet you. There are no porches for people to gather and talk, you know. And that's what I remember about growing up. So, I didn't think that my community, nor my family, was that dysfunctional. But, again, I was in academia.

But what I began to do in order to survive was write. And I began to write poetry. And I began to listen to poets like the Last Poets⁷ who talked about the blues, the blues of being back. And I remember doing one particular poem, which is called "True Blues." And it, just to give you a little example, is, "True Blues ain't no new news about who's been abused, for the blues is old as my stolen soul, and I sing the blues when the missionaries came, passing out bibles in Jesus name.

And I became so motivated and inspired by the Last Poets that I began to read [Nikki Giovanni] And I began to read Haki Madhubuti and Leroi Jones [also known as Amiri Baraka], and before I knew it, I was sort of like the campus poet.

And then I formed a group, a poetry theatre group, called Uhuru Sasa. Uhuru Sasa means "Freedom Now" in Swahili. *Uhuru* is freedom and *Sasa* meant now. And I can remember doing poetry shows where we were asserting our blackness and our pride and black empowerment. And we were reflecting the era, which was the era of the Black Power movement and afros and dashikis, and I can remember being on stage and discovering, while I was on stage, there are these white kids who came to this university from small, rural and suburban towns—this is a major culture shock for them, too. And now I'm beginning to understand that they also were having a culture shock, even sitting in a theatre and watching us perform.

And there's one thing I remember—what stands out in my mind is a poetry show that I did and, you know, "Black is the velvet of the midnight sky. Black is so beautiful it makes you cry. Black is short and black is tall. Let me impress that black is all." And I looked up and this young lady is crying, a young white female, she's just crying. This is all frightening and intimidating, and then I realized that, yeah, maybe we're not the only ones going through a culture shock here.

⁷ A group of poets and musicians formed in Harlem during the late 1960s.

So I formed Uhuru Sasa, and we played the [conga] drums behind the poetry, and we sang and we danced and we shouted, and it was an experience to watch us perform. It was a great time. And all of this helped relieve some of the academic pressure and the stress of being here.

And we also strengthened the black student union. I don't know whether I talked about that earlier. We strengthened the black student union. We became highly organized. My last two years, I was chairman of the black student union and we demonstrated against the whole notion of a New South. We, um, caused the presidents of the university real irritation—I think one was President [John] Allen and (Cecil Mackey) we caused them a great deal of pain (laughs) and embarrassment. And, you know, we would call the local newspapers and media when we marched.

And we weren't just marching for the sake of marching. We were marching because we thought that the university should have stronger recruitment and retention policies. We marched because we wanted a strong African American Studies program. We marched because we wanted more black professors as part of the teaching faculty here at the university. And we marched about issues that concerned us in the community, also, not just the issues here on the campus.

So, it got me a great deal of attention, um, and one of the things that happened was that it led to was my arrest (laughs)—

AH: Oh. Okay.

OA: —as a student leader. But they would never arrest me on the campus. You see, our marches were so organized and we were so well organized—you have to understand, that we had an active committee set up for each of the colleges, the Colleges of Engineering and Science, the College Language Arts, the College of Social Sciences. For each of the colleges that affected our lives, we were actively in the office of those deans advocating for educational policies, advocating for professors who understood us and understood our culture and our background.

And we were also very active on the university Lecture Series Committee because we wanted to bring in the Last Poets, and we did. And we wanted to bring in national African American speakers, you know, because this was all part of us creating and fashioning a life for our selves here at the university. And we were very effective, by the way. The university provided us with thousands of dollars in order to do that. The university funded the black student union and we had a strong advocacy. They respected what we did, but you could tell that the university was embarrassed by some of our activities.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And I will never forget that I went home one weekend for spring break or something, and here I am going home into the projects. Imagine this, (coughs) coming from the university. And I'm getting ready to go out one night and I get dressed, and I say goodbye to my mother and my father and I go out the back door to jump in this old car—I had an old car—going to meet my girlfriend to go out on a date or whatever. And soon as I pull out of the back of my house and

pull onto the streets—it was Union Street in the middle of the projects—the sheriff’s department and all their cars converged on me. And then they snatched me out of my car, they put handcuffs on me and threw me on top of one of the sheriff cars. They put a shotgun to my head, they accused me of being involved in some attempted robbery, and then, to top it off, they threw me into a drunk tank that night. And I spent the whole night in the drunk tank. I must’ve spent, like, a couple nights in the drunk tank. And then they eventually dropped all the charges.

And so, they did this more than once. I would go to Polk County, the sheriff department over there was afraid of the poetry that we were doing, (on the college campus) and they would follow me all the way back to the county line. And then, when I got to the Hillsborough County line,(my friends in the car) they stopped my car and they arrested me again. And they would charge me with some crazy crime, and then I’m back in jail again.

But the last time it was very serious. They’d say that they had a witness, that I had robbed a convenience store and that the witness was coming to court and they could I.D. [identify] me. And so, I could tell that, you know, somebody was getting very nervous about some of my advocacy on behalf of black students and the black community.

But eventually, that all worked out. The witness came to court and realized that the picture that they showed him, when the police brought him down to the police station—the reason he recognized me was because he was someone I played basketball with. He was someone I played basketball with. I was on the summer basketball league team here [USF]. And he knew me very well from playing basketball, and you know, I’m black, and he didn’t know that many black people. So he thought, “Yeah. That looks familiar to me.” And he picked me out.⁸

And then he was very embarrassed. And he told the judge, “No. This is not the guy.” And eventually the charges were dropped, but it stayed on my record for years.

AH: Yeah.

OA: You know. And every job I’ve had, almost, since then, I’ve had to explain that situation. Even going into the nineties [1990s] and in 2000, I have always had to explain it. So it has followed me, but the judge has now sealed those records and, hopefully, it won’t follow me anymore. So, that’s kind of like my experience at USF. It was poetry, it was drama, it was arrests for my political activity. But I lived through it. I have never been convicted of a crime or felony.

AH: Yeah. Well, you know—and I wanted to go back to the, African American Studies.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: Cause, I mean, that’s a real landmark in USF’s history, because that wasn’t originally on the agenda.

⁸ [Transcriber’s Note: Interviewee added after the interview - or they conveniently showed him my picture.]

OA: No, it wasn't.

AH: That was not in the plans—and this is in 1969, I believe, and the march happened and the university was very responsive.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: In fact, one of the professors, (not sure of name) I believe, who was well known, you know, to rile the white establishment, you know; he thought that the plans being put forward were too hasty, because of all the pressure that was happening. (OA laughs) And I think it's true, because the demonstrations didn't end there. They didn't get the black faculty in place. So originally, they tried to operate the program with white professors, that they had reassigned, right?

OA: I remember. Yeah.

AH: Yeah.

OA: But—yeah.

AH: Yeah. Just tell us a little bit about that, and then how the demonstrations—

OA: Yeah. And I've got to say to you, you're right. Originally, they tried to operate the program with white professors, but some of them were pretty knowledgeable. Looking back on it, some of them were really sensitive to the needs of African American students. They were trying to give us a sense of how this society worked. Because we were, essentially, if you think about it—although we sounded very militant, we were essentially, dashiki wearing cultural (laughs) nationalists. We really were about black culture and black pride and black history, establishing a Black Studies department, you know, that would help both black and white students understand our contributions to mainstream American society.

And so, I can remember going to class and one of my white professors, who I cannot call his name now—but I remember Dr. Judith Ocshorn who would always make her assignments relevant to the ethnic experiences of the students in her classroom. But I remember one of my professors would be—always demonstrate what he was trying to say, that is so the students could feel the suffering, the indignities, and the experiences of black people. And he would demonstrate it in class in very dramatic ways. He sometimes would throw over desks and shake desks and catch students when they weren't really thinking, and [say], "What if somebody did this to you?" And students would be absolutely shocked. I was shocked. It was all new to me.

So, that part of it was a real good effort. But we still continued to fight for more African American faculty. And eventually we got more African American speakers, and some of those speakers eventually decided to temporarily teach at the university and—you know, as part of their sabbatical. They would come in for a short period of time. And I think that was the transitional period. And eventually, we started to get a few African American professors and the program began to take shape. We were very—you know, we were very happy during this period

about what we were able accomplish. And we began to call it the African American Studies Program.⁹

And so, by the time I graduated, in my senior year, the program was at least underway. It still had a lot of growing pains to go through—

AH: Sure.

OA: The university brought in people like Professor [Festus] Ohaegbulam, you know, who was there to help the program evolve to that next level and did so much to lay the background and the foundation for the African American Studies Program.(now Africana Studies) And today it has evolved into something different, a real entity that is part of the university, and we are so proud of it, you know?

AH: Well, you know—and one of the things that I reminded you of last time we talked, and that you had originally forgotten, was the fatigues and berets (OA laughs), the militant uniforms. The fashion didn't stop with dashikis and afros.

OA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

AH: And, so, there were some pictures in the *Oracle* [USF student daily newspaper] (OA laughs) of some very, you know—

OA: Are you serious?

AH: —some very—yeah. I'll show you on the way out.

OA: You've got to show me.

AH: Yeah. (inaudible)

OA: So you saw some of that. (laughs)

AH: Yeah. And so, it was very Black Panther-esque—

OA: Yeah.

AH: —you know, the look and everything, kind of, the fatigues and—which would later be kind of resurrected by Public Enemy [recording artists]—

OA: (laughs) Right.

AH: —(inaudible) as the whole beret and Professor Griffin.

⁹ [Transcriber's Note: Interviewee added after the interview - other key students advocates: Bomani, Harper, Calvin, Wilma, Neva, Gary.]

OA: Well, you know, what's really funny about that, before I talk about that - you know, I came from a rather conservative family. And I remember my mother telling me, before I went to college, that, "How you going to—" No. I remember, one day, I came home from college and she said, "Well, how you going to march and protest against white people?" She'd say, "Everything we get comes from white people, and young black people like you need to understand that."

Well, at the time, I really didn't understand the wisdom (laughs) in that statement. I really didn't get it. But the other thing was that—what was really odd about that, to be quite honest with you, I was raised to always be kind and courteous and really to speak to people in a very humble tone, and to be reasonable in my conversations, even in the way I debated. Because, again, I had the tradition of the old, segregated black school, which is always—taught us to carry ourselves with dignity. And you were never loud, and you never used profanity (laughs)—all the things I end up doing (both laugh) as part of this college transformation—

AH: Yeah.

OA: —that took place. So, when I see those kind of pictures, it's amazing, because in some ways, it was so unlike me and the way I was raised. But on the other hand, we had to create a persona that forced people to listen to us. Because one of the greatest frustrations of being a leader on this campus was the fact that people would ignore you and you could actually be invisible here unless you made yourself heard. And so, I guess, the clothes, I remember growing an afro, and I had a beard. I don't know whether I had a beard in those pictures. And we always played the conga drums in the middle of the university, what is now the Martin Luther King Plaza, now. And, when we did our marches, yeah, we would buy these old Salvation Army green soldier jackets, which was, like, the uniform of the militants during that time.

AH: Sure.

OA: Maybe now I understand why they arrested me. (laughs) I didn't think it was that threatening an image, but obviously it was to the establishment. And so, yeah, all of that was part of it. But the other part of it was that we didn't just do regular protest rallies where, you know, you walk with your poster and you have your slogans on your poster. We would actually sometimes do military marches and military formations, and this was all my idea (laughs) and all my creation. So, I suppose I have to take responsibility for it. And so, we marched like we were very serious.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Yeah. And we looked paramilitary. But not all of our marches were that way. But when we were angry and really serious about something, it was a paramilitary formation, which was my own creation—never been in the Army in my life, or the military, but it must've worked (laughs)—

AH: Yeah. It worked.

OA: —cause it got everybody's attention. So, yeah, that was a real part of it, not just the dashikis, you know.

AH: And then—oh, yeah. Well, and then, finally, it's important—I mean you said transformation and that's—it's definitely no exaggeration, because, I mean, one semester you're kneeling and praying, you know, with the racist professor and then you're marching. And I think it's important to put this in context, too, that there's an antiwar movement going on.

OA: Oh, God. Yeah.

AH: There's all kinds of stuff. So that, you know, that kind of context is one of the reasons why you felt comfortable doing what you did.

OA: Oh, yeah. Mm-hm.

AH: And I just was curious. There was a women's movements going on, there was—I mean, all different kinds of groups and clubs. Was there a lot of crossover, you know, between, like, what you were doing and the [Vietnam] antiwar movement or were those kind of separate? How did that work?

OA: We would become spectators. You know, we were aware of the antiwar movement. We would be spectators to those.

We were aware of the fact when a radical student leader from the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], or a well known antiwar activist, or a well known antiwar artist was on campus, we would be spectators to those events. But we were not part of the groups and the organizations, because, again, we formed the Black Student Union, out of sheer desperation. It was so few of us out here. And we needed to fashion a life for ourselves. And we were all new at this. This all happened within a four year period.

So, for most of that time, we spent a great deal of our time trying to get organized ourselves. But we were aware of the fact that Angela Davis, for example, was on the F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of Investigation] number one most wanted list. And she was one of our "Sheroes" with her beautiful afro. And we were aware of the situation with—in San Quentin with the Soledad brothers and how—you know, her association with that whole incident¹⁰. And we were aware of the—Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party, and we were reading Malcolm X and Sonia Sanchez.

¹⁰ The Soledad Brothers were three African American inmates at San Quentin State Prison in California, who in 1970 were charged with murdering a prison guard. The guard's murder was claimed to be retaliation for three other African American inmates at Soledad Prison, who were murdered by another guard at that prison. Angela Davis, an activist and university professor who was associated with the Black Panthers, was involved the Soledad Brothers' defense. On August 7, 1970, Jonathan Jackson, who was related to one of the Soledad Brothers, led a group of activists to the Marin County Courthouse, where they took several hostages, including the judge, who was killed when Jackson and his accomplices were trying to escape. The gun used to kill the judge was registered in Davis's name, and she was charged as an accomplice. She fled California, was captured after two months, and ultimately tried and acquitted of all charges.

And so, this was all part of what we became, because of the environment. I should say that, interestingly enough, Dr. King died in 1968, was assassinated in 1968, so try and think about it like this: in a sense, it was the beginning of the end of the civil rights movement. So, for those of us who were young, imagine what young people are being exposed to today. For those of us who were as young as we were, our major influences were not the civil rights figures, but actually, the Black Power movement figures, the Eldridge Cleavers. And these people were very popular in the headlines. I can remember hearing about H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. So, these people were very prominent in our minds when we were students. And it was part of our evolution that we identified, in some ways, more with them than we did with civil rights figures.

AH: Well, and especially being younger, you know, younger and less patient—

OA: That's right.

AH: —you know, than your forbears.

OA: Yeah, because they had the more radical notions.

AH: Yeah. And you wanted change now, I mean, we want a African nation, you know, American Studies Program now, and, uh, but you were able to effect change that quickly.

OA: Yeah. Yeah. And the rights movement had really blossomed. I mean human rights and civil rights and women rights and the antiwar movement, all this was part of the social environment the new U [university] that we are a part of. And when I look back on it today, it was a real part of my growth and my development. And it gave us a chance to go through that stage so that we could become more sophisticated, later, and mature in our political development.

AH: Okay. I'm going to stop and save this real quick.

Interview 2, tape 1 ends; Interview 2 tape 2 begins.

AH: All right. So, let's get you out of USF.

OA: Okay.

AH: And so, obviously, this is a real decisive time for you here at the university, and you mentioned you kind of learned—trained yourself to study and blew off pressure with the extracurricular activities. So how do we get you to graduation, then?

OA: Okay. All right. Uh, this is after USF or—

AH: Well, I'm interested in, like—is there anything else you want to discuss about USF before we leave?

OA: Nothing, except—except the fact that a lot of the students—remember I talked about this whole experience. It was USF finally getting some federal dollars, trying to be inclusive about

bringing minority students here, and part of it being a very painful experience for many of the students.

I think, when I look on it, there are two things that come to mind. One was the African American students who didn't make it, you know. There were people who just—at a certain point the pressure was so much, they walked away. There were people who didn't develop the study skills and they simply dropped out. Okay?

But the other part of it was that generally, as a group, when we talked to one another at the end of our senior year, very few of us planned to go on to get our master's degree. And I began to think about that. Why was that? In a sense what had happened was this was a too-painful educational experience, and all of us wanted to get that degree because that was so important to our communities and our mothers and our parents, but we also wanted to escape this university. And part of the reason why we wanted to escape it was because it was—it had just become too shocking an experience on too many different levels, and there were too many indignities that we had to deal with, you know. And the dilemma is that—however, when I put University of South Florida on my resume and another student puts Florida A&M University or Bethune-Cookman College, I have noticed when I graduated from college, that I immediately get more attention. So, how about that as a paradox? (laughs) Okay? So I had to recognize that.

So, graduating was very important to us. Many of us did not attend our graduation ceremony, never marched. Until this day I regret that, to be quite honest with you, that I don't have a picture of me marching, that I didn't get a class ring and do all of the mainstream stuff. I was into my radical notes (laughs) and—

AH: Well, bring your parents on the—

OA: Yeah. Bring the parents.

AH: —campus.

OA: Yeah. I really regret that stuff now. I wish that I had done that.

So, it was that kind of experience with—recently, I had a class reunion. And some of my class members from my high school came to university with me. And we were recently having this same conversation about how none of us wanted to continue our education. (inaudible) usually, for most of us, four or five years later before we would go back and get our master's degree, wherever we'd go back and get it. So, it left us with that kind of emotional imprint, you know.

Yet, I have to say this. I have to say that when I came home from spring break and talked to my friends from Florida A&M University and Edward Waters College and the black universities, Morris Brown and Morehouse, students who had gone to predominantly black colleges, what I learned, to my surprise, was that because we were confronted directly with the challenges of races, of racism, and institutional racism here at the University of South Florida, we were more politically mature than my peers that attended predominantly black colleges.

Our conversations were different. We were more aware of African American history. We were more aware of international developments in the world. We were more aware of the figures in the civil rights movement, and the antiwar movement, and the women's movement. We were completely different. It was as though we had visited two different universities and we were all supposed to be going for this liberal arts education in general, liberal arts experience. But we came out of University of South Florida with a much broader sense of who we were as human beings in the world than, I think, my peers at predominantly black colleges. So, you know, go figure. It was interesting.

AH: Yeah, well—

OA: —a part of the dynamics.

AH: You know, I mean, in addition to all of that here, unlike what some of your black peers, you know, at black colleges might be doing, you're organizing, you're agitating.

OA: Yes.

AH: But then, you are also going through pressures that they're not experiencing. I mean, first of all, there is the institutional part that we talked about and then the pressures from the community. "Don't come home without a degree."

OA: That's right.

AH: And then, there's also the additional pressure you're really putting on yourself of, you know, of the activism, harassment by police—

OA: Right.

AH: —all this stuff. So, we were really walking' a completely different line, you know, and going way out of your comfort zone.

