

K. Pennington: So this an interview with Jim Lanier. Today is April 17th; it's almost 11:15 and Katherine Pennington is interviewing – is doing the interview.

So, I'd like to talk to you a little bit about your observations when you came to Rhodes and I was wondering what year you came to Rhodes.

Jim Lanier: Well, I came in the fall of '67 to start teaching that year. I had never been to Memphis until I came out here for the job interview that spring. So I moved here in July of '67 and started teaching the first of September.

K. Pennington: And where had you come from?

Jim Lanier: I had been at Emory in Atlanta in graduate school, and before that, I grew up in central Florida, Winter Haven.

K. Pennington: And how did – what were your first impressions of Memphis?

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Jim Lanier: Well, the – from the start I liked the college, and it's leadership at that point in time. David Alexander was president, and Jameson Jones was dean, and it seemed to me like a progressive place that was working on a lot of new things, new curriculum, and adjusting to the students of the late sixties, and dealing with racial integration. It seemed to me like a place with a progressive atmosphere about all those places and its part of the reason that I chose to come here.

And so first impressions with the college were all very positive, but now, I'm, almost 40 years later, I was just stunned, that first year, by the garbage strike and the depth of polarization in Memphis between blacks and whites, and it made it very difficult to meet people at church and outside of Rhodes, without that subject coming up and if you weren't completely on the side of the whites, it was just difficult to make relationships.

So I remember a pretty painful experience with that first year because of the way the city was polarized around racial issues.

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K. Pennington: Uh-huh. So was there a hard shift from the fall of '67 into the spring of '68? Like a noticeable shift or had some of those tensions already been in the air?

Jim Lanier: They must have been in the air. I didn't think of Memphis as different from the South that I know pretty well. Winter Haven is a small town, very segregated. My parents are from Georgia. I grew up in a family that practiced segregation and did not challenge it.

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And so coming to Memphis seemed like a kind of normal Southern situation, but obviously tensions had been heating up from '64-'65 and they were – there were issues I was aware of everywhere, but I didn't – did not sense the depth of racial separatism until these issues came up.

Memphis was more segregated than Atlanta. I mean not – Memphis did not have a kind of civic leadership that had been encouraging peaceful adaptation to change. So the tone of Memphis politics and the newspaper, especially, was more conservative than Atlanta, and more resistant to change. The newspaper was still running those "Hambone" cartoons that made fun of black people.

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K. Pennington: Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier: And so I sensed a little difference in Memphis and – even growing up, there was – a sense that Mississippi was one of the worst of places as far as segregation was concerned, and we were out here now in Mississippi, and I was prepared for all of that, and didn't sense it was terribly different until we got into the events of the garbage strike.

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K. Pennington: Uh-huh. And when you mentioned that it was a particularly painful and difficult period to come to Memphis from that – from '67-'68 is there any particular experience, you think, that sort of exemplifies that?

00:04:47

Jim Lanier: Well, the big one was the decision to go down to the march, and so that was the first time I had participated in a civil rights demonstration. And this was after Dr. King had been killed; it was a memorial march to him, and the National Guard was there in very obvious ways; there were tanks at every street corner; there were guys at weapons on the top of every building at all the corners. And here I was walking with the marchers, carrying my little sign to honor King and end racism.

And for the first time in my life I felt very much an outsider. I felt like I was a part of something that made me feel like almost an enemy of my country, of the state. So that experience left me with a deep sense of alienation and worry about where we were.

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K. Pennington: Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier: There were other parts of the march that were very positive but I mean just as a guy who'd grown up in a small town and always been, you know, part of the mainstream of things this – this really drove home the fact that my thinking was quite different from those white people about these issues, and that it was going to be tough getting along in a world that was polarized.

K. Pennington: And what were some of the positive things, the positive experiences that you received?

Jim Lanier: Well, the national figure I remember best from the march is Baird Ruston, who is somebody I admire very much, and had heard a little about at the time, but he was very much in the background at the time, and only those of us who read a lot, and who were aware of some of the origins of the movement were probably appreciative of his role. But because he had been associated with the left, also because we know now he was a homosexual, the movement deliberately kept him in the background.

