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John Yackulics: -recording.

Holly McGlown: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom at Rhodes College we want to thank you for coming here today and sharing your story with us. We really appreciate it. My name is Holly McGlown and I'm a sophomore at Rhodes College, and this is LaKevia Perry, and she's going to be a junior at Rhodes College. We're both honored for you to be here to find a little bit more about Memphis and the things that you've been involved with.

Today's interview will be available online at www.crossroadstofreedom.com. For the record can you please state your names?

Robert Benham: Robert Benham.

Ann Benham: Ann Benham.

Holly McGlown: What year were you born?

Ann Benham: 1939.

Robert Benham: 1938.

Holly McGlown: Where were you born and raised?

Robert Benham: I was born in Newark, New Jersey and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Ann's much more interesting.

Ann Benham: I was born in Quincy, Massachusetts and raised in Manhattan.

Holly McGlown: Who were your parents?

Robert Benham: Start here.

[0:01:00]

Robert Benham: My mother was Martha Barris-Benham. My father was Albert Benham.

Ann Benham: My mother was Florence Regina Levy and my father was Albert White.

Holly McGlown: What are your occupations?

Robert Benham: I'm a lawyer by trade, and for the past 13 years have been privileged to serve as a trial court judge in Division One of the Probate Court of Shelby County.

Ann Benham: And I'm an author and an educator.

Holly McGlown: What were your parents' occupations? What were they like?

Robert Benham: Well, my mother at one time was in retailing, but was a stay-at-home mom after I was born. My father was a merchant; he was involved in a number of businesses.

Ann Benham: My mother was on the stage before she was married, in the era when one person would take a whole play and do all the parts.

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Ann Benham: And then she became a homemaker after she married. And my father was in merchandising.

Holly McGlown: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Robert Benham: I've got one brother, who likewise is a lawyer, but has been retired for a number of years.

Ann Benham: And I have a sister.

Holly McGlown: Can you tell a little about her?

Ann Benham: She's a homemaker.

Holly McGlown: Can you both tell me a little bit about the neighborhoods that you grew up in, what they were like?

Robert Benham: Well, mine was – we didn't live in that many houses. It was a very middle class neighborhood. The first house in Chattanooga was two bedrooms and one bath, probably had 1,100 square feet maybe, 1,200. When I was nine we moved away briefly, then moved back into a house right around the corner from where we originally were-

[0:03:00]

Robert Benham: -and it was really luxurious because we had two bathrooms, and it was about 1,600 square feet. Then my last year in law school my

parents built a house that was probably 3,000 square feet, but I didn't live there.

Ann Benham:

I lived in a really interesting building in Manhattan. It's at the corner of 72nd Street and Central Park West, so it overlooks the park. And it's referred to as the Twin Towers of the Majestic; the name of the building is the Majestic. And it's a deco building. People who study architecture look at this as a major example of deco architecture. But there were a couple of really interesting things. When I was young the top floor was available to everybody who rented apartments in the building, and it had a solarium, which is like a sunroom with a huge glass roof. And a preschool was run up-

[0:04:00]

Ann Benham:

-there. I mean today, I'm sure long since it's been converted to apartments that are, you know, sky-high in price. But imagine in the middle of Manhattan having a whole floor in a prominent building just available to the tenants. I remember having Punch and Judy shows up there.

The other interesting thing about the building is that our living room overlooked a quite incredible demi-gothic building where it was not as tall a building, so we could see the whole roof structure and everything, and that's the building where John Lennon was shot. So it's a real – I mean decades later, but it's a – everybody – everybody knows that building. So it was really interesting to have grownu up, you know, it was just there. It's a great looking building right across the street.

Holly McGlown:

That's very interesting. What kinds-

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Holly McGlown:

-of activities were you both involved in when you were younger?

Robert Benham:

Growing up in Chattanooga, Tennessee was primarily sports and outdoor activities. It had to be outdoor; everybody was in a very small house, so we had to be outside. Vacation times I spent most of my time on a bicycle, played baseball from dawn to dusk, or sneak onto the golf course and play golf when the pro wasn't watching, so we wouldn't have to pay. Or we had old – Chattanooga, bear in mind, is very hilly, and a lot of time the tees were in low ground, the greens were in low ground, there was a great big mound in between, so people with a good driver could

drive over the mound towards the green, but they could never see the green, and they would inevitably ~~lose use~~ a lot of golf balls that we would retrieve and sell back to-

[0:06:00]

Robert Benham: -them. So that was one way of making a living.

Then one of my early endeavors was a stand where we sold cold colas to all the people involved in the construction industry in the neighborhood. That was shortly after the 2nd World War. And then when I was a bit older I spent a great deal of time ~~out~~ on Chickamauga Lake, which was eight or ten miles from our house. We used to think it was a great big distance, till I moved to Memphis and to go to Pickwick Lake you had to drive 110. But I spent a lot of time fishing, water skiing, doing water sports. Primarily outdoor activities.

Ann Benham: I had just the opposite experience. I grew up in museums. Literally, I felt – I mean as a child I knew every bit of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and I knew the American Museum of Natural History, just inside out. They were my museums. And I did a lot of-

[0:07:00] -reading. Would play with other children at their apartments. So very, very indoor, unathletic childhood.

Begin Segment 2: [0:07:10:03]

Holly McGlown: Going back to your occupations, can you tell about what motivated ~~you~~ to become a lawyer and a judge and an author and a teacher.

Robert Benham: I'll let you start this time. You've did a lot of things before the author and teacher.