OA: Right. And then managing to graduate.

And I'm glad you mentioned some of the things that were going on at predominantly black colleges because, in my senior year, we began to get a new crop of African American students, who were not politicized, who identified a great deal with their mothers and their fathers and their friends at predominantly black colleges.

And this is a very funny story. You'll appreciate this. And they began to establish fraternities and sororities on the campus of the University of South Florida. Now, remember, here we are fighting for black pride and dignity, and wanting the world to respect our history and respect our culture. And all of a sudden, black fraternities come on this campus, and one of the fraternities, for example, is Omega Psi Phi [$\Omega\Psi\Phi$], and they call themselves Q Dogs. And they walk around—as part of their initiation, they shave their bald hair and they have a dog chain on their neck, and the leaders walk them around campus with this chain attached to their neck.

Now, to us who are political (both laugh) and the followers of Malcolm [X]'s philosophy this is like re-enslavement all over again. So, me being the black student leader (laughs) and the militant leader on campus, we challenged these black fraternities and sororities, and we embarrassed them in our poetry shows from the stage. And we made fun of the fact that all they did was drink Coca-Cola, ate crackers and played cards all day and marched around making—lettin' white folks making fun of them. And I must've done this, like, the entire year, till they got tired of me. (both laugh)

So, I've got to tell you what they did. One night they threw a party, all of the fraternities. It would be just my luck that I would pick the night where all of the fraternities (laughs) and all of the sororities were there. They threw this huge party. And I got me and my militant friends and we marched down the heart of the party, grabbed the record player and smashed it. (both laugh) I'll never forget—smashed the record player—and they were in the middle of a hot slow drag song (inaudible). They were (inaudible), they were drinking, and they were partying. They were living the normal college life. They didn't want to get in to stuff about the black movement, Black Power, being relevant. And before I knew it—things happened so fast. I mean, every guy in this place—I don't know what happened to the people who were with me but they disappeared. (both laugh) These guys attacked me. There must've been, like, a hundred of 'em.

AH: Uh huh.

OA: Somehow, I managed to get out of the party, out of the building, and I thought it was over. (laughs) I looked back and there must've been, like, seventy-five guys chasing me (both laugh) with rage (inaudible). They was trying to kill me. And the only thing that saved me was that when I was running I tripped and fell between—I was in a parking lot with a lot of cars. And I tripped and fell between two cars. And so, while they were kicking me and trying to hit me, because I was between the two cars they couldn't really do me no damage.

But let's just say that was quite a lesson for me. I don't care who you are, you don't break up black folks' parties. (both laugh) I had forgotten that story.

AH: Oh, man.

OA: But was, you know—that's what it was like when we had the clash of a newer generation moving in who wanted to identify with all of that stuff. And they weren't as political as we were. And so we clashed, and it caused those kinds (laughs) of incidents. I had forgotten all about that.

AH: Perhaps that's more courageous than the marching on campus.

OA: (laughs) I know. (both laugh)

AH: I mean, go in and smash the record player. (both laugh)

OA: You know, I kind of looked at the fraternity guys as sissy boys. I didn't know they had that much rage. (both laugh) You know, so, it was one of them things, you know?

AH: Yeah. The way—a way of bringing it out of 'em. (laughs)

OA: Yeah, well, I brought it out. (AH laughs) I forgot some of those guys were former football players, and you know, they got scholarships to come here. But they were doing fine otherwise.

AH: But, yeah. It's an important illustration of—like, there's the conflict in the black student community.

OA: Among the black students, yeah, among the black student population.

AH: Okay.

OA: Because we were getting more students by my senior year, and they came with different perspectives and—you know, and things began to evolve. And in fact, they did establish the black student union—I mean, the fraternities and sororities. And they became a real integral part of the university and made some real contributions to the university.

The other thing I didn't mention was that one of the central events of being in the black student union—being a black student member was the annual Miss Black Uhuru Pageant.

AH: Yes.

OA: Miss Black Uhuru, which was sort of like an African beauty queen contest. But it wasn't your normal mainstream type of beauty contest, because the women all wore their (inaudible) dashikis and they had the afros, and the importance was they didn't wear bathing suits to compete.

AH: Yeah.

OA: The idea was that this was the woman that symbolized our aspirations for freedom and liberation and independence. And we always surrounded this event, not only with our African attire, you know, and with great food and with music and drums and celebration, but always with the colors of black liberation, which were the red, the black, and the green. And of course, the red was for the blood we've shared all over the years being dragged to America, to the New World. And then the green was for the land and the wealth that we lost in Africa, and the black represented us, you know, needing to grow and develop again and empower ourselves. So everything was centered on red, black and green. And this was an annual event that, I think, has continued, since the early 1970s till today, you know. So, you know, it's one of those enduring sort of institutions that we established that is still here and part of the black student experience, along with the Africana Studies program, which was formerly the African American Studies program.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, we're pretty proud of some of the things we established before we got out of here, not to

mention some of the efforts of the university to establish offices to assist students a lot more with retention and recruitment.

So, when you think about that, and you think about the fact that we were able to get funding for our effort, and we were able to bring in renowned speakers from all over the country—people like Dick Gregory would come and stay at my house when he came. Stokely Carmichael, the Last Poets, Nikki Giovanni, we brought them all in. You know, that period was quite a success for us.

AH: Well, and the classroom extended way out into the community. I mean, you had the rare experience, I think, unlike someone who maybe gets into engineering or—you know, gets into the sciences or something—to have this classroom experience, but then to have all this other stuff going on, and that it's all completely immersive. I mean, it's no wonder you were exhausted, (laughs) you know, by the end—

OA: Oh, my God. Yes.

AH: —and just wanted to get out.

OA: And to think that—you know, I remember telling you this story. And to think that when I first came onto this campus, I bought a pair of penny loafers. I was doing my best at trying to do (laughs)—to integrate and was failing at it miserably and meeting some white guy—it was a white guy that woke me up, a white student that asked me did I know who Malcolm X was. What do I know about my history? And I was, like, a freshman and I didn't understand what he was talking about. Because remember, the predominantly black schools of my segregated era, they put their emphasis on us being accepted by white people. So, they weren't emphasizing black history, the black studies, and that sort of thing.

So, I can remember moving—so the way that I evolved was from that experience to actually (laughs) being a black student leader and helping to establish the African American Studies program and fighting for it. So, it was quite an experience, yeah.

AH: Yeah. So, then you—when did you get your degree?

OA: Nineteen seventy-three.

AH: Okay. And this—that was in African American Studies?

OA: I got a B.A. in African American Studies and a B.A. in Sociology.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: All right. Um, now, when you graduated, you said you didn't walk. You didn't go to the ceremony. But obviously, there was some sort of celebration when you were finished. Tell us

about what it was like graduating.

OA: Well, keep in mind, now, the one thing, the one thing that we did very well (both laugh) when we were not studying was that we knew how to celebrate, and we knew how to party. And this was such an incredible experience for us. So, believe me, upon graduation, we partied all night long. As they say, we tore the roof off the motha because that was always part of what we did.

And the interesting thing is, when I look back on it, every weekend—it was such a wonderful time in that sense because we always knew where to gather. We knew where everyone was, we knew where everyone lived, their dorm, their dorm number. And we knew that on Fridays you gather at a certain place in the cafeteria to figure out where we're going to party that night. And we knew to rent the hall for the party on Saturday night. And, so, it was always a great party going on.

And during that time, one of the most popular songs was “It’s Your Thing.”¹¹ “Do what you want to do.” You know? And I can still hear that in my head I would walk down the street, you know. “Don’t let nobody tell you who to sock it to, it’s your thing.” And that was a very unpopular song that we danced to. And so, yeah, it was a great experience. We were very happy about graduating.

But interestingly enough, an entire group of us, a core of us, who were, I suppose, hard core in our political beliefs, when we graduated we essentially moved from becoming student leaders to becoming community leaders. And we brought a much more serious movement to the African American community of Tampa, by us making that transformation from university to the community. Because what we wanted to know was whether all of these theories and philosophies and ideologies we had read about and studied, we honestly said—and I remember saying that we wanted to put this [in] to practice.

You may remember me saying- the quote I told you that we would often say when I was in college - that we would not let college interfere with our education. (both laugh)

AH: Yes.

OA: So, by the time we graduated, we were really serious about going into the community and making a difference. And boy, did we go (laughs) into the community, and boy, did we really run up against the wrath (laughs) of the entire establishment in Tampa when we entered and began to organize real people and adults and students and the elderly in the African American community of Tampa. That became quite an experience, and we can talk about that.

AH: Yeah. So, and before we get (inaudible)—

OA: Okay.

AH: —that activism, I just want to go back to the social scene, cause something occurred to me.

¹¹ Written and performed by the Isley Brothers, the song was released in 1969.

You were talking about all the parties and dancing and everything. Obviously at this time you were probably still popular with the ladies—

OA: Mm-hm. Absolutely. Mm-hm.

AH: —just like in high school and everything, and—that was all part of the scene was meeting—

OA: Oh, God, yes.

AH: —new people and stuff, right?

OA: Mm hm.

AH: So, uh—but I just wanted to mention that because I don't know if you have anything to say about that. But if not, we'll just—we'll go straight into the activism.

OA: No. It's—you know, it's like—when you're in a leadership position and you—and this is true, probably, in all cultures—and you're showing a great deal of moral courage and you're challenging the establishment—and you have to understand that many of the young people, the young African American students and the young black women, most of them are coming from small towns in Florida, you know. Tampa was large for some of them. You know, I was more of an urban dweller and from an urban area than many of them. They [were] coming from Lake City and small towns near Tallahassee, and this sort of thing.

So, it was—to them, coming to the university and meeting a guy like me, it was almost like I—it was an automatic thing that I had a following. And of course, women were part of that, and I—I mean, we didn't miss partying. Let me put it (laughs)—let me put it that way. We enjoyed what we were doing, and it was really a great life and a great time. And many of us, we had—we created lifelong friendships as a result of that. And then, like I said, we eventually went into the community and really tested what we were about.

Note: after college I eventually married a young lady, Gloria Anthony that I met in college, and we eventually had a beautiful daughter by the name of Ashaki Anthony. Gloria is currently a Vice President with the Chamber of Commerce and my daughter is Strategic Advisor for a major utility in Seattle. Although we are no longer married, we are extremely proud of Ashaki's accomplishments, including her work for JP Morgan Chase in India, completing the National Urban Fellows leadership program and earning her Masters Degree in New York.

AH: And how did you do that? Tell us about that.

OA: Well, we had already begun by—every now and then, we would, in order to explain our cause at the university, we would go on the black radio station WTMP. And Bob Gilder¹², who was a well-known civil rights leader in Tampa, had a Saturday morning talk show on WTMP.

¹² Gilder, who died in 2003, was a former president of the Tampa NAACP who also served as WTMP's general manager.

So, we would go on his show to advocate for various issues

AH: This sounds familiar. (laughs)

OA: Yeah. Yeah. How about that?

AH: Yeah.

OA: Eventually, I got that same talk show. (AH laughs) But we would go onto his talk show to explain what we were doing at the university and why we were challenging the university. But we would also go into the community and organize voter registration drives, in West Tampa in particular, and in East Tampa. So that, by the time we really transitioned to the community, we had these tentacles throughout the community, we were connected. And the community knew about us. And we would be in the newspaper and on television about some of our activities.

So, the black leadership was aware of the fact that we had these new young people, they were energetic, bright, activist, didn't take no for an answer, was willing to challenge the system, and so, you know, they kind of took a standoffish attitude toward us. But they kept their eye on us until we began to embarrass them.

AH: Well, there must have been, even, some grudging respect in that you weren't just people out there who were making noise. You had gotten results at the university.

OA: Oh, yes.

AH: So, it wasn't like, you know, you were just coming out of nowhere and saying, We're going to make a bunch of noise. But this is—you had a record at that point.

OA: Yeah. And not only that, but most of the civil rights leadership, they believed in holding meetings with the establishment leaders behind closed doors, five to ten of them, with the downtown leadership, the white power structure. But when the white power structure mistreated the African American community, when we entered the scene—now, let me go back a bit because we were not the first to do this.

AH: Yes.

OA: Before us there was a group even more radical than us. And they, too, emerged from out of the University of South Florida. Many of them did not graduate from that experience. They got their first couple of years, didn't do that well, most of them, some of them went through arrests, and then they went into the community. And they called themselves Black Youth for Peace and Power. And they probably preceded us three years or so. And they ran into constant harassment, constant arrests, they were put on trial for marijuana charges and it was just horrible. We were always marching and helping them. Even as students, we would go in town and march to help—Free Connie was one of the big movements at the time. Free Connie. And Connie was one of the major activists in the Black Youth for Peace and Power.¹³

¹³ Connie Tucker was an African American woman who in 1971 was sentenced to five years in prison for possession

But we weren't really part of the Black Youth for Peace and Power, you know. But we would also participate in their activities. We also had the African People's Socialist Party, who was headed by Joe Waller¹⁴, [Omali Yeshetela] which at the time was called JOMO [Junta of Militant Organizations], in St. Petersburg. And we would sometimes invite them on campus to be a speaker. And we weren't really part of JOMO, but we would participate in their activities. And their activities were extremely (laughs) radical. They were even too radical for us.

AH: Yeah. Now, did they evolve into the Uhuru Movement?

OA: They evolved into the Uhuru Movement.

AH: Yes. Yes.

OA: And, now, they've expanded to London and all over the world, and Africa, you know. But the beautiful thing about that was that early on in our transition into the community we became very popular and—I think for two incidents. One was the high suspension and expulsion rate of African American students in the Hillsborough County School System.

So, I led a fight to force the school board to come into—to hold their school board meeting in the heart of the black community. It was a fight to force them to hold the meeting in the community. And then, it was a fight at the meeting, you know, because then I had to get hundreds of people there. And that was the first test of our mettle. And I will never forget this. And this is, like, still early seventies [1970s].

We turned out the entire community. We had hundreds of people there. And this school board was completely (laughs) intimidated. And we demanded answers and what kind of policies were they going to change as it relates to why our students are always being kicked out of school and pushed out of school. So, that made me very popular as a leader in the community, because we were a mass movement. We took the masses with us. We didn't go behind closed doors with the leaders.

And the other was a shooting incident, a police shooting death incident in East Tampa. I'm trying to think of the kid's name now. His last name was Murphy, and I believe it was Larry Murphy.¹⁵ And it really incensed the entire black community.

AH: And this is—this is not the sixty-seven [1967] riots¹⁶.

OA: No. No. This is after that.

of marijuana. Free Connie was the movement calling for her release.

¹⁴ Waller later changed his name to Omali Yeshetela.

¹⁵ OA may be referring to Charles Stevens, a young African American Muslim who was shot by Tampa police in February 1974.

¹⁶ This riot took place on Central Avenue in June 1967, and was caused when Tampa police shot a young African American man named Martin Chambers, who was accused of theft.

AH: This is in the seventies [1970s].

OA: Yeah. This was in the seventies.

AH: Okay.

OA: And this was after that. And we went into the community. And because there was so much resentment about police brutality and excessive use of force, we organized the community around this issue very well. As a matter of fact, we organized them so well, I'll never forget this, that—and the community was so outraged. Somebody told me later that the police department would, at times, come to us and say, “You know, we want to set up community policing. Can we have—” They didn't—it wasn't like they were really asking for our permission. But they knew they needed to talk to us before they put policeman on the streets to walk the neighborhoods of the African American community.

So, that showed a lot of power. That showed a lot of power and there was another incident where the brother in a family—this brother was shot by the policemen and killed. And there was—it really showed a lot—there was a lot of insensitivity in the incident. And the police chief publicly came into the African American community, went on stage with me, and nobody had ever seen anybody do this, and his name was—the chief at the time was Chief [Charles] Otero. He eventually became the supervisor of security for Hillsborough County School System, and I remember his name very well. He was really a kind of wise police chief, different from some of the hard-nosed. He knew how to manipulate public opinion like civil rights leaders knew how to manipulate public opinion.

So, he actually went on stage with me, after this incident, and apologized to the community. And by him apologizing to the community, a lot of things cooled off and, you know, and there were no major disturbances at that particular point.

So, those two incidents, police brutality and bringing the school board, really put me on the map, but more importantly, put my organization on the map. And my organization was Black Organization Project, the idea [being] that we were going to come in the community and be a black organizing project. And we was going to organize poor people, and people without a voice, and powerless people, to stand up for themselves and fight for themselves and fight city council, and to fight the school board, and to fight the county commissioner and fight the white power structure. And that was our goal when we graduated from college.

Now, in the meantime (laughs), I needed to get a job. You know, I needed to figure out some way to pay for my, you know, activities. But go ahead.

AH: And before—yeah. Before we go there, I think it's worth mentioning, for the records, that—you know, I mentioned in 1967 there was a very destructive riot on Central Avenue that was probably the death knell—

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: —of the old African American business district.

OA: Right.

AH: And had there been an Otero, you know, and a more organized black presence, that—maybe that might have been prevented. So, it's worth noting that, because the potential was always there. And, you know, it was a similar shooting incident that sparked the riots in sixty-seven [1967]. And, then, once it got started it was really difficult to—

OA: Yeah.

AH: —to kind of contain everything again. So, I think that's why it's especially significant—

OA: It is.

AH: —you know, that what happened with you and that the police chief would actually come into the community and apologize for something like that, but—

OA: Yeah. And all of this history was part of it. You're right. And to show you that this was true, there were no mass leaders during 1967. So, you had this spontaneous rebellion. And when you had this spontaneous rebellion—and by the way, this rebellion was taking place all over the country. There were, you know, all kinds of rebellions and riots taking place. And to show you that the African American leadership at the time formed was called the White Hats—

AH: Yes.

OA: —headed by Mr. Jim Hammond. And the White Hats were seen—it's interesting. They were seen as a counterforce set up by the police department and the power structure within the African American community to suppress the militancy of the African American masses. So, that was the best that the African American leadership produced during that time.

So, you're right. They didn't have the kind of leadership that we were organizing. The people trusted us. They knew that we were mass community organizers. We were in the streets with them at night. They actually saw us on television challenging the establishment. So, they knew that—who we said we were, that we weren't just talking the talk. We were walking the walk. And so, yeah, it was a lot different.

So, there was beginning to be a shift in the nature of the leadership in the community when we arrived.

AH: Yeah. And I just want to get back to the White Hats, just for a second. So, for most people in the African American community, would you say that that was kind of seen as, like co-opting?

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: Yeah. And that was sort of like a sellout. Like, you put a white hat on them and he feels like

he's got some kind of power?

OA: Yeah. But interestingly enough, when you think about that, and you think about the Kerner Commission report during the time after the riots, and the Kerner Commission reports that "white society created the ghetto, white society sustained the ghetto, and white society maintained the ghetto", and that white society, essentially, was at fault, so then the federal government and state and city government and the law enforcement community saw this as the greatest counter-tactic that they had ever developed.

AH: Okay.

