

Robert Benham: I'm not going to talk loud.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay.

Robert Benham: Robert Benham.

Jocelyn Cole: All right and what's your birth date?

Robert Benham: Well, I guess you can ask a man. You can't ask a woman that.
July 7, 1938.

Jocelyn Cole: Happy early birthday.

Robert Benham: But too close.

Jocelyn Cole: And then where were you born?

Robert Benham: Born in Newark, New Jersey.

Jocelyn Cole: All right.

Robert Benham: By Accident.

Jocelyn Cole: Could you tell us about your parents?

Robert Benham: Well, my father was originally from New Jersey. My mother was originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. They got married during the Depression and moved back and forth wherever my father could get a job.

And when I was born, he was working on the docks in New York City and they were living in my grandmother's attic. It was during the Depression and I just happened to be born in Newark, New Jersey.

[00:01:01] Shortly thereafter, moved to Chattanooga and I grew up in Chattanooga.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay and what were your parents' names?

Robert Benham: Albert Benham and Martha Benham.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay, do you have any siblings?

Robert Benham: I have a brother, Tom, who's a retired lawyer who spends five months of the year in British Columbia. It's truly a beautiful place, and seven months of the year on Lake Lanier outside of Atlanta.

Jocelyn Cole: What was it like growing up in your family?

Robert Benham: Well, it was kinda like two years before the **mast**. I should say both my parents were very, very strict and there was no nonsense. It was quite a relief when I went in the Army at the age of 17 'cause it was a lot easier. Basic training was a lot easier than home after that.

[00:02:01]

Paris Westbrook: What was it like growing up in Chattanooga?

Robert Benham: Be more specific.

Paris Westbrook: Like what was the town like or the city or what was –?

Robert Benham: It was a heavy industrial town, very, very heavily polluted. There was no middle class. A small group of people ran everything. There was very little in between, if that's what you're alluding to.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember anything about race relations during that time period when you were growing up?

Robert Benham: Oh, yes. It was horrible. You know, if you were black, if you were African-American, the opportunities in Chattanooga were minimal at best. Housing was horrible. My father built and rented probably the first decent housing for black people.

[00:03:05] That was in 1952, '53, '54. My mother had inherited some housing. The tenants were black and conditions were so bad my father made her **sell it**. There was no indoor plumbing, indoor commodes, when they put indoor commodes in; people didn't know what they were for. They were used for baby baths.

I can't describe how things have changed in 60 years. It's just a different day and a different age now. The wage scale, if you were female, you were a domestic and that was it and it was \$3.50 a day in-and car fare. It was horrible.

Jocelyn Cole: Hmm. Okay. How old were you when you moved back to Chattanooga?

[00:04:01]

Robert Benham: Two maybe.

Jocelyn Cole: How long were you there?

Robert Benham: Until I left for school when I – you know, I left for the Army after I graduated high school and then I was just in the Army for six months and then I went to school in Nashville and actually moved back to Chattanooga after law school and worked for the Treasury Department a couple of years there before I moved to Memphis in 1965.

Paris Westbrook: Can you tell us about your time in the Army?

Robert Benham: Not much to tell. I learned that I didn't want to be in the Army and I didn't want to dig ditches and I wanted to get an education.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay. How did you enlist that you only had a six-month_____?

[Crosstalk]

Robert Benham: They started a new program where you signed up for six months' active duty, 7 1/2 years in the Reserves and my father at that period of time believed in compulsory military training.

[00:05:00] So I ended up in the Army five days after I graduated high school, was in the Reserves for three years and they ran outta money and told me they would call me and they haven't called me and I haven't shown up.

Begin Segment 2- 00:05:13

Jocelyn Cole: Go ahead.

Paris Westbrook: What did you do after the Army?

Robert Benham: Went to school.

Paris Westbrook: At what age did you go to school?

Robert Benham: I was 18.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Okay. Did you go –?

Robert Benham: I graduated high school when I was 17.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Robert Benham: And in May of – or June 2, 1956. I was in the Army by June the 5th. Got out in December. In January, I started college at Vanderbilt in Nashville.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. How was your college experience?