Ann Benham: I was motivated to go into the field of education because I was quite young, I was 20 when I got married, five days after I graduated from college, and I had got pregnant almost right away, and so, you know, I sometimes say my son is older than I am. But I was motivated by – it was a miracle to me to see this baby. I had never done any babysitting, I didn't know anything about babies, and it was just a miracle to me, and I just-

[0:08:00]

Ann Benham: -as he got to an age where he was ready for school, I never liked any school that I looked at.

So I made a lot of schools over the years, and then became frustrated with trying to change traditional education, dropped out of the schools and founded what turned into, over a number of years, a very large children's museum, and was fortunate to be in the field before there were – I mean there were maybe eight other children's museums in the United States. Today there are hundreds, in almost every city and many little towns and villages. But then nobody knew what a children's museum was, so I founded and ran this museum for 20 years and we really created the field, 'cause the field almost didn't exist. So everything we were doing then we couldn't go out and copy what anybody else had done, so we were doing-

[0:09:00] -things for the first time. It was a very interesting 20 years.

Robert Benham: Continue.

[Laughter]

Ann Benham: I became frustrated with the museum after awhile because I realized that museums get a tiny fraction of a child's time. A child may visit once a year, usually the Friday after Thanksgiving is the most popular museum day in America. So I started schools again, based at the museum. We had a huge – we had three acres right in downtown D.C., Washington, D.C. And one school was a dropout prevention program that we ran under contract to the public school system. They gave us students who they called their "100 worst", students who they felt had literally-

[0:10:00] -exploded out of the school, kids they couldn't handle. And we learned how to handle them and we became their safety net. And our goal was to motivate these young people to stay in school and to finish high school so that they could get on with a meaningful life.

And the other school was at the opposite end of the spectrum; it was a 3 to 6-year-old program for children, again, under contract to the public school system in Washington, D.C., and we took the overflow from six elementary schools Head Start programs where there wasn't enough room. The children were eligible for Head Start, but there wasn't enough room. In both schools the families had to be eligible for federal poverty guidelines; they had to meet federal poverty guidelines in order to get into either one of the schools.

And as it turned out in the school for three to six-year-olds, we adapted-

[0:11:00] -an approach to education that had been pioneered in Northern Italy, in a city called Reggio Emilia, commonly referred to as the Reggio approach. And they actually accredited our school. They had never done that before, they have never done it since, but they actually considered, once our practices, once we became fluent in the use of their philosophy and practices, they felt that we were good enough that they gave us the accreditation and then they considered that they had not 33 schools in their own city, but 34 schools; 33 in their city and one in Washington, D.C.

And that school is the subject of the first two books that I wrote recently. And the third book, which has just been published, is on infants and toddlers. So that's-

Robert Benham: I'm not near as long.

Begin Segment 3: [0:11:57:10]

[Laughter]

[0:12:00]

Robert Benham: Growing up in Chattanooga I had my mother's sister and her husband, my aunt and uncle, lived directly next door to us. My uncle was a lawyer, later, 1955, became a judge in Chattanooga. He was like a second father to me. Their eldest son was a lawyer and a partner in one of the largest law firms in California. He was somebody that I idolized. And as a result of their being in the legal profession, that was something that I always wanted to do. Turns out that virtually all of my male cousins became lawyers, my brother became a lawyer.

[0:13:00] Down deep I had always wanted to be a judge. I didn't think I would ever have the opportunity. I moved to Memphis in 1965 and was in private practice for almost 34 years, and in-
-1997 one of the city probate court judges died with a year left in his term, and after a lot of agonizing I made the decision to try to fill out the unexpired portion of his term. It was dicey for two reasons: number one, I would have to give up the law practice to do it; and number two, we were in a critical situation here in Memphis with the County Commission. The County Commission had to fill this vacancy.

We had a real division between the African-American and White members of the council. It was to the point where they couldn't even get a quorum. And everybody said that you're not going to be able to get either the White vote or the Black vote, as it was referred to.

[0:14:00] And I was naïve enough to go talk to every single member of the County Commission, and somehow the day that they were going to fill the vacancy they all stayed long enough to have a quorum, and I was elected by acclamation. So it was something of which I was very, very proud.

We had an election the next year and I had to wind up a law practice, sit on the bench, help plan a campaign, and it was a tough six months, but fortunately, due to Ann's good work we raised an awful lot of money, scared off the opposition, and I was elected without opposition. We then did something very different; we sent all the money back to the contributors.

[0:15:00] But going back, growing up in Chattanooga, it was a very different day and a very different time that would be difficult for people in your generation to relate to. At that point in time real discrimination existed if you were Jewish, and I happen to be Jewish. And it was very, very difficult to get a job with a law firm in Chattanooga if you were Jewish. There were very few Jewish lawyers. You couldn't work for any of the three owned insurance companies, which were the big industries there at that time. You couldn't work for a bank. And I decided to get out of town.

[0:16:00] Right after law school I had, since there was nobody knocking on the door to hire me-
-I took a civil service test and I was scored pretty well on general knowledge test. My grades never reflected it. On general knowledge tests I did well, and as a result I received an offer to go to work for the Internal Revenue Service. And this was in auditing of state and gift tax returns, and I had no other opportunities, so I did that for a couple of years. And I developed a real skill as a result of it; it was as good as a Masters degree. And I worked for the IRS primarily in Nashville and then in Chattanooga, and at one point in time was sent over to Memphis on a temporary assignment, liked it, started knocking on doors and got a job here.