OA: And it was successful, in the sense that it gave the white community a sense of comfort that they didn't have to be the ones that go in directly and stop all these crazy black people who were enraged. We've got black people we can send in there with White Hats

AH: Yes.

OA: —to do this. Now, just as a kind of a commentary on tactics today, think about strategies in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, you know, counterinsurgency. This is the same philosophy. This is the same philosophy and most of this grew out of certain strategies at that time, (60's) the president had appointed a guy by the name of George McBundy—I think that was the name. He was kind of the architect of the counter strategy.

AH: McGeorge Bundy?

OA: McGeorge Bundy.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And he was over the counteroffensive against black student militancy and black movement in this country. So this was part of a national strategy.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And so, the White Hats were very popular and they blew them up all over the country as an example of what should happen.

AH: But it was short-lived, right?

OA: Very short-lived.

AH: Yeah. It didn't last.

OA: It didn't last very long.

AH: Okay. So, that then left a vacuum for you guys to walk into and really start to effect change.

OA: Absolutely.

AH: So then, you said with all those activities you had to find a job.

OA: Yeah. (laughs)

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, in the meantime, I'm struggling with—I'm an activist and I had a good friend of mine who was a lawyer and just an all-around wonderful person. She was an attorney for Bay Area Legal Services, and all she wanted to do was use her professional skills to help poor people. And she became my best friend. And she used to say to me—she used to say, "Otis, you can't be a philosopher and a poet and walk around espousing poetry on the beach. You're going (laughs) to have to go to work one day." And so, eventually, what I did was I became an artist in residence in New Place.

The interesting thing about these times was that a lot of federal money was coming into the cities in the post-rebellion, post-riot era for arts and for the community, and community development, and a lot of grants. And we had a fellow here from the University of South Florida who was very good at writing grants, and he established what was called the New Place. It was supposed to be a home to develop the arts among minority kids in the inner city community.

I became an artist in residence at the New Place and finally started working there. And the most fascinating thing about that experience was that we took the experiences of the kids—the kids who would get involved in the riots, the kids who would challenge the police straight up with such courage—we took their experiences and created poetry plays. We would have what you call poetry readings, and then we would have poetry theatre. And the kids would actually perform what they felt, the life that they were living in the streets, and how they were getting intimidated by the police, and how they were—they hated it so much.

And so, we would put that all on stage for the community and invite the community in, you know. We would create, for example, scene—our own scene in the barbershop, but the young people would create their own conversation about what they would do in the barbershop and what they would talk about. And people—it was fascinating. A lot of it was improvisation. They improvised and we encouraged it. And, so, it turned out to be a great success (laughs), believe it or not.

And, so, I must have did that, probably, in 1974. I went to work for a drug program for a while, helping people who were in crises and drug addiction. And then eventually I went to work for the Tampa Urban League.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm hm.

AH: Now, in your work with the drugs, what were the big ills at the time? I mean, this is—obviously, it's pre-crack.

OA: Oh. This is—yeah. Yeah.

AH: So, what were the main problems in the community?

OA: Yeah. Uh, heroin was serious. (inaudible) of heroin was a serious problem, but they also had smack, or—it was a cut form of heroin that was very cheap, called it scag, I believe.

And, interestingly enough, this was the beginning of the flood. People think it began with crack, but I remember some of the strongest guys in Central Park Village, which was right next to the riot area, some of the strongest guys that I had to tussle with, and fight with coming through high school. I mean, these guys were he-men. I mean, these guys could throw hands, and they were strong. I can remember very clearly, several years later, after the riots, seeing these very strong young black men all strung out on this scag.

And I wrote poems about it when I was in college, 'cause it was such an unbelievable experience to see people that I grew up with, you know, their bodies turn into almost—what we call dishrags, right before your eyes. And so, that, too, was part of the experience in the post-riot America, and living in these cities where there rebellions.

So—

AH: Okay.

OA: I forgot where we were.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Yeah. Okay.

AH: I just wanted to get a little more information there. So—and then you talk about you're going to work with your friend, then?

OA: No. My friend would kick me.

AH: Oh, okay. She's the one prodding you—

OA: About the fact that I needed to get a job.

AH: Okay.

OA: And so, eventually I gave in. I mean, I had some practical nature from my parents. My father worked his whole life and had me working, you know, until I decided to go crazy and join the movement. But I went to work for the Urban League.

AH: Yeah. Okay.

OA: And so, that was the beginning of the next real transformation—

AH: Yeah.

OA: —in my life.

AH: Yeah. Well, this is a good place for me to save it real quick.

OA: All right. All right.

Interview 2, tape 2 ends; Interview 2, tape 3 begins.

AH: Okay. All right. So, you're working for the Urban League.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: Okay.

OA: Yes. And—and it was—I call it a transformational period. I went to work for Augusta Thomas and Joanna Tokley, you know, who were giants in terms of the Urban League movement. And I was the—my position was I was the Housing and Civic Education Coordinator for the Tampa Urban League.

Yet, I—one of the reasons they hired me was because I brought this broad-based community organizing experience into the Urban League and I had a lot of contacts in the community. And one of the first things (laughs) that happened to me was the fact that my wife at the time, Gloria Anthony, I met her at the University of South Florida. My senior year that I graduated my daughter was born, in 1973, and my wife was working at the office of community relations.

And I should go back just a bit. Right before I became a member of the Urban League staff, I was still leading Black Organization Project. And one of the things that I did was I challenged WTMP Radio for the fact that they needed to have more positive programs that uplifted black people. Now, that was a mistake (laughs)—

AH: Okay.

OA: —but I did it anyway. And, at the same time that I was challenging WTMP, I had a newsletter and I passed this newsletter out in the community. At the same time I was criticizing WTMP radio, I was criticizing Alton White, who was the executive assistant to the mayor. No black person had ever ascended to the level of achievement that Alton White had achieved. And the entire African American community was so proud of Alton White. But we thought that he was beginning to look like a sellout, my organization. So I challenged Alton White publicly.

And I got on the radio and talked about what my issues were. And I'll never forget it, because my ex-wife reminded me of this recently, because we saw Michelle Patty¹⁷ going through her thing with WTMP. And she said, "Do you remember when they—" They actually removed her from her (laughs) job with the city, because she was associated with me, 'cause she happened to go on the air with me on that particular show.

Note: Alton White called me to his office downtown and read me the riot act and reminded me of his contributions. The irony is that I eventually occupied the same position in the Mayor's office and there were those who accused me of the same thing.

So, here I am in the community starting all these—(inaudible) all these troubles all over again. But, eventually, I settled down at the Urban League, believe it or not, and I loved my work at the Urban League.

One of the things that I remember was a great success was I created a Housing and Health and Education Fair and nobody had ever put the three together before, housing, education and health. And I brought in all the agencies in the entire county into the heart of the African American community so that they could understand what services were available to them.

So, even though I had been very active in a militant fashion in my approach to issues while I was in school, this was the kind of practical stuff I had started to do and how I evolved as part of the Urban League staff. And I had a great deal of respect for Augusta Thomas. I mean, she was a great grants writer. She was a wonderful debater and diplomat. She had a very smooth and tactful way of dealing with the white downtown establishment. I got a chance to sit at her feet and watch how the old school really operates to get the things they really need for the community.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And she usually got what she wanted. And she had an interracial board, because the Urban League always had an interracial board. And she had corporate members on that board. Some of those corporate members were scared to death of fact, by the way, that I was on the staff, but she stood up for me. And as a result of me being a part of that staff, I wore my dashikis a lot and still wore my beard, but she very subtly began to nudge me to change. She finally got me to start wearing a shirt and tie every now and then.

I still wore my dashiki, and of course, I'll tell you this story, she finally sent me to a National Urban League convention—

AH: Ah.

OA: —in Washington, D.C. I had never been to a predominantly black city before in my life. And I didn't know, I mean, that there could be so many sharp, professional, well-dressed—I'm talking about good looking black women who were as black as me in their advocacy, and their intelligence—knew as much about history and culture and the community as I knew, but they

¹⁷ Michelle Patty is a community activist in Tampa.

weren't walking around in old tie [tie-dyed] dashikis. I mean, they were dressed, they were looking professional, and it just blew my mind.

I saw all those beautiful African American women and I ran and found me a suit (both laugh) real quick. I went to find me some—I bought me about one or two suits. They were old, they were tired, I think one of 'em came—I had a coat from the Goodwill, even, you know. It was an old brown coat. I wore that brown coat to death, and a brown tie. But at least I had on a coat and a tie and that was the beginning of my transformation as a professional in the community. So, by the time I went to my next national Urban League convention—I think it was out in Dallas—I mean, I got my suit and tie and I got—I know, now, to wear new white shirts—

AH: Are you shaving?

OA: Oh, I'm shaved and I'm ready for the world. (laughs)

AH: Well, you know, and—

OA: That's how it happens, you know—interesting.

AH: Yeah. And I'm glad you brought up some of the things you brought up. I mean, like Alton White, you know—not just him, but his family.

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: His father Moses really represented the old school in Tampa.

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: They kind of—trying to come to an accommodation, you know, negotiation, not—

OA: It's so interesting that you would mention that. Now that you've—Very few people knew this. Now, Alton White and his brothers—Gerald White really knows this. Interestingly enough, when I was a teenager, before I even knew anything about political activity or anything, Moses White, who was, like, I guess, the Godfather of the African American community—Italians in Tampa had a lot of power, and they were in political office. I mean, there were Spanish, Italians, Latinos. Moses White had connections downtown. He knew the judges—you know that there's been accusations about what the other more seamy side of his life there was, but I don't know anything about that.

But, interestingly enough, Moses White took a liking to me as a teenager. And in the African American community, we had a drive-in called Anthony's Drive-in. To this day, many people think that my family was associated with that drive-in. But this was the meeting spot in West Tampa for anybody who was anybody. All right. There is one for the Latino community- has their meeting spot at the Spanish restaurant today. And Moses White, who owned Cozy Corner Chicken—he had one on Central Avenue and one in West Tampa on Main Street near Howard [Avenue]—would spend time with me, and me only, all the time. And I never really thought

about that till later in life. There was something about me at that time that he loved sitting down and talking to me. And he taught me many things.

And I remember that—the thing that I remember the most that he taught me was how to present myself. And whatever I was doing—this is the—it's kind of not so clear what it was all about. But what I got out of it was [that] you have to know how to have a poker face in all situations. That's what it was. And he taught me, as a teenager, about that. I really didn't understand what it was all about at the time.

So, interestingly, when I got arrested as an activist, my grandaunt hired—wow—the son of a very prominent white attorney in Tampa. My grandaunt always worked for prominent white families. She had put money away—always put money away; was a great saver. It's about to come to my name—Wilkerson, the family was Wilkins or Wilkinson. The son's father was known as a member of the white segregationists in Tampa, almost like a Ku Klux Klan, but the son, I guess, as part of his development, wanted to shed that history. And when he took on my case, he was in the media constantly. And this was part of his contribution to shedding his family's history. And it was all by accident, —my grand-aunt—I did say—my grand-aunt. I didn't mean my grandmother. My grand-aunt just happened to know his father's family, which she had no problem with. She knew how to manage herself in that environment, and that's how he became my attorney.

So, between him, that attorney, and Moses White—Moses White would call a judge, and that's what got me out of jail. It's very interesting how those webs of connections played out when I left the community to go to USF and became an activist (laughs) and got in trouble. (laughs)

AH: Yeah. Well, and then—

OA: Isn't that fascinating? I never really thought about it like that until—

AH: Well, yeah. And in a sense, I think, Moses was teaching you a really old lesson in the African American community—

OA: Yes, he was.

AH: —and that your grand-aunt knew as well. I mean, she knew what this family was about, yet she was connected to them and was, you know—

OA: That's part of the complexity—

AH: Exactly.

OA: —of interracial relationships in the South, much more complex than people understood, than I even understood or anything I learned at the time from the Black Studies Program. The Black Studies Program couldn't have taught me about those kinds of intricate dynamics between whites and blacks, but they existed.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And it was not—if it were not for my grand-aunt's relationship to what was a prominent segregationist family, I probably would have stayed in jail, because that second charge was a serious charge.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: Yeah. And it's—there's so much unspoken, you know, that—it's not in books, you know?

OA: That's right.

AH: That's what you're talking about, and that's the—it's all those subtleties. And, then, of course, one of the other ironies is that you went to work for the Urban League, and that it's one of the oldest, most established—

OA: Absolutely.

AH: —black organizations in the community, that was known to be more like Moses White than, say, Stokely Carmichael—

OA: (laughing) That's right. That's right.

AH: —let's say. So that—it's another irony in that in a sense, you didn't lose your activist edge there, but you were able to digest some of the lessons they had to teach.

OA: Yeah. And part of my growth and development was that I was, in fact, imbued with the old school way of approaching the system. And I needed to know that. As a young activist, at some point I needed to evolve and understand that because it wasn't enough to just stand outside the system and shout, you know, "Black Power," or "Black Pride." At some point, if I was going to be seen as an effective leader, I had to come in and be able to deliver on the goods.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And so, those experiences came in handy as I began to develop and, in a sense—what I used to say is get out of my own way. (laughs)

AH: Yes. Well, and it's impossible to imagine your radio show, your present-day radio show, without that experience.

OA: Now how about that?

AH: I mean, it would be a completely different show.

OA: Isn't that interesting?

AH: Yeah.

OA: Absolutely.

AH: I mean, it may be something closer to the Uhurus—

OA: That's right.

AH: —than what you do, and so you have a large tent on your radio show, you know, and the people feel welcome to speak their minds. So, it's—

OA: And the University of South Florida (inaudible) had a great deal—

AH: Oh, sure.

OA: —a great deal to do with that.

AH: Well, they both go hand in hand, you know? And it's really important that, kind of, the sequence in that you were kind of radicalized and, then—it's not that anything was tamed down, it was just that you found—

OA: You evolve.

AH: Yeah. And you find what's effective.

OA: Yes you do.

AH: And at a certain point, if you really care about, you know, what you're espousing, effectiveness becomes the most important thing.

OA: Oh, absolutely.

AH: The results, and—

OA: Absolutely. Because we were always serious—we were always about results, always serious about results. And you'll see that, eventually, when I came in the mayor's—when I became part of the mayor's office. Imagine that. You know, that the results were there because I was—we were always serious about results, whether we were in the system or out of the system.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: So, um, let's talk about oral history.

OA: Okay.

AH: Tell us a little bit—we don't have to go too deeply—

OA: Okay. Yeah, 'cause we have some of that (inaudible).

AH: —into it. Yeah. We have some of that in the can already, and that's going to be on video. But yeah, just tell us a little bit about how that started.

OA: This—. This is the connection to the Urban League. While I was working at the Urban League, I had always desired, after I left college—and here I am walking around in the African American community. I have a—I'm a poet. I'm out doing poetry everywhere.

One of the great things about being a poet and an activist is that I use my poetry to inspire people to get organized in order to tackle issues. But in order to have poetry to be very effective, you have to know the history behind what was going on in our community, and in the country. And the history of the African American community is the history of America, because you cannot study the history of black folk without studying the history of this country and how it impacted upon black folk, and so all of that was part of the poetry.

And I said all that to say that I became—I had an incredible affinity for history all the time. And I was really fascinated, at this stage in my life, about where did our history really begin, because one of the things that happened in education, and for black kids—I noticed was that if the teachers taught that African American history began with slavery, then for many black children that means that my history began with shame and degradation and in chains.

And this was during a period of my life, while I was at the Urban League, now, we're talking, probably, around seventy-six [1976], seventy-seven [1977], seventy-eight [1978], going into seventy-nine [1979], I'm fascinated by [the] pre-slavery period of African history. And I'm fascinated by Egyptian history, and I'm fascinated by the whole period of 3500 B.C., and early ancient African civilizations.

So I'm off into this stuff already, and I'm writing about it, and I'm doing poetry about it. One of the Last Poets' poems talk about African civilization. And I remembered it word-for-word because it was such a fascinating poem. "I built all your cities. I worked in your mines. I fought to protect you many a times. It was I who taught you what it is to be brave, why I had great civilizations, when you ran around in caves. I taught you what soap was when you dyed yourself blue. I taught you planting and harvesting, too. And when you knew nothing of the barrier of sound, it was I who taught you that this world was round." It was that kind of poetry, you know. The Last Poets—I love that. Because it's poetry, it's the beat, it's the rhythm and it captures, and it teaches people about history.

So, this was my mindset, even while I was at the Urban League, when a representative from the Hillsborough County Museum, who had heard about me, obviously, and knew some of my work

in the community, came to me and said, “We’ve got a grant to really look at African American history and black history in Tampa, and we would like to get you involved with that. It’s going to be an oral history project. And we would like to know if you would like to be involved. We’re going to be looking for a coordinator for the program.” And that was the beginning of the Black History of Tampa Research Project.

And I transitioned from the Urban League to the Hillsborough County Museum, eventually [to] Hillsborough Community College. And we began the oral history project, you know, which has led us to this day and [to] this moment.

AH: Yeah. And you said—in the short interview that we did, you talked about that you immediately accepted (OA laughs) and—

OA: Oh, absolutely.

AH: —I’m trying to imagine Otis Anthony at this time, you know, getting this news, like we need help with this project. And just how—it must have just seemed to completely fit—

OA: Yes, it did.

AH: —yeah, with everything that you were doing.

OA: It was the right opportunity—incredible—the right opportunity at the right time. Because remember, I was also a mass organizer, so I knew everybody in the community. I was with the Urban League that had the most incredible mailing lists of leaders and church people and social service workers and all the agencies. So, I had all the material necessary to do this. I had this fanatic love for history and black history, and wanted to know more about African American history. I had listened to the stories of my own grandmothers, and the stories of my own family, and heard others talk about their family history.

So, I was ready to go. Yeah. There was no hesitation on my part, you know, and—so that’s how it all developed—

AH: Okay.

OA: —and started. Yeah.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: And in the short video, you talked about just how important it was to document that history, especially locally, and that people later will be able to listen—

OA: Oh, yeah.

AH: —yeah, to their grandparents, or whatever—

OA: Family members.

AH: And that the timing of this was great because—I mean, it was really before oral history became a big, you know, something. There was no oral history program here at USF yet.

OA: Is that right? Okay. I did not—yeah.

AH: Yeah. There was nothing that was firmly established. There was academics who were doing oral history, but it was not linked to this area. It was—

OA: (inaudible) in the community. Mm-hm.

AH: Yeah. And so, you interviewed people who are no longer with us, you know, interviews that are irreplaceable, and what else do you have to tell us about that? And then, we can move on.

OA: Well, first of all, it was just an honor. It was really an honor and a privilege to do the program. The other thing that still stands out in my mind was how excited and how hungry these everyday ordinary people, who had been extraordinary enough to survive—and not only did some of them survive, but they thrived. And they built hospitals, and they built insurance companies, and they built a black teacher's union, and they became the first black policeman's and sheriffs in this community, and the first workers in the post office, and the first workers at Tampa General Hospital, and they worked with the longshoremen.

