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Missy Murray: I'm Missy, by the way.

Vernon Shaw: Yeah, how you doing, Missy? Vernon Shaw. Nice to meet you.

Carlos Barksdale: So, we'll get into the interviewing _____, we're ready.

Missy Murray: _____.

Carlos Barksdale: This is Carlos Barksdale and Missy Murray interviewing Vernon Shaw on July 1st, 2010, at Manassas High School, in Memphis, Tennessee for the Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive. We're gonna start off with a few background questions, Mr. Shaw.

Vernon Shaw: Okay.

Carlos Barksdale: First of all, could you spell your name for us?

Vernon Shaw: My name is Vernon Shaw, V-E-R-N-O-N, middle initial E, Shaw, S-H-A-W.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, and what year were you born?

Vernon Shaw: I was born in 1957.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, and where were you born and raised?

Vernon Shaw: I was born here in Memphis, Tennessee, uh, raised, brought up in Memphis.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, what were you, I guess what were your occupations over your life? Like, what jobs did you have?

[0:01:00]

Vernon Shaw: All of them *[Laughs]*.

Carlos Barksdale: I guess give us a little recap, a little run down.

Vernon Shaw: Ooh, wee, well, first off, I was a student, okay?

Carlos Barksdale: All right.

Vernon Shaw: Then I guess you can say, ooh, wee, I've done a lot of things in life. I've been, I've worked at McDonalds, I've worked at Armour and

Company on the Hull Kiel. I have been a professional photographer. I have been, I have worked for the government. I have worked, I guess I've worked in television production. I've worked in, as a teacher, and I've worked as an administrator.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, so, tell us about your parents. Who were they, where were they born, and what were their jobs?

Vernon Shaw: Oh, my parents.

Carlos Barksdale: Yes, