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Jenna Sullivan: Today is Wednesday, April 8, 2015 and I'm Jenna Sullivan, a Senior Religious Studies major, and I'm here with – can you say your name?

Dr. Coby Smith: Dr. Coby Smith.

Jenna Sullivan: Dr. Coby Smith. Well, thank you so much for being here. I know it's kind of a formal setting but I really am so grateful for you coming over. There's so many questions I could ask you but I guess we'll just kinda dive right in.

So you arrive at the school in 1964, but I'm sure you had perceptions of Southwestern before you came. Can you just tell me a little bit about what you knew about the school before you arrived?

Dr. Coby Smith: Actually since I live nearby my mother would drive me past the school. Now she loved the idea of chapel. The students would be crossing from –

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Evergreen and you'd have to stop and wait for them all to pass, and that was just a thrilling idea for her. I think she had decided that I was gonna go to Rhodes. I really wanted to go to the U.S. Military Academy and I had gone to WestPoint for competitives. However, I was waiting for the following year because I received a principal appointment to the Naval Academy from Congressman George Grider who was a very interesting man who also got a chance to come to Southwestern.

My perceptions were really based on driving past the students crossing for chapel and I had made a campus visit in the spring. At that visit I had met –

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Three people who still remain very close – Michael Cody – W. Michael J. Cody who was his class graduated 50 years ago – 51 or 52 years ago. He was an attorney that I was familiar with. At the time I thought Mike was really a student here. I met Don Hollinsworth, who was the quarterback on the football team, which I played on, and Beau Scarborough, but the person who really

made the lasting impression on me was a young Divinity student named Roger Hart.

Jenna Sullivan: Roger Hart. Yeah.

Dr. Coby Smith: Roger was tall. Roger had a –

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A very calm complexion. His hair was thinning. I guess that's why I was drawn to him. I never thought my hair would thin at that time of course, but Roger was a wonderful student. He was involved in the sit-ins at Second Presbyterian – the pray-ins. So Roger influenced me very greatly and Mike Cody had been working in the Grider campaign with me so I thought Mike was dashing. Of course, he was a cross-country guy so he usually was dashing. But he worked for Burch, Porter and Johnson, and anybody who knows Lucius Burch knows that this was a great old warhorse. There are two –

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Attorneys who are a part of the history of this school that are very important – Louie Donaldson and Lucius Burch. Lucius Burch was the one I was closest to and Lucius was a fantastic old man. Years ago, Jenna, they had an airport on Mud Allen. Lucius used to fly in from Caryville every day and land on that astro. He must have crashed 20 times. And you know you'd go visit him in the hospital, he'd be in there with a broken leg or something. He was an avid hunter. Just a tremendous old guy, but he is one of the guys who helped fight the Crump machine. So he was just a dynamic person. His personality just stood out in the room. I think he made his money representing the wives of planners and –

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Divorces. So he was just a gallant old guy who just had a really – he had a bouncing personality. He just was the kind of person who never took no for an answer. He wore a full beard, which to this day I cannot grow, but we were all fast friends. Of course George Grider was a wonderful old guy. He had been a submarine captain and George Grider told me that when he came here he followed the same steps that Abe Fortas had followed. Abe Fortas was waiting to go to a military academy, too, and he decided to come here so I guess that was the –

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The way to make sure you get students who want – are stuck trying to make their decisions. Now I don't know where else I would have gone. I had scholarships to mostly black colleges – traditional black colleges, but for some reason I guess I did not – after I came over here it was a cool spring night. I'll never forget it, when I went into the men's dormitory. The first thing that impressed me was the great fireplaces with all of that red oak burning and that just stuns you in those days, you know. So it was just impressive to me. And the students were so quiet. Yes, ma'am. They're quiet. That's the same thing my son says. He says, in high school they're loud. He says, man –

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The people are too loud. But the students were so quiet and at that time Barrows was where the library was. Nothing like this library, but it was a very impressive library. You go in there in the students' wall waiting on reference books. I did not know until I got here that a lot of students owned the reference books. Of course my allowance did not allow that and I hadn't even thought about it. In fact, I relied on my allowance to take care of getting me some copies occasionally – very important things and it was just an intriguing experience. The first thing that happened to us is that football practice starts really before students get here and the team was here, and great bunch of guys. I should never have played football at 140 pounds. Of course I mean look at me now. I could probably fit right in.