And they had all this history, and they had gone through the crash of the twenties [1920s] and the hurricane of Florida, I think it was 1927. They had gone through the Depression, and they had gone through the period of the cigar factories coming to Tampa, and they had lived through World War I and World War II, and they had their own views about all of that. And they had gone through Tampa's segregationist practices, and Florida's segregationist practices, and they knew about the experience of sharecropping from their own grandparents, and a new form of slavery. So, they had all of these stories, and they had lived through World War II and the first attempts of the—A. Philip Randolph and integrating the armed services.

And so, they were open and they were hungry and they were ready to tell their story. Nobody had asked them before.

AH: Sure.

OA: And it's so—I also think, you know, sometimes I feel so fortunate that for some reason I had this incredible hunger and the patience, to be so young at the time. I had this hunger to want to hear their stories and know their stories.

And I was—I can remember being so driven. I was driven to get the transcripts written up, driven to make sure we got to as many of them as possible. That's why we ended up with, what, over eighty?

AH: Yeah. It's almost a hundred. Yeah.

OA: And imagine this. This is what people need to understand. For a short period, I had supervision at the Hillsborough County Museum. Once I moved to Hillsborough Community College, I had no supervision with this project whatsoever. There was no one to set deadlines. There was no one to report to, except for every now and then I think I had to send a report in to the museum. There was no one to say whether we were in the office working or goofing off. There was no oversight, we didn't have any of that.

I drove this staff crazy. (both laugh) I literally drove them mad, because I was aware that this was the moment and we wouldn't have this moment again. Now how I knew that, I'm not sure. But that's very interesting now when I look back on it, that I was that obsessed with getting it done, given the fact that I was young and there were so many distractions at that time in my life, that we followed—we actually followed through.

We were not professional historians. I used to say that we were community intellectuals. (laughs) We were not real intellectuals. And yeah, we made our mistakes, and there's some things I wish we had documented differently or better. But we went at it. We went at it with our heart and our souls, and we got done, what could get done.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, that is how this project came about.

AH: Well, one question I'm really interested in is how did these interviews and the things, stories you heard, how did it change your thinking? You had some really strong ideas, you know, about—coming into the project about African American history and all these other things, and the way things ought to be.

OA: Wow. Interesting you would ask.

AH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, how did that change your thinking?

OA: The best indication of how impacted me was that after this experience, for the first time in my life, I went into corporate America. (coughs) Isn't that interesting?

AH: Yeah. Yeah, (inaudible).

OA: So it must've had a very interesting experience on me, because it gave me a much more balanced perspective about all of the tools that you're going to need in order to survive and be successful and be a professional, and be just as good in this system.

And these folk, these older folk that I interviewed, they were intelligent. They had some vibes. Their stories proved to me that they had a cat-like wisdom. You know, there was always—they would always throw out some little saying, like, "There's always, son, more than one way to skin

a cat,” you know, me coming to understand the old wisdom and how they survived.

And so, interestingly enough—I didn’t think about it until later in life, and I didn’t really think—focus on it until you asked that question, “What was the impact of the entire experience,” that I went into corporate America right after that. I didn’t really put that together yet. Yeah. That was something. (inaudible)

AH: Well, and, you know, you mentioned before there was a certain amount of impatience with the elders in the community that—and a lot of the younger people felt they weren’t pushing hard enough and all these things.

OA: Right.

AH: Did it give you a little more insight and respect for all those who had come before, and that maybe they were—maybe it wasn’t that they weren’t, uh,—

OA: Oh, absolutely.

AH: —lazy, or not wanting to push, or they were scared, but it was—

OA: Yeah. Because we—

AH: —more balanced.

OA: —we even questioned Martin Luther King and his non-violent movement.

AH: Yeah.

OA: We thought at the time that Martin Luther King was too much of a pacifist. It took us a long time to understand, you know, that his tactics—particularly when you look at some of the things that’s happening in the world today—that they were very effective tactics. The non-violent civil rights movement was a very effective approach for dealing with something as savage and as brutal as what we were dealing with in the South with these county sheriff departments, et cetera.

So yeah, we had to learn. And in coming to appreciate Martin Luther King, I was later able to assess people like Reverend A. Leon Lowry here in Tampa, you know, who was a major civil rights figure, and Jim Hammond, and all of those people—even Alton White—and Bob Gilder and Augusta Thomas, and their approach to the system. I was able to appreciate it a little differently later. But at the time, when I was younger— (laughs)

AH: Sure.

OA: —and radical, I couldn’t really appreciate it. Because now I had to do some of those same things, you know, and being—as part of the Urban League, I sat at corporate meetings at these companies. I sat at these corporate board meetings, and watched the way things were done.

AH: Okay.

OA: And I didn't know that's the way you get things done. And so, yeah, it was—they took me to school, so to speak.

AH: Yeah. Yeah. That's really fascinating—

OA: Mm hm.

AH: —'cause not only are you putting your old activism to work, but you're learning, you know, you're kind of—it's a whole new education.

OA: Yeah. And I'm taking it all in and it's soaking—it's all, uh, soaking in.

AH: Okay. And then, so, we talked about—one thing that I wasn't clear about was how did it go from the museum to HCC, the project?

OA: The museum, as I recall, they either—oh, I know. The museum, they were about to build a new museum. I think the county was going to defund that old museum by the river; they were going to defund it. And this was the beginning of the makings of the new museum that's out here, MOSI [Museum of Science and Industry]—

AH: Okay.

OA: —the idea of the early stages of a new museum, much more upscale type of museum. And so, that's what happened. So that museum became defunct and we didn't have a place to go. And by the way, these were very old wooden, almost like the summer camp sheds that's—I mean, the wooden camp cabins that you have at a parks.

AH: Cabins, yeah.

OA: That's what the offices were like.

AH: Oh, I see, yeah, like, um, pavilions, like shelters, yeah.

OA: Yeah, that you get at some campgrounds

AH: Okay, yeah.

OA: That's what the offices was like. And so, it wasn't the best place to keep oral history material anyway.

AH: (laughs) Yeah.

OA: And it was Sybil Barnes, bless her heart, one of the few African Americans that worked at Hillsborough Community College, who heard that we did need a home. But she understood the

value of what we were collecting, this oral history. And she convinced the president of Hillsborough Community College, to give us an office at Hillsborough Community College.

And, from that point on, we were on our own. When the museum sort of went by the wayside, the people who initially got us involved with this project, they went by the wayside. Many of them, obviously, were not employed by the county anymore. They were doing something else. And here we were, you know, still working trying to complete this project. And we were pretty much on our own till the end of this project.

AH: Yeah. Well, it's interesting that you went to HCC, too. Maybe USF wasn't too eager to have you back. (both laugh)

OA: Yeah. How about that? (laughs)

AH: But, uh—all right. So then, you mentioned Dr. [Susan] Greenbaum and how it got here to the library and it kind of—the anthropology program really took a—you really inspired, I think, some of their later work and what they did. Is there anything else you want to talk about with the oral history?

OA: Um, what else can I remember? It's just that I had a great staff. We were all highly inexperienced, but at least we were able—we respected one another to be able to take instruction, and if we say we were going to do an interview, we went out to do that interview.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And, as a result of their fidelity to the process, we were able to complete as much as we were able to complete. And the fact that the community was completely surprised by the quality and the quantity of the work that we were able to accomplish on our own, is great.

AH: Yeah. Well, that's interesting—I mean, to some extent, it's—are all the—is that oral history program just kind of forgotten? I mean, I'm sure some people remember it, but to a large extent, it's been a long time.

OA: Yeah. It's forgotten. The other thing I wanted to mention was that I had two objectives—

AH: Okay.

OA: —of doing them. I remember thinking about this. And I remember that there are a lot of people in the community who are not—who don't enjoy reading, who are not good readers.

AH: Mm-hm.

OA: And I remember thinking there was also a lot of illiteracy in the African American community. So it's very important that we get the history orally and on tape, because people can listen to it, for the people who couldn't read. But also, it was very important to me that I develop a set of historical facts for people who were not those great readers, but they could read bullets.

And so, that's why we got the first publication of *Black History Facts of Tampa*.

And then, it occurred to me that a narrative to put all of this in context was missing. And so, that's why I began to write *Black Tampa: The Roots of a People* to accompany *Black Historical Facts about Black Tampa*. And once I completed writing the narrative to give this some context, it occurred to me that there were things missing, and that I needed to broaden the story. And I began to even go back and connect broad African American history, ancient African American history, general review of African American history in the country, to African American history in Florida, Seminole Indian Wars, the beginning of Tampa, to give a broader context to the black history of blacks in Tampa.

And so, we even took it further to show—I'm now beginning to realize the degree of the seriousness with which we took this project. We were takin' it further. And all of that got written, to a certain extent, at least up to the period of the 1970s when the first black began to run for mayor, Alton White, in the city of Tampa.

So, it was very important that I bring it up to that period. I figured history would take it from there.

AH: Yeah. Well, it's also really important to note that no historian had really touched this before. I mean, Tampa—you know, everyone liked to study the cigar industry and the other industries in town, things like this. But you know, African American history in Tampa, as far as I know, had never really been documented with any kind of seriousness, and there were a lot of—

OA: Wow.

AH: —you know, we had academics. We also had folks like Hampton Dunn and Tony Pizzo, people who were history enthusiasts, but wrote history. And this was kind of completely off the radar, in that if African Americans came up, it usually had something to do with Prohibition, gambling—

OA: Right.

AH: —something else that—you know, that wasn't really the meat and potatoes, really the core of what history is about. So, you know, to an extent, you may be one of the first people to have really documented in a serious way history, but African American history, in Tampa.

OA: You know, you're bringing back things to me now in terms of how our methodology—how we approached this. I had forgotten it. I forgot the many hours that we spent going through the archives of the African American newspaper, the *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*.

AH: Yes.

OA: And I had forgotten the many hours we spent going through the Special Collection—USF Special Collection of the Florida Writers Project, trying to find anything that touched on Tampa or the Tampa Bay region in general to include in the history. And I had forgotten the many hours

we spent down at the courthouse—it's funny. The old courthouses had libraries. I'm trying to remember exactly—and it had great information down there. And we spent hours down at the old courthouses and city hall trying to collect data information, also.

And then, we went to the University of Florida, because the University of Florida had these incredible archives that somebody told us about. And I had forgotten the many hours that we spent up at the University of Florida in the library regarding the experiences of some people in Tampa. And I can even remember a story—there was a story about the myth of the guy who shot Charlie Moon, which we talked about in the history. And I remember us even trying to get to this guy on his deathbed to get his interview, to see if he would confess to us, you know, why did he kill Charlie Moon—

AH: Yeah.

OA: —you know, because that was an important story in the African American—in Central Avenue history. And Charlie Moon was a black, Depression, thirties [1930s], forties [1940s] figure who had money, owned his own lounge and club, and eventually was just assassinated. They got a—somebody got a former black policeman to just assassinate him.

AH: Hm.

OA: And the rumor was that Pearl Adams—that was his name. Pearl Adams was the guy, if I recall, that assassinated him.¹⁸ And so, we wanted to get the background of that person we thought was a very important part of the history of African Americans in Tampa. So that's how extensive—that's the extent that we went to try and really tell the story, you know, of the African American community in Tampa.

AH: Yeah.

OA: I had forgotten that. (laughs)

AH: Yeah. Yeah, that's great. Oh, yeah. I'll save it here.

end of Interview 2.

Interview 3, tape 1 begins.

OA: (inaudible) I appreciate it. There.

AH: All right. Well, we're rollin', and it's, um, July 24, 2009. And we are here to wrap up the oral history with Otis Anthony. The last time we left off, you had just shed your dashiki and your beard (both laugh) and you were getting ready to go corporate (OA laughs) after a kind of transformation working with the Urban League, et cetera.

¹⁸ Pearl McAden.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: You talked about going to that Washington, D.C., conference, and that kind of opened your eyes up.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: So, describe to us the transition, then, from kind of activist [to] getting into corporate life and into a suit.

OA: Yeah. I'd be glad to. And a big part of that transition, by the way, was this Black History of Tampa Research Project.

AH: Yeah.

OA: But again, I was at the Urban League, and I do have fond memories of going to the national Urban League convention in Washington, D.C., and I think I also mentioned Dallas. And just seeing professional black folk so well dressed, yet they were involved with workshops about community and empowering poor people, and teaching poor people how to have a voice. And it was, like, the best of both worlds for me. I didn't think of myself very much as a professional at that time. I was more of a community organizer.

And so, that made quite an impression on me. And again, Augusta Thomas, the executive director of the Tampa Urban League at the time—and the Urban League has an incredible history in Tampa dating all the way back to the 1920s when Dr. Benjamin Mays, who was the mentor for Dr. Martin Luther King at Morehouse College, was the executive director. So again, the Urban League, like in so many cases, was a critical part of my transition and my transformation.

She [Augusta Thomas] obviously saw something in me that I didn't see in myself at the time, and she had a vision of me being a professional. As a matter of fact, she eventually told me one day—in California there's a very effective legislator (Willie Brown) he's now the mayor of San Francisco. I'm trying to think of his name. But he was a very effective state legislator. Willie Brown, I think, was his name, Willie Brown. And he was always clean, sharp-dressed, held great parties at his house for President Clinton when Clinton was running for the presidency. And she said that she could see me being the next Willie Brown, and she eventually told me that.

But at the time, I was just having fun, and I was just glad to be at the convention, to be honest with you. But that was a major change in my life, because the Urban League, which always struggled for funding—at some point they got a little low in their funding, their federal funding and local funding and United Way funding, and so it was time for me to move on. And I was lucky enough and fortunate enough to be offered the position by the Hillsborough County Museum to work as the director and coordinator of the Black History of Tampa Research Project. And they essentially transitioned me, you know, from social services, now, into research and oral history and writing, which was the kind of thing I did anyway for the community on various issues.

But now I had this incredible project. And I was a little bit aware of the importance of history because I was a major—my major at University of South Florida, one of my majors, was in African American Studies, what is now called Africana Studies.

So, I knew it was important that someone do this. I felt like, as an organizer and a person who was entrenched in the Tampa community, I would be able to—I would have the network to interview all the right people in order to get this done. So, that was the basic transformation for me. And, after completing the project, which we've talked about, that was when I began to make my move into the corporate world.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: All right. And so, describe to us, then—you're working at the museum and you wrap up the project. And how long were you at the museum?

OA: My God. How long were we? Maybe—we may have been at the museum maybe six or seven months before we had to move to Hillsborough Community College, my best guess.

AH: Okay. And that's where you finished the project, then?

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: Okay.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: And then, so how do we get you to your next gig? What's, uh—

OA: Okay. This is interesting. At that time in my life, I have a mentor. She's an African American female. She is out of Greenville, North Carolina. She is one of the sharpest attorneys I ever met in my life. She had a total commitment to poor people. She worked for Bay Area Legal Services, which was constantly under attack by the Reagan administration because they represented poor people in class action lawsuits. And she loved doing that kind of work. And she came to Tampa to do her legal work with poor people in Tampa.

Well, she became my best friend; we hung out together. Her name was Pam, Allison Thompson, and I call her Pam. And Pam was just an incredible human being. And she looked at me, I guess, with empathy (laughs) and pity and said, "This poor guy, he has no clue as to what to do with his life."

And so, she began to talk to me about the fact that I was not going to be able to walk on the beach the rest of my life and recite poetry, and that I needed to do more with my life. So, you know, with Pam whispering in one side of my ear, I decided to start applying for other positions.

And I applied for a position as an entry-level supervisor at Allstate Insurance Company, which is all the way in St. Petersburg, in their regional office on Thirty-Fourth Street.

So, this was quite an experience. I have to tell you about this experience. (laughs) Community organizer goes to corporate America and forgets to leave his community organizing at the door. (laughs)

So, I get over to Allstate, and I'm excited. I wear a shirt and tie—not necessarily a suit, a shirt and tie—every day. And the first thing they hit me with was, after I was there for a month or two, was, “Son, we don't think you got the Allstate walk, and we don't think you got the Allstate talk.” (both laugh) Okay? That was the first thing they hit me with.

Secondly, they told me, “Son, when you walk around this building—” Now, this is a huge building, because this is a regional office with hundreds of thousands of files, and this is before we went into automation and technology. So, we were—as a matter of fact, we made the transition to automation and technology with all these files while I was there.

AH: Okay.

OA: Now, here I am. I am the file supervisor of this massive office, entry-level supervisor, and I have all of these low-paid clerical, majority of them African American women, Hispanic women, or disadvantaged white women, all working for me. And they are oppressed like all get-out. (laughs) Okay, the perfect [supervisor], right? I go in as their supervisor, they absolutely love me. They never had a supervisor who cared about them, their birthdays, their children, talked with them.

So, the first thing I do is I get tired of trying to walk around this huge building communicating with everybody. So, the first thing I do is I put together a newsletter, an employee newsletter— (laughs)

AH: Uh-oh.

OA: —which ends up being a political weapon— (laughs)

AH: It sounds dangerous. Yes.

OA: —inside the corporation. But that—I swear that wasn't what I—it didn't start out as that. I was just trying to communicate with everybody, and the company loved it. The vice president of Allstate for the regional office, he just thought all of that was great stuff. But at some point, all of the new entry-level supervisors—and by the way, this was interesting for Allstate. Allstate had never brought in that many minority supervisors at one time.

AH: Okay.

OA: I'm not really sure what the company's intent was, but all of us arrived around the same time. So we trained together, we developed a closeness together, and then there was this

set—interesting. Along with the new African American supervisors, he brought in a set of young white males, a lot of young white males, a few white females, who were—many of them had gone to some pretty good colleges. And these guys had an attitude like, “Before I do all this work, I’ll throw these files (laughs) in the garbage.”

But we were serious about getting the work done, okay? They were serious about “What we going to do after work,” you know, where they’re going to have a drink or a beer. That’s all they talked about. While we were there, we were talking about the conditions of the clerks, and the demand on them.

So, this was an average day, just to give you an idea of a management meeting. Try and visualize: You’re in a kind of large room. In front of the room is the vice president of the company. And who sits next to him is the operations manager, which is over the building that I work for, ’cause I’m in operations. I’m not selling insurance. I’m not underwriting; I’m in operations. And so, in front of the operations manager, then behind them sits all of the division managers. And behind the division managers sit the unit managers. And behind the unit managers sit supervisors, and I’m a supervisor, right?

And an average meeting goes like this: The guy would walk in and cuss out the operations manager. And the operations manager would dog out the division managers in front of everybody else. I mean, they used profanity. They would take rulers and slap them on the desk. I mean, this was like boot camp 101 in this company. I kid you not. That is what it was like.

And production goals—if you didn’t meet production goals, and if you didn’t meet quality goals—I was also the supervisor of the quality verification unit—and if a policy for a one hundred thousand dollars or one thousand dollars—say for example, ten thousand dollars went out the door as a hundred thousand dollars, buddy, you’ve got a problem, (laughs) okay? I mean, you’ve got to look at everything, very detailed. And so, when errors were made like that, these meetings—I didn’t know corporate America was like that.