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And – but he was the – seemed to be the organizing genius that morning at the march. He was at the pulpit giving instructions and directing, seemed very much in charge, a very powerful personality, very forceful and that was all kind of assuring and maybe I was a little start struck for all the prominent people that were there but especially Baird Ruston.

But immediately when I got there, and the black people there were very welcoming and appreciative to see me. And one couldn't help but feel a little nervousness going into it, particularly me as a kind of white moderate liberal who had never participated or helped out, one would have plenty of reasons to be frustrated that I had done so little so late.

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And so I had a little sense of that going into it, but from the time I got there, people were welcoming and just joining in and there was a kind of warmth and a connectedness with people that made the march a very positive experience in those terms.

It was only out there on the street and that lasting memory of the National Guard at every street corner that caused that sense of alienation that I started with, so it was really mixed from one side of total acceptance being with people that I shared values with to the other side of feeling alienated from the establishment somewhat.

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K. Pennington:

Uh-huh. Let's go back for just a second to when you first came to Rhodes and your first impressions of Rhodes. You said that there were new things and a new curriculum going on that impressed you. Could you talk a little bit more about that? And what you mean by that? More specifically?

00:08:58

Jim Lanier:

Well, we were moving away from a very large set of specific course requirements, and moving to a curriculum that gave students more choice, and at the same time trying to maintain the breadth of their education, so we ended up adopting a set of area requirements in the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, natural sciences – but within those areas students had a good bit of choice.

K. Pennington:

Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier:

But it was very difficult to change from a departmentally-based requirements where every department was assured of its number of students in those entry courses to where we would be competing in those entry courses with other departments in our area. And – but

that was dealt with over the first couple of years I was here and active. And particularly I think now significant we started a set of freshmen colloquia that were interdisciplinary and each faculty member if they taught it alone was encouraged to teach something they weren't a specialist in, that they wanted to explore themselves as a learner in that area and to work with a small group of freshmen on that subject.

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And I remember doing that for five or six years and one of those courses was something on "Southern Identity" and I don't teach Southern history, have not specialized in it, but this was my chance to think a lot about Southernness and in the context of being in Memphis and in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and all of that.

So we were doing some very innovative things with the curriculum. We changed the calendar to have a short term in the spring, for six weeks, and each student took two courses and we were able to develop some off-campus experiences and I took students off to New York for a month to do 20th century American culture of art, theatre, music, ethnic neighborhoods.

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And so it was a very engaging time at the college in terms of curriculum change and all of the things that were associated with the late 60s, early 70s.

K. Pennington:

And what is it that is your specialty?

Jim Lanier:

20th century U.S. cultural, intellectual history and I was particularly focused on, say the history of American liberalism and left movements and the tension between those two. Kind of a Southern boy who chose to read a lot about New York intellectuals. I won't go into what's going on there, but I never got into really studying Southern history professionally but I've obviously been teaching basic courses and some things been involved in that.

K. Pennington:

And living it.

Jim Lanier:

And living it, yeah.

K. Pennington: So can you tell me a little bit more about what it was you were doing during the sanitation worker's strike and what was sort of your attitude **towards who was responsible**? What were they talking about on campus? How was it affecting student life?

00:12:14

Jim Lanier: Well, a small number of students were going down to participate, and I think that number was very small. I hate to guess, but I think its 10 to 20 max who actually went down to assist in some of the demonstrations. My memory could be wrong about that; I don't have any good evidence for it, but it seemed like a small group.

A larger group of students worked the student newspaper or maybe were involved with student government and they knew something special was going on in the strike and in these demonstrations and so a larger number of students went down to see what was happening and to write it up for the newspaper, so I would say student leaders were talking a good bit about what was going on and trying to figure out their own position on those thing and trying to educate other students to it.

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Certainly attitudes discovered in that first year with the student body as you might expect were spread across the board from left to right and – but the campus, certainly the classroom, we always had open discussions and tried to make people feel comfortable about talking through their position on those things.

But it's – in those days I think the liberal and more engaged students were the most vocal and most energetic in discussions. And students maybe who were strongly opposed a little more reluctant to express themselves but there certainly were the occasional pieces in the student newspaper where those opposed to the civil rights movement had their say.

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And I remember from a panel we had here one of the RAs, **Harmon Ray** talked about that night at the – of the assassination and discovering that there were a couple of guys on his floor who had guns and he was quite afraid that they would be using them on

African-Americans and made a point of getting those removed from their rooms. So Harmon left me with the impression in the student culture that there was some very strong segregationist feeling.

But generally the campus, I don't hesitate to say the campus, was a more open, more progressive place than the larger city of Memphis even though the student body is still predominantly white, just a small number of the first students who – first black students who were admitted here were on campus. And they probably were oh, what would they be? Fifteen in number out of 1,000 students – 15 to 20.

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K. Pennington: And what year was it – what years was the integration?

Jim Lanier: '64 – two African-American males were admitted in '64 and they were seniors in the year of the strike.

K. Pennington: Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier: And the second year, five students came and about that number the next two years. So together I think they couldn't have numbered more than 20.

K. Pennington: Was there a relatively smooth response towards – as far as the campus was concerned?

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Jim Lanier: I think so, and most of those involved have said that in interviews my students have done. The college was very careful in going into that. It announced the decisions to integrate at the end of '62 and said that at the beginning of '64 they would admit the first African-American students, so there's a whole year and a half in there when parents were notified and students were notified to be ready for this change.

And there were the expected reactions. I've heard some white students say their parents considered making them come home and not attend the college, but I don't think that happened in any significant degree, maybe not at all. But there were certainly concerns about what the impact would be if we took that step. But by the time we did it in '64 everybody was doing it and the Civil Rights Act passed in the summer of '64 and so some people

thought well we admitted people in September of '64 because of the law, but that's not true. We had changed the policy and had already recruited these two guys in the fall of '64.

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But once the laws changed and white students who wanted to go to an all-white school didn't really have that option.

K. Pennington: Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier: A few – for a few years there, but all the good students obeyed the law and changed that climate.

K. Pennington: Do you think there was a shift between the sanitation workers strike and the effect after the assassination in terms of people's interest and willingness to get involved – did that mark a shift do you think?

Jim Lanier: Well, in Memphis generally what little bit I know makes me think it did encourage some new kinds of participation and I think **MIFA** was founded in the aftermath of the strike and so there's a steady effort of progressive people to try to rebuild and start again as those things occur.

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Politically I think the majority of the city didn't feel that way and continued to elect officials who weren't a part of that new progressive effort to build bridges so it was a long period and Memphis is unusual to me in never having elected a white liberal on the basis of a biracial coalition.

So we went from white mayors with almost no black support to a black mayor with almost no white support. And even Mayor Harrington was able to subsequently to develop white support in his reelection campaigns but in – first time around and I think that political history shows how polarized the city continued to be during and after the strike for quite a long while.

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And that's – that's why I'm optimistic and encouraged about the efforts today where I think maybe in the last ten years we've

started moving away from that legacy and done more to build better communication.

K. Pennington: How did the sanitation workers strike affect you personally? I mean, did your garbage get picked up? Did it have any sort of every day impact? Any that you can remember?

19:45

Jim Lanier: I don't remember any problem about the garbage. I'm not sure what we did as a matter of fact, but it was not a hassle for us and we may have collaborated with neighbors in driving it somewhere but I just don't remember how we dealt with the garbage issue. I remember feeling a little awkward in this mid-town neighborhood, you know, the college that coming back from the strike and getting out of the car with our placards – the neighbors out in the yard – we assumed they were hostile to what we were doing but nobody really said anything to me. But there was a sense of being pretty much alone in that effort with just a handful of academics and a few ministers, assistant ministers, some of the younger clergy.

But I can't remember any, you know, the strike itself being much of an impact. We tried to hold classes as normal on the morning after the assassination and that seemed to me impossible. And by the time of my first class at 10:00 some upperclassmen were already upset that political science professors had not allowed them to talk about what happened the evening before. So my class in American History spent time talking about it and airing out all of our fears and worries and I think before the day was out the college decided to close but we tried to open the next morning as though nothing had happened.

Trying to go along with life as usual.

K. Pennington: That kind of leads me to my next question. What was the administration's response? Not just to the assassination but sort of this whole period of time? Obviously the school hadn't been segregated so there was some _____, open-mindedness but how would you describe the political and social tensions _____?

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Jim Lanier: Well, their – we had progressive leaders who were very committed to holding the college together in a polarized environment therefore they often walked a pretty moderate public line in terms

of that. I think protection of the college is their – was felt to be their main responsibility. So we had slowly moved into integrating and getting that accepted and – but we clearly had progressive leaders.

I was a little uneasy as a first-year faculty member and untenured and all of that about participating in the march even though I knew several junior faculty had been working with the strikers. But the morning before the march, one of my colleagues, **Carl Walters** in religion and I were out in the hallway and we were talking about going to the march and Dean Jones walked by, Jameson Jones, and I was inclined to speak in a low voice and not talk to the dean about what we were doing and Carl invited him over and told him what we were talking about and would he like to join us and he didn't say much he just kind of said well, I've been thinking about walking some. And went back to this office.

And the next day he was at the march. And for a man in a position like that he was taking considerable risk at being identified as way too liberal by doing that. Low-level risk for me as a first-year faculty member and unknown in Memphis. So for me it was reassuring to know that the dean had that type of commitment.

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David Alexander played some role in the aftermath, our president, in the group called Memphis Cares, I think, that tried to have a big assembly and gather people after the strike with agreements not to talk about how upset we were with one another, and I think that didn't work very well, and it was not something I wanted to do, it didn't really make sense to me at that point, but that suggested David was trying to be a healer and trying to bring people together who wanted to try to build a better Memphis in the future and I think he was perceived by conservatives in the community as way too liberal for doing that kind of thing.

So that both our leaders took risks and made clear what their values were in the area of racial integration.

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K. Pennington:

Were you involved in any _____ at the same time or _____ at the same time _____?

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Jim Lanier: Not significantly that first year. Well, we were members over at Idlewild Presbyterian and doing a little. In subsequent years, I remember a few years later, I don't know, '69, '70, somewhere in there, my wife was teaching Sunday school with another couple, and someone brought a black child to the Sunday school classroom and the other couple were just furious and the woman actually got sick at her stomach and had to go home. And they subsequently left that church.

So we did have a kind of upsetting experience somewhere in there around '69 and '70. But Idlewild had – they had a progressive constituency. But the church as a whole did not win strong support through an associate minister who was one of those clergymen who went to the mayor's office. Bill Aldridge was the leader among those clergymen in pressuring the mayor to end the strike and he did not have the support of the congregation in that and made his life uncomfortable after that.

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So that's just an indication at how things were mixed out there and Idlewild was moving along toward being some progressive things but it's – but had a lot of resistance to any kind of activism that Bill Aldridge was engaged in.

K. Pennington: Weren't they talking about it at the pulpit? Weren't the clergy –

Jim Lanier: I don't think so. But I – my memory is not so good about all of that. But I don't remember from the time that I came in '67, I don't think racial issues were regularly talked about in the pulpit. But I gather they had been in a constructive way leading up to that. But I had the feeling that the strike raised new issues and created new bitterness's and the moderates did not prevail.

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K. Pennington: Uh-huh. Was Idlewild integrated at that time or was it sort of a de facto segregated –

Jim Lanier: It was basically segregated, but I'm not sure. They probably had their first black member somewhere in there in the late '60s. I do remember when this child, who was a visitor, showed up in Sunday school and I think that was an effort on the part of some folks over there to bring a black family into the church; they may

have been the first. But I really don't remember too much about that.

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K. Pennington: What do you see as the long-term impact of, after having lived in the South for almost 40 years, the strike and the assassination on **where you come from?**

Jim Lanier: Well, long-term I – on the positive side, we have the National Civil Rights Museum, which is a wonderful place and prominent in ways that it should be. That legacy is being kept alive and people are learning that history and I live near enough by to know that there are lots of family that come with young kids to do that.

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I think there are levels of racial tension that are subliminal, almost, and they – people prefer not to talk about them and they surface every now and then in some unusual ways and they most recent one was the Nathan Bedford Forest statue and we were on the verge of having some demonstrations about all of that that were embarrassing to city leaders including Mayor Herenton and others that we could – people could still be so vocal about this guy who is a Civil War hero to much of the white community.

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And so the resolution of that as I understand it is we won't do anything and we won't talk about it any more so let's get it off the table because we're still pretty bitterly divided and I – I'm frustrated about that and I wish we had more of an open discourse that people could talk about those things and work through them so that when we get into particular little incidents things don't blow up and get angry so quickly.

But I don't really know how to do that. I think the Mayor Wharton's election in the county was a positive political sign and he was elected with a biracial coalition so there are political signs of a new willingness to work together. A lot of other things I could mention, things like bridges and things – I mean the city has renewed its efforts to try to resolve that history of racial polarization that's just there.

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And maybe – well, I don't know whether it works as a positive or a negative over time that it actually occurred here. I mean, Martin Luther King could have been assassinated any number of places. Chicago. Anywhere in the South. But it – the fact that it happened here may be beneficial in forcing us to think about ourselves and why it was here and the tensions that were here. I would like to think that it will work its way out in really forcing us to really think about this in a way we might not if it had not happened here.

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K. Pennington:

Can you think of any other incidents or stories or memories of conversations that come to mind around issues of race in the civil rights movement?

Jim Lanier:

Well, none that are too Memphis specific. Beyond that big first year when I got here. There are – well, we've – when I think about the college, it was important to me early on to have African-American history in the curriculum of the History Department and to recruit African-American faculty and that was initially very difficult in Memphis. And – to get black professionals to move here and to teach students who are predominantly white and predominantly Southern.

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So in our very first experience hiring someone with great credentials who came from Williams College, he called a real estate agency in Memphis about **Tony's** coming to teach at Rhodes and he has a kind of Northern accent and the first thing this woman said on the phone was, "Well, you don't want to live anywhere near the college, there are too many black people around there." And he said, "Thank you very much." And hung up.

And that was just the most graphic evidence that I could think of the difficulty of recruiting in those early years but we persisted and with some turnover there because we hired great people and they went on to other jobs and now I'd say in the last decade, last five or six years, Memphis may be an asset in hiring African-Americans. It's seen as a place where professional black people can easily enter into a community where they are recognized and respected and they are sufficient in number to have an impact in this city.

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And I think in conversations with Russell Wiggins and others we've kind of come to think that maybe it's an asset to be in Memphis. But I certainly didn't think that in 1980 when we first started these efforts.

K. Pennington: Uh-huh.

Jim Lanier: And it's – I'm hopeful about things like that.

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K. Pennington: Is there anything that I should have asked that I haven't asked?

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Jim Lanier: Not that I can think of. Right now. No. We can think about it, but I don't know of anything in particular. I mean I didn't know how much to say about my own background and my – where I was on race at the time and I think probably I've said enough about that without digging back into my childhood or –

(Laughter)

Or earlier years. But there were – there were tough family issues with doing things ones parents didn't want you to do, but I'm not terribly eager to talk about those.

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(Laughter)

But I do some – I mean I have talked about those things in public and in writing, because I think it's unfortunate most white people are reluctant to talk about that. It's either because we think it's embarrassing to us or it can be embarrassing to our parents. And I sometimes thought in talking about my father that the only thing people would know about my father is that he and I disagreed about segregation that they would miss a lot of good things about him.

But it was tough to kind of pursue the values that I thought I learned at home: church, civic values about democracy and fair play and equality of opportunity and all the stuff I thought I learned at home but when it came to race they didn't apply in the

same way. So working through that, especially with my father, was difficult.

But we managed after the serious disagreements about it; we managed to continue to have a great relationship.

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Did – I don't know – I've got some things I could show you, some more details about how I heard about the assassination that I could – might dredge out of my mind maybe.

But a grad school – I mean I guess we didn't have the radio on or TV or something. I was probably working on lectures for the next day. The phone rings and this Northern voice, guy I knew in graduate school at Emory, he had taken a job at Ohio State and he says something like, "Lanier, you damned Southerners have really blown it this time." And I said, "Yeah, well, we – yeah, we've got a lot of problems with the garbage strike."

And he said, "Well, I'm talking about the assassination." I said, "What?"

00:38:03

And he had just heard that Martin Luther King had been killed and so that's – that's how I learned the news that evening and before the night was out we could hear the crackling of gunfire in North Memphis and seems like that first night, the first rumbling of tanks headed down North Parkway. We were just half a block off of the Parkway.

And whatever – whatever night that was, I mean I get a real sense here in the middle of the Vietnam War of seeing news shots of tanks and oh, that – and hearing them rumble down a street in Memphis and hearing the little firecracker pops of guns. It was scary. Left a lasting impression of how difficult that moment was.

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But I think that's it.

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