Robert Benham: Undergraduate or graduate?

Paris Westbrook: Both.

Robert Benham: Undergraduate, I had a lot of fun. Academically, certain areas I think in undergraduate school in those days were pretty good.

[00:06:00] Certain areas were not. Law school was excellent, but undergraduate school, I played too much.

Jocelyn Cole: Mm-hm. What kind of activities were you involved in?

Robert Benham: Virtually everything, you know, just the typical for the 1950s. You were involved in ~~your~~ intramural sports. You were involved in the school newspaper. You were involved in many activities, but mainly sports and academics.

Paris Westbrook: To backtrack, what elementary school did you go to?

Robert Benham: Sunnyside.

Paris Westbrook: Sunnyside and what was that like?

Robert Benham: It was interesting. I really had some excellent teachers. I can remember each grammar school teacher I had. I can't remember each college professor I had.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Robert Benham: But they made an indelible impression on me. It was really a blue collar school.

[00:07:01] It was right across the street from the orphan's home. It was in vogue in those days. I started school. It was still during World War II. It was a different America at that time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What middle school did you go to? Middle school?

Robert Benham: It wasn't a middle school. I went to **Verner Brainerd Junior High** for one year and then I went to **McCauley-McCallie** in Chattanooga, which was then a military school, from the eighth grade through high school, but we graduated;—my high school class was 96 maybe and there were 30 of us went to Vanderbilt. It was just kind of a migration.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Were you involved in any sports or anything like that in high school?

Robert Benham: Yeah. I tried. I was not a very good athlete. Believe it or not, I was too small most of the time; I grew late; **B**but I tried to play football and wrestling was a big sport. I participated in that.

[00:08:00]

Paris Westbrook: Okay, to move forward, why did you decide to go to law school?

Robert Benham: A gentleman up there was my uncle and was like a second father to me and was a lawyer and a judge in Chattanooga and I guess it was his influence.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and his name is?

Robert Benham: His name was **Morris Finkelstein**.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Robert Benham: He went on the bench in Chattanooga in 1955 as the Chancellor over there.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What did you do after law school?

Robert Benham: And was probably the best lawyer I ever met.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Robert Benham: Much better lawyer than his son and his son was editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Paris Westbrook: Hmm. Okay. What did you do after law school?

Robert Benham: Went to work for the Internal Revenue Service and the Treasury Department.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Did you work here in Memphis?

Robert Benham: Once, I got to Memphis. I was based in Chattanooga.

[00:08:58] Well, I started out in Nashville, then in Chattanooga and there was – they needed a lot of help over here and I got sent over here. I'd really never been to Memphis, been through Memphis, never been here before, liked it and decided to stay.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and what year did you come to Memphis?

Robert Benham: January 1965.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Can you tell us what that time period was like as far as civil rights and everything like that?

Robert Benham: Well, there wasn't much in the way of civil rights down here. In the legal profession in particular there were very, very few African-American lawyers in Memphis and I would say less than ten.

If you were black, you couldn't be a member of the bar association. If you couldn't be a member of the bar association, you couldn't go upstairs to the third floor to the library. And I never thought that was very fair and I kind of expressed those views and I didn't win any popularity contests.

[00:10:06] But it was. It was very, very unfair and some of the judges treated some of the black lawyers with respect and some of the judges did not and mostly all lawyers at that time were male. It was, again, different day, different age.

But that was one of my chief complaints and then shortly thereafter a couple of things happened. The bar association finally decided black people wouldn't destroy the law library. A fellow by the name of Benjamin Hooks was appointed criminal court judge and the first African-American trial court judge in the South since Reconstruction.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Begin Segment 3- 00:10:58

[00:11:00]

Robert Benham: And he was ~~reappointed~~ a real pioneer.

Paris Westbrook: Did you work directly with civil rights or anything of that nature?

Robert Benham: Probably more – it was just apparent early on that we needed change and I was a member of the Jaycees, which ~~is~~was a huge organization. It was a male organization and we had between – various years between 500 and 800 members.