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[Laughter]

But it was great. The other guy who came with me was a great athlete as he was a great scholar – Lorenzo Childress. He was just a dynamic guy. We graduated in the same class from Manassas. Of course Lorenzo was about I guess 6'3", 215 pounds, which at that time to me was like – that was the ideal size to be. It took me about a semester to learn that I was not that size, but I was a quick study. I finally found out that I was not. I'd thought that the things that we were able to do were just exciting. For example, I loved the fact that there was an honor code. I loved the fact that you could leave your possessions anywhere and nobody would bother them. That was just novelty –

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To me. And I loved the fact that it was near back a walk to the campus. Of course I didn't have a car. I had to walk. But there was some wonderful people. Last night I called an alum who's wife was a senior when I was a freshman and she had grown up with a distant relative of mine who worked for her parents and cared for her. So she told everybody that I was her brother and to be nice to me, so I thought that was just from another world because it was – the world was black and white then. There were no in betweens. This morning I was looking at television and they've –

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Got a new museum dedicated to slavery down in Louisiana on the former sugar plantation, but the atmosphere was so different in those days. Everything was relegated to race and there was no interracialism at all. So coming here was a great experience because I went to segregated schools all my life and everything was so harsh. The buses were segregated. There were places where black people could not shop. You could not try clothes on in major department stores. It was just an interesting life. At that time there were no blacks in the civil service so you couldn't get a job as a secretary or a clerk –

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Anywhere that paid money. In fact, in those days the world I grew up in was so segregated until almost all the black people had jobs as either domestics or – well, they were either maids or yardmen. This was before the washing machine became a practical convenience and the power mower. Can you imagine that?

Jenna Sullivan:

I can't imagine that.

Dr. Coby Smith:

Well, when I grew up there was such a thing as a push mower. You cut your grass with a regular push mower and I was not very big so I was not good at it, but I had two older brothers and both of them were much better.

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They were more sturdy built so one brother cut the front yard, one cut the back yard, and I had to help both of them. So the world of work was extremely different. Everything was labor intensive.

When I got here, the only black people here were the maids and the housekeepers and over in the field house there were three black people. There was a guy who was the equipment man, and I loved him. He had had polio, so he had a limp and wore braces. Just a fantastic guy. He took us under wing. And there was another guy who worked there who's name was Mose and I later found out that Mose's daughter –

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Had gone to Manassas before I had. Now he had another daughter who was younger who used to work the concession stands on Saturdays at the games. Now these were very important people to me because Mose and Roscoe would always send us to drive places for them and get things in those days. They probably had the free-est jobs on campus. The other jobs were guys who worked the lawns and I mean this was a labor-intensive part of the work, but the people were very nice and to all of the black people who worked here, we were really – we were like I guess their hope. They would all –

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Treasure us whatever we needed or wanted they saw to it. So it was an interesting place. As for regular campus life, I had never made a – I think I had made one C in high school so I didn't know anything about bad grades. The C I made in high school I got because I took physical education and the guy who taught it said look, the only people who get A's here are my varsity athletes. So I was not a varsity athlete so I couldn't get an A.

Jenna Sullivan:

Oh goodness.

Dr. Coby Smith:

Outstanding students, guys who were athletically outstanding got B's, and I was not that way so I got a C. Man, that C hurt me so badly because the girl that I really admired in high school had all A's. I said man, you know –

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That must be interesting. She doesn't get a demerit because she's not a big athlete, but she was a very smart girl. I loved her. Puppy love is only important to the puppies. I was groomed in a world where we had hopes for changing society where one day we would be doing the same things that everybody else did. At that time I aspired to be an attorney, so I took political science. There was

some interesting people here. I told you a little while ago about Professor Amaker who was head of the political science department. He was a traditionalist and wore a three-piece suit every day no matter how hot it was. You had to wear a tie to his –

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Class, which there were some classes you had to wear ties to. You always had to wear a tie to chapel and you had to wear a tie to dinner. Now this would be very hard for students today, but we went to school six days a week and we had three chapels. So arrange that in your schedule and you spend most of your time at school on the campus, so it was just a delight for me because it got me out of some of the work I had to do at home. I loved that. By this time I was not only helping my brothers, they had gone off to school so I was cutting both yards, the back and the front. That was terrible and I had a job, so I used to have to leave campus and –

