Participants:

- Robert Taylor
- Deborah Douglas
- Rome Vasser
- Unknown Person

Location: Rhodes College – Memphis, Tennessee

Date: November 27, 2008

Taylor: My name is Robert Maurice Taylor, Sr. My age is 63. The date, November 27, location Rhodes College, relationship —

Unknown Person: _____ friends.

Taylor: Friends.

Douglas: My name is Deborah Douglas, age 51, the date is 11/27/07, location Rhodes College, and I'm with three of my coworkers — two coworkers, I mean.

Vasser: My name is Rome Vasser; my age is 54. The date is November 27, '07, at Rhodes College along with my friends and coworkers.

Taylor: Okay, my family life. I grew up — was born here in Memphis, TN, Shelby County; I grew up in a family of five — four brothers and three sisters, a mother and a father, and we lived in the rural I would say part of the Binghamton area, a part of East Memphis at the time _____. My father was a truck driver for Stenotype Printing Company, where he worked very vigorously so far as raising a family.

Vasser: My mother was a house mom. We grew up all in the same house. My father worked three jobs at one time, and some of — one of the jobs was a good memory for my brothers and I and my sisters. As we were coming up, we got a chance to share Christmas parades; it was a highlight for us, and we shared them from a building that is no longer in existence downtown, which was the M and M Building, about 15, 16 stories. I remember that as being one of the highlights of our family life.

I — we had a pretty nice life. It was four boys, two girls, and my mother and my father, which was a bricklayer at the time. We seemed to enjoy ourselves and family. We was more close-knitted type. My grandfather was a minister which passed sometime in '55, if I'm not mistaken, but we all lived very normal for the time. I mean we still enjoyed one another. I guess like Mr. Taylor said, the most exciting time was during Christmas for me. We was all given gifts, and we just had a very good time during our bringing

Right now — I'd say that the part of town that we lived in was North Memphis, close to town, which was a walking distance downtown to enjoy some activity that was going on at the time. Mrs. Douglas, would you like to say anything?

Douglas: I was raised with two brothers and one sister in the downtown area, and my mother and father — my father was a sanitation worker, my mom was a homemaker, and we was raised very religious, and like Mr. Taylor and Mr. Vasser said, the best time of the year was Christmas for us, and our family got together during holidays, and we really enjoyed each other. It's not like times is now; you can't hardly get together with family now; it's hard unless it's a funeral. But back in the days, as they will say, we had a good time.

Unknown Person: Was your fa — your father was a sanitation worker; was he working during the 60's?

Douglas: Yes, he was.

Unknown Person: Did he —

Douglas: On strike, yes. He was during the strike.

Unknown Person: Do you remember any of that?

Douglas: Not too much of it, just a little bit. I remember when they went on strike and all that, and there was boycotting and had those marches downtown and stuff like — I remember that much.

Unknown Person: Did your father ever tell you what the working conditions were like before?

Douglas: No. No, he didn't.

Taylor: I can — Robert Taylor speaking. I can kind of spearhead on some of the working conditions were just short of ridiculous for our garbage men. There was no set way of doing things. They'd come, and they'd pick up your garbage, and if there was anything left on the ground in the black community, that's where it was left, but now, once you went out toward the upper crust, the richer part of Memphis, then everything had to be spic and span. Those guys left a piece of paper on the ground, they had to get out of the truck and pick that paper up and clean up the area that they had just pulled garbage from. So even at the point at that time, the money wasn't coinciding with the job that they had to do, so they ended up quite a few times, people would come home, the male figure would come home and take his frustrations out on his family. So it involved the whole family.

During that sanitation strike that Mrs. Douglas' family was involved in, the only way that it was broken was because of the marches that we had because of a elite group of Caucasian women who were wives of some of — the mayor's wife, your councilmen, I guess _____ president — these ladies band together to try to put an end to the strike because of the fact that garbage was being left everywhere and it was starting to create rats. So they had put pressure — they had to put pressure on their husbands and their counterparts to make this thing end, and for the most part, that's basically where the ending came in.

Vasser: Wasn't it also the fact that the treatment of the workers at the plants that really caused the problems?

Taylor: Yeah, that had a lot to do with it also.

Vasser: In other words, the black man that worked in these sanitation was really the limit as far as him as man — to be a man. I mean I think it was a whole lot more involved in that than just the pickup.

Taylor: Yeah, well, it had a lot of things to do with the treatment that the workers were getting, also the amount of money that they were being paid for what they were doing.

Vasser: But wasn't it also the fact that the way they looked at — it wasn't about just being money-wise; it was about being given the same respect as a man. Isn't that also part of it?