These meetings literally turned into fistfights, and this was every time we met. It was rough. It was raw. It was, like, male testosterone swung all over the place all the time. It was nasty language. It was sexist. It was racist. I mean, it didn’t matter what they’d say. They were like the good ole boys at home on the golf course; that’s the same way they were in the meetings. I mean, this professionalism stuff, they didn’t care anything about that. All they cared about was results.

The vice president called me in one day, and he said, “Otis, I just want to make sure you understand something. In this life, nobody cares about the storm you encountered at sea. All we want to know around here is, ‘Did you bring in the ship?’” Okay? This is the philosophy, right?

Great boot camp for me, though, I mean, later—just a great experience, you know, because I learned to think on my feet. I learned to move very fast, work very fast, work smart, [and] work under pressure at a very early age. So, all of this is happening.

So, eventually, I turned to—

AH: Well, actually, I just wanted to back up—

OA: Go ahead.

AH: —before you finish. Is—you said you didn't have the Allstate walk or talk.

OA: Yeah.

AH: So, before we finish with this, I just wanted to go back to that for a second—

OA: Oh, well, you know, I'm from public housing. (laughs)

AH: Did they—they gave you some advice that they thought you were walking too much like the streets? Or—

OA: (laughs) Yes. I was walking too much (laughs) like—I'd have my (inaudible) and, you know, strolling through the building, and I'm not walking fast enough, and you know, I'm leanin' a little bit. You know, all that's goin' on, but I'm not even conscious of it.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Because I walked like this my whole life, you know; they used to call me Otis Cool. So, you know, this doesn't—this is a new thing to me.

AH: Now, what about the talk?

OA: Oh, well, the talk. I guess at the time, I probably talked more like an activist.

AH: Okay.

OA: You see what I'm saying?

AH: Yeah.

OA: And you've got to learn to talk corporate, everything was brief, succinct and to the point. That's how they want you to communicate. All right? You can't communicate with no great narrative going on, (AH laughs) flowery, no, no, no, no, no. Brief—I'll never forget that. Brief, succinct and to the point. And it changed the way I do things- it's funny how that happened, because since that time, I have sat on various boards been on a lot of corporate-type boards. And it prepared me for corporate boards, because that's how it is on a corporate board, to be quite honest with you. But at the time, I didn't understand. But I adapted, you know? I adapted.

AH: All right. I was just curious about that. Okay.

OA: So, I'm making that drive every day from Tampa all the way to St. Petersburg. So, eventually, I decide to use the newsletter to organize all of the clerks (laughs) in the building.

Don't ask me why.

AH: Not just the ones in your unit?

OA: No, the whole building.

AH: Okay.

OA: (laughs) The whole building, all right?

AH: All right.

OA: So, I get all the clerks organized with my newsletter weapon, okay? Then I organize all of the supervisors, okay? Many of the white males would not come along, but most of the other supervisors came along, and we formed a force inside the company before they knew it. Now, this went on for a year. We were highly organized for a year before the company even knew, okay?

One day, the operations manager noticed something was different, and I got a call to come up to the office. And they called me into the office, and the vice president, the operation managers, division manager [were] all sitting around a conference table. And they tell me that they know what's going on. And I say, "Well, what are you talkin' about?" They said, "Well, people are demanding things and asking for things and wanting things that they weren't demanding and asking for before. We think you are behind it." (laughs) So, I say, "Oh, absolutely not. Why would you think that?"

So, interestingly enough—I'm trying to remember how they set me up, but they set me up nicely. They said something about, "We're going to leave the room, and we already know about your network. We're going to leave the room, and we'll be back in ten minutes. We want to talk to all of the leaders of this ring that you all have formed in this company, and we want 'em all in this room in ten minutes." I said, "What makes you think I can get up this whole building and get everybody in this room in ten minutes like that?" And they say, "We already know you can, (both laugh)

Actually, they weren't sure. I figured out they weren't sure, but I had to shown my hand. I ended up showing my hand, because I just stepped out the door, spoke to one person, and when they got back, the whole room was filled with all the leaders and all the organizers, and we were serious.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And then, we had a serious meeting as though I'm back at the university (both laugh) negotiating with the university president for a Black Studies program.

AH: Uh-huh.

OA: And, you know, I'm trying to remember the kind of things we wanted, but we had quite a set of demands and they were really concerned about the file clerks. But they were impressed with our level of organization, so much so they—one of the discussions was to kill the newsletter that I had started. But they decided not to kill it, you know, because we wrote in codes. We really didn't write out—I would write something like, "It's going to be a great lunch today." You know, "Today is going to be a great day to have a great lunch." And everybody'd know we were going to meet in the cafeteria, we got something important to talk about. So, that's how I communicated, but they figured it out.

And interestingly enough, uh—I know what it was. Interestingly enough—the operations manager was named Ray Morgan. I'll never forget him as long as I live. He was mean. He was—he walked around like he was mean-spirited, and he didn't like people. So, one of our demands was to get rid of him. (both laugh)

AH: Okay.

OA: I remember that. To get rid of him. And would you believe that, interestingly enough, this whole thing got reported to the Chicago headquarters for Allstate Insurance Company. And do you know that they got rid of Ray Morgan? They eventually got rid of him.

AH: Wow.

OA: Because I guess the thing was, if you can let something like that get organized under you, that effectively—you are not that great a manager. (laughs)

AH: No.

OA: It took 'em a while. They didn't do it right when we said do it, but they did it. They did it. It was like a couple of months. It blew our minds. And then we were really a force to be reckoned with within the regional office. But strangely enough, once we understood—once they understood that we were organizing, we were empowered, we really didn't have that many fights after that. You know, most of the fights were related to work items. We weren't making a lot of serious demands. But again, I just think that's such a funny period in my life, because I took my community organizer skills into the corporate world. I learned not to ever do that again. (laughs) But what a way, to learn, not to do that again!

So, that was my Allstate experience. And what transitioned me out of that—and we're talking now probably about 1980 or so. My friend the attorney, Allison Thompson, sent me an application for the National Urban Fellows Program. It's a fellowship program. It's designed to accelerate minority leadership in public administration and the public sector throughout the country. It's a very competitive fellowship. You have to have strong academic background; you have to have strong leadership background. And about five hundred people apply each year. They only select twenty-five.

You have to go up to Washington, D.C. and you do an interview with the executive director, and then you do an interview with a panel of professors who are in urban administration and public

administration, and then you come back and do another interview where they give you a public sector problem to solve. It could be transportation, it could be storm water, it doesn't matter; how to keep the busses running, how to handle a garbage strike. Whatever it is, they give you this issue on the spot, and you're at a table with seven other people—they break us down into about seven—and the professors are in the back looking at us. And the idea is how you interact with others, and what kind of leadership you show, and whether you show any ethics, and whether you have any empathy or any respect for the other people's feelings, and all of this. But we don't know what we're being judged on. This is all part of the interview process.

And then they put you in a room by yourself with one interviewer, and when you step into the room, they give you a problem to solve. You only have three minutes to come up with a solution, then you have to tell them your solution. So you've got to think on your feet real quick. This is an incredible interview process, one of the most difficult ones I've ever gone through in my life. But that's how you become a National Urban Fellow.

So, eventually I was selected to become a National Urban Fellow. And as a result of being selected—the National Urban Fellows Program is headquartered in New York. At one point they were sponsored by different colleges for the master's degree, but when I entered the program, Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania was the college for finishing your master's as part of this program.

Now, what I didn't tell you is that- as part of this program, you do a nine month mentorship. Usually it's with a congressman, a mayor, a governor, a city manager or a public sector person that's a high-level person, and you get the high-level experience. You also get that viewpoint of working at the top of an organization. That's why they call it accelerated leadership.

Well, this ended up being perfect for me, right? I got an activist background. I'd finished with the Black History of Tampa Research Project. I'd had a little corporate experience. And now I get a chance to complete my master's and work as an assistant to the mayor. I was fighting like the dickens. At the time, Tom Bradley was the mayor of Los Angeles. First African American mayor, the mayor for Los Angeles, and I always wanted to live in Los Angeles. (laughs). I was ready to go. I'm so glad I didn't go. Los Angeles would have killed me (laughs) at that time of my life. But I thought I wanted to go to Los Angeles, and I fought to go to Los Angeles.

And I ended up—the philosophy of the program is this: If you're from the South, they send you north. If you're from the East, they send you west. If you are a radical or progressive, they put you with a conservative. If you are conservative, they put you with a much more left-leaning, public official. So, the idea is to mix it all up and force you into unfamiliar territory where you have to survive, and you have to use different skills than what you've known in the past.

And so, I got appointed to a conservative mayor (laughs) in Kansas City, Missouri, by the name of Richard Berkley¹⁹. I became his special assistant. I had never lived in that kind of cold in my life! (both laugh) Being a Florida boy, I froze my butt off.

I remember while I was there—and I shouldn't have been partying—one night we had a party.

¹⁹ Mayor of Kansas City from 1979 to 1991.

We were all dancing on these pillars in front of this house. All the men were trying to impress the women. I'm in Kansas City, right, (AH laughs) taking my stuff to Kansas City, we're trying to impress the women, but I'm the only one from Florida. We all throw off all of our shirts, right, and we are dancing. And these women are clapping; they're on the porch and hollering and screaming. It's a great party. I mean, just a great party.

I'm out there no longer than five minutes, seven minutes the most, and that cold attacked my body so bad they had to take me upstairs in—like, it was an attic. They had to wrap me in blankets. (both laugh) The women were laughing at me. (laughs) It was horrible!²⁰

AH: Oh, man.

OA: I couldn't leave. I couldn't move. I froze to death. My body was just assaulted! (both laugh) I had no idea what was going on! So, that's my big Kansas City story. (AH laughs)

But anyway, working as the special assistant to the mayor was quite an experience. What happened was there- was an organization in Kansas City called Freedom Inc. Now, interestingly, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, who became the next mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, who is currently a congressman from Kansas City²¹, was the head of this organization Freedom Inc. Freedom Inc. was a version of Operation PUSH²², only they had total community organization. They put into Congress one of the youngest African Americans in the country at the time, out of the sheer power of their network and organization, and his name was Congressman Alan Wheat²³. When I got there, the first thing I did was dated his sister! (both laugh) That's how I knew him very well.

Matter of fact, I've got to tell you that story, if I can come back. That date lasted five minutes. She picked me up in the car. I got in the car. I froze to death [shivering with embarrassment]. I asked, "Could I go back in the house?" and the date was over. It was just that cold! I could not deal with how cold it was in Kansas City[75 degrees below zero wind chill factor].

But here's the thing: Freedom Inc. consisted of all of the activist ministers, all of the minority contractors, all of the young community activists, all of the black elected officials. It was just an incredible network. Somehow, I got involved with Freedom Now, (laughs) as I would—

AH: Uh-huh.

OA: I gravitate to Freedom Inc. Here I go again. And Freedom Inc. uses me to open our rallies,

²⁰ [Transcriber's Note: Interviewee added the following after the interview - (so much for wine and artificial warmth)]

²¹ Cleaver was mayor from 1991 to 1999, and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2005 as a Democrat.

²² Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) is an African American activist organization founded by Reverend Jesse Jackson in 1971. In 1996, it merged with another of Jackson's organizations, National Rainbow Coalition, and is now known as Rainbow/PUSH.

²³ Wheat served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983 to 1995 as a Democrat. He was elected at age thirty-one.

okay? They heard me do poetry, they heard me speak. So, they used me to open our rallies, a great thing. I mean, I'm in my soup again! (laughs)

AH: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

OA: Right? Here I am, a special assistant to the mayor, (laughs) had to gravitate to all the wrong people again, right? (AH laughs) So, it's a great experience. I got a chance to see African American empowerment at work on a day-to-day basis. I have never seen, in Tampa or anywhere in Florida, black people that well organized, highly sophisticated, good network, excellent writers. They controlled the media, dominated the county commission, dominated the city council, frightened the death out of the mayor. I mean, when they wanted to fight, everybody showed up, and they rarely lost a fight, okay. And they liked me! (laughs) I was one of their own. They adopted me immediately.

So, I got a chance to have this entire experience for nine months. At the same time, I'm working in the mayor's office. I'm working on the annexation of another community, a suburban community. I'm getting experiences like this. So, it was an incredible experience. I'm writing part of my master's degree thesis at the same time, while I'm doing all of this. But here's the killer: In Kansas City, Missouri—Kansas City is known for the blues, you know?

AH: Oh, yeah.

OA: "I'm going to Kansas City. Kansas City, here I come." And they talk about Vine Street, one of the famous streets for the blues.²⁴ Well, Kansas City has this great blues tradition, and so, I'm thinking I should interject poetry with the blues, put it in the nightclubs, make something happen. So, what I eventually do is I convince a nightclub owner to let me put together a poetry act backed up with the blues. It turns out to be such a success—I didn't think it was going to be such a success.

Now, here's the funny thing about it, if you want to hear it; really funny. The funny thing about it was I was part—I turned myself into part comedian, to open up the nightclub. I was part comedian, then it was part poetry, then it was part—how do you say it? It was part—after about eleven-thirty, part erotic poetry. (laughs)

AH: Uh-huh.

OA: That's when all the women and the guys come in, and the couples come in, they sit around, and then I had other poets that come in after twelve. We're doing this very interesting kind of erotic poetry. The whole thing spreads over the community. People want to come to this club, hear all this talk, this poetry about love and intimacy and all this, and romance. I mean, we got it going on. We got a spot now. And so, this is how I spend my evenings. (laughs) I'm the special assistant to the mayor by day, totally serious. (AH laughs)

Kansas City was such a great experience for me. People get it confused with Kansas City,

²⁴ OA is quoting from the song "Kansas City," written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and recorded by numerous artists.

Kansas, which is really conservative. Kansas City, Missouri is an activist community. They believe in economic and political empowerment of the African American community. And I'll tell you later about the value of that experience when I got back to Tampa, because they taught me the importance of putting together an economic development agenda.

As a result of that, when I left Kansas City, Missouri, I went to work for the Justice Department in Miami. And this is after the riots in Miami—

AH: Okay, now, let's just back up, just for a second.

OA: Okay, all right. Let's back up.

AH: All I want to ask about in Kansas City, which sounds like (OA laughs) you were really in your element, is, was there any friction with the mayor over your involvement with Freedom Now?

OA: No.

AH: Okay.

OA: No.

AH: So, you kept it kind of—moderated it a little—?

OA: No, it wasn't that. It's just Freedom Inc. was so powerful, the mayor would never have bothered me about Freedom Inc.

AH: Okay.

OA: That's just how awesome they were, okay. He respected Freedom Now. Freedom Inc., they got him elected. I mean, they liked him. He was kind of what you'd call a moderate to liberal Republican mayor, okay. So he was pretty much okay with that.

But when I left, they wrote up the funniest proclamation about my activities. (laughs) He showed that he understood how unusual—he wrote a proclamation just for me, called it “Otis Anthony Day,” and he understood just how unusual I was. Basically, I think he was trying to say, “I'm glad you were here, and I'm glad you're gone.” (both laugh) “You stayed too long.” I think eventually that's what it was about.

AH: Well, you had a lot more than just one mentor. It was a lot more than the mayor, it sounded like. You had Freedom Now—

OA: Mm-hm. Oh, yeah.

AH: Okay.

OA: I'm trying to think of—boy, I cannot think of this guy's name(Michael Fisher) There was another African American, who was a national urban fellow, and he worked in the same office. He really helped me with my transition. He was out of Atlanta. He was really respected for his conservative ways. He was pragmatic, strategic, very tactical—I studied him and what he does—very tactful in everything he did. He was sort of like—yeah, my mentor when I was there. His name was Michael, and I can't think of his last name now. But yeah, he was a big part of my transition into that office.

So, I didn't bring my stuff to work, okay? When I came to work, I was conservative. But at night, we owned the city! (laughs)

AH: Yes, okay. Nice. Well, and that's kind of the Allstate experience speaking to that, too, not mixing it too much.

OA: Mm-hm.

AH: Okay. So then, tell us—you get to Miami in the Justice Department, of all places.

OA: Yes. I get a job as a Conciliator, which is essentially—you are a troubleshooter for the federal government in the office of CRS, Community Relations Service. Very few people know about this service of the Justice Department. It is still there. And it's two of us in the office in Miami.

And so, we have the Overtown Riots to break out.²⁵ And now we have to manage this. And I'm very good at this kind of stuff, all right? So, I got to pull together the corporate leaders with the police chiefs, with the community leaders, and we got to come up with a plan for the post-riot, after the riot, to address the community concerns. Well, again, (laughs) I'm in my element. I mean, this is perfect, right?

The problem was that they had an African American city manager, the first city manager in Miami, and he was powerful. His name was Howard something—I'm trying to think of his name; it'll come to me. Howard something.²⁶ And he was in a major public conflict with the chief of police. This is very similar, now—Miami is in this period of evolution where police departments are dominated by white males, yet you have African Americans showing more and more political power on the county commission and the city council, and you can see their power is about to develop.

And finally, it reaches a point where they can challenge a powerful police chief who is backed up by the corporate leaders, and this guy's name is Chief [Kenneth] Harms. All of the corporate leaders love this guy, and they don't want him to go. And the African American city manager—and the riots caused the tension, and the riot exploded the contradiction—imploded the contradictions between the city manager and the police chief. And this is all taking place, and all of these—this friction is part of the meetings we have to resolve these issues with the community.

²⁵ The riots broke out in December 1982. OA proceeds to summarize the causes.

²⁶ Howard Gary.

So, on the one hand, we got the militants in the African American community in Miami shouting in the meetings. On the other hand, you got the police department standing its grounds about instances of police brutality. On the other hand, I got a black city manager who wants to see changes. And in comes the Justice Department, and we got to facilitate and mediate all of these forces, and make sure something gets done.

AH: Now, just for the people who are uninitiated, just summarize real quick what the riots were about.

OA: Okay. The Overtown Riot—again, Miami had a history of some of the most vicious rebellions and vicious riots. In the early seventies [1970s], there was the Liberty City Riots, where a young African American male on a motorcycle was chased by police. He stopped, and they literally beat him to death with flashlights. Well, they nearly burned Miami down as a result.²⁷ So, Miami had a history—if you abuse black people, they will take to the streets.

So, when I came there, what happened—

AH: Was that [Arthur] McDuffie, by chance?

OA: McDuffie. You remember it. That's the McDuffie case.

AH: Okay, yes.

OA: Okay, you remember it.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So, I was not there for McDuffie. I was there for Overtown. In the Overtown Riots, a young kid, African American kid, was at an arcade playing video games. A Spanish white police officer comes in. They get into some kind of altercation, and he shoots and kills a kid in an arcade full of kids. Oh, the community goes off the chain, okay? The community explodes.