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Rush to the library, do my studying, go to my jobs and come back. I had a different life than the other students. It was clear to me all the time. There was a remoteness about many of the students. I found out years later that the women had a meeting and decided that nobody would talk to me or the other guy or date us, so I said you know years later I'm finding this. I said man, why did they do that? But that's the way segregation was. They'd meet in their sororities and now that we talk about what fraternities and sororities are doing today and we're seeing the institutional racism involved in what they do, well once we got here we thought that the –

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Racism was behind. We thought that the big issue was desegregation or integration and we thought that this was better than what was going on at Memphis State, which had only desegregated in 1960 and CBU desegregated in 1952, so these were the major institutions. Other than that, I could go to Le Moyne College and spend all the time I wanted to roaming around there. I knew plenty of people. Le Moyne was the cultural heart of the black community. So Beale Street and Le Moyne College and the church life was a life that I was very accustomed to. I was fairly well known because I was just a gregarious guy and I spent a lot of time working in –

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In community activities and in politics. So I had gotten to be one of the guys who was go to on the political scene because I worked for the organizations that turned out to vote that followed the candidates who at that time – we had had one close call for a black elected official in 1958 – 1958 and he was just a tremendous guy. He's still alive today – Russell B. Sugarmon, who just retired a few years ago as a judge. But Russell had gone to Harvard and in that year he had run for a public works commissioner. We had a commission form of government. We didn't have the strong mayor that we have now in the city council, so he came within 200 votes of winning –

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A mysterious 200 votes. We later found out that the elections were being rigged and they still are. These are the things that are hard to deal with. A lot of the things that we suspected in those days have now been proven to be true. Now people look at Ferguson, Missouri and the police shootings, police brutality and they act as if this is something that is new. Well police brutality was an every day fact of life and the police had the power of life and death over you any time. It didn't matter what you did. In fact, segregation was so rigid until you had to say sir to everybody who was white –

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Even children. If a white person was walking down the sidewalk, you had to get off the sidewalk into the street. Can you imagine that? If a white was sitting on the bus, you could not sit in front between where they sat and the front of the buses. When you go to the Civil Rights Museum, you see that now and you say how did they operate that? Well if a white sat way back at the back of the bus, you could not sit in front of them so those seats where the last white person sat was all reserved for white. So in society you lived in a way where most people never challenged this. Fortunately –

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When I got here the kinds of things that I had been taught all my life and the experience of being here made me I guess aware of what segregation was. I became involved in a group of young people and adults who felt that it was their obligation to make sure that all of these rules changed and the laws. Now remember now,

all of this was enforced by law. It was not just custom. It was by law. So if you went downtown to the courthouse, the courthouses were segregated. We had no black judges at that time. Now Memphis is an interesting place.

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It's interesting because blacks could vote in elections here throughout my childhood and before. I would see people and know people who were very interesting. W. C. Handy who was a great publisher of the Blues. I knew musicians, I knew doctors and lawyers, but all of that in the segregated world. Now when they came to the regular world, most black people were confined to just deal with black restaurants, black clubs, we had our own baseball stadiums, we had our own league. At that time, Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier in baseball, but the old Negro league really drew more people –

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Than the Major League Baseball did. Well in Memphis we had two stadiums. My father would want to take us to Martin Stadium, which was over on Lamar and Danny Thomas every Sunday after church. Well, the last thing I wanted to see after church was some grown men playing baseball. What I wanted to do is to be the one playing baseball, so I would see baseball players many of whom later became the people to know. I had seen Satchel Paige, the greatest pitcher in the game. I had seen some of the men who later became the greatest players in the game – Willie Mays, Don Newcombe, just lots of these guys. But it was amazing that –

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In the South you never even got a chance to question segregation. Now when we go to Chicago where my mother's sister lived you could go to the beaches. So I would go with my cousin to the beaches and the museum, all kinds of places. Everything was an education experience for me and I was just kind of a little nerd so I always went for this, but I would also get a chance to see some of the real dignitaries in the black world. Growing up I used to see Ray Charles over in my neighborhood and there were musicians who played all the time, so I knew that there were great entertainers and artists and other kids of things. We had everything in our world –

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And we tried very hard to be a part of all of that. Once I went to a show – a concert by a folk singer named Odetta. They had it at Le Moyne. It was very interesting to me because Le Moyne College was very important but nobody in my family had been to college until 1959. Well, that's not true. 1958 I think one of my cousins went. I had gotten a chance to see Tennessee State University which was a huge difference from seeing Le Moyne College, which was a very small school. I had seen Russ College, but I had never seen anything like this, so it was quite an experience –

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For me. I loved it. You're not asking me any questions.

