

[0:00:00]

Jim Lanier: Why don't you begin by giving us your name and when and where you were born?

Bill Reed: My name is Billy Reed. William L. Reed, R-E-E-D. And I was born October 9th, 1936 in Jackson, Tennessee. And I lived in Jackson, Tennessee with my mother and father until just before World War II. And then, I never have totally understood the reasons, but we moved from Jackson down to Memphis. By that time, my younger brother, Fred, who is three years younger than me was a baby. And we lived in a house over on McConnell Street not far from what at that time was Southwestern and Memphis Roads College now, and so from ages three to about eight, I lived on McConnell Street.

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Went to Springdale Elementary School, kindergarten. I enrolled in Springdale Elementary School kindergarten 70 years ago last fall.

Jim Lanier: Right.

Bill Reed: And actually –

Jim Lanier: You stayed in public schools in Memphis then?

Bill Reed: Well, I went to Springdale. Then in the third grade in late 1944, my family moved back to Jackson, and so I grew up – so the rest of my growing up life was on Rowland Street in Jackson. I went to Alexander Grammar School, to me a revered institution.

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And I went to Jackson Junior High School and Jackson High School. And I – after I graduated from Jackson High School in 1955, I went to the army for two years, which was kind of a fairly routine thing for choices for people to make. Either went then or you went after you got out of college. Everybody went. I happened to be a major proponent for universal national service because of that. But anyway, in 1957, I came back to the states. I was stationed in Heidelberg, Germany for a year and a half, which was a great experience. And I enrolled as a freshman at Southwestern in 1957.

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Jim Lanier: So you were here at the college then until the early '60s.

Bill Reed: Yeah. I left here in the spring of 1960 because a friend here, Louis Vance, Rusty Vance's father, was a – had a big plantation down in Marks, Mississippi. And he told me that he'd give me a job for the summer. So I had my other alternatives weren't as interesting, so I actually packed up and went to Marks, Mississippi and lived in a little house out on his farm intending to come back to Southwestern, but I stayed in Marks for eight years.

I met a man down there, William King Self, that I really loved and liked, and he had a lot of interesting work for me to do.

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And life was pretty interesting in Mississippi in those days.

Jim Lanier: Tell us about growing up in the era of the segregated south. I mean clearly in the '50s, all that period. What was your experience of that?

Bill Reed: If you were a kid, growing up in the '40s and '50s – I mean I can say that for my neighbor – in Sandborne, my neighborhood and my friends or my cousins, I never heard one discussion about it. You know? About segregation. I mean it just was. I lived with my parents in our house in Jackson, you know, for three – I guess about three years, although that's a guess. A woman whose name was Fanny Mae Emery, who was a black woman, was a servant in our family and a friend of my mothers.

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But definitely a servant in our family, and her daughter, Kathleen, who was probably 14 or 15 years old when they came, they actually lived with us in our house. You know, we had – there were four children. My mother had her hands full, and so Fanny Mae and Kathleen just lived with us. You know, we were together all the time. I don't think any of the people that I was associated with were ever significantly thought about it. You know? I do remember that one time, I guess I was probably 13 or 14 years old, and I was on the bus in Jackson, and that was a frequent way of all of us getting around. Anybody else I knew were a one-car family. You know?

[0:06:12] CUT – Begin Segment 2

And dad had the car. But anyway, I was on the bus, and a young black woman was sitting sort of in the middle, and a man who was sitting closer to the front asked the driver to make her move to the back. And you know, I remember really noticing that and having sort of feelings about that, and I do very specifically remember that the driver wouldn't do anything.

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He wouldn't make the lady move. And the lady didn't move. So I – I mean this is like 50, 60 something years later or something I still remember that. I don't know that I would call it a defining experience or anything like that. But sort of the reality of it for me was I occasionally read about Jim Crow laws, and I occasionally was aware of the – I mean not occasionally. I can definitely say I knew and disapproved of the fact that if you went to the courthouse, there was a black bathroom and a white bathroom, and there was a white drinking fountain and a black drinking fountain. Totally saw that, and as a kid, didn't approve of it, but nobody ever talked about it or was going to do anything that I was aware of.