Taylor: Yeah, but for the most part, when they were trying to get a contract with the city, these were the issues: Insurance, higher rate of pay, better working conditions; matter of fact, better equipment to work with. One of the men I remember lost his life over there in one of the pickup trucks.

Vasser: In the dump truck because the fact that he couldn't come up out of the rain.

Taylor: Right.

Vasser: So therefore, it was convenient. I feel like it was more the working conditions that they would seem like to be more concerned about than just not only pay is something to have, but it was being the treatment that they was going through.

Douglas: Yeah, because they had to go back in the back yard and roll those big old gallon barrels around and tilt those tubs when they were picking up trash, and that wasn't such a good idea, but being having a job, that's what they had to do and do within the rain, sleet, snow and all that kind of stuff.

Taylor: Now, my education, that was a part of the things that we probably need to cover, education. I went to elementary school, junior high and high school, graduated from Lester High in 1962. I went on to LeMoyne-Owen College at that time and spent two years there. Well, going back to my education so far as coming up to get to this point, we were basically discriminated toward our learning facilities as well as the books that we had to learn from. I remember most of the time, the books that they would bring into the predominantly black schools — let me back up.

We had a white superintendent for the white schools, a black superintendent for the black schools. Most of the time, the books that we received were books that had already been used the prior year, and when they would come to the black schools, there was a new edition already for this book, but we were learning from the old edition. So that was that thing of having to learn secondhand what our counterparts — our white, Chicano brothers or whoever — had learned already.

Unknown Person: Did you all go to fully segregated schools for your whole public school education?

Douglas: No, I started in fifth grade. I started segregated school in fifth grade.

Unknown Person: So you were in fifth grade when the schools were desegregated?

Douglas: Mm hmm.

Unknown Person: What was that like?

Douglas: Well, it was kind of — it was strange because all my first grade, second, third, fourth grade, I was among all blacks. Then when I got into the fifth grade, I had a white teacher, and we was mixed up, and it was different because it was like you were sitting on one side of the room and they were sitting up in the front or whatever, and the teacher was like mostly teaching to the white kids than she was the black. But then she would say, "Well, we're all gonna learn this today," and stuff like that, and she was

like one of these teachers from — it was like a little country teacher because she liked the country music and did things like that. But it was different.

Unknown Person: Did you stay in the same school and they came to you, or did you go to a new school?

Douglas: No, I went to a new school.

Unknown Person: >Was it scary at all when you first started going?

Douglas: Yeah.

Unknown Person: How were the white children towards you?

Douglas: They were like, "Okay, you stay over there, and I'll stay over here."

Unknown Person: How do you think Memphis has changed over times in terms of segregation?

Douglas: Is — go ahead. Go. Go.

Taylor: I think it has made a vast move towards segregation in many areas, but every once in a while you see the ugly head of integration raising up and slapping us in the face. Now, I feel that the young people now don't know what we had to go through to get to where we are now. They think that it's been like this all the time, and when I tell my grandkids about some of the things that we had to go through during school, they look, "Granddaddy, you gotta be kidding!"

No, I'm not kidding! This is the way it was then. But right now, the kids have grown to know each other as an individual and to respect each other as an individual, not for color, not for who your daddy is or who your mother was, but for the individual person. This is the way our young people now are seeing things, which is much better than what we had when we were coming up.

Vasser: The only thing I can say about that, I noticed the schools that were closer to us, we still had to go further.

Bet yet, not knowing, we still enjoyed the way we — we were still — it wasn't — to me it didn't affect me as a whole because that's the way I supposed to be going. I really didn't think that much about that, but there were several closer elementary, high schools that was in the area that we had to bypass in order to get to another school. But as time changes, those same schools, we were still — we was able to go to later. But it just — I don't know. I guess it just didn't dawn on me like it did on others.

Taylor: Then you have to know how it feels to pay an amount of money and then to ride the bus _____ just to ride the bus and then have to go past 20 seats just to sit down for the same amount of money that your white counterparts had just paid. If there was a difference, then you maybe can understand the difference, but to go past 20 seats to sit in the back, and sometime there were no seats at all because black people were all crowded in the back of the bus. This is a part of the segregation that we encountered.

Even certain days you go to amusement parks, you had one day to do this, but you paid the same amount of money to go to these different places. So to me, I just felt that that wasn't right, and at that particular time, if I wanted to enjoy these entertainments, then I had to do it that way, and that was the only way I could handle it for a minute. But it's changed.

Vasser: Well, I understand that, too, and like my older brother, which is 68, he spoke on the fact that it was certain days if you wanted to go to the zoo, it'll be a Tuesday or Thursday, but you know, actually, it — I mean during this time, he went through that, but it didn't seem that much. It didn't bother me at the time because I was small, and also we experienced the fact that they had two _____, like the Cotton Carnival for instance. There was a white cotton carnival, and there was black. The whites go to Front St., the blacks to Beale St. I mean it was things like that, but I'd say as the years passed, all changed, even here in Memphis, they made just one Cotton Carnival, and everybody participated.