Begin Segment 4: [0:16:44:06]

Holly McGlown: Can you say-

Ann Benham: I think he was a little modest in telling you how he got the appointment. And he's too modest to tell you, but I'll tell you. Robert had a very close relationship with Ben Hooks and Francis Hooks, the great, great-
[0:17:00] -internationally renowned Civil Rights leaders. He and Francis founded a daycare center together. She to this day refers to Robert as "my baby". And this is true. And-

Robert Benham: Some baby.

Ann Benham: Well, we're all older, sweetheart than we once were.

Robert Benham: Yes.

Ann Benham: ~~You once were.~~ And Francis is a little older than we are. Not much, but a little. When Robert realized that a judgeship was available one of the first things he did was sit down and talk to Ben Hooks. And Ben loved Robert immensely, and it wasn't just magical and just Robert visiting every single councilmember, but Ben Hooks made a lot of calls on his behalf because they understood that this man was born with a natural sense of justice and compassion-
[0:18:00] -and that he would be an enormous addition to the judiciary here in Memphis. So -

Robert Benham: Well, I had help from him. I had other help too. I had – a lot of people really came out of the woodwork to help me, so it was quite amazing. And I had served on the board of Memphis Light, Gas, and Water for a number of years and I chaired that board for eight years, and during that period of time we hired Colonel Morris' ~~s~~ as general counsel. The Colonel was a real big help in soliciting votes for me. The day I was sworn in in the Council Chamber was just a really stormy, horrible day and the place was absolutely full, so it's quite an amazing thing.

Ann Benham: Well the legal community, he had a very, very strong reputation in the legal community-
[0:19:00] -and the lawyers – across the board the lawyers got behind him because they knew his capacity, they knew he knew the field of probate inside out. And they wanted to see him on the bench because they wanted competence on the bench and they knew that he represented extreme competence. So -

I remember there were people for months after that event who said, "I drove all the way down from Collierville and there was no place to park and it was raining so hard I couldn't get in; I wanted to be

there.” But people were, as they say, hanging from the rafters the day that he was confirmed – I guess that was the common-

Robert Benham: Sworn in.

Ann Benham: Sworn in. So it was a big deal in our lives, it was a very big deal in Robert’s life, and it was really a crowning day for the judiciary in Memphis, because a lot of – again, he’ll never tell you this, but a lot of lawyers come up to me-

[0:20:00] -and say, “We wish every judge were like your husband. I’ve had people come up to me with tears streaming down their face and describe something that happened on the bench, for example, where he comes off the bench if somebody’s in a wheelchair and kneels down on the floor in front of the wheelchair so that he can make eye contact and really see what is in the person’s mind and heart. And people just say to me with tears streaming down their face, “He saved my mother’s life” or “my family’s life.”

So the compassion that Ben and Francis Hooks knew were in this man absolutely – he’s absolutely in the right job as a judge; there’s just no question about it. You’re not always lucky enough in life to have your temperament, your nature, and your skills match the job that you’re in, but his does.

Holly McGlown: Can you both talk a little-
[0:21:00] -bit more about Benjamin Hooks?

Robert Benham: I really met him through his wife, Francis, in probably 1966-1967; I was very, very active in the Memphis Jaycees that at that time ran a large leadership training program. We had over 700 members, and we started the program, leadership training program at Carver High School. She was a guidance counselor at Carver High School. That’s how I met her.

[0:22:00] At or about the same time Ben Hooks became the first African-American trial court judge in the South since reconstruction, so while I didn’t know him near as well as I knew her, I certainly knew him, ‘cause he was on the bench. And through her-
-we all became very, very friendly and remained so till I think he called me April 13th of this year; he died the 15th. He didn’t want to die in a hospital, and he went home, had and a list of people to call, and I was fortunate enough to be on that list. He just literally called people to say goodbye.

In the intervening period, of course, he went from the bench to the one and only area in which he didn’t succeed, and that was with

Mahalia Jackson Fried Chicken franchise with John J. Hooker, and that didn't work. I told him it wouldn't work. It didn't work. But he went from there to the Federal Communications Commission. He went from the Federal Communications Commission in Washington to executive director of the NAACP.

Begin Segment 5: [0:23:00]

At that point in time they were in New York. He moved them from New York to Baltimore. He was in that position I can't remember how many years, 13? 15? A substantial period of time, before he moved back to Memphis.

And when he got back to Memphis he was involved in a myriad of activities, but it was really my privilege to serve kind of – not kind of; it was my privilege to serve as their family lawyer all these years when he was in Washington and New York and in Baltimore and whenever there were problems here in Memphis, and I would get a call and take care of the problem. I guess the greatest compliment of all was when President Bush selected him to receive the Presidential Award of Freedom and he was kind of enough to include me with his family in going to the White House when he received it. That was a day I'll never forget.

[0:24:00]

We flew up there in _____ plane. And a relatively small group and family members were included, but it was an extremely well orchestrated event and the people who were honored were extremely deserving and he was obviously extremely deserving. And he was – you know, the man just did everything while doing all these things. He had two churches; one here and one in Detroit, and he wrote all his own sermons. Now when he had time to do all this, I don't know. But a lot of them are being archived at the University of Memphis now. There's still tons of them in their apartment at Waterford Place. And, you know, one week he would be in Detroit and one week he would be in Memphis, and in between time he would be working for the FCC or the NAACP.

[0:25:00]

He was just an amazing man.

Ann Benham:

He was brilliant. He was absolutely brilliant. He was a natural orator.