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It was just the way it was. I've given up sort of wishing that I had been more conscious and more in opposite to that. I just lived in it, and it was the way it was.

Jim Lanier:

What are your first memories of national events that might start challenging that? The Supreme Court decision in '54? Earlier?

Bill Reed:

It was the Supreme Court – was the Supreme Court decision in '54?

Jim Lanier:

Yeah.

Bill Reed:

Yeah, I remember being conscious of that, I mean being aware of that. You know, in 1955, I went to the army.

[0:09:06]

I was inducted in September of 1955 down at Camp Chaffee in Fort Smith, Arkansas. I think it's now Fort Chaffee, and totally integrated. You know, we rode – it was kind of – that was an interesting experience to me. You know, I was friends with a number of black guys, and in basic training and in the schools

afterwards, and then I got sent to Heidelberg, and there were – I was at a very small army security agency detachment in Heidelberg. Maybe only 50 people in there. And I'd say of those 50 people, there were probably five black guys.

[0:10:00]

And that – my memory of them and association with them was very comfortable and very pleasant. That was in a totally integrated circumstance.

Jim Lanier: So the military is your first experience of that kind of equitable relationship.

Bill Reed: Yeah. That's correct. Yeah.

Jim Lanier: But you could not – in Arkansas, at least, you could not have gone into town to have a meal or –

Bill Reed: I mean in that time, you know, in that time, if you think of it, yeah, you couldn't go from Camp Chaffee out to Fort Smith, Arkansas with Zook Tanner, who was one of the guys that was with me there and who went to Heidelberg, and you couldn't go to the café with Zook.

[0:11:00]

Jim Lanier: Right. Maybe in Germany –

Bill Reed: Did in Germany, yeah. Totally integrated in Germany. No segregation that I remember. And then when I got back to Southwestern, if you think about it, 1957, there were no black people that worked for the city except sanitation workers or maids or janitors. Not to my knowledge are there any administrative people. No black person worked at a bank that was anything in any capacity other than maid or maintenance. No black person worked in any department store and anything like that. I mean across the board, I was not aware at that time of any black people working in the economy except in more menial jobs or as teachers.

[0:12:10] CUT – Begin Section 3

Or you know, in a business that catered to and served only black people. When I got here, though, the – you know, when I got here, the move was beginning. In other words, the – there was a – the

Little Rock integration of the schools in Little Rock, and that event occurred, I think, in '57 while I was a freshman here.

Jim Lanier: Do you remember much discussion here on campus about that?

Bill Reed: Yeah. I mean you know, a person that I've always had really great admiration for then and since then is a guy named Mike Cody.

[0:13:07]

Mike Cody as a college student had the perception and the courage, you know, to see and do things that we had not seen before. And so you know, I remember – there was, let's see, I think if I'm not mistaken Mike in his senior year, he would have graduated 1958. He and I were the same age, but I went to the army while he was in school. I think Mike was the president of the student body, and he was active in something called – I think it's called the National Student Association.

[0:14:01]

NSA, or something like that. I do remember that he was involved in that, active in that, and we – I think, though, I'm not – I know I was a student-officer at one juncture, too, and you know, like we – we got together and met with students from **Le Moyne**, I remember, and that was kind of NSA stuff on campus – that we would go from here to down there. And I don't remember anything about the substance of occasions, but yeah, that was the beginning. I also remember I've never been able to really put this together in final – in sort of documented form, but on an occasion, Russell Sugarman, who at that time was a very young lawyer in Memphis and very much a civil rights person in Memphis, young black guy, and he was invited to speak at the college in, what is it, Palmer Hall.

[0:15:24]

And he – what's the auditorium in Palmer Hall?

Jim Lanier: Hardy.