All kinds of things are happening in this riot, and I have to go down in a riot because what I do is called a pulse report. I actually have to give an on the ground report of what is going on. It was in Miami that I learned you don't want to be riding around in a white federal car during the middle of a riot. (laughs) I also learned that if you're going to go down in the middle of a riot, you know, you back your car in so you can get out fast. I didn't know those little things, so I drove my car in, then I get backed in and I can't get—I had to leave my car. (laughs) I left my car there for two days. Things like that.

But, you know, it was crazy. There were whites in pickup trucks who came in from the surrounding community. They were shooting at people during the riots; I mean it gets real crazy.

²⁷ McDuffie was killed on December 17, 1979. The riots took place in May 1980, after all of the police officers involved in his death had been acquitted. The trial, which was prosecuted by Janet Reno, took place in Tampa, and with an all-white, all-male jury.

There were police officers. Now, the community report that the police officers would ride in the back of the police cars with shotguns, and they would kick the door open shooting at people. So, you got black people shooting guns. You got the police shooting. You got whites coming in from the outside shooting. This is a very serious thing. And it was my first experience at a really serious riot.

But the real thing is afterwards, because this is when you've got to really utilize the rebellion to make profound changes in the community. And this is the part I think I'm pretty good at, and I knew how to do that. So, as a result of that situation and facilitating the mediation—by the way, in this office that I worked with, I worked with a white guy by the name of Rob. He was married to an African American woman, pretty liberal, pretty progressive—more conservative than me, but we made a great team. You know, I could go into the community, and he could be downtown, and we'd get together, put our nose together. We'd figure out how we're gonna facilitate a mediation to resolve these disputes.

So, we worked really good together in these meetings. And as a result, we came out with like a blueprint, as I recall, for economic development for the Overtown area in Miami. It was an incredible blueprint. And for a while, the city fathers and the powers that be, they all got involved. There was one office that I worked with constantly. It was the Office of Community Relations. It was based in Miami; it was a branch of government. And these guys were radicals (laughs) in this office, actually. They were radicals, but they knew how to sit down, plan, strategize, and plan for economic development.

And so, I got this whole experience out of Miami of practical community development, getting a person together to solve real problems that's taking place at the street level. And that was really the value of my experience, which really paid off for me, as I was saying earlier, when I got back to Tampa and we had some conflict here and we had to, in a sense, force the city fathers of Tampa to do the same thing. So—

AH: Now, just real quick, the way that you kind of summed up the riot, sum up the economic plan.

OA: Well, if my memory serves me—here's the parts that I can remember. Part of economic development is that the banks have to be involved. Another part of economic development is that capital has to flow to minority contractors. The other aspect is that minority contractors have to be able to establish businesses in the community where they can employ people from that community. Another aspect of it is job creation.

But the real heart and soul of economic development is that the political leadership, the chamber [of commerce], the planning commissions, all of those people, before they can plan for the future, they need to be consulting with inner-city residents about their concerns and what they want in their community. Okay? And if you have that kind of backing, you can create actual taxing districts, where all the funds from that district go into a fund for economic development so you can have sustainable economic development. So, it's that kind of thing when you talk about economic development.

So in a sense, yeah, that's what you're trying to do. The key to it is to lay a new economic infrastructure for communities that are red-lined, and victims of red-lining, communities where nobody wants to bring insurance or businesses into those communities, to jumpstart those communities' economic life again.

AH: Okay. And then, so how long were you in Miami?

OA: I was in Miami probably for two years. We did all this in about a two-year period.

AH: Okay. And then how'd the next change come?

OA: Okay, let me see. I'm going blank here. I had to go back to Bucknell, because remember, I had to complete my master thesis. So I'm trying to work on my master thesis—oh, I got it! And I am in Miami, thinking about whether I want to live there. I'm not thinking I want to go back to Tampa right now. I mean, Miami is like a lot of fun, too, all right? I mean, Miami's just wild. A lot of things going in Miami, and I want to be part of it.

But I got a call from Bob Morrison, who was the executive assistant to the mayor, to Mayor Bob Martinez here in Tampa. A position as the Deputy Director of the Sanitation Department opens up. Now, this is a strange set of events that leads me into this position. Bob Morrison is Republican. Bob Martinez is Republican. I, in my fellowship, my last job was with a Republican mayor.

AH: Ah.

OA: My credentials looked great compared to everybody else's.

AH: (laughs)

OA: How interesting that was, right? So, Bob Martinez said, "Yeah, bring this guy on down." I did my interview. I was hired. At the same time, Sandy Freedman is running for mayor. Bob Martinez is transitioning out of the mayor's office, okay—let me back up, I'm sorry. It was not as the director of the Solid Waste Department, or the Sanitation Department. It was as the Deputy Director of the Solid Waste Department. Because what Bob Martinez was getting ready to do was run for governor, and Bob Martinez needed to prove that he had diversity among his administrative staff, even in his top administrative staff, and he had very little diversity. So this was an excellent appointment for him. At the time, I'm a son of Tampa. I just finished working for a Republican mayor.

It all worked out so interesting. I get this position as the Deputy Director of Solid Waste, so I leave Miami and I come back to Tampa. Right before I leave, though, my mother—I get a call. My mother is in the hospital. They don't think she's going to make it. They got her on a respirator, you know. I fly into Tampa overnight, spend time to her, talking to her while she's laying there, and eventually she passes away. So I'm going through this period where my mother's passed—again, this is early eighties [1980s]—about to transition into a new job as the deputy director of Solid Waste.

I arrive at the Solid Waste Department in the City of Tampa not knowing that the current director, who was a West Point graduate—brilliant in his own right, absolutely no question; just one of the most brilliant guys I’ve ever met in my life. He has military background. He is regimental and authoritarian in everything that he does, okay. He has an I.Q. off the chart. Sharp. He was not afraid of anybody. I mean, I saw him in meetings, and he told the mayor what he think if he didn’t agree with the mayor. I mean, he was really something else. He was different, and he was my boss! (laughs)

And he did not want me in this position. He had a best friend; her name was Pam. He had already nominated her and fought for her to have this position. And she is still there in the department when I arrive. And so, in less than no time at all, he has given instructions to everybody in the department, “Don’t give him any help. Don’t give him any support. Don’t help him understand our computer system, the technology here. If he supposed to be all that—the mayor appointed him here—he supposed to be that sharp, he’ll survive on his own.” That was my experience going in.

This went on for about a year. We went head to head. It was a major war inside of the Sanitation Department just for me to have the agenda, to know when there was another meeting. I mean, he was cold. He made it very clear to me I was not his choice. He did not want me there. He was tolerating me, but he didn’t feel any responsibility to help me in my professional development while I was there.

Strangely enough, I guess because of my own uniqueness and my curiosity about everything, he was curious enough about me to want to just sometime call me in the office, and we would spend forty-five minutes to an hour discussing the world, discussing politics, discussing the city, discussing the community. He loved doing this. He was very conservative, and he wanted to challenge my liberal ideas (laughs) and set me on the right path. I think in his own way, he eventually developed a relationship with me, but he really didn’t want to let me know, and he wanted me out of that position.

Well, things got worse. They didn’t get better, they got worse. So, eventually I wrote a white paper on how the department was run, how he was an ineffective leader, how the men did not like him on the yard—the garbage men, the men who actually picked up the garbage did not like him, the way he talked to them. And this paper ended up in the mayor’s office. (laughs) I write this paper, end up in the mayor’s office, and Sandy Freedman is just transitioning in—no, no, it was right before she transitions in.

Bob Martinez decides, for some reason—I think Bob Martinez decides this guy’s too arrogant, too, and that was the last straw. I gave them the last straw that they needed with that white paper. They got rid of him, and I became the director of Solid Waste.

AH: Wow.

OA: Now, you want to know what’s interesting? Before that happened, it was the first time in my life in a long time, that for the first time in my life, I questioned my own ability. This guy

was good, and he got to me. Not to mention, I felt ineffective in the organization. He questioned my management skills. He questioned my technical knowledge. He knew I had never had any experience with a budget of thirty-five million dollars a year, the executive director. He questioned my inexperience. I went home every day very frustrated.

I'll never forget I talked to this elderly black woman. I was so down one day I was thinking about quitting. I mean, he really had gotten to me. And I was talking to this elderly black woman, and I was telling her about what I was going through. And she told me, she said—I'll never forget this. She said, "Otis, I hear you, but you claim you know something about our people's history? You don't know nothing about slavery. You don't know nothing about chains. You don't know nothing about castrating, whipping, lynching. You don't know nothing about being worked to death, being called 'boy' or 'girl.' You don't know nothing about no suffering. So, I want you get on out of here and stop feeling sorry for yourself, because you ain't suffered, young man. You don't know how good you've had it. You don't know nothing about suffering." And that's how she left me, okay? (laughs) That is how she left me.

I went back and I took over. (both laugh)

AH: Yes.

OA: And I became the director of Solid Waste. Had a great period. All of the black employees that had been fired, I brought 'them back, particularly the black supervisors. I brought 'em—they could not believe it. These people were home, they had retired them early. I brought 'em back. They knew the yard. They knew garbage trucks. They knew garbage routes. They knew the customers. They knew the customers that would complain. They had been in sanitation most of 'em twenty-five and thirty years, some of them, and they knew sanitation. And he got rid of them. I brought them back; that was my first act.

My second act was—you would not believe this. The men come on the yard, and they would leave, say, five-thirty, because people didn't want us clanging the garbage cans too early in the morning, or I would have put them out on the routes out even earlier. So maybe five-thirty in the morning, the trucks are leaving out of the yard. Now, I'm the director of Solid Waste, and I'm out there in the mornings, okay. I've never in my life been able to get up early, but I got to be there, right?

I convinced these guys, who were illiterate, many of them, uneducated, could not read—when I discovered that many of these guys could not read, it just blew my mind. I just couldn't believe it. Now, you would not believe how motivated these guys were to learn to read. Nobody ever asked them if they could read, or tried to help them read. And these guys are on complicated routes, and they're driving new vehicles, cost twenty-two thousand dollars a truck, okay?

So, I start a literacy class that starts at four o'clock in the morning, on the yard. These guys would come to work at four o'clock, sit in the literacy class till five o'clock, then get in their trucks and go to work, every morning. I got with the Hillsborough County School System, brought in a reading coach. And that one simple act right there bonded me with my men.

The other thing, before I got there, they said that you can't stop garbage routes in order to have staff meetings. "The garbage goes first. The men will kill you." I said, "How can you run a department and you never meet with your people? You can't incentivize them, you can't give them rewards, you can't talk with them, you can't let them know what's about to come down." So, I broke with that tradition, and I would bring them in off of their routes to have a staff meeting, all the garbage trucks. Oh! Nobody ever thought of doing that. But these guys were so good; they'd pick up the pace soon as they go back out. They could not believe that I thought enough of them to bring them into staff meetings, tell them what the mayor was saying, what the next budget was going to be like.

The other challenge I had was that the chamber and the mayor and all those believe that if you privatize things, it was always better. And so, their jobs were being threatened at a time that I was their director. And so, I went to the mayor. Right before I got there, the mayor brought in one private company out of Miami. So, now the private companies had taken over half of the city, and this was just too much for these guys. They were fuming. And they said, "Otis, we got to stop this. These guys gonna take our jobs." And the quality of the private work was poor; they'd throw the garbage cans down, they left stuff on the ground. Neighbors and the community people were complaining. But it was cheaper.

So, I went to the mayor, and I told the mayor, I said, "Let me compete. This is what I learned at Allstate. It's called intrapreneurship. Let me run this department like it's a business. Let me compete head-up with the private contractors. You pick a contract, any contract. Let them do it and let us do it. We're gonna do it more efficiently, we're gonna do it more timely. We're gonna have a greater quality, and we're gonna come in under cost. And we're gonna prove to you that the private sector's not necessarily better than the public sector."

I went back to my men and I told them what we had to do. In many respects, it meant them doubling duty sometimes. So the mayor said, "Okay. Show me on the Housing Authority contract. Y'all go at it, and show me." And we did it. Eventually, the private sector contractors fell out of favor with city government, and we looked stronger than we'd ever been. So, that was kind of like my contribution as a director of Solid Waste for the City of Tampa.

And I've got to tell you, when I took this position, I was scared to death. I mean, really, now I'm in charge with a thirty-five million dollar budget. I got over two hundred employees. I got an office full of technology and people who know more about me and what's going on. And I got to really know that city now. It was scary, but I kept it to myself. I assumed the position, and as a result, that's what we were able to do. So, it was the most incredible experience. When I see those guys now if I'm on the street or somewhere, you know, they all know me. They holler, scream at me when they see me somewhere. You know, we had an incredible bond. It has never been like that since I was down there.

Oh, and by the way, I brought in and developed the future Solid Waste directors, and got those people trained, who are now the managers, in management at Solid Waste, and a lot of them are still there today.

AH: Okay.

OA: Oh, the other thing! One more thing that's really important, because once I went into the mayor's office—what I'll tell you about this. The Solid Waste experience taught me, and the Miami experience taught me, how to take the kids off the street when they were rioting and put them in jobs. And now that I had the city experience—we'll get to that, when the College Hill Riots broke out in Tampa, I was able to take those kids off the street and put them to work in the Solid Waste Department. Many of those kids have a career today as a result of the riot and me putting them to work. That's kind of that story.

AH: And when was that riot?

OA: Oh, now we're talking. We're looking at 1986, eighty-seven [1987]. I entered the mayor's office about eighty-seven [1987]; I think the College Hill Riots are around 1987.²⁸ It was the most incredible time in Tampa's history. There had been several police shootings. Now, the mayor has elevated me to the executive assistant to the mayor. I'm no longer the Solid Waste director. Bob Morrison, who has held that position, has moved on. And one of the first big things that happens is the College Hill Riots.

Well, I go into the College Hill Riots, and essentially—you're not going to believe this. Essentially, I get the kids and put on a political theatre. (laughs) These are kids that are involved in the riot. I kid you not, I put on a political theatre, invited all the city leaders—chamber of commerce, mayor, everybody—into the College Hill Auditorium, and I convinced the kids that this is how you tell your story, cause they think y'all are just wild and crazy and angry, and you don't have any real grievances.

AH: Yeah.

OA: This is how you tell your story. Now, I'm the executive assistant to the mayor, and I got to go back to my activist skills, right? (laughs)

AH: Yeah, this goes way back to the seventies [1970s] right here.

OA: We do it. We actually pull it off. Tampa Electric Company and its executives are involved. Major leaders, distinguished—newspaper articles are written about it and everything. That was one thing.

The other thing: During the course of the riot—this is always at night—the kids were so angry. See, I didn't understand that anger. They were so angry for being stopped, and being jacked up by the police, and being searched. They went through this so much, that kids as young as the fifth grade had this incredible anger towards the police, that I underestimated, but then I began to remember Miami. But, I didn't think the kids in Tampa were having as bad an experience as the kids in Miami. I really didn't. So that caught me by surprise.

²⁸ February 1987. Tampa police had used a carotid neck-hold on a young African American man with schizophrenia, leading to his death. The day after this man died, a report was released clearing Tampa police of misconduct in the 1986 arrest of baseball player Dwight Gooden. The combination of these events caused the riots.

So, when the rioting cooled off, what we would do is- we would put together a community patrol. It's made up of mainly professionals—worked for the city, worked for the county. African Americans mostly, ministers, social workers, people in the Department of Corrections, and we would be in our casual clothes. And starting about four o'clock, we hit the streets, because the riots kick off after dark, okay?

So, we're hitting the street talking to these kids and trying to convince them, "Don't yawl do nothing tonight. Let's bring this all to a meeting table. Let's talk about it." Man, the first two or three days, those kids would say, "Oh, yeah, yeah. We're gonna come and talk." As it got darker and darker and darker, the police department would line up its forces, and they'd have their riot gear, and they are across the street from the kids in College Hill. And the College Hill Projects are huge at this time. You have both Ponce de Leon, all the kids in Ponce de Leon, and all the kids in College Hill. And some of these kids remembered me as an organizer, and their parents remembered me. So, I had some credibility with them, but this is a whole nother generation, and they are a little scarier.

These kids had a chant. Around six o'clock they started going, (sings) "Oh-oh-oh." I'll never forget it. That's how it sounds. And they'll start coming out by the hundreds, slowly from behind the projects, from behind the buildings, and they go, (sings) "Oh-oh-oh. Oh-oh-oh."

And when they start doing the chant, imagine this: The police are lined up across the street, the kids are on the other side of the street, and in the middle is us, trying to convince the kids, "Don't do nothing." That didn't work. That was not a good place for me to be. (laughs)

AH: No.

OA: All right? That was— But they had such respect for us, because we spent time talking to 'em. We were there. As soon as it got dark and when nightfall comes, the bottles, the Molotov [cocktails] went over our heads, with us standing there. We're supposed to be—the community think we're controlling these kids, right? No way. It goes over our heads at the police, and the riot breaks out again.

This goes on for a couple of days like this, all right? Like the second night, I decide to go deeper into the hole; it's called a hole. I take one guy with me; his name is Freddie Moore. I want to go deeper into the hole because I want to know what's going on back there in the dark, how they're getting together, how they're organized, and I want to know if they'll talk to me.

So, I take a chance to go into the hole. Well, I'm back there in the—they called it the hole because it was a drug hole, okay, but now they're using the hole to get organized. I go into the hole, and in a sense, they kidnap me. (laughs) I am serious. They surround me. They kidnap me, and they walk around making jokes about who gonna hit me first, and who gonna stomp me, who gonna kick me, and they're gonna take my wallet. "[We] know y'all got some money." Now, they don't know I'm the assistant to the mayor, okay? They just feel like I'm a sell-out been sent in to stop them from rioting, and they're fittin' to kick my butt. Okay?

Now, I gotta talk. (laughs) I got to talk quick, I got to talk fast. While I'm talking to them, and

I'm telling them, "First of all, don't hit the news trucks. You hitting the news truck. Why you hitting the news truck? Your story not getting out." And I'm talking about—"Are you willing to tell the public what this is all about, and what is it that you want?" I'm going through all this.

Finally, I convinced them that they shouldn't beat me up and rob me, but they're still angry with me. And as soon as they're trying to make a decision as to whether they're gonna hurt me or not—I'll never forget this. There's a lieutenant in the police department who calls out and says, "Mr. Anthony, is there anything you want us to do?" Unbelievable. He was actually smart enough to figure out what was happening.

As soon as he said that, them guys go, "Did that policeman call you Mr. Anthony? Who are you, man?" I tell them who I am and they say, "You lie. You masqueradin'. You masqueradin'. You are lyin'. You a clown, and you are masqueradin'." I say, "No, I am. I am!" They didn't believe me! So, they say, "Prove it." I say, "What y'all want me to do?" They say, "If they'll move back, then we ain't gonna throw no rocks, if they will move their forces back across the street and off our side of the street." So, I call out to the police lieutenant, and I said, "Sir, I think we got this thing under control. If you would just move your forces back across the street, they're willing to talk."