Unknown Person: How old do you remember being when it first occurred to you that this was wrong, that it wasn't the way life should be, but that life should be different, that you shouldn't have to pay the same price as everyone else and not get the same treatment on the bus?

Taylor: I was about 14 years old when it really started hitting in reality that we were being made a difference, not because we didn't have the money or didn't know how to do certain things, but because of my color.

Those are the things that started to disturb me as I was coming up during my school day years. Mr. Vasser, we're probably like ten years apart — and also Mrs. Douglas — in our age bracket, so some of the things that I had to incur or I had to endure had started maybe to changing then, but as it is, like I said right now, kids don't see the difference. Most of them don't even have the knowledge of what we had to go through. You can speak of some of the people right now who were heroes during the — even the sanitation strike, and young people now don't even know who that is.

Unknown Person: Who were some of your heroes when you were young and saw people starting to fight the fight?

Taylor: I enjoyed the way Ezekiel Bell carried hisself, Rev. Abernathy at the time,—

Unknown Person: Did you ever see him preach?

Vasser: — Hooks — yes, I did.

Unknown Person: What do you remember when you first heard them? Or what's your sort of your — when you look back on that time to thinking about hearing Ben Hooks speak or Abernathy? Like do you remember one specifically?

Taylor: Yeah, I felt that these were men who were going to stand up and stand out for our color, for the injustice more so of the color than just being a black man or being a white man, but the injustice that was being done toward us. I think their speeches were dynamic — the were very dynamic — and I enjoyed as a young person listening to them. So I tried to instill in my son some of these type things that were going on and to understand.

Now, don't get me wrong. We had entrepreneurs — I felt they were entrepreneurs because they had my grandparents had their own business. Their business was in coal and ice. They had a wagon that they would pick up coal from the coal house at a certain price and then sell it over the communities at another price. Same way with ice, and so I felt that they were entrepreneurs at that time and had their own businesses.

It wasn't inside a building, but they had their own horse and wagon, and this is the way they came about. At that particular time, you saw a lot of entrepreneurs, I feel, downplayed because you had — this is what we were talking about when we got started on this. You had the coal man, the rag man —

Vasser: You had the —

Douglas: The market man.

Taylor: The market man — all these different people, and they carried their own structure about what they did for the black community. When you mention these names now to a certain age group, they don't even know what you're talking about.

Vasser: I know for a fact that my mother's oldest brother, he was considered a rag man.

Taylor: Yeah!

Vasser: He had his wagon, he had his horse or mule or whatever, but during that time, that's what he was doing. He'd gather up the rags in different places, and a lot of times people just laugh at that, but he was doing what he loved to do. But a whole lot's been changed from that time, you know what I mean.

It's just strange the way it haven't got as far as it have. You know you look back on and say, "Well, there are some men that did so much," but yet they're still, the young people just don't understand what that person had done or what he was all about. Seem like it's lost.

Unknown Person: Did you want to say something?

Douglas: Well, in my days, we all went to church on Sundays; that was what everybody — I know I did. You had to get up and go to church on Sunday. You didn't do like most kids, now they sit at home, watch ball games, play video games and stuff. It was all about the Lord, too. He had to be in this plan. So without Him, these things wouldn't be where they are today, but He's brought us from a mighty long way.

Unknown Person: Can you describe your church where you grew up?

Douglas: Well, we went to a little church, and everybody was singing and —

Unknown Person: What was it called?

Douglas: The first church I went to was Progressive Church over there on Vance, and Rev. O.C. Collins was the pastor.

Unknown Person: Okay, yeah, _____ _____.

Douglas: Yeah, and it was real nice. People enjoyed going to church. People — you would go to church, and you would have a dynamite sermon, you could listen to what the preacher was saying and singing, and it was real enjoyable. Nowadays, you go to church, some of them's enjoyable; some of them's not. But back in my days, it was enjoyable to go to church, and it still is now if you've got Christ in your life.

Taylor: That's basically what I was talking about when I said we had — as black families — had lost the institutionalization of our coming up or our being raised, 'cause we — the home that we started off in

the home, and there was stern discipline in most of your black homes. You didn't see that criminal element there in the home. Father worked, and most of the time the mother also worked. You left the home, and at that time, you picked up the learning from the church. So after the church, then you take that on to the school, was your educational portions of it, and it just filtered down from the home to the church to the school.

Well, right now, most of the homes have lost their structure. You find in a lot of the homes now, the kids are running the house, not the parents, and then that filters on over into our church and our schools.