Bill Reed: Hardy auditorium, yeah. And I very much remember is I remember him coming and speaking. I remember – I don't remember anything about his speech. And the – I very specifically remember, though, that after he spoke, he came and had another sort of conference out on the lawn in front of Palmer Hall.

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I remember standing there in a pretty substantial group of people asking Russell questions and kind of hearing his responses and all. I also, you know – I believe, though I don't recall any specifics, I think that made Dr. Rhodes and some of the administrative people kind of nervous. You know? And I don't know to what degree that's documented here at all, but it was in answer to your question, that's an event that I remember.

Jim Lanier: Anything else about discussions of race in the classroom or any sense of – could you say whether the military or the college experience had more to do with affecting your views of race?

[0:17:06]

Bill Reed: I mean in the military, I don't know that the military affected my views of race. It's just that I experienced sort of and was not ever uncomfortable with the fact that the military was totally integrated and I was sleeping in the bunk next to – you know, I'd sleep upstairs at our house with Fanny Mae Emery and Kathleen for years, and so sleeping next to a black soldier would – that wouldn't – I never thought anything about that, and I don't remember, to tell you the truth, I don't remember any circumstance where there was any hard edged sort of white positions taken by anybody in the army.

[0:18:11] CUT Begin Section 4

I mean I ran into that when I lived in Mississippi, but I never saw any of that here at Southwestern when I was here.

Jim Lanier: Did Kathleen go to high school, or did she go to a different school? You and your brother go to one school, and she goes to another?

Bill Reed: No, we had totally segregated schools.

Jim Lanier: But the fact that she went to a different school than you all went to didn't –

Bill Reed: You know, actually, in living with us in the house, I never remember Kathleen going to school.

Jim Lanier: Yeah.

Bill Reed: But I remember my mother giving her things to read and kind of helping her read some. But that's funny. I've never thought of that.

[0:19:04]

Jim Lanier: Well, it just hit me. So but you – and then you go down to Mississippi to Marks to start working in '61?

Bill Reed: In the fall – in June of 1960.

Jim Lanier: June of '60. And that's the very same spring of the student sit-ins that start breaking out around the south. So I'm just trying to –

Bill Reed: Yeah. I mean I – when I went to – when I moved to Marks in 1960, I wasn't really aware of it so much. But at the time, I – you know, it didn't take long to become aware of it. I think that in **Quitman** County, which is where Marks was, black people could vote. And in Memphis. To back up a little bit, black people could vote for years in Memphis before I came down to Southwestern.

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In Quitman County, black people could vote. But not all that many black people voted. You could go over to Tallahatchie County, which would be Charleston and Sumner and Webb. I don't know that there were any black people who could vote in 1960 there. I might be wrong about that, but that was an issue.

And I would say that where I was – I became aware that I had friends who lived out from Sumner and Tallahatchie County who I'd have to say that I admire more than any people I've ever known because in the midst of a culture that was sort of as segregated as Mississippi was in those days, they were outspoken in their – quietly outspoken in their opposition to segregation.

[0:21:24]

And I have a friend, she's still – she's in her '90s and lives with her daughter out in California now. But woman named Betty Pearson lived out from Sumner, Mississippi, and her husband, Bill Pearson. You know, they managed to be absolute advocates for civil rights at a time when it really wasn't very popular to do that in that culture.

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I mean Betty Pearson, anybody who wanted – any black person who wanted to go to register to vote could request Betty to go, and Betty would go to the courthouse with them to register.

Jim Lanier: So you had friends who sympathetic, even helping out with that sort of thing. In the business world you're operating in, you must have also had friends and acquaintances who were opposed to desegregating. You were living in a world of Mississippi where the majority of whites were on the side of resisting the movement.

Bill Reed: You know, I think this. That in the sort of among the people that I associated with, I did not encounter like hard edged couldn't talk about it kind of social interaction.

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You know? I mean you could kind of be in the same room with the guy that you knew was opposed to civil rights, and it would work out okay. Now I have been in certain circumstances there where the issue couldn't even come up. But for the most part, when I lived in Marks and in that area of Marks and Clarksdale and there, it was not something that was discussed greatly except that there was always an issue like the ride at Ole Miss or the so and so, and there would be discussion about that.