In less than one minute, they saw the entire riot policemen move. They couldn't believe it! Their whole experience is that a white policeman ain't never listen to nothing a black person had to say. That sewed the whole moment up for them. From that moment on, we did political theatre. I got them jobs with the city. They sat down and negotiated their demands with us. The riot eventually stopped. It was just the most incredible time. But that was my experience in the College Hill Riot. The mayor was happy. We got it all solved. That kind of made my reputation. (laughs)

AH: Yeah.

OA: In my first real experience, my first real test, as the executive assistant to the mayor.

AH: And this is under Freedman?

OA: Now I'm under Sandy Freedman.

AH: Yeah, okay.

OA: Sandy Freedman. And I'm thinking, Boy, now I can relax and cruise and everything gonna be all right. And lo and behold—

AH: Well, actually, let's stop right here.

OA: Yeah, okay, okay.

AH: And we'll save it—

OA: How we doin' on time?

AH: Yeah, yeah, good. What time is it?

Tape 1 of Interview 3 ends; tape 2 of Interview 3 begins.

AH: Okay.

OA: Okay.

AH: Now, you talked about your mother passing. We haven't talked about your father in a while, so I just wanted to catch up with him. Was he still with you at this time?

OA: Yeah, my father's still with me. And I told you my father was a laborer. And by this time now, he does odd jobs, sometime drive trucks, but he's worked all his life, you know, and it's starting to get to him. It's starting to get to his health. But he's there with me. My mother doesn't have the opportunity to see me ascend to the mayor's office, but my father does. And all of his friends would come around and talk about, "Your boy, the assistant to the mayor." I mean, this is a really big deal to him, so he's very proud. That's the situation.

What was different about me becoming the executive assistant to the mayor was that before me, there was Alton White, and after Alton White, there was Bob Morrison. Both Alton White and Bob Morrison came from pretty stable middle-class families. Bob Morrison's father was a pharmacist; Alton White, of course, Moses White, a businessman. And so, they were expected to ascend to this level, but I was not expected to from the projects. So immediately after I was appointed to the executive assistant to the mayor, a sector of the black leadership challenged the mayor's decision, for putting me in that position.

AH: Now, is this before the riots, or after?

OA: No, this all after the riots now.

AH: Okay.

OA: No, no, no. I'm sorry, this is before the riots.

AH: Okay.

OA: Immediately, when I'm appointed.

AH: Yes.

OA: Yeah, when I'm appointed. They challenged her decision, and she stands her grounds, because she knew me when she was on city council, and she saw the work I did in the community. And she knew what I had done at the Solid Waste; they didn't know about all this part of my history. But they thought that I wasn't one of them, that's essentially what it was. I

wasn't from one of the families in Tampa, and that was the whole gist of the matter.

So, here I was, out of a segregated high school. The African Americans who attended the segregated high schools and schools in Tampa, they knew me from way back as the president of the student government. They were really proud of me. It was one of the most important things that ever happened in my life. I remember calling the *Florida Sentinel*, and they were asking me how did I feel? I said I felt like I was walking on water. And I remember thinking to myself that Sandy Freedman, what she had done for me, was something I could never do for myself. And I always wanted to show her how much I really appreciate it, her taking a chance with me.

So, I was extremely loyal to the mayor, so loyal, so much so that I went to a meeting one day, of black leaders, at the house of Mr. James Hammond. This is early on, after my appointment. People were talking about, "The mayor's not this," and "The mayor's not that," "The mayor pretends like she understand us, but she's not with us on this, she's not with us on that. You got to remember, Otis, you from this community and you one of us. You need to tell her what she need to do." And the first thing out of my mouth was, "I understand what you all are saying, but the first thing you all are gonna have to respect is that I was appointed by the mayor, and I am loyal to the mayor."

Well, I didn't even understand the impact and the drama behind those words for them. I thought they knew enough about me as a background to understand that of course, I would always still care for them. But they wanted to make a case against me, anyway, cause many of them didn't want me to have that position. So, it spread all over the community just like the loyal slave, (laughs) acting like the loyal slave Negro. White folks done gave him a little position, and now we done lost him.

So, I mean, from the very beginning they just started damaging my name, you know. And I'm in this position, and I'm trying to get everything done for black folk possible. And I'm not Perry Harvey, on the city council. I am appointed. Everything I do and I accomplish, I do it in the name of the mayor. And I'm in the newspapers a lot, and I'm doing a lot, and I got a lot of different projects going on that benefit the African American Community, and I'm thinking they reading between the lines. But no, they're not. They are still going along with the rumor mongering in the community.

Along with that, there's a newspaper columnist—his name is Rudolph Harris—in the *Florida Sentinel Bulletin*, who has gotten a bad deal his entire life at the Hillsborough County School System. He is the black historian at the *Florida Sentinel*, he writes about black history, and he writes about current-day issues impacting the black community. He decided to take me on, as their spokesperson for this group who doesn't like me, and whenever they—and he writes something negative me about me in the *Florida Sentinel* every week.

Now, I'm just getting in the mayor's office, just getting my feet established, and I'm dealing with this in the community. So, a lot of people who were new to Tampa, African American professionals who moved here—we had a lot of people like that. They got an early negative view of me without even getting to know me. The community had questions about my loyalty to them. And I'm going through all of this at a time when I'm attempting to force the city to do more than

they'd ever done for the African American community, and these are the tensions that I'm dealing with. I'm the highest ranking African American in this city. When you're the executive assistant to the mayor, probably they viewed me as being in the most powerful position, because Alton White made it a powerful position.

What nobody knows is that I'm also managing another contradiction. Previous mayors gave more authority and power to that position. Sandy Freedman brings in a chief of staff as her number two. She also brings in a media specialist. So, as the issues broke, the three of them now are doing what the mayor and the executive assistant would do, what Alton White and Bill Poe would do, get together and work. So, I'm really kind of on the outside of the inside clique in the mayor's office, but I don't tell anybody, and I don't complain.

This went on for a while. I'm experiencing isolation within the mayor's office. But the mayor still has a great deal of faith in me, all right, and I'm loyal to her. So, we're dealing with all kinds of issues: minority contractors excluded from wealth. Finally, I get to a point where I challenge the mayor to give me things, assignments, other than community relations assignments. So this is the first time she gets an indication that I'm a little different than the person she thought she had hired.

What happens is that we're getting ready to build the Tampa Convention Center. And the owner of the [New York] Yankees, um—

AH: [George] Steinbrenner.

OA: Steinbrenner puts in a proposal. Our finance director, who is Lou Russo, is not very happy with George Steinbrenner and his proposals, but we're gonna put together a committee. Now, I'm concerned about this, because I want to be on the selection committee from the beginning, because that would mean minority contractors and jobs for the African American community. So, I make my pitch to sit in on the committee that's gonna make the selection for Steinbrenner, whether Steinbrenner's gonna build the convention center, and I push a little hard. The mayor allows me on it, but I think it's the first indication she begins to realize that I want to do more than community relations.

So, I'm dealing with this, and eventually what happens is some of the mayor's friends goes to New York (or somewhere) meets these very wealthy guys, who are both explorers and investors; they own a Major League Baseball team. They discover the *Whydah* slave ship at the bottom of the sea.

AH: Ah, yes.

OA: And somehow, a couple of the mayor's friends at the time—I didn't know it was a couple of the mayor's friends; I think they were doctors—heard about this incredible find, and I think they had very good intentions. The investors had tried to put this ship in another community, and the black community raised questions.

AH: Yeah.

OA: I think it was—it's in the newspaper. They tried to put this slave ship there. And so, we learned that they're gonna try to bring this slave ship to Tampa. Well, the black community gets very concerned. I'm the executive assistant to the mayor. The mayor's very nervous about this whole thing. The community organizes itself into what is called the African American Leadership Conference, and they are preparing to challenge the mayor on bringing a slave ship. Now, they were okay with bringing this slave ship as a historical museum, as an educational experience for schoolchildren. But the problem was it had to be connected with the new museum that they were building over by the [Florida] Aquarium. These are the new projects going up. And this was going to be the centerpiece of this new multimillion dollar museum, bringing in tourists from all over the world.

AH: Now, this museum is what, the precursor to the Tampa Bay History Center?

OA: Right—no, no, no. This is—

AH: The art museum?

OA: This is something completely different.

AH: Okay.

OA: What they're trying to do is develop Channelside at the time, that whole area of Channelside. And this was going to be the anchor-piece, you know, along with the Aquarium. And the city fathers and everybody has signed off on this. Now, let me back up for a second.

AH: Sure.

OA: Because one thing happened in between that, before that happened. Tampa, for years, since the turn of the century, has had a group, a very powerful group, called Ye Mystic Krewe. It's made up of all the powerful corporate leaders of the community. These are the people that give political contributions to the mayor, and everybody respects these—these are the developers and the bankers—

AH: This is a Gasparilla [parade] krewe, right?

OA: Everybody knows the Gasparilla Krewe. For years, they have put on this segregated parade, and they are a segregated organization, and have no black members and no women allowed. And they have these private clubs, like the University Club and other golf and country clubs, and no blacks are allowed and no women are allowed. There was an incident with one of the black golfers, Lee Elder, in another community. He was not allowed into the golf and country club. Warren Dawson, an attorney here in Tampa, says to us, "Well, this is similar to the Lee Elder event." So he calls a meeting at his law office. I say, "I need to be at that meeting," okay, and I told the mayor. I said, "Mayor, I need to be in that meeting."

So, I go to this meeting. They form the African American Leadership Council. I can't be a part

of the council, but I can be one of its advisers, cause I want to stay involved. I want to know what they're doing. But in the meeting, the issues that they're getting ready to challenge, Ye Mystic Krewe, the most powerful people, and the city fathers, I think, are putting pressure on the mayor at the time that I don't know about.

So, I go to one of their meetings, and when I get back to the mayor's meeting—morning meeting with all of her senior advisers—I'm explaining to her and her staff what I think our strategy should be, how I think we should approach this. We're going to have to be very strategic, what's delicate about this whole process. Lou Russo, the mayor's right-hand man—one of her other right-hand men—said, "Mayor, Otis sounds like he more part of them than he part of us."

Wow. I said, "No, I'm just trying to tell you we're gonna need a really clear strategy for this, okay, because people are angry and upset." What I didn't understand—the mayor admitted later—what I didn't understand is they totally underestimated African Americans' reactions to slavery. To them, that was something of the past, so they didn't understand what I was talking to them about.

AH: All right, now are you talking about the slave ship or Gasparilla?

OA: Okay, I'm talking about—I'm talking about—I'm sorry. I'm sorry. What happens—okay, let me back up.

Yes, it's about the slave ship. The issue was—no, no, I'm sorry. It's about Gasparilla. It's about Gasparilla. They are about to challenge Ye Mystic Krewe. The mayor does admit later that she did understand how the brouhaha over the slave ship. But no, it was the battle for Gasparilla first, okay, and fighting Ye Mystic Krewe. So, and I'm telling her, I said, "We gotta be very strategic about this. Okay?"

I will never forget. The mayor comes out from behind her desk, stands over me, and says to me, "You will choose, and you will choose now." Wow. Wow. And she meant right then, right there, right now, who you are with. Us or them. I couldn't believe it.

So, I didn't choose at all. I just looked at her, all right, and I didn't say a word. So for her, I guess she took it as a signal of, okay, things had changed about me and—

AH: You hadn't chose her.

OA: Yeah, things are changing. But she keeps me on. I mean, I'm on. I stay with the mayor for seven of her eight years, you know. Part of it was cause of my connection to the community, part of it was trying to figure out just how to deal with me.

So, that was a very trying time in my life. We challenge Ye Mystic Krewe, and these guys explode. I mean, these guys are so angry, and they are so accustomed to having power, they cancel the Gasparilla parade.

AH: Mm-hm.

OA: Well, by now, I'm in their meetings, between Ye Mystic Krewe and the chamber, and we are—asked the Chamber of Commerce to sponsor the meetings between us and Ye Mystic Krewe, to facilitate. So, the chamber's playing a very critical role. There are incredible meeting notes and meeting reports that came out of those sessions, that the Chamber still has, by the way. And by the way, I still have the records of those meetings. But I'm playing too much of a facilitator role in these meetings, and I'm not sure what's getting back to the mayor.

But to be quite honest with you, man, I had the mayor's back the whole time. Nothing in this entire process, not even during the *Whydah*, nothing ever touched her. She was never tapped by the community. She was never challenged by the community. She was never made a part of this whole thing. You know, I protected her name, and I protected her reputation. But at the time, she couldn't see it. She couldn't understand the kind of work I was doing in there.

But the African American leadership group, led by Warren Dawson, Reverend Arthur Jones, James Ransom, got bigger and stronger, and they had the most incredible rallies, and black people came out of the woodworks for these rallies, okay? So, by the time the *Whydah* slave ship came along after this, I mean, they are really incensed, and they are truly organized.

AH: Just for the benefit of the transcriptionist, the *Whydah* is—

OA: *Whydah*.

AH: *Y-w-d-a-h*.

OA: Yeah, right. *W-y*—

AH: Yeah, *W*—

OA: *W-h-y. W-h-y-d-a-h*.

AH: Yeah.

OA: So by the time they're gonna bring the *Whydah* slave ship, the community is organized and enflamed. And I'm the executive assistant to the mayor while all of this is going on. I didn't like the idea of the slave ship, and I didn't hold my opinion about that. But I was not argumentative about it, at no point while I was in the mayor's office. I just warned them, okay?

But eventually, it turned into a major brouhaha. The community rallied so hard and the mayor understood completely, cause the mayor had a good relationship with the African American community. But she really—she understood that this was threatening her political position in the community. And eventually, we killed the project. Well, this demonstrated the political power of the African American community in ways that—

Now, here's where I had a problem. I'm the one from Miami. I'm the one that knows about economic development. I know how to write an economic development agenda.

So in the midst of all of this friction with the city fathers over Gasparilla and the *Whydah*, the idea that I learned was that you always take conflict, and you use it as an engine for social change. So in the middle of these negotiations, I don't put my name on anything, but I write an economic development plan that the Chamber was behind, members of Ye Mystic Krewe were behind. The two groups got together, the black group, the city fathers, the power structure was behind. The banks got behind it. It was incredible. We had a plan, we had a strategy, we had a council to implement the plan. This is all my learning from Kansas City and Miami. And we were on our way to an economic development plan.

Well, part of the problem was that when you are a mayor of a city or something like that—and it's understandable—you want to control the content, the texture, and the depth of change. But this thing was out of the—the genie was out of the box and gone, and all I could do was take it and convert it. But I couldn't convince her that she could come in and change it and shift its direction, you know, but we could drive it the way it should go into a positive direction.

Well, by me being in the middle of all that, it just—it soured me and the mayor's relationship. Yet again, she never gets criticized, nothing touches her, and as far as the community is concerned, the mayor is with me on all of this stuff that I'm doing. But they don't know on the inside, she is beginning to isolate me, stand back from me, speak to me less—become worried about me. She tells me one day, "You know, if I ever find out something about you, we're gonna have to part ways." I didn't quite know what that meant, but I remember the word, "We're gonna have to part ways."

I could not convince her that what I was doing was positive for her. There was never any betrayal. It was so strange that I couldn't connect that with—get her to get that. And I believe that part of the problem was that subjectively, what happens in those kind of situations? It's kind of like what I call the Bill Clinton complex. Sometimes, you get moderate to liberal mayors and people in positions of power who are accustomed to acting in the interests of African Americans and minorities as their proxy. What you don't think is that somebody from your own staff will evolve to be the voice just as much for the group that—a white who is liberal and caring and sensitive has been representing. And so, you get this kind of situation where I'm on an empowerment channel, and this is the mayor that's most loved by most black people.

So, I suppose what happens is there's conflict, but it's not spoken, that's going on. This is subterranean conflict going on all the time. But it's unspoken. It's very difficult for her to believe that everything that I'm doing is in her best interest. I can tell you that I honestly admired the mayor. I can tell you that I had such incredible respect for her intelligence. I can tell you that I—I can remember finding myself saying to myself many days, "When this is all over, I'm going to write the mayor a letter and tell her what an incredible opportunity she gave me." That's all my thoughts about her, when she decided to get rid of me. (laughs)

AH: Yes.

OA: This is what I felt about her, but she decided to get rid of me. And—

AH: And do you think that part of it is that she didn't feel like she had ownership over this economic plan, for example? You said the genie's out of the bottle, and it's like—it's not Freedman's plan?

OA: Well, like most white liberals, they are accustomed to a group of black people that controls the rest of us. Now, they can work through them; things can get done. Sandy Freedman goes—the only mayor that goes through this incredible period: the riot, Gasparilla, and the *Whydah*. New actors are on the stage, people she can't manage and she can't control, and she can't set the limitations or the context of the discussion. Yet, I'm part of it. That helps explain it, okay?

AH: Yeah.

OA: This is a different kind of leadership that's emerging. We were ready to move towards—well, they were ready to move towards civil disobedience. They were very serious about this slave ship. So, this is not the kind of thing she can't control, and I can't explain it to her, "You can't call your middle class friends and control this one. I'm the best weapon you got in this situation." But she couldn't see it. She couldn't see it.

So, eventually, she asks me to retire—forces me to retire. That's her prerogative. And I actually thought right after that that she would think about it and change her mind. So, I didn't tell the community. Rumors went out that she had fired me, but I refused to go to the media and I refused to complain. Part of it was I wanted to at least negotiate six months of salary, cause there was no severance for me. I got nothing out of this. I was not in the severance system. I left with nothing but my little vacation money, whatever, that I had left in my account. So, I was fired from my job with nothing. I went immediately—after my little saving were gone, I went—I dove straight into poverty, and I was there for two years. You know what I'm saying?

It was the most incredible time in my life. Black people—some black people wouldn't associate with me no more. Some people saw me as a failure for losing such a great job, seventy-seven thousand—like some people told me, "With seventy-seven thousand, I'd have sold my momma out! How you lose a job that good? Don't give me that stuff about you was up there helping black people. Black people don't deserve—nobody losin' no seventy-seven thousand dollar a year job over." That's the kind of stuff I hear. "Otis, you was stupid. You should have focused—you should have been about you, instead of being about the community."

So, that's the kind of stuff was circulating about. And I still didn't speak to the media. So in the meantime, while I don't say anything, the community—with some help I believe from the mayor's advisors—fill in the rumor gap. There's something wrong with me, maybe drugs are involved, maybe this, maybe that. And I just can't believe it. So, I finally have to talk about it and write an entire article in the *Florida Sentinel*, explaining what had happened with me and the mayor.

But here's the problem. Here's the problem. I never complained once in seven years about how the mayor excluded me from the inner circles of leadership. I never complained once in seven years that they had the meeting across the street at breakfast before the morning meeting that I was part of. I never complained because I had my own survival strategy, and because I was loyal

enough to the mayor I would never go to the community and say anything negative about her.