So it was fairly influential, and probably the most important thing I did, and I got in all sorts of trouble, as they say over there, it was spearheaded and brought in the first black to be a member of a civic organization in Memphis.

[00:12:00] At that time, the Rotary was segregated. **Kiwanis** was segregated. The Exchange Club was segregated, the Lions. Everything was segregated and the first organization that was integrated was the Memphis Jaycees and it was very, very controversial within that organization.

But **Dan Wilkinson**, who's ~~a~~in the real estate business here in town, and I were really the ones that brought in the first black member. Everybody thought that was just a horrible thing, but it wasn't and that's where – and I always maintained integration ought to start in civic organizations and churches 'cause that's the big common ground.

And then at the same time we started a leadership training program at Carver High School. At Carver High School at that time, the guidance counselor was Frances Hooks, who was Judge Hooks's wife.

[00:13:01] And we formed a friendship. Projects that were started in 1966, '67 and started a friendship that persists 'til this day. ~~We've been~~We are very close friends.

Jocelyn Cole: Let me ask – you mentioned integrating the civic organization in Memphis. Was that the first time integration touched your life or had other entities been integrated before that?

Robert Benham: The schools weren't integrated. When I was at Vanderbilt, I was in law school when Jim Lawson got into divinity school and that, I guess, was the first school integration I was ever – I was familiar with at the college level.

[00:14:02] You know, Little Rock Central had taken place in 1957. Then the schools in Little Rock closed for a year and I guess that was the

first school integration which I was exposed to was when Lawson was admitted to divinity school and I was in law school at that time. This is at the time when the sit-ins were starting in downtown Nashville.

Paris Westbrook: What were your thoughts on integration and the sit-ins as well in Nashville?

Robert Benham: You know, I never really understood a lot of the segregation. When I would ask questions, you got – the stock answer was “They like it that way.” I can’t tell you how many times I heard that.

[00:15:00] But why people can’t eat off the same plate, I don’t know. I just – I never understood it, you know. It was the way it was and I guess I started questioning it in high school when Howard High, which was the black high school in Chattanooga, got all the used football equipment, and used books, and where’s this separate but equal and what’s equal about that?

Begin Segment 4- 00:15:33

Jocelyn Cole: Before your friendship with the gentleman from the civic organization, had you had any personal friendships or relationships with black people before then?

Robert Benham: Yes.

Jocelyn Cole: How was that received in your community of friends and family and all that **and everybody else?**

[00:16:01]

Robert Benham: You know, we could have – there was acceptance with individuals and rejection with ~~in~~ the group. You and I could be friends and nobody would say anything about it, but then, oh, no, they can’t do this and they can’t do that as a group. There was also a lot of paternalistic attitude. We have to take care of them, like they can’t think for themselves.

Paris Westbrook: Hmm. Do you remember what Nashville was like as the sit-ins were taking place and as integration –?

Robert Benham: Yes, chaos. It was literally chaos at that time. You know, the police were out of control and there was a lot of police brutality and policy brutality persists until today and that’s what we saw a

week ago that happened to get filmed at the Family-Criminal Justice Center.

[00:17:03]

That wasn't the first time. That's been going on for years and people have been lying about it and covering it up for years. In Nashville, it was kind of interesting.

The people at Vanderbilt, we kind of had a unique relationship with then Tennessee A&I because they played this upbeat basketball and I had season tickets to Tennessee A&I and I would go to more of those games than the Vanderbilt games 'cause they were more exciting.

And so a lot of us went to Kingsville-Keen's Little Garden and that was the name of the gym for basketball games, but they really had a great team and at the other hand there were no – I would say almost no African-Americans, no blacks in the stands at Memorial Auditorium, Memorial Coliseum at Vanderbilt.

[00:18:05]

Paris Westbrook:

Do you know when Vanderbilt Law School became integrated? Was it while you were there or did it come afterwards?

Robert Benham:

You know, there may have been a couple of students there before I was in law school. When I was in law school I don't think we had five females and they were certainly all white, but it was pretty much white male.

Jocelyn Cole:

So you were at Vanderbilt in the beginning of the decade and then you went back to Chattanooga and then you came here.

Robert Benham:

Mm-hm.