[0:24:06] CUT Begin Section 5

Jim Lanier: Well, I was about to say tensions were rising, obviously, with Meredith at Ole Miss and the freedom rides, the busses that came to Jackson and all that. You have any recollections of that tension becoming greater?

Bill Reed: Yeah, I mean you know, in the sort of – on one hand in my life of riding up and up and down the road, so to speak, and going where I went and being with who I went with, on the minute-by-minute level, it was not a lot of anxiety for me, though if you read the newspaper, and by that time, television was sort of a daily event for a lot of people. Or listened to the radio. You know, there was always some event going on that was filled with anxiety.

[0:25:18]

Jim Lanier: Did you have any personal experiences with some of those dramatic moments?

Bill Reed: Yeah, I did. In 1964, in June of 1964, I was – you know, I was a 28-year-old manager of a little division of an agricultural supply company, and that company owned an ag supply store in – a little feed mill in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and in Kosciusko, Mississippi, and in Starkville, Mississippi.

[0:26:04]

And on a Monday morning in June, I went into the – I went into our store in Philadelphia about 7:00, and the manager of the store who was a nice guy named Emmett Hardy, he was so nervous that he was just, oh, could hardly contain himself. And I remember, he said, “Bill, Bill, they killed them two Jews and a nigger last night.” Now that was not language I was used to hearing when I went around. But in certain circles, that was normal language. And he said, “They killed them two Jews and a nigger last night.” And I said, “What in the world are you talking about?”

[0:27:02]

And he said, “Yeah,” and he named all of the people who killed James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner who I didn’t know at the time. They were kind of very historically famous names now, but at that time, they were just some young guys who were working, I think, on voter registration, but also other civil rights issues, and they had come to Philadelphia, been picked up by the police, and spent the night in the jail in Philadelphia. When they were let out on Sunday, they were taken away and murdered.

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And so anyway, he told me that, and I ended up suggesting that he go home, he was so nervous. Then I’m standing there knowing – I don’t know one of the guys that he told me that did it was the sheriff, a man named Lawrence Rainey, and the other was a deputy, a person named Cecil Price. And so I – and I was aware but not sort of – you know, really wasn’t – I was just conscious of it, but I didn’t think about it much, but I was aware that the whole store had been listening to what he told me, store in a kind of warehouse. And so I left there. I didn’t feel comfortable there. I left there, and I went over in town, and I called my boss, William King Self, and I told him what Mr. Hardy had told me and the names of the people and all that and asked him what to do.

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And he said, “You leave there right now, and you go to Starkville to the store in Starkville. When you get there, call me, and I’ll tell you what to do.” So I left immediately, and I drove to Starkville, which is about an hour away. Get to Starkville, I call him back, and he says, “Well, I tell you this.” He said – he named a guy that was an attorney in Jackson he was good friends with. He said, “I called so and so.” Together, we called the FBI, and they already know who did it.

[0:29:58] CUT Begin Section 6

And he said, “You don’t go back to Philadelphia until next week sometime.” So I didn’t. I stayed there, and then I – and I don’t have any memory of what I did during that week or what I was thinking about. But then about a week later, I drove back over there, and my recollection is I was driving from Starkville to Philadelphia, and I got to – as I was a few miles before I got to Philadelphia, I was going up to this hill, and there was a police car at the top of the hill, and so I – you know, the guy that I recognize him as the sheriff.

[0:31:03]

This is a guy about 6’ 5”. He was a very physically imposing kind of guy. He was making that motion to stop, and so I stop, and the sheriff’s car was there. You know, the man that I recognized as Deputy Price. He was arms folded, leaning up against the – against the car and had his shades on. It was pretty classic sort of pose. Anyway, I remember I was in my little blue Ford Falcon. I roll the window down. Sheriff comes over, and he kind of kneels down, and he puts his face right in the window. He was so close to me that I could smell the chewing tobacco in his mouth. He said, “Ain’t you Bill Reed?” I said, “Yes, I am.” And he said, “Don’t you have a little nigger named Dave that worked for you?”