Jenna Sullivan: Well that's okay. I want to hear your stories. Do you mind if I ask you another question?

Dr. Coby Smith: Go ahead.

Jenna Sullivan: Okay, so I know that you had this experience at Manassas High and you were very involved in the community. When you thought about attending Southwestern, did you know you were going to be one of the first black students? Or how was that presented to you on behalf of the college?

Dr. Coby Smith: Well, yes once they accepted me I knew I was gonna be accepted. They really wanted the other guy.

Jenna Sullivan: Who was the other guy?

Dr. Coby Smith: His name was Lorenzo Childress. He's a physician retired over in Virginia Beach. Now they wanted him because he was not only a scholar, he was an athlete. You know in the black world, athleticism is cherished. However –

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In the white world I discovered that there were a lot of different rules. I was athletic enough as a child, however I was not a physical specimen. So when I came here I discovered that a lot of what white people call leadership depends on your size. Not just your ability, but your size. You gotta look the part. So it was very interesting to me to see all of that.

Jenna Sullivan: So he was wanted by the college.

Dr. Coby Smith: Right.

Jenna Sullivan: Did they reach out to you or did you – 'cause the college had just voted to integrate in the spring of '63, so right before you came. So did they ask you to apply or –

Dr. Coby Smith: No, the guidance counselors at my school –

Jenna Sullivan: Told you they were integrating I guess.

Dr. Coby Smith: Well, they didn't exactly say it that way.

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They said you can go where you want to go, so why don't you apply here. I had won the American Legion Army/Navy Legion of Valor Award, which is the only award that a cadet can wear once he gets to an academy. I had won for the third Army area. That's the South basically from Florida over to Arkansas. Well, not Arkansas 'cause that's on the other side of the river – to Kentucky. Third Army is the prestige area of the country. More generals, more career officers, everything else came from the South. Since I had won that award, everybody else who had won that award automatically went to a service academy –

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And we had a congressman who did not see it that way so he did not give me an appointment. So I think my guidance counselors and the principal decided that I needed better than that. So it was kind of interesting. My principal was a man who was an outstanding educator who had gone to Wilberforce. In fact, at that time Oberlin and many of the colleges in the Ohio area were the bastions of progressivism and integration. So I think he made a conscious effort to make sure that we got every –

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Opportunity to go to the best places. He had worked over with the science department over here and he used to get donations of used equipment from Rhodes for our science department for biology, chemistry, and physics. So he had a relationship with the administration over here and with some of the faculty, as did many of the other people who were really – segregation's very interesting. You get the very best and you get the worst of both

worlds. In terms of the best, a lot of the people who chose to work in the Memphis city schools were the best people in their fields in the country. So the –

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Segregated school that I went to had example as one of his teachers a wonderful musician who now has a note down on Beale Street. Not a note, he has a star. His name was Jimmie Lunceford. He was the biggest bandleader in the world. He was more renown than Dorsey and Ellington. One of the guys that I admired from the desegregation efforts and the NAACP and other organizations was a dentist named Vasco Smith. Dr. Vasco Smith probably was the leading aficionado on Jimmie Lunceford. Lunceford had come to Memphis from Missouri to be the football coach at my high school.

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At halftime he decided he would bring out a band. Now the thing that's very interesting about Lunceford is that he created the tradition of great jazz musicians who come from this area and we have here at Rhodes Dr. Bass brings at least one of these noted musicians a year over to the campus. Last year it was Herald Mabern and George Coleman who incidentally grew up not far from here, not far from where I grew up. These were outstanding musicians – I mean world known. Year before last I think we had Charles Lloyd who was also a product of this same school.

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He was known as the musician for the flower children, so had you been along in my era when peace and love first hit the scene this would have been one of the musicians that you would have listened to. I got a chance to grow up with musicians like Hank Crawford, Frank Strozier, Fathead Newman. Emerson Able was my favorite but because of the tradition of music and culture that generated out of the school that I went to, which incidentally was the first public high school for blacks in this county before the city had a high school, so these people were intent on creating a world where you put –

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Away the vestiges of slavery. The interesting thing about slavery was that it was illegal for blacks to have families and to learn how

to read and write so that after slavery was over what the former slaves wanted more than anything else was to be able to marry, to be able to have families. Now when I say have families, that probably sounds real strange to you, doesn't it? Well under slavery you did not own your children. Your children were not your own. They could be sold, families could be broken up, husbands and wives could be sold, so the culture actually created the need to really have family to learn how to read and to be accomplished. Well you know –

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You couldn't vote in most places if you could not pass the literacy test. If you could not read and write you couldn't vote. If you did not own property, you could not vote. Well Memphis was the rare exception, so I grew up in a world where I could go down on Beale Street, which had all the black professionals on it, the doctors and the dentists and the lawyers and whatnot and I could see all of these people so I knew who to want to be, and that was very interesting to me. Then we had the tradition of great educators who would always whenever they came to town you could be a part of that. Then there were the great religious leaders. I was Baptist so I had a chance to always see the great religious leaders who were involved in different things. So quite early –

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After the Birmingham and Montgomery movements, the great leader was Dr. Martin Luther King, so whenever Dr. Martin Luther King came to town that's where I would go. So I got a chance to hear him speak, to be in places he'd be, the people that I knew who I respected knew him and respected him, so it was just a natural kind of thing. So when he began to get the publicity for things he was saying and doing I was right in the middle of that because it was important in the black world to achieve and to achieve you had to be around the very best. Dr. Martin Luther King, he is a young scholar who went ahead and received his – now remember now –

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Memphis used to be at the turn of the century the publishing capital of the black world. W. E. B. Du Bois had lived here and written the predecessor of *Crisis Magazine* from Memphis before he went to Fisk University in Nashville. Now this a Harvard educated scholar who had written many books. He wrote *The Philadelphia Negro*, he was first to really challenge the philosophy

of Booker T. Washington who was the great arbiter for Negro affairs. You couldn't get a job as a postal worker without Booker T. Washington's signing off on it. He had that kind of power.

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Now I grew up understanding the tradition of men like Frederick Douglas and Washington and there were lots of other people. Benjamin O. Davis was the first black general, so he was high on my list of people to admire. I'm about not that far apart from Colin Powell myself, so he was not really a known commodity in those days. In fact, he did not become well known until Vietnam so I had learned to admire the Tuskegee Flyers since I was interested in the military. I wanted to be a soldier –

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And that was crazy now that I think about it. Can you imagine being the one to run up on the beach where the enemy is already entrenched and getting shot at? Now that I'm a wiser older man, I can't either.

Jenna Sullivan:

Well I have a question about the administration of the college when you were here. Did you interact much with them or how did you feel that they treated you?

Dr. Coby Smith:

The administration was great. Peyton Rhodes was a wonderful campus leader. He had time for everybody so when I came here I got a chance to talk to him. I could walk up to him and say hello and all of that and talk to him. He was just a unique person. The person I gravitated to most closely was Dr. –

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Jameson Jones. Jameson Jones was the dean of students – dean of men. He was just a person who spoke directly frankly and he was involved in trying to make sure that we were always well treated and accepted. Now the college had a different interest than I had. Their interest was in complying to the rules of the Senate and desegregating. They knew they did not want to do the same way that the state universities had done. In other words, there was no George Wallace here saying I'm gonna stand in the schoolhouse doors. You will not integrate. Once the Senate had said that they –

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Were going to desegregate, they really meant it and Peyton Rhodes was committed to doing it – he had stood up, Jameson Jones had stood up – now some of the others had not stood up but they were not going against the desires of the Senate. Of course you know –

Jenna Sullivan: You mean the Presbyterian Senate, and that's kind of what my research is focusing on is the role of the church and influencing this decision. I know that in 1954 the Presbyterian General Assembly kind of made a mandate saying to the board of trustees of higher education institutions that they would need to integrate and that was in '54 so it wasn't till ten years later that the college decided to integrate. So you had some understanding of those pressures then.

Dr. Coby Smith: Well, not really.

Jenna Sullivan: Not till later on?

Dr. Coby Smith: You know –

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1954 was very important to me because Brown versus Ferguson was – board of education, I'm sorry, was there and it became clear that the law of the land was gonna be different. But it was only in 1957 that it became clear that the country was moving in a different direction. Little Rock made a difference. In fact I can remember, and my father would sit at the table and read the paper and I'd be there right with him. My father was a very interesting man. He went to the third grade. He was born in West Virginia but grew up in Birmingham, so he had worked in the old WOPC camps, which is how he finally got over to Memphis. He was an interesting man because he did not have a great deal of education but he was a very educated man.

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In terms of his work he was an engineer. In terms of his title he was just a laborer. He grew up knowing how to dig a latrine or a trench and he was a very physical man who was always the one called upon when there was a tough job to do. But he always tried to associate with well-spoken people and was interested in his children becoming educated. He worked as a custodian at a local international harvester plant, so I would always go out there and see things. He was in the labor movement. He was a shop

steward, so I got a chance to see that. He made sure I understood what government was .

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In 1952, Frank Clement who was the former governor of Tennessee came to town and my father took me out to meet him and he shook my hand. This is a monumental thing. You know, a guy who's running for governor, he shakes your hand, you're six years old. So that became a very important kind of thing for me. In other words, he made sure that I understood that the world I was gonna work in and live in was not going to just be an all black world. I was doing pretty well in an all black world. I could go where I wanted to go, I could talk to and meet and be influenced by all of the people who were good to know. Ben Hooks was a person whose home I could go to. The great ministers of the time in the area, both in Memphis and in Nashville –

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Were people that I knew. I'd see them at encampments and religious situations. At the time I was a pretty good student and a pretty good speaker, so I was always in the middle of whatever was going on. So when 1954 came it became clear that the momentum was on our side. Since my father had grown up in Alabama, I would read about Autherine Lucy and all of the great men and women who were desegregating schools. So it became a part of my life to know about every effort to change things. So when I came here, Ole' Miss had –

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Already desegregated. There was great racial tension in the air. Memphis had decided that it would not be another Little Rock or Birmingham or New Orleans for that matter, that desegregation or integration of schools would not be a tragedy where there would be bloodshed, so this environment was unique in the South. Atlanta probably set the best example for Memphis in what to do and what not to do. Even though Memphis did it, it did so begrudgingly except here at Rhodes and over at CBU where one of my church members went, and that was kind of interesting to me that the private schools had a different approach. Also, I'd go to Le Moyne College –

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And at that time they had a relationship with the congregational church and many of the leadership and training grounds for civil rights workers would take place there. So I was in a group of youngsters who would always be in that circle. So in 1963 I met the Reverend James Lawson. Jim Lawson had been a friend of Dr. King's. In fact, he was the man who asked Dr. King to come to Memphis to participate in the sanitation workers strike. Lawson had gone to prison because of his conscientious objection to war in the Korean War.

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He was a great theologian. He understood the workings of the black community and of the community at large. He had served on a number of boards and organizations that were involved in trying to make a change. So in 1963 I met him while I was in high school and he convinced me to lead the students at Manassas out of school because we were protesting the extended day that we had in our school. We had so many kids in the school at Manassas – there were 3,300 kids there until we had to have school start at staggered times and kids would go to lunches on staggered schedules. Can you imagine 3,300 kids –

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On ten acres? Well this is 100 acres and it was just the elementary school I went to actually was larger than the high school I went to. So I was accustomed to being crowded up in these schools that had huge class sizes and just a lot of little kids who were going and poor neighborhoods. But I didn't realize we were poor. I just thought we were doing what everybody else was doing. I knew we were better off than the kids in the farm counties around us because I used to spend a lot of time with my grandparents and family in Fayette County. In fact, it was there that I became aware of Tent City –

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And the struggles that black people were going through there. The tenant farmers had decided to register to vote in Fayette County. We could vote in Memphis. That wasn't a problem. So the plantation owners put them all off the tenant farms and they had to go erect a tent city in Summerville. My grandfather was a farmer in Fayette County and fortunately he owned his own land. So we went to Tent City and I met John McPheron and his family, and John McPheron was the leader of the Fayette County Improvement

Association. What they did was to provide the land for the Tent City. They got the tents and they would get the food –

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And provisions for those people who had been expelled from the farms. I mean they put you out of your house. You had nowhere to go. All you could do was take whatever belongings you had and your family and go live in this mud and – I'll never forget the mud. You had to wear rubber boots. The mud was almost up to my knees and it was just a horrible environment. I saw first hand what the fight was. Then as I go back to what I was telling you about Little Rock, my father and I would read the paper and the news would come in from Little Rock. Eisenhower sent the troops in. That was great news to us. So one day I was looking at the paper and I saw this guy who was being run – this black guy –