Jocelyn Cole:

How would you compare race relations and society between the three cities in the '60s?

[00:19:00]

Robert Benham:

At that time, I would say that Nashville was probably a bit more progressive than Memphis. Nashville historically had had A&I. It had Fisk. Memphis had, you know, one small predominantly black school. Chattanooga had none.

The black population in Chattanooga was smaller than Nashville and Nashville was much, much smaller than Memphis. I think

change came – I don't – we didn't have the leadership in Memphis that really accepted African-Americans the way the leadership in Nashville did.

[00:20:00]

You know, we had **anyone**, but then we had Henry Loeb and we had the garbage strike and I don't think the city's gotten over it since and that's 40 years ago – 40 years ago – and I don't think we've gotten over it since then.

And I think we have problems now with black racism and while I didn't like white racism, I don't like black racism and I think that the ~~pendulum~~ pendulum has gone **completely** from one side to the other side.

Paris Westbrook:

Can you tell us what Memphis was like during the garbage strike or the sanitation strike?

Robert Benham:

It was shut down. The National Guard was on the streets at night. Everybody lived in fear. Everybody had guns. It was not very pleasant.

Paris Westbrook:

What were your –?

Robert Benham:

Not very pleasant.

[00:21:01]

Paris Westbrook:

What were your thoughts or feelings during the sanitation strike and how it took place and why it took place and what was happening while it was going on?

Robert Benham:

Why it took place was the conditions were horrible.

Paris Westbrook:

Mm-hm.

Robert Benham:

And people wanted – you know, there are very – when things are that horrible, you need collective bargaining, and that's how unions got started in the first place because an individual worker couldn't negotiate with an Alfred Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie.

It takes a whole group to be able to do it, so they needed the group and there were some real safety issues at that time and the pay was abysmal at that time and the real problem was Henry Loeb didn't want the dues check-off. He didn't want the union and said he, you know, didn't **want the** dues check-off.

[00:22:00]

You know, ~~and they got it finally got~~ settled a bit too late. If you – well, if ~~you were~~ **Eddie Abe Plough**, ~~he~~ was ~~the~~ motivator to get the garbage strike settled.

Begin Segment 5- 00:22:16

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember what your emotions were when Dr. King got assassinated?

Robert Benham: Yes. I was standing right outside the **Chistler Chisca Hotel**, which is four blocks, and the ambulances went down to then St. **Thomas Joseph** Hospital down Main Street, which was **open to traffic** at that time and I ~~mean-knew~~ the city was gonna erupt. The city had already erupted.

He came here to show that something could be done peacefully and the **answer** was to give his life and I knew there was gonna be an eruption and there was an eruption and just immediately that night things started burning.

[00:23:05]

Paris Westbrook: What did you personally feel about his assassination?

Robert Benham: I was, you know, extremely sad and I was extremely frustrated. I didn't see anybody that could step into his shoes. I'm not too sure that anybody ever has stepped into his shoes; big ones to fill.

Jocelyn Cole: You mentioned that you came to Memphis right before the sanitation strike and King's assassination.

Robert Benham: Well, see, '65. That was in '68.

Paris Westbrook: Right.

Robert Benham: In the meantime, you know, I had gotten involved in the Jaycees and we had gotten involved and integrated our organization. We had gotten involved in traditionally **black** schools.

And I don't- I'm trying to think when the public schools here started integrating and started – originally, it was gonna be a grade a year and that didn't work.

[00:24:03]

And I really can't remember the years when they really fully started integrating the public school system. It was after that.

Jocelyn Cole: What – if you could describe that three-year period before the sanitation strike, do you feel that tensions were mounting? Could you in any way feel that something major like the sanitation strike might come soon or was it –?

Robert Benham: I really didn't. I knew things needed to change. I didn't know whether ~~they could~~ change would come out of **violence**, but change was very, very necessary and you had a substantial percentage of your population which was economically disenfranchised.

[00:25:01] And, frankly, they're still economically disenfranchised because every time you see somebody who happens to be black and happens to be successful they get snapped up by a FedEx or an AutoZone and you have no black entrepreneurs in Memphis the way you do in Nashville.