[0:32:04]

And I said, “Yes, I do.” And he said, “I had to slap Dave around last night. Dave got to be – he got to being too smart for his own good, and I had to beat him up pretty good.” And he said, “You have any problems with me beating Dave up?” I’m sorry, I dropped this thing. And so you know, I was so courageous that I said, “Oh, no, I don’t have any problem with you beating...” I mean I was scared to death. I just was – I was scared to death, and you know, I said, “You know, no, I don’t.”

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And he – you know, I’ve always felt like that he was trying to get me to resist him in some way or be smart to him in some way so he could kind of pull me out of the car, but I just held onto the steering wheel, and I remember he just – at some point, he stood up and left. He got in the car and left. I went back to the store in Philadelphia, and I went to see Dave who was at work, and he was in the warehouse, and his lips were just swollen and cut and beat up, and his face was beat in.

[0:34:05]

And so, I never will forget this. I told him, I said, “Dave, I’ll go to the FBI with you if you want to go,” and he told me, “Man, there’s no way I would go. I don’t want to go to the FBI. I don’t want to talk to anybody.” And you know, I guess from a personal experience from my standpoint, I was – I don’t know. It was something I couldn’t think about for a long time. I don’t know. And then one day, a year – some years later, you know, it began to dawn on me that the guys that had killed Schwerner, Cheney, and Goodman according to the courts confronted me at a time when they were scared to death.

[0:35:19]

You know? So that was a difficult personal experience. But I would say that’s also kind of – I don’t really have anything to say else to say to that, really.

Jim Lanier: Yeah, that’s a –

Bill Reed: You know what? I need to go across the hall a second if I can use this time.

Female: Definitely. If you want to leave that, I’ll fix it. I’m going to be ready.

Jim Lanier: So did you continue living in Marks, or were you living in Memphis and working down there?

Bill Reed: Well, what I did was I lived in Marks from ’60 through – excuse me, from ’60 until sometime in ’64.

[0:36:06] *Cut Begin Section* 7

And then I spent the year of '64 and maybe the first part of '65, I actually lived in Kosciusko, Mississippi, and sort of managed those three places from there. And then later in '65, I moved back to Marks, and I lived in Marks until early 1968. And then I came back here, and I was – you know, I was in the general insurance business and real estate development for my career after that.

Jim Lanier: Well, as I'm thinking – then if you came back to live in Memphis or early '68, you must have been here when Dr. King was assassinated.

[0:37:01]

Bill Reed: I was here. I was here when Dr. King was assassinated. I was present. I mean you know, sort of here in the – you know, I remember I was at my uncle's automobile dealership in the – the late afternoon that Dr. King was murdered, and I noticed that many of the guys that worked for the dealership moved in a really fast way through the lot and to the liquor store next door. I said, "Why? What's going on next door?" They said, "We just heard that Dr. King has been murdered, and we know they're going to close the stores and have a curfew."

[0:38:08]

And then I – I mean I was here, you know, during that really difficult, sad time. I mean I – my office was down at 72 Madison Avenue downtown Memphis, and I observed I think every sanitation workers parade, march, and was certainly here relative to the curfews and those circumstances that we had. I mean I've always felt like that was just something we had to go through, and that was a good thing we had to go through.

[0:39:03]

Jim Lanier: In terms of facing up to the whole system.

Bill Reed: Yeah, I mean I think that in order for the great middle – and my opinion is that the great middle – and this I'm speaking middle of everybody, but specifically the great middle of all the white people. You know, the great middle did not oppose the implementation of civil rights, but it took the action of Dr. King and the action of many heroic African-Americans to get that done, and it also – you know, there were many white people who took an active role in the implementation of those rights.

[0:40:10]

But they were enabled because of their leadership connected to the fact that the great middle who would never have done anything about it would have lived just like we did in the '40s and '50s in Jackson, just lived with it, but were sympathetic with it. You know?

Jim Lanier: Is your recollection that most white folks in Memphis were supporting Mayor Loeb though through that crisis?

Bill Reed: No.

Jim Lanier: You don't think so.

Bill Reed: I mean I think there were a lot. There were many who did. You know, but I feel like that there were also many maybe even a majority who thought that that was not appropriate.

[0:41:11]

And I think that subsequent to that, the fact that the mayors who came along after Mayor Loeb, and I was acquainted to Mayor Loeb, and I thought he was a good guy, but I thought he was wrong. But the subsequent mayors and the development of the city council were all more moderate than Mayor Loeb was.

Jim Lanier: Right. What are your thoughts about racial reconciliation in the city in the aftermath of all that?

[0:41:53] CUT Begin Section 8

Bill Reed: I think that we had – I think the primary responsibility of people who live here is the implementation of an overall reconciliation. And I mean you know, one of the things that I have to say was a surprise to me, but that black people, there are certain black people who can be just as stupid and just as racist and the most stupid and racist klan mentality. I went for years thinking that the black people were in some kind of sublime zone because they had been mistreated so, but there are people – there are black African-Americans who take a totally racist attitude, and we just have to live with that, too. You know?

[0:43:00]

I believe that we have – that we're in about a – I think we were making progress, and I think we're in a probably three-to-five generational process of that. I mean you know, when I was a student – I'll say this, and I'm not, you know, I'm not the only – I'm not in the distinct minority there. There are many, many, many people who are like this. I am now acquainted on a social level and economic level and other interaction level with black families, you know, who – you know, who are the most attractive people I know. You know? Now my dad couldn't have said that.

[0:43:57]

He could have said, "I worked with this guy," and he was – he stayed close to people that he grew up – black people that he worked with on the farm and all, but he never had any kind of social interaction in the way that I see people having it now. Now is it the great majority? No. Is it significant and substantial? Yes.

Jim Lanier:

Could you tell us a little bit about your work at Springdale that aims at dealing with some lingering problems?

Bill Reed:

Yeah, sure. I'm – as I said earlier, that I went to Springdale Elementary School kindergarten 70 years ago this past fall. I – beginning about ten years ago, nine or ten years ago, I went back over to Springdale as a reading tutor, and I did that just because I felt like that I needed to be doing some different things.

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I actually had the thought of becoming a full time teacher, but I realized that wasn't the thing for me to do. But I went to Springdale. There's a guy there who's recently taken another teaching position at Delta State University, but the man who is the principal there, JeVon Marshall, received me warmly, and I went over there every day for years, you know, and worked with kids just tutoring and reading.

[0:46:00]

Then about a little over a year ago, we – it just came to my attention from several different perspectives that we were getting children who came to kindergarten that they weren't ready for kindergarten, and in our system, we had to do – and so what we've done is we've kind of organized a tutoring process, really a process of engaging with a family, and in most circumstances, that's the primary contact is a mother who has not married, but who has a

number of children. And sort of working with that mother, and getting her – helping her have her children be tutored beginning in infancy, and you know, all the way through – we're in the very early stages.

[0:47:19]

It has been really difficult. We have some instances of real progress and success, and we have some cases where we just haven't really gotten anywhere. And so but we're in the middle – we're working it out.

Jim Lanier: Right, and I know that's – that you're doing some really important work there.

Bill Reed: Thank you.

Jim Lanier: Are there any other experiences that come to mind that somehow we've missed? Anything else about any other stories of your encounters or experiences in those earlier years that we've left out, or any – any summary lessons that you have to say about the impact of all that?

[0:48:11]

Bill Reed: I don't think I have anything else.

Jim Lanier: Okay, good. I just want to make sure I hadn't missed anything. All right, thank you very much. We really appreciate your doing this interview for Crossroads.

Bill Reed: Well, thank you for having me.

[End of Audio]