Robert Benham:

Yeah, he could get out of a hospital bed, barely walk, you get him to the podium and a microphone and bingo, he was off to the races. And his knowledge was just extremely broad. You know, it was history, it was psychology, it was the Bible. Extremely well-read; he retained everything he read.

Ann Benham: An amazing memory. Just an amazing memory. And as I said, his oratory skills – we would go to his church and hear the sermons. And he was a people person also. He would always begin – before he delivered his sermon he would always recognize anybody in the audience who was a visitor to the church, who held political office, who was special-

[0:26:00] -in some kind of way. And he just – he had a way of making you feel that you were the most special person in his presence. He just – he was gifted in his ability to relate to people.

And then as Robert has said, this incredible memory. I mean he could – you know, whether it was ancient history or whether it was history during his own life, whether it was people he had met, he was a storyteller. He was a great, great storyteller, because he knew so much about so many things and had the capacity to integrate all this knowledge and really to juxtapose things in very creative ways. He was a creative thinker, very concerned about social conditions in this country. A unique human being. Handsome, handsome man, that the pictures in their apartment, then going back to, you know, to when he was-

[0:27:00] -quite a young man is quite a gallery of pictures.

It's a privilege to know someone like that. We had dinner with them on many occasions. It's just a privilege to be able to sit and listen when someone like that is just telling stories casually around the dinner table.

Robert Benham: And yet has a distinguished legal career as a lawyer before he went on the bench. And it was very, very difficult if you were African-American to practice law. When he came to Memphis there was one ~~other~~~~another~~ black lawyer, a gentleman by the name of A.A. Latting, who if you get a chance you need to learn about. He was as articulate and competent as any lawyer at the bar at a day when it was very, very difficult for an African-American, and he was the only one that was here. There had been a few before him, but by the end of the 2nd World War-

[0:28:00] -he was the only African-American lawyer in Memphis. Then Hooks came down and at one time they practiced together, and Judge Lockard came not long after Ben Hooks.

But this was a time where, you know, there was a lot of unrest and justifiable unrest and so much of their practice was defending people, it was then in City Court, where people who decided that they didn't want to be excluded from the library, and went to the

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[0:29:00] library and all got arrested, including one of his nieces. Which was kind of interesting, when we get to the White House-
-for this award, the Presidential Freedom Award, we've got one person with us whose got a criminal record. And it's one of his nieces who was arrested at the CASA Library when she was in school at LeMoyne-Owen, for going into the library along with some other students. They all got scooped up, and the next thing they knew they were all in jail with Ben Hooks representing them in city court, and there was an issue as to whether "criminally" record would prohibit her from getting in the White House that day. Obviously it did not.

Ann Benham: Did they stop her at the gate?

Robert Benham: No, but they were all in discussions beforehand, you know, whether, you know, if this shows up what are we all going to do.

Begin Segment 6: [0:29:45:04]

[0:30:00] So these were the type of cases that we had at that time. And the segregation was exacerbated – you know, if you were African-American you couldn't be a member of the Memphis-Bar Association. If you couldn't be a member of the Memphis bar Association you couldn't use the law library. Now if you couldn't use the law library, what are you going to do to do a whole lot of research to represent your clients? You've got to have a huge investment in a private library or you've got to win. There was no inequality. No equality.

Ann Benham: And again, he's too modest to tell you much about his role, but he integrated the Jaycees, which was a civic organization when Robert was younger in the way ~~of~~ the Kiwanis or the Rotary ~~are~~ civic organizations today.

[0:31:00] Robert Benham: We ll it was a leadership training organization. It was big; we had over 700 members. And it doesn't seem like much today, but it was the first civic service organization that got integrated in Memphis, and it was very controversial-
-very controversial. You know, you just weren't supposed to do that.

Ann Benham: And he took it on and did it. And that's the kind – I mean Robert's very modest; he doesn't say – I'm glad I'm here.

[Laughter]

Ann Benham: 'Cause he doesn't tell you a lot about-

Robert Benham: Well, I hadn't ~~=====~~ told you a lot either; you left out the fact that you were executive director of leadership. Matter of fact, you left out a lot of things. You left out the fact that the Capitol Children's Museum in Washington was 150,000 square feet, that you had over 100 employees and 300 volunteers, that you had all these schools that they were really the first two charter schools in the United States. I'm not the only one that leaves things out.

[Laughter]

Holly McGlown: Well you've talked about integration, so do you think that integration or segregation affected you-
[0:32:00] -in your educational experiences when you were growing up at all?

Robert Benham: Sure. I grew up in the South in Chattanooga in a very segregated society. They talk about separate but equal. There's no such thing, you know. If you went to Howard High and you played football, you got the used equipment from City High. If you went to Howard High and you were in class you got the used books from City High. Bear in mind that at that point in time we had one City High School for the whole city, and that was for the whites, and Howard High was for the African-Americans. And never understood – never understood the second-class citizen business. I never understood people in my own family, you know, we would have domestic-

[0:33:00] -help and they would have to eat off separate plates. I never understood that, and I would always question things. It just wasn't right. That's the only thing I can tell you, it just wasn't right.

You know, the economic – not just school, the whole economic structure if you were black, you couldn't do much of anything. I mean where could you work? Everything was pretty segregated. Where could you live? You know, people were paying when I was in high school rent, you know, \$14.00 a week, \$10.00 a week, paid rent by the week. They were pretty well confined. Some people could be teachers.

[0:34:00] Beyond that there were very few African-American professionals. Here in Memphis there were a couple of lawyers, maybe a handful of doctors. ~~But~~ bear in mind ~~that~~ all the schools were segregated, so if you had a medical degree you went to Meharry. And I don't know, did Howard have a medical school? I'm sure there was.

Ann Benham: Howard I know has a very prominent medical school, but I don't know when it opened.

Robert Benham: You know, in the South, if I'm not mistaken, the only place you could get a medical degree was Meharry. ~~The e~~Colleges, you had Fisk, you had it was then Tennessee A&M now and Tennessee State, you had LeMoyne here, you had Owen here. There were no-
[0:35:00] -schools, post-secondary schools for African-Americans in Chattanooga, and I'm not sure about Knoxville and the Tri-Cities. I don't think there were any there. So if you wanted to go to college you went to Tennessee State or Fisk or LeMoyne or Owen or other traditionally black schools in Northern Mississippi.

Am I answering your question?

Holly McGlown: Yes, sir.

Robert Benham: You know, it was really, really tough. And once you got this college education what were you going to do with it? Now, I talked about, you know, if you were Jewish you couldn't do a lot of things. Well, it was even worse if you were African-American. There was just, very, very little opportunity, so people migrated to the north or the west, and a lot of the best talent left.

Begin Segment 7: [0:36:00:18]

Holly McGlown: Mrs. Benham, has segregation or integration affected you?

Ann Benham: Well, I grew up – you know, growing up in a city like Manhattan, you just saw everybody and, you know, I'm Jewish also, but there's so many Jews in New York, you know, I didn't even – you know, I was not aware. I didn't really run into the kinds of problems of economic poverty and racial discrimination until my first job out of college. In my first marriage my first husband was in the Marine Corps to pay back – the Navy had put him through college, so he paid his three years back, at that time it was three years, by taking the Marine Option. And we lived in Jacksonville, North Carolina, near Camp Lejeune, which is a major huge Marine Corps base.

[0:37:00] And there I was, five days out of college, when I got married. And there were no jobs in the city because the sergeants' wives, the upper-level sergeants' wives had all the jobs. And I was at the Laundromat, I was stir crazy. I was just, you know, 'cause I have a lot of energy. And I was at the Laundromat in my second week there, and I saw this sign, "caseworker open" at the welfare

department. I had no idea what a caseworker was; I had no idea what welfare was. That's how naïve and sheltered I was.

But I applied and got the job and it turned out that the director of this agency was a liberal. This was before desegregation. I mean this town knew nothing about the Civil Rights movement. I mean it was like this little town existed on its own planet, because the Civil Rights

[0:38:00] -movement had begun a number of years before, but it hadn't ~~have~~ hit Jacksonville.

Robert Benham: Well, you're talking about 1960.

Ann Benham: Sixty, right. '56 was what I recall.

Robert Benham: No, '56 you graduated high school.

Ann Benham: No, no, no.

Robert Benham: But the sit-ins – the sit-ins really started in '62 or '63.

Ann Benham: When was Little Rock?

Robert Benham: Little Rock was – that was in '57.

Ann Benham: That's what I'm referring to when I talk about the beginning of the Civil Rights movement.

Robert Benham: Okay. Okay. I'm talking about sit-ins, you're talking about ~~schools~~.

Ann Benham: Yeah, we're talking about different episodes. Okay. I was talking about – I mean Little Rock just, you know, anybody our age is going to remember Little Rock. So -

[0:39:00] But nothing – this little town was, you know, decades back, and I remember the director on his own had desegregated the waiting room, which was unheard of, desegregated the bathrooms, desegregated the drinking fountains-
-and White and Black were together. And then as his caseworkers, he gave each of us our own private office. That was unheard of. Unheard of. If you've ever been in the welfare department, it is – the physical setup disrespects humanity; desks are as close together as our chairs, the lighting is all fluorescent, ~~but~~ it's government colors, you know, it's this dishwater green or gray. I mean it's just, it's ugly and it's – people sit, you know, as close as we're

sitting, pouring out all the private details of their lives to a caseworker who's sitting there.

[0:40:00] To have private rooms in which you can meet privately with a client if you were a caseworker, put some dignity into it. I mean it's an-
-undignified process for a human being to have to ask for welfare, but this puts some dignity into it. There were many things this man did. There was a formula by which you added up how much somebody receiving aid to dependant children was going to be paid and then you automatically arbitrarily took 75-percent of that, of what their needs were, and that was what you could give them. But if they had a collard patch or a turnip patch you had to subtract more. If they had a television or a car, which was generally a broken-down jalopy, they weren't allowed to get welfare. And this director overlooked all that. You know, he was more humane than what the norm was at that time.

[0:41:00] But I remember some of my clients were the prostitutes that the Black men on base-
-visited. Okay? Not the officers, but the enlisted men. And they lived in – it's hard even to call them houses. You know, these were kind of tumbledown buildings sort of on stilts, because the roads were unpaved and after it rained it was just mud; it was just running mud. And there was no electricity, no indoor plumbing. And I noticed that their checks were all addressed, you know, all the women who lived there, their checks were addressed to the clerk of the County Court. And I didn't understand that, and I went to my director and I said, "Why are these checks going to the clerk of the County Court?" Well, the clerk of the County Court owned the property, so he would take his rent out and return change to these women in prostitution. So you talk about perpetuating the institution of prostitution, there you were.

Begin Segment 8: [0:42:00:10]

Robert talked his two years with the IRS being a Masters degree. I learned more in my year – I was only – I only worked there for a year because I became pregnant very early in my marriage, and so I worked until I was almost nine months pregnant, so that was about a year. And I learned more in that year than I learned I feel in four years of college. I mean I had been very sheltered. I had been privileged and very sheltered and there was nothing sheltered about the work that I was doing.

And it really certainly provided a direction for me in my life. I mean I always felt that it was ultimately important to provide the best possible educational opportunities for kids living in poverty, and it just gave a focus to the rest of my career.

[0:43:00]

For most of my career I worked – when I founded the museum I founded it on the wrong side of the tracks, because I knew that children growing up in inner city Washington, D.C. never made it to the Smithsonian Institution. Washington has more museums than any city per square foot, possibly other than New York or Paris, but our children, the children who are native to the city, never got to those museums.

So I felt it was very important that we were starting a major new museum that was going to be a resource for children and families that would be where they could get to it, that it not be down on the mall or out in the suburbs. And there was opposition from the board. Always. I mean it was 20 years of, “Oh, let’s move the museum. Let’s-

[0:44:00]

-move the museum,” you know, and it was – you know, fortunately there were always enough trustees who believed in this mission of making sure we were serving kids who would not have access to the other cultural resources in the city. There were always enough board members, thankfully, to out-vote the people who were saying, “Let’s move. Let’s move. Let’s get out of that neighborhood.” So we stayed there, at least for my tenure. At least for my 20 years.

But it was – that experience in North Carolina really made me aware of everything else that I did, of the importance of seeing that kids growing up in poverty had access to a broader world view than they would’ve had.

Holly McGlown:

Okay, now we’re going to talk a little bit more about the 1950s through the 1970s.

[0:45:00]

LaKevia Perry:

Were you involved with the Civil Rights movement at all?

Ann Benham:

No. I mean we were in Washington, D.C., so, you know, we went on a number of marches, but that was my only involvement. That and, you know, reading about it or seeing some of the horrific things on television that were going on. That was the extent of my involvement.

Robert Benham:

You know, here I guess, say “involvement”; I don’t know how you talk about involvement. I was always involved in projects. I guess

I was. I was always involved in projects that were reaching out to the African-American community. Integrating the Jaycees was a big deal in those days.

[0:46:00]

A bigger deal was 1968. 1968, as you all know, Martin Luther King's assassinated in Memphis, we're under Martial Law, half the city's on fire, and it's springtime and everybody's going to get out of school. And there was something called the National Alliance of Businessmen that was supposed to intercede and do something to find jobs for people, and they were afraid to do anything. And we had the Jaycees came up with the job fair that we had out at the fairgrounds, may it rest in peace.

The police wouldn't come out there to control. Everybody said, "You're going to have nothing but riots." All the leaders in the city told the police and the-

[0:47:00]

-sheriff's department to stay away, it was going to be nothing but chaos. And a number of employers showed up, a lot of young people showed up, and there were no problems. And we were able to get a whole lot of jobs that summer, and that was very, very critical, 'cause this city was - I don't think the city's ever fully recovered from 1968; I think we've still got conflicts. But that was a very, very crucial summer. So that was very, very important.

Starting daycare centers so mothers had a decent place to put their children while they got job training, which was what Riverview, Kansas, which I understand still exists, was probably the first, other than some people having some-

[0:48:00]

-small daycare centers in their homes. But that was one of the first ones.

Begin Segment 9: [0:48:06:19]

Ann Benham: And you founded that with Francis. You and Francis founded that center.

Robert Benham: Yeah. But there were other people. There were other people involved. Myra Dreyfuss was involved very heavily in it. Jeday Dreyfuss was involved very heavily in it. But it got founded and really was doing a good job. And we had one premise, and that was that people would have more pride if they paid something for their children to be there. And this was during the Johnson administration, so we were charging people, it was \$1.00 a week, \$2.00 a week. But then the government interceded and said we couldn't charge.

[0:49:00] And you know, if you pay for something you've got a feeling that you're-
-part of the process. When something's just handed to you, I don't think that's so good. But having this nominal charge I think gave people pride in that they were paying to have their children there. I got out of it after that. That just really almost broke my heart.

[0:50:00] It was kind of like starting a program out at the Arlington. Arlington's pretty much closed today, but there are a whole lot of developmentally-delayed people out there. And we started something called the Tennessee Foster Grandparents program, where we would get volunteers and we would pay them \$5.00 a day and lunch and take them out there to work with these children. And this one-on-one, they progressed way beyond what the medical community said they could progress to-
-just no comparison. It was off the charts. Somebody comes down from Washington and says, "You've got to pay minimum wage or we're going to close you down." We didn't have the money to pay minimum wage; we were doing good to get the \$5.00 a day and pay for their lunch.

So, you know, you have some bureaucracies are far, far overreaching; other bureaucracies are very necessary. But these are two examples, two that I fought and it was not successful fighting. But it just didn't help. It just didn't help.

LaKevia Perry: How did integration affect your life? Was it a difficult transition or was it easy?

Robert Benham: Integration? You know, I was always a big supporter of it. I was in law school in Nashville when the sit-ins started.
[0:51:00] I was in the first school in the Southeastern Conference that did integrate. It was something I just always kind of looked forward to. Again, by the time I graduated law school, school integration was just really getting started. I finished in January of '65, so I was really kind of above it in age in the schools per se, if I'm answering that.