In Nashville, you had some. We don't have any. In Atlanta, you have a lot. We had very, very few and politically, as we've seen this past year, there've been a lot of problems.

Paris Westbrook: What made you decide to integrate your organizations? Did you believe that –?

Robert Benham: It just needed to be done.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Robert Benham: It just needed to – it was a leadership training organization. That was the purpose of it and what better way to even things up in an unjust society than to get everybody involved in leadership training?

[00:26:04] I mean that was just so obvious.

Paris Westbrook: What do you think – I don't know if it's a "what do you think" question. How did the City of Memphis, I guess, cope or react to a change once Dr. King was assassinated and after the –?

Robert Benham: I thought you were gonna talk about civic – civic organizations, it was a tough change and I can remember we had an event at the Memphis Athletic Club, now the Racquet Club, and we had two black members and the maitre d', who was black, said, "You can't bring another black in here," and we all left and that happened.

Whenever you had an event someplace, you had to make sure that they would accept blacks and whites socializing together. That was a big deal, believe it or not.

[00:26:57]

You know, even to go to a Holiday Inn Event Center, you know, you had to make sure that you weren't gonna end up in an embarrassing situation. Excuse me for interrupting.

Paris Westbrook:

Oh, you're fine. I was gonna ask how did the City of Memphis change after Dr. King's assassination and after the sanitation strike. Was it – I mean obviously it wasn't the same, but –

Robert Benham:

It didn't really change, you know. Everybody that was supposed to do something didn't do it, so in the summer of 1968, as you see in the resume, the Jaycees took it upon themselves to have a job fair. I think it was the first one here and the police department said, "We're not gonna give you any protection. It's gonna end up in a riot."

It was in Athlete's Hall, There was an outfit called the National Alliance of Businessmen here, the president of it, the president of Goldsmith's and they weren't doing anything.

[00:28:00]

But several of us in the Jaycees again said, "We're gonna put on a job fair." We did. It worked. There were no problems. We got a lot of people placed and it was really super and that was May of 1968.

Paris Westbrook:

Oh, okay.

Begin Segment 6- 00:28:20

Jocelyn Cole:

I'd like to know; do you have any children?

Robert Benham:

My wife has a son.

Jocelyn Cole:

Oh, okay. How old is he?

Robert Benham:

Forty-six.

Jocelyn Cole:

Were you – did you incur any experiences with his coming of age or in his adulthood, any _____ –?

[Crosstalk]

Robert Benham: No, because she and I haven't been married that long. He was already an adult and he's a child psychologist now.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay. For the record, can you tell us a little bit about your wife?

[00:29:02]

Robert Benham: Well, my wife is an extremely bright, accomplished person. She's well traveled and probably is one of the leading authorities ~~o~~in early childhood education in the United States.

She, as I told you before we started filming, founded and ran the Capital Children's Museum in Washington, D.C. for 20 years, started with \$6,000.00 **and a dream** and after 20 years occupied a building that had 150,000 square feet and ~~had~~got over 100 employees.

As part of it, she had Drop Out intervention program where they took 100 of the worst Washington seventh grade rebels and rehabilitated them to get back into the public schools.

[00:30:01]

She also started a preschool there modeled after the preschools of ~~_____~~, Reggio Emilie, Italy, about which she's written two books that have been published ~~by. Those five t~~ Teachers College profess-Press at Columbia University.

Part and parcel of running the children's museum, she was always entertaining first ladies from whatever country in the world and as a result of this she was asked to consult on children's museums by Madam Sadat and she went to Egypt with Begin and she went to Israel; the queen of Thailand.

The contacts she's had are just absolutely unbelievable. Outside of Memphis, she's a real authority ~~of~~on children's early education but you're never an authority **in your hometown**.

[00:30:57]

Paris Westbrook: For the record, could you state your occupation and tell us a little bit about what you do here in Memphis?

Robert Benham: I'm a trial court judge and I've been judge of Division 1 of the probate court since – went on the bench October 13, 1997 when I was selected to replace Judge _____ Parrati Leonard Pierotti who passed away end of August, first of September of that year.