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Who was being run by a white mob and I ran and told my father, look at this. They're gonna kill him. He said I don't think so. I said well daddy, how can you say that? He says look at the gait that this man is running with. I mean he looked like one of those keep on trucking signs. One foot was out that way and his heel was back up behind his head. He said taking those little short steps they'll never catch him *[laughs]*. So I mean there was a lot to learn in this thing and 1955 was probably just as big a year as 1954 because that was the year that Emmett Till was murdered. That was traumatic for me because as a child I was protected by my family from any real –

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Fears. I did not think that in America you could be killed for such a thing so that was an eye-opener for me. In fact from 1955 until 1964 I did not eat scrambled eggs after having seen his picture, the picture of his body. Two things I started to do when I came to Southwestern. I drank coffee and I ate scrambled eggs for the first time.

Jenna Sullivan: Was that just because it reminded you of Emmett Till?

Dr. Coby Smith: Right. Well you know they put his picture in the paper and that was a horrible site.

Jenna Sullivan: It's a horrible picture.

Dr. Coby Smith: You know? I mean he was shot and beaten and then he was chained to a windmill –

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In the river and it was two weeks before they discovered his body. So the fish had eaten whatever remained and he was just a mess. His mother had the courage to permit his funeral with an open casket. At the time that it happened, the federal troops stopped black people from coming down. They couldn't go past Memphis. Money, Mississippi is not far from here and they made sure that anybody who went down who was black was disarmed. This is a strange kind of thing when you're a little kid and you never – you don't know any fear. Your parents are really the ones who control you. Now we knew that –

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We knew that you could not interact directly with white people but we did not have any real fear because blacks and whites lived everywhere on the same streets and the next streets. Growing up we played with white kids. We did not understand the strict limitations –

Jenna Sullivan: Of segregation.

Dr. Coby Smith: Yeah, segregation's a horrible thing. Just think, you could play with white boys and girls when you're a child until the girls got a certain age, then you could no longer play with them. I mean this was just a very complicated way to live.

Jenna Sullivan: Right. Well let me ask you a question about you've talked about how there was chapel daily and you know that the Senate helped make this decision. What was your perception of the religious culture on campus and how did your own personal faith differ from –

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That culture or was it similar?

Dr. Coby Smith: It was clear that there was a stark difference. You know, when you think of the black church today, what do you think of?

Jenna Sullivan: Music, preaching –

Dr. Coby Smith: Right. The music, the fire and brimstone intensity of the preaching, that kind of thing. To worship here in chapel was extremely different. I mean it was quiet, it was calm, it was slow, it was boring as hell –

[Laughter]

You know, I was used to choirs and singers who could make you stand up on your feet. Now that we're full gospel I think everybody can see it, but in those days –

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Even the – how do you say this? Even the most _____ black churches still had religious fervor and a kind of how do you say an unconfined spirit. You could have the unabashed, you could – I was used to hearing people shout in church and seeing them jump and run and they could do the holy roll or whatever else. What you see now on TV I saw every day. There were all kinds of differences. The analysis of the Bible was different.

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We emphasized in our churches more of the spirit and the emotionalism of religion. You had to be cut and dried. I took religion of course and read the entire Bible and it seemed like to me everybody here was an atheist. Then there was some other stark differences. I had never experienced or heard of suicide until I got here. I could not understand that. I said man, well these people have everything. Why would they kill themselves?

Jenna Sullivan: Was it common on campus or what do you mean?

Dr. Coby Smith: Well, we had a couple of suicides my freshman year and I said man, what a waste. Here you got everything. Why the hell? You got money, you got cars, you got privilege, you can go where you wanna go, you can eat where you wanna eat –

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They don't call the police on you. What you got to be suicidal about? And you don't have to be oppressed. After I got here the administration said – I remember Dr. Jones saying now boys, we want you to know – Dean Deal said this – boys, you know I was raised to the Negro woman's breast. I like colored people. We

want you to do everything here that everybody else does. We want you to rush the fraternities. I knew what a fraternity was, but I had not really seen what a fraternity can mean on a campus. So we went to –

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The rush parties and participated in all that, but it was clear that none of them were considering us. So they had to put up with letting us come in. By that time the football team kind of made it different for us. All the guys on the team knew us, just two of us, and they knew when you're on a football team you get a chance to be the one telling the joke, you get to be the butt of the joke, you get a chance to mix physically. So it became clear to the guys on the team that we were gonna be in this thing –