Ann Benham: I, as Robert mentioned, this museum that I founded, it started with me as one employee and grew to about 100 employees. And I've always felt a very strong responsibility that my staff be integrated. Very strong responsibility. And we have-
[0:52:00] -I mean there's a very large African-American population in Washington, D.C., and when I say "integrated" I mean with African-American. That was the mix we needed to have there, was Black and White; it wasn't - the Hispanic population wasn't that

large. And while there's a huge, much larger today than in the mid-'70s even population from all over the world because of the embassies and one thing and another, my focus was make sure my staff has strong African-American representation.

[0:53:00] So, you know, I would just be sure that I hired very, very carefully in management positions and that my managers understood that we weren't going to be a White organization; that we were going to reflect the racial composition of the children who lived in our-neighborhood. We did huge, huge after-school summer programs. I mean we basically were the babysitter in the neighborhood; we'd have 300 children in our after-school programs because there wasn't any alternative. It was just – it was a commitment on the Institution's part.

Robert Benham: It's just kind of in our mind, and it's kind of curious, is recently as 1997, when I went on the bench, when you have – or when judges have certain appointments, if the litigants were Black you always had a Black lawyer that was appointed guardian ad litem; if they were White it was invariably a White lawyer, and I stopped that. I may have been the first judge to do that. You know, I had several high-profile cases-
[0:54:00] -a lot of money involved, and I appointed Black lawyers and the litigants were all White. There was never any resistance to it. Occasionally today you're going to get some racist~~m~~, there's no question about it. Particularly ~~if~~ I was also in a jurisdiction of mental health area. You get the mental health hospital and you'll get some people in there who are notorious racists, and you'll have a Black lawyer that's appointed to represent them and it can get kind of nasty.

Ann Benham: You mean patients? The patients are racist?

Robert Benham: Yeah. Yeah.

Ann Benham: Washington was in-

Robert Benham: But these are sick people, and I think most of the lawyers realize they're sick people. Although they are, you know, it can be infuriating when people use the N-word and use a lot of profanity. But again, these are sick people. Be they Black or be they White, they are sick people. And it works both ways. It's not just-
[0:55:00] -it's just not the White racists; we've got Black racists today I think just as much.

Begin Segment 10: [0:55:07:17]

Ann Benham: Washington is a very – I mean I don't know what it's like today; I've been here for 15 years now. But it was a very segregated city, because I was just way out front in – I mean it was a very public thing to have founded and be running this museum. And I would find myself all over the city. I would be at inner-city things, I would be at neighborhood things, I would meet with the City Council, which was a predominantly African-American council, as I recall, in Washington at the time. Because I did a huge amount of fundraising I would be in some of the wealthiest homes in the city. So it was, you know, and I just remember thinking days when I would, you know, kind of go from event to event all day long, you know, I could be in a-
[0:56:00] -huge, crowded ballroom where I was the only White person, and then I would go to another event and there wouldn't be a Black person in the room. I mean it was just amazing to me to see how terribly separate the races were.

And I mean to this day, after that experience, because I always try to maintain racial balance on that staff. And to this day I go into a room, you know, if we're at a function, you know, and I look around and I say, "Is this an all-White? Is this an all-Black?" You know, is there a racial mix in whatever situation I'm in, and often there isn't. Often we still have a long way to go.

| *Robert Benham:* Well I think that still exists a little here.

Ann Benham: Still a long way to go.

Robert Benham: And some obvious areas that I don't understand. We happen to be season-
[0:57:00] -ticketholders at the Orpheum. We have very few African-Americans in the audience. You go to a University of Memphis basketball game, and I fairly enjoy going to, you've got an all-African-American team, but very, very few African-American spectators. I don't understand that. You go to a Grizzly's game, which is much, much more expensive, and you've got a pretty good mix. I don't understand that.

Ann Benham: We've got a ways to go. Now I think – I mean I think prejudice is alive and well. You know, I sometimes-

Robert Benham: You're always going to have some.

Ann Benham: Well, you know, I read a lot about human evolution. You have two minutes left?

[0:58:00]

John Yackulics: ~~Thirteen~~Fifteen.

Ann Benham: Okay. Why don't you take the questions where you want to go?

LaKevia Perry: Oh no, continue. Continue. I really want to hear this.

Ann Benham: You know, I've read a lot of books on human evolution, and you know, so there's an isolated clan that thinks it's the only clan in the universe. Its universe may be, you know, the forest where they live. And then one day they venture out of the forest and they meet another clan, and I think that part of survival of early – as humans evolve, was protecting your own clan. So I sometimes think that they're – you know, I don't think that – I think prejudice is cultural; I don't think it's genetic. I don't think there's a child in the world now or ever who has been born prejudiced. You learn to be prejudiced. But I think it's a cultural-

[0:59:00] -adaptation. But I think it goes way, way, way, way back in our species. I think that, you know, we against them. I'm sure it didn't start out as racial prejudice; I'm sure it started out as a we/they, you know, us against them kind of thing. And, you know, difference brings out prejudice.

I mean we both know that as Jews. We both know, you know, Jews are – a lot of people think Jews have horns and, you know, there are all these myths about – well, they're there; they exist. There's a lot of interesting cultural history there too. But I think that prejudice may have been an adaptive response to protecting your own clan and family. But I don't think it had anything at that time, you know, way, way back in evolutionary time I don't think it had anything to do with racial prejudice; I just think it had to do with difference, anybody who is not-

[1:00:00] -us, anybody who is them is bad. So I just – you know, but it certainly prejudice is very alive and well in our society in many, many, many ways. Whether we can ever truly stamp it out remains to be seen. It's going to be your generation that has to take – you know, we're old. It's going to be your generation that has to take this on.

LaKevia Perry: So how would you suggest that we try to remedy prejudice?