Prior to that time, I had practiced law for 34 years – 33, 34 years. I had handled virtually all types of cases, although my preference was really business planning, estate planning, financial planning. Here in the probate courts, we do things that people don't realize. About 40 percent of what we do is contested conservatorships.

That is cases that involve disabled adults and often case older people whose families – it's most often likely divorce whose family is fighting much of the time over who's gonna get the money.

[00:32:07]

We have stewardship over guardianships of minors which involves and anything that has to do with descendants estates of state whether it may be litigation over a claimed debt. It may be the interpretation of a premarital agreement, a very, very broad jurisdiction and I'm very fortunate 'cause I get up every day and look forward to going to work.

Jocelyn Cole:

Okay.

Robert Benham:

So I get to protect and serve the people.

Paris Westbrook:

Okay. Can you tell us about Memphis then and Memphis now? Like could you compare the two or has there been a change?

Robert Benham:

I don't think there's any comparison, you know, the world has turned. You look at the city council today. It's majority African-American. You look at the county commission. It's majority African-American. The city mayor is black. The county mayor is black. Go through this courthouse.

[00:32:59]

And as opposed to virtually the rest of the State of Tennessee, we see some real diversity in the judiciary, male, female, black, white, which is not true anyplace else. Nashville has two or three maybe black trial court judges. I don't know the number here.

I'd have to sit and go down the roster, but it reflects the demographics of Memphis and the male/female mix, the demographics ~~in thereof~~ memphis, and we've got a lot of black females who are judges at the trial court level, a substantial number.

So, you know, the change has been marked and within the legal community and within the judicial community, I don't see any prejudice.

Jocelyn Cole: I want to jump a little bit earlier.

Robert Benham: Not on racial.

[00:34:00]

Jocelyn Cole: Mm-hm. Earlier you mentioned being opposed to white racism and also to black racism.

Robert Benham: Mm-hm.

Jocelyn Cole: Could you speak a little bit more on that phrase, “black racism?”

Robert Benham: Well, I think that what we are seeing today is I’m not gonna appoint somebody to A, B or C unless he or she is black. Forty years ago, I’m not appointing anybody who’s not white and it’s the same thing.

Jocelyn Cole: And what are your thoughts on militant black nationalist groups like the Invaders here in Memphis or the Panthers?

Robert Benham: The same thing I thought about the Ku Klux Klan.

Jocelyn Cole: Mm-hm.

Robert Benham: I think they’re in the same boat today and I don’t like either one of them and I grew up – Chattanooga, Tennessee is the hotbed of the Ku Klux Klan.

[00:35:01]

Jocelyn Cole: And so while you were working your program in Carver High School – was that it?

Robert Benham: Mm-hm.

Jocelyn Cole: Did you come across any of these type of attitudes in high school? Carver High School is a black high school, right?

Robert Benham: Mm-hm.

Jocelyn Cole: Did you come across any young militant students in high school?

Robert Benham: If they were there I didn’t know about it. I’m sure they may have been there, but they didn’t express it to me. I never had any problems at all, you know.

You know, it was really interesting and I think everybody – the programs that we were putting in, the leadership training programs, at the high school level and they were accepted and popular. They worked.

Begin Segment-7 00:35:48

Paris Westbrook: Can you talk about racial attitudes then and now and how it's improved or –?

Robert Benham: I think it's improved substantially.

[00:35:59]

I mean all you have to do is walk down the street. All you have to do is go into a your restaurant. **That's all you have to do now.** You're young and I think it's great and I think it's great that we're having this discussion, but it's hard to relate the fact that, you know, if you're black you couldn't even go to the lunch counter and you couldn't go to ~~the~~ . Krystal. You couldn't go anyplace.

You couldn't go to the theater. You could go to the zoo one day where that came from. You know, you had one day that you were welcome at the zoo. The rest of the time, you were not. Black males would enter the store and they'd take off their hat and say, "May I enter?" It just didn't make any sense; just didn't make any sense.

Jocelyn Cole: So what are your thoughts on the current election?

Robert Benham: I think it's a real landmark that a Barack Obama may well be our next president.

[00:37:06]

My worst fear is he gets **some crazy out there**. That's a real fear I have.

Jocelyn Cole: So do you have any advice or words of wisdom for us, people our age? Do you have any advice or words of wisdom for young folk or **newcomers**?

Robert Benham: I think that all of you know that you can be whatever you want to be and yeah there's gonna be some prejudice. I happen to be Jewish and where I grew up in Chattanooga, there was a lot of places – if you were Jewish there were a lot of places you couldn't ~~go~~work. You couldn't ~~go to~~work for a bank.

[00:38:00] You couldn't ~~go to work at~~ the one ~~on of~~ the ~~Home home~~ Owner's ~~owned~~ Insurance companies. I experienced a lot of prejudice. There were – I can remember going to Florida in the summer with my parents. If you were Jewish there were certain hotels you weren't supposed to go to.

Jocelyn Cole: Why?

Robert Benham: 'Cause you were Jewish. ~~They had a~~ Why did the Holocaust take place?– That was done in my lifetime. Why? I'm reading a book on it now. Why? Why did the United States photograph Auschwitz at low altitude and not ~~find~~ ~~bomb~~ the ~~railroad~~ tracks to the crematorium?

You can answer that question for me, because between when these pictures were taken January of 1945 and May of 1945, over a million people died there.

[00:39:00]

Jocelyn Cole: Do you think your experiences growing up Jewish had a significant impact on your attitude towards race relations?

Robert Benham: Yeah, I couldn't understand why Jewish people were prejudiced. After all that we'd experienced, how could you be Jewish and how could you be prejudiced?

Jocelyn Cole: Did you encounter a lot of that?

Robert Benham: Yeah and, you know, my grandparents, how they ever got out of wherever they came from in Eastern Europe, I'll never know. They were poor. They ~~wasn't~~ ~~weren't~~ but peasants they came out of someplace outside of Kiev.

They were making – I would ask my grandmother, you know, what little town it was and she said, "I don't want to even think about that place."

If you ever saw – did you ever see the movie "Fiddler on the Roof?" That's where they came from, just some little town like ~~_____~~ ~~Anptevka~~ and they came out with the clothes on their back, very little more, some children. Some were ~~down~~ ~~born~~ there; some were ~~down~~ ~~born~~ here.

[00:40:02]

But, you know, there was a lot of anti-Semitism in Chattanooga. That was one of the main reasons I moved to Memphis. I was 24, 25, 26 years old.

I could work as a lawyer. I'd been working for the government and I had a case which involved the First Tennessee Bank Trust Department that had just moved in the new building at the corner of ~~Ford~~ Third and Madison.

The Trust Department was on the same floor as the executive offices and waiting for my appointment, I saw the ~~book which was portrait of~~ all the directors of the bank, and I see Goldsmith, ~~Brown-Plough~~ and I did not know that you could be Jewish and be on the board of directors of a bank in the United States of America.

This was 1964. I didn't think that was possible, so Memphis is much more open.

[00:41:00]

There were a lot of Jewish lawyers in Memphis and there were very, very few in Chattanooga. I think that there had been one Jewish judge and, of course, my uncle was the first one —~~the first of the~~ trial court judges who happened to be Jewish in the State of Tennessee. It's interesting, Frank Clement appointed him.

Jocelyn Cole:

You want to go first?

Paris Westbrook:

Any last thoughts, comments? Any last thoughts, comments?

Robert Benham:

No, I –

Paris Westbrook:

Want to say anything else?

Robert Benham:

There's some good – the two of you have gotten me thinking on a lot of things I hadn't thought about in a long time tonight and I really appreciate your plowing up those old fields. I think I appreciate it, but it's been interesting – been interesting.

Paris Westbrook:

Okay. Well, on behalf of Crossroads and Jocelyn and myself, we would like to say thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to do this interview.

[00:42:03]

Robert Benham: I thank you for your interest and I think what you're doing gives you a lot of exposure and you can get – if you need names, I can give you names of people to talk to.

Jocelyn Cole: Okay. Thank you so much. Thank you, sir.

[End of Audio]