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And, you know, I was a little guy but I had a lot of spunk. The other guy made sure that I knew what to do in a fight and there was a fight every day. So I was fast and I was kind of quick witted and talked too damn much, so that got me in a lot of situations where I had to prove myself early. So by the time we came to the school starting and the rush parties and the activities, the pecking order was already established and it was clear that race was not gonna make a difference to me. The other gal was a lot quieter and probably more thoughtful than that 'cause he was a big guy and nobody was gonna say much to him. In situations where I had to impose my own style of leadership –

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I was quite prepared to do that. I had a style that was far different. We dressed different. The things that were attractive to us were different. The conservative expensive taste that the wealthy white kids had was far different than what we enjoyed, but we were sharp now. Don't get me wrong. One of the things that was important in the black world was to always put your best foot forward. So when it came to that, I don't think the students here were prepared to think that there would be any real competition when it came to blacks and whites, but that was not on our mind. We wanted to be the best at whatever we did and when I went to class that was my intention. I could see the shock in –

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People's faces – the faculty and the students. They were not prepared for us to be either intelligent or assertive. Unfortunately I had grown up in a situation where I was expected to be both. So there were clashes and things that we did not understand about each other. But the thing that was very interesting to me was that once the white students got a chance to sit down and talk with us, I mean you know, they might have been expecting a step and fetch it. But when they found out that my vocabulary was as good as theirs, that my knowledge of the world history and the course material was the same as theirs or better, that was fine except in certain classes. You know, I still couldn't –

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Understand why I was the leading student in the class and was not getting the leading grade. But I didn't realize the fraternities and sororities provided the test and everything else and that they had a leg up on that. I was going from what I knew and that was to study, be prepared, go in, give your best shot, and so that's what I did. The other guy had better advisement I think. He ended up having a better career path, a better advisement path, and some professors in areas that were more inclined to promote his interest and they wanted him to play football. He was good. So –

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That was kind of interesting. It was like discovering that I've seen this movie where I think it's either Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy – maybe it was Eddie Murphy – was given – he traded places with a white person and the whole idea was that he was gonna end up with a lot of money and privilege if he did what he was supposed to do. The expectations changed when he traded places, but what occurred was the powers that be had made a deal. They were going to eventually sabotage him and keep him from achieving –

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Well I did not realize until after I had seen the – I said that's exactly what I went through at that school. One guy they decided that they were going to take the traditional way. He was the traditional style of student, scholar, leader that they wanted and I happened to be a little runt talking a lot of smack in their mind, and a little too quick with the tongue and perhaps too friendly with a lot of students. Though they said we want you to fully participate, there was no real intention among the faculty to permit this real true integration. Many of them had been to places that were

segregated and they liked that idea. I had a professor who had been at Ole Miss who told me I could never get more than a D in his class.

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Jenna Sullivan: Oh man.

Dr. Coby Smith: I couldn't imagine that. If I achieve, give me what I'm supposed to have. So I'd go to the administration about it. That ain't fair. Here I'm teaching an English class with the other jocks. I'm in the jock classes because I'm not supposed to be here and the other guy is getting a chance to be in the first track classes.

Jenna Sullivan: Lorenzo or –

Dr. Coby Smith: Yeah. He took man and I had to take religion. The man course was designed for the students who were intended to achieve. Well there's only one Bible. You still gotta read the thing book-by-book, verse and chapter. So I didn't quite understand what that meant. One is the –

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Philosophy of man in religion and in the world. The other is just verse by verse, the Bible, what does this mean, and that's a different track. Now I never did get over that.

Jenna Sullivan: And they kind of placed you in that course or did you choose that?

Dr. Coby Smith: They placed me in that course. They knew what the expectations were. I did not know. So in other words they picked one for success and one for failure. When I talked to the other guy just before the program that you had moderated, I realized that he probably suffered more from knowing that there was a dual track than I did. I didn't really care. I was kind of like a gunslinger. Okay, ya'll want to shoot it out?

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You over there and me over here. Who can get to the gun first? You know, I was kind of like that Rudyard Kipling piece. If you can keep your head when all about you – I was willing to roll the dice as they say. My father had created in me a little monster that he probably didn't even know because he was such a – he was confrontational. I remember once we were at Pickwick Lake at

Shiloh Park on a family picnic. My mother had laid out a wonderful spread. We were sitting there – I have two brothers and two sisters –

[1:11:00]

In our nuclear family. We were sitting there and this white guy drove by – what are you niggers doing out there?

[End of Audio]