Ann Benham: I think it starts with children. I really think – I mean here's a funny personal story. We have a nine-year-old grandson, and we had all the kids – we have – there are five young children; the nine-year-

[01:01:00] old is the oldest. And we were picking up Robert's cousin, who adopted Chinese twins. And there was a whole mix-up – she was renting a car 'cause she needed the car seats and there were two car seats, 'cause they were twins, and there was this huge mix-up, and the man from Hertz was a-
-very, you know, being very, very helpful. Big, tall African-American man who was trying to help all this mix-up over the car and the car seats get settled. And our grandson remembered that Tracy has a significant other who is a very large man. He's White, she's White. He just assumed – our grandson just assumed that the man from Hertz – he hadn't seen David in years; you know, maybe it's been four or five years since he'd seen David, he just assumed that David was Tracy's significant other.

Begin Segment 11: [1:01:42:17]

[01:02:00] You know, it wouldn't have occurred to this nine-year-old to say, "He can't be because he's Black and she's White." It didn't occur to the nine-year-old to think that this wouldn't be Tracy's significant other because they're of different races; never-
-occurred to him. Children learn prejudice at home, and I think we've got to start with the children. That powerful, powerful song from *South Pacific*, "You've got to be taught. You've got to be careful." You know the song?

Robert Benham: And the other place-

Ann Benham: Look it up. It's a great song.

Robert Benham: -where everybody has common ground I think are in churches.

Ann Benham: Oh, I think the churches are as segregated and as separate as they could possibly be, Robert.

Robert Benham: They are.

Ann Benham: I don't see common ground in churches. What do you mean by common ground?

Robert Benham: I think that's – you know, that's where you need to learn acceptance. That is the best common ground; you get a common religion. But they remain virtually segregated. And that's a good topic for one of you guys' schoolwork. And it may be economic.

[1:03:00]

LaKevia Perry: You have any questions?

Holly McGlown: Go ahead. I think we're running out of tape. So...The greater reality.

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Ann Benham: Bryson, you've been very quiet. You must have some questions?

Bryson Whitney: Well, I'm just quiet 'cause I'm not really supposed to be part of the interview.

Ann Benham: Well that's all right. Join the conversation. If you have a question, ask it?

Bryson Whitney: I find it interesting, my mom works in education. She was a principal for probably about 20 years and a teacher for about maybe five, and she works in professional development.

Ann Benham: In this city? In Memphis?

Bryson Whitney: At the Teaching and Learning Academy on Union. She's always stressing the public schools – my dad is a big – they're both big advocates of public schools and they're afraid that public schools are being kind of let go and they're being put in the periphery-
[1:04:00] -in the back window and—when people are kind of moving towards privatized type of education. And therefore they're afraid, because – and I believe that, you know, 'cause one of my brother went to a private school. I have two younger brothers, and one went to a private school and the other went to White Station with me—; it's a public school. And public schools, like just that setting, especially early on, is a good way for people of different backgrounds, you know, be it religious or economic or, you know, creed, color, to mix, and you need to get to see different areas and, you know, just come more informed—form, and private type settings, like private schools, it's not as, you know-

Robert Benham: You know, that's the real issue, and it's a hot button issue. And people want the best education for their children, be they Black or White or Asian, doesn't make any difference. Everybody wants the best education for their children. And those economically-
[1:05:00] -who can afford it, certainly locally are of the opinion that they're going to get it in one of the private schools. There are very few public schools that are recognized as giving quality education, unfortunately. And we both happen to tutor as volunteers in a school in Frazier, and it's virtually 90-plus-percent African-American, maybe 1-percent European-American and 8-percent

Hispanic. And when those kids get to school they are so far behind; it takes years for them to catch up.

[1:06:00]

And even when people learn to read, and this has been an eye-opener for Ann, she's had a little boy who's had a breakthrough and is really reading great. There's only-one problem: he doesn't know the meaning of the words he's reading. So you have to sit there with a dictionary and make a list once they read a word, ask them what it means, how to use it, and if the student doesn't know, which is much of the time, you're making a list and trying to teach meaning. And all of this goes back to the fact that children are not raised in households with books, they're not read to early on, they're propped in front of the television set.

[1:07:00]

And if there's one thing that we both agree on that we both, to get rid of if we could, would be television sets in front of young children until they're about in the third, fourth, fifth grade. Because that I think is the root of a lot of evil. And again, you've got virtually all the students in this school are from single-parent-households, mother's working two or three jobs to put food on the table, who's there to read to them? And that's where it starts. And, you know, I just got the statistics, over 60-percent, 61-percent of the babies born in Shelby County in 2008 were to single mothers. And it just perpetuates. Over 40-percent of the state as a whole, so it's not just confined to Shelby County. But it's getting worse and worse and worse, and this is a cancer that's got to get cured. You know, it's got to start at the crib and go forward.

[1:08:00]

LaKevia Perry: Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Ann Benham: Yeah, I just think what you're doing is really important, is getting, you know, getting a dialogue that hopefully will stimulate people to think about these kinds of issues. You've got to keep that awareness up. It's too easy. You know, it's too easy to turn your head to problems. So we really applaud what you're doing.

Robert Benham: ~~And a~~ And I second ~~that thing~~, You know, it—— is very important work for people to realize what the real issues are ~~and~~, ~~we~~ talk about the issues. Most places ~~rather~~—— bury it. At least we talk about it here.

LaKevia Perry: Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom project.

Robert Benham: Thank you for including us.

Ann Benham: Thank you for doing this.

[End of Audio]