So, the community had this view that all of these things never happened, the mayor was still a positive force, and then overnight, me and her are not getting along. I must have did something wrong, because we know Sandy Freedman is a good person, and she loves the black community—just like Clinton to them. So, I'm in this strange paradox (laughs) of a situation.

AH: Absolutely.

OA: That's how—and that's how it sort of—and that's how it ends. To be honest with you, because the community does not have a chance to hear me, like they hear me on the radio today, it's something about being in the system that if you're there long enough, three or four or five years, it stinks you up anyway. And when they publish your salary in the black newspaper, in the minority newspaper, and you are making seventy-seven thousand dollars a year and you come from among them, you get some people who admire that, and you get some people who can't wait to see you fail.

So, I had all of this going on with this black columnist still writing negative things. Finally, I'm challenging—I challenged this black writer openly, word for word, cause I can write when I want to write. And so, I take him on, and this goes on for about a year. I take—every time he wrote something about me, I wrote—I responded. And the community was in on this conflict. This was like Tupac and Biggie,²⁹ (both laugh) you know what I'm saying? I got this going on, I got this stuff going in the mayor's office. So you can just imagine all of those variables, all of those balls, in the air. Eventually, I'm out of the mayor's office. I mean, I go through a period of poverty—

AH: Let's just pause this for a second.

OA: Okay. (sound of something clicking) Oh, man, we're at 11:30, and you got to get out of here.

AH: Yeah, I'll just turn my phone on now—

Tape 2 Interview 3 ends; tape 3, Interview 3 begins.

AH: Okay. All right, so you're out of the mayor's office.

OA: I'm out of the mayor's office.

AH: Poverty for two years.

OA: I try to go to work for the Housing Authority for a little while, but the Housing Authority is—and that doesn't work out. So, I'm out of work. I'm out of unemployment compensation. I have a home. I'm losing my home. I lose my car. I lose my daughter's car. I lose all my credit cards. I go through this period of poverty. I'm thinking eventually I'm gonna be back in the

²⁹ Referring to rap musicians Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls and their notorious rivalry.

projects. And what is worse, I'm angry.

Want to stop for a second right there?

AH: Yeah, why don't we do that?

Tape 3, Interview 3 ends; tape 4, Interview 3 begins.

AH: Okay.

OA: So—

AH: And you're angry; that's the last thing you said.

OA: I'm angry. And let me just go back to the mayor forcing me into retirement. Um—eventually I understand that they aren't going to give me any kind of severance. I really don't want to cause a controversy, but I understand that at some point, I was going to have to challenge it. And I challenge it, and that hits the newspapers and stays in the newspapers for the longest—it becomes a six year battle, which ends up in court, lawsuit.

In the meantime, at some point along the way, Dick Greco becomes mayor³⁰. He remembers me from marching against him. (laughs) He decides the city's not going to pay me anything. Even after Sandy Freedman decided she wanted to settle with me, he decides the city's not going to pay me anything. And so, I go on for about—this is like 1993, ninety-four [1994] now, when this happens. So, I'm out of work. I lose everything for a while. And what is worse, not only am I out of work, but I'm so angry, emotionally. I find myself getting involved with issues, and—I'm not leading, I don't try to lead, but I'm involved. I'm out still doing some marching and demonstrating. It's almost like I revert back to the past, almost.³¹

Then we had the Rogers Park issue, the black golf course.³² I was a real key part of that leadership, the rallies and stuff. So—but eventually, they have my trial. The judge says, quote unquote, "Nobody won." It's an incredible trial, but I don't get anything out of it. And so, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Tampa Tribune*, all those write about the trial. But the mayor and her entire staff are put on the stand, and nobody's ever done that, taken a Tampa mayor to trial about employment discrimination, illegal, unlawful termination. But I don't win it, either.

So now, nobody will hire me, because my name is in all the newspapers, and I go through this period of unemployment. I lose almost everything. Eventually, I decide to become a substitute

³⁰ Dick Greco was Mayor of Tampa from October 1, 1967 to April 1, 1974 and was re-elected for a second term as mayor from April 1, 1995 to April 1, 2003.

³¹ [Transcriber's Note: Interviewee added the following after the interview - I then organize a highly diverse coalition to save Tampa General from privatization, this became a truly hard fought battle.]

³² Rogers Park Golf Course was formerly the only golf course at which African Americans in Tampa could play. In 1993, a white pro joined the course's staff for the first time, which displeased some members of the African American community.

teacher, then I decide to teach in alternative schools, and I started teaching kids who were put into these alternative schools, and begin to find my groove back, so to speak. I went into teaching still very angry, but these kids turned me around. These kids reminded me that I didn't have any problems when I came to learn their problems, cause I went there thinking I had problems. Dealing with them every day, they reminded me that I didn't have any problems.

That's the whole story of that. But you know, I taught for about three or four years in Hillsborough County School System, mainly in alternative education. Eventually, I taught fifth graders [at] a predominantly black school. I also taught first and third at various teaching jobs.

AH: You specialize in any subject, or did you just kind of teach whatever was—?

OA: Yeah, I basically—wherever they needed somebody, they'd bring me in. Being a black male, a lot of them needed males in these schools. So, you know, I was in the right place at the right time. I'm making maybe twenty-two thousand dollars a year as a beginning teacher. At the same time, I got to go to school at night to remain—to continue teaching. I got to pay for these expensive courses at USF to become a teacher and get my teacher's certificate. So, I'm going through all this at the same time.

Eventually, I go to Polk County and take a job in the elderly services department, dealing with elderly services, making sure they got nurses in their homes, they got medical services, they got people to come by and cook for them, straighten up their houses so that their lives wouldn't deteriorate. These are all Medicaid patients. I fill out their Medicaid applications. And I'm doing all of this for a couple of years.

After that, I go to work for Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance, and as part of my job at Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance, I become responsible for corporate job development. And what I do is I go out and I develop jobs—over thirty thousand and forty thousand a year—for people who have lost their job in this economy. You know, most jobs that come in, they are for sixteen thousand, twenty thousand, but I was responsible for corporate jobs. We had a whole department dedicated—this was a new thing, going after the corporate jobs. And I loved doing that, by the way. I was out all day, I was in my car, I was meeting with company executives, et cetera, putting my experience to work, and I was a corporate job developer.

It was while I was working as a corporate job developer, in 2005, that I applied for the job in Polk County as the senior director for minority relations, which eventually became the senior director of diversity management. I renamed it, and the superintendent agreed. And since that time, I have served as the senior director for diversity management for the Polk County School System, which has fourteen thousand employees, seven thousand teachers, and I'm responsible for ensuring that the system, that the institution, the district, is culturally sensitive to employees, students, and parents. And I'm responsible for dealing with their issues, their complaints, and advancing the techniques, methods, and strategies and policies that result in minority children and children with learning disabilities—result in better strategies for teaching them and making them higher achievers and higher academic performers. I also deal with issues of behavior in the classroom, preparing teachers to deal with very diverse classrooms. I train all of the principals and administrators, along with teachers and staff.

So, essentially I'm responsible for cultural sensitivity and diversity for the entire school district. And that's where we are right now.

AH: You've been there for a while.

OA: I've been there since 2005. It's now 2009.

AH: Okay.

OA: It's a great position for me. All of my experiences of the past come to bear. I'm older, (laughs) fifty-seven, what, fifty-eight years old, and I'm cooled out. And I'm on a mission, because this is about children and whether they will learn, whether we have the right curriculum, whether we have the right classroom atmosphere, whether we have the right books, books that reflect them and their background, whether we have the quality of teachers in high poverty schools, whether the teachers and the administrators understand poverty. Do they understand the influx of new Latino immigrants, how to manage demographic change?

It's about all of those issues, but the bottom line is, it's about learning and improving our ability to teach diverse kids with diverse needs. And I'm part of that policymaking body for the superintendent of the school system, Dr. Gail McKinzie. I'm one of her senior policy advisers. And it's one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. And I have to be honest with you, I never thought after I left the mayor's office, that I would never get—that I would ever get another opportunity again.

AH: Yeah.

OA: I pretty much thought that I'd probably retire teaching or something, maybe eventually get my Ph.D. and teach in a predominantly black college. But I never thought I'd get an opportunity like this. So, that's where things are.

AH: Okay. Now, before we close, I gotta ask you about WMNF³³.

OA: Okay. All right. (laughs)

AH: How did you get involved, cause to me, this is a big, you know—a job was never big enough for Otis.

OA: (laughs)

AH: It seems like, you know, you're in Kansas City—

OA: (laughs) Is that what the story says?

³³ WMNF is a volunteer-powered and listener-sponsored radio station in Tampa. This is Florida's first community radio station with a frequency of 88.5 FM.

AH: —and you're all over the city.

OA: WMNF is really interesting.

AH: Yeah.

OA: Again, WMNF was looking for somebody.

AH: Okay.

OA: I didn't even know.

AH: Now, when was this, about?

OA: This was like four and a half years ago. It was right at the start of the Iraq War, before—the Iraq War was 2002, something like that? They were looking for somebody, and what they wanted was to do a talk show that appealed to the black middle class, because they were beginning to lose their listenership among the black middle class. They certainly didn't have me in mind (laughs) when they were looking for someone. They were looking at some of the people who had been at WTMP³⁴ when James Ransom, one of my best friends, heard about this and convinced me to put in a proposal to do a talk show.

The idea of my talk show was to create an issues forum that reflected the diversity of opinions of people in this community. Matter of fact, one of the topics I suggested from the beginning was something to do with the Rainbow/PUSH thing, because I wanted to bring the Rainbow people into a bigger tent. That was my concept going in. They liked the concept; they didn't like the word Rainbow, but they liked the idea of broad diversity. But while they liked it, I think what they were after was more of a focus on the black middle class. Well, when I first thought of the programs, I had segments on health, I had segments on jobs, I had segments that appealed to black professionals, and I was just trying to find my way.

AH: Did you start with your partner—what's his name?

OA: Oh, uh, Elliot Steele.

AH: Yeah, did you start with him?

OA: I started with Elliot Steele. Me and Elliot.

AH: It's a really good mix.

OA: Yeah. And Elliot Steele had DJ [disc jockey] experience, and I didn't know the music as well. I mean, I'm pretty good at music, but I didn't know music like he knew music. And so, we were really trying to gear our show towards the black middle class, yet it was a lot about black

³⁴ WTMP is an R&B radio station based out of Tampa, whose audience is predominantly African-American with the frequency of 1150 AM.

culture, understanding culture and black history. And I probably fumbled around with that for the first year or so.

But obviously, by now I'm a different person. I mean, I've grown tremendously. I've had my USF experience and all the experiences I mentioned before. I'm more interested in a broad array of topics that people are affected by, not only in Tampa and in the state of Florida but all over the world and all over this country. I now have a master's degree in urban administration from a professor—Professor Steve Stamos, one of my other mentors I didn't mention—at Bucknell, who taught me about political economy and city taxation and the importance of understanding federal public policy. And I got a—I had an interdisciplinary master's degree in urban administration, and I'm studying Keynesian economics and macroeconomics and all of this. And so, just focused on black culture and the black middle class doesn't allow me to use, you know, all of my background.

AH: All that stuff. Yeah, yeah.

OA: And so, it automatically at some point began to flow into more broader topics because of the war.

AH: Yes. Now, before we continue with this, I just wanted to ask, what did you write your thesis on?

OA: (laughs)

AH: In a nutshell.

OA: Believe it or not, my thesis was on a project I did, similar to the literacy project, my experiences as a solid waste director. It was on that experience.

AH: Oh, wow.

OA: Yeah. Isn't that something? (laughs)

AH: I agree. Okay, so then, it's the Iraq War that was really the stimulus to get you into broader topics, because that's what I notice—

OA: Yeah. Mm-hm.

AH: —about—you know, you'll talk about stuff closer to home, but you also talk about some really big issues.

OA: Yeah. We'll get into the racial issues, and we'll get into issues about police brutality and you know, one million black men in prison. But a war was going on, and people were protesting across the country—around the world. The Bush Administration had put forth a new doctrine, the doctrine of preemptive strikes. And this is very controversial stuff, and people from the peace movement and people on the left and progressives all want to talk about this war, and talk about

the Bush Administration and their overreaching, overarching conception of presidential power. And so, these topics, and the topic of the war against terrorism and the war—and then 9/11 and all of this stuff just broadened my audience and broadened the topics until the show became, you know, more international.

AH: Oh, yeah.

OA: The show became more about serious public policy issues. And I got a broader audience. So, we began to branch out from just talking about black history and black culture, and the audience loved it. And so, we sort of—we stuck with it. It took me a while to kind of learn to manage the microphone and debate with listeners and all of that, but I wanted to have a good feel to the show, so we start off with music and poetry, and we hype the issues, and then, you know, we open up the phone lines.

AH: Yes.

OA: That get 'em going, and that—you know, that formula works for me. So, that's what we've been doing ever since.

AH: What I notice is it's got to be one of the most civil talk shows on radio. I mean, obviously people are coming with all their different opinions and everything, but people don't get shouted down. It's a forum for ideas, and I noticed that—I mean, there's still a bit of the firebrand—

OA: Every now and then. (laughs)

AH: —but at the same time, it's like maybe your humbling experience has been kind of channeled into this radio persona, which really isn't much different than Otis, but—

OA: But you're absolutely right, because as you get older, you get practical, you know. You look at Barack Obama. Barack Obama the campaigner is different from Barack Obama in governance. And when you at that—when you are in the seat, and you're sort of the leader inside the arena when you're on that radio show, you know, it doesn't help to be totally argumentative or dogmatic, because you really want ideas to be discussed, and you want various positions and you want dialogue.

AH: Yeah.

OA: And you want people's perspectives to be debated, and what you are doing is you are facilitating that debate. It would be very difficult to do that if you are one-dimensional or you're just dogmatic. So, it happened for me naturally, my style. The *Tampa Tribune* has written about it that it is very real and civilized debate. It's not something that I did intentional, I just think it's who I am now and what I've evolved into. It would be very difficult for me to sound for two hours like I sounded back in the early 1970s.

AH: Yeah.

OA: (laughs) You know what I'm saying? (AH laughs) Like a black activist. I mean, that would just wear me out. (both laugh) So, that's where we are at. But I love doing that on WMNF.

AH: Okay.

OA: But I also love the work that I'm doing over in Polk County as a diversity manager. We are really making a difference.

One last thing I want to mention is that not only are we impacting learning and impacting curriculum, but I have put together a parent engagement program, because the greatest criticism against the African American community is that they are not taking responsibility for their own children's education. I want to put that to a lie district-wide, so I have put together a parent engagement program that engages parents. It goes to their jobs; it goes to their homes at night. We go to their church on Sundays. We'll go to their community organization on a Saturday.

We go and get parents. We get them involved in their children's education, and it has impacted these kids' academic achievement, and we have the data to prove it. Kids are learning more and behaving better, and the community is taking more responsibility for kids' learning and behaving in the classroom. So, it's one of my greatest achievements over there. It's called Parent Engagement Program, and people are writing me all over the country wanting to copy it now.

AH: That's great. Yeah.

OA: Yeah. (laughs)

AH: That's something that's talked about a lot. Well, I know time is short, so let's go ahead and conclude. What I usually like to do is give you an opportunity to offer any advice, you know, to young people. (OA laughs) I know it's something that you do an awful lot of, (OA laughs) but—obviously you've had a very multifaceted, kind of complex life. What would you say to people coming up?

OA: Well, I sometimes talk to young people. I go around to schools and I talk to young people all the time. The first thing I tell them is that you just have to care about other people. That's just—it's fundamental. If you don't care—if you don't have a foundation of caring, nothing else is going to work. And I tell them that your philosophy leads to your beliefs, and your beliefs will lead to your lifestyle, and your lifestyle will say something about your character.

So, you have to keep all of that in mind. But also, I emphasize, because the one thing the University of South Florida taught me [is] the importance of reading, writing, and studying, and being a lifelong learner. You just got to be curious about everything. As a talk show host, I read five newspapers a week. I catch every news program in the middle of the night. I go online and I'm looking for news stories and analysis. I'm always reading, absorbing, analyzing. And if you can develop the habit of reading, being curious, absorbing, analyzing, it just makes you a so much more broader person.

When I have issues with the Latino community—I don't speak Spanish, but when they come in a

room to argue their case, I lead the discussions. And believe it or not, it is through nonverbal language alone that they trust me more than a Spanish speaker to resolve their problem, because somehow you have to speak verbally and nonverbally the language of caring, in a way that people gets it even if you don't speak their language. And so, I had those kind of experiences. It's just something that you develop over time.

So, I think my greatest advice is to study and be curious and want to know, and simply to care about people. And don't fail. Even with all the risks that are involved, don't fail to be an advocate for people who are powerless and who are voiceless and who are vulnerable. That is all of our calling. It's not just a political calling for me; it is an emotional and spiritual calling.

You know, during this process, I haven't talked very much about my spiritual life, but you can just imagine that the influence spiritually of my great-grand-aunt and my grandmothers and the people in my community, that as I went in and out of all of these difficult situations, part of the foundation that sustained me was that I was always taught to maintain a close relationship to God.

You know, you may not always be right. You may have sin in your life. You may not be perfect. But stay in prayer, and have a good strong spiritual relationship to God, because that will comfort you spiritually and mentally and give you a peace when nothing else will happen. And I notice that we're living in a period now where blacks who are successful and who have made it commit suicide more than they've ever committed suicide, and I often wonder that when they hit their period of difficulty, did they remember the old teachings, that when you ain't got nowhere else to go, when the system has taken you to your limit, and when you are into the abyss of darkness and anger about how the world has treated you, you can always take it to the old folks, take it to the Lord, and God will be there with you and help you come out of it.

And so, that has always been part of the foundation of what I do. So, I think that's also part and parcel of what any young analytical, critically thinking young person has to do, have a spiritual life to back up your political and analytical life. And it will just give you the tools that you need to survive.

AH: Wow. That's quite a closing, Otis. (OA laughs) I really want to thank you for coming in, for sharing your thoughts, sharing your life experiences with the Oral History Program here. And in a way, you know, maybe you've kind of come full circle. I mean—

OA: Yeah.

AH: This whole thing started—you're here because you gathered other people's stories. And in some ways, you still do on the radio: get people's stories and opinions. But you know, you've come in here today and you've contributed your own, and I want you to know that that means a lot to us.

OA: Thank you.

AH: And then to us, it kind of puts the bowtie on the top of your collection that's finally getting

up to the Internet and everything else. So, I just want to thank you for sharing.

OA: Okay.

AH: It's been really fun.

OA: Let me close with this. One of my poems called "Black Poetry" is—and I plan to share some of my poetry with the collection. The poem ends, and it says, (recites)

Black poetry is coming to know
Yourself and kind
Moving on the positives
In your mind
Becoming a genius
Through struggle and strife
People, did I tell you?
Black poetry is black folks' life.

You got it. (laughs) All right, all right—

end of interview