Unknown Person: When did you father teach you how to be a man, how to be a responsible man?

Taylor: Oh, man, I tell you. We had a stern, disciplinary father who taught us stealing was wrong. If you stole, if you had something that you wanted and you couldn't work for it, you didn't need it. He taught us how to stand up and be a man.

A female to you or to me, no matter what her status is, whether she's a prostitute, whether she's the banker's daughter or the President's wife, she was still a female, no matter what color she was, and you respected her as being a female. Those are some of the things that my father taught me, and I learned that it'll take you a long way.

Vasser: Well, my father passed when I was a young age, and so we mostly — well, we did, not mostly — relied on the shoulders of our mother, in which I feel she was a strong woman.

She was a hardworking woman, and most of our maturity comes from what she built from, and that strongness, it endure in all of us. Now, for the man part, it was mostly our uncles, so that's the way my side — I mean my family was. We — my man figure would be my uncle, but the strongest person in my upbringing was my mother because she was the only one I had to rely on.

Taylor: One other thing we had talked about on segregation, and the question was asked, "Do you feel it was still segregated somewhat in that manner?" Well, I do feel that we are still segregated, and not only now by color, we segregate by gender, still some on the educational basis, and our financial status. We have people who come together right here at Rhodes College, and you see that we gravitate toward each other. If there's a function, you watch the area fill up, and you'll see that most of the whites gravitate toward the whites, most of the blacks gravitate toward the blacks, and the only time that the integrated portion of it comes in is when there are no seats left.

Douglas: You're right about that.

Vasser: [laughs]

Taylor: So we still in a manner of speaking segregate ourselves.

Douglas: It's not as bad as it used to be back in the days, but you can tell that there's still some in dif — in places you can still tell. You can go into the grocery store; if you got a white cashier, and you can tell when you walk up there she got this frown, "Okay, what is you doin' in this sto'?" But you're buying groceries just like the rest of them, so you know we've still got some in now.

Vasser: I guess that's something that's gonna forever be, you know?

Douglas: Yeah.

Unknown Person: How do you think the working conditions are different for your generation than from your parents?

Taylor: Oh, I feel that the working conditions are much, much better. Not only are we as men making these standards come up to par, but we have now different organizations and even the government that _____ the fact that there will be no injustice here in America. Now, it's not as well as it could be, but it's much better than it used to be.

Vasser: Yeah, I think it's — I think so, too, because I looked at the fact — my mother, she worked at St. Joseph's Hospital at the time, and 50 years ago, it was just $1.00 an hour. Now, may not be the best, but it's a whole lot better than it was.

Unknown Person: You were talking earlier about riding the bus. Do you remember when you — like the first time when you got to ride the bus and there wasn't a place where you had to go on the bus?

Taylor: Yes, sir, I do. I remember riding the bus downtown with my sister, and we had to walk — at that particular time we were using tokens, not money, but tokens — and you put your token in, and you had to walk past 20 seats, 10 seats that might have been empty to go back beyond the middle door where blacks were supposed to sit. Now, on many occasions on that same day, coming back that afternoon, the bus was full of blacks that rode the bus to and fro from their jobs, and you had to go beyond seats that were empty and stand up back in the back. So I'm asking, "Why do we have to do this? Can't we sit there?" "No, be quiet. Just be quiet. You can't sit up there."

That's the way it was in growing up, and I vowed then that my kids would never have to go through that if I had anything to do with it. But in many occasions, things had changed, and thanks to the Lord, we didn't have to go through it — or they didn't.

Unknown Person: Do you remember then after that, when was the first time that you got to pay your money and sit wherever you wanted on the bus?

Taylor: Oh, that was — uh — let me see, that was in the — it should have been 1959, I believe it was, and I was able to sit beyond the back door, gravitating toward the front. I figure the year was '59 or '60.

Vasser: Well, I'm saying you can see that change from the — like I said, you're ten years older than I am, and I didn't experience that. I mean that just shows the change. It was still changing during that time. So I never had to go through the experience with not being able to ride where —

Douglas: Sit on the bus.

Vasser: — sit on the bus or — at that time.

Taylor: I think it's going to be a continuous change as long as we don't, as citizens, don't let things gravitate back into what they used to be. You still have people that teach hatred, not only toward color but toward races. You've still got the Nazis that hate Jews, and we feel that that's not concerning us, but it is because we've gone through that. We've seen where you just hated me because I was black or I was brown, and those things are now changed where you and I can sit down in the same restaurant and eat as friends, and we will continue, I feel, to change/gravitate toward becoming one closed nation, not

a black United States, not a white United States, not a Mexican United States, but a united front of people.

Vasser: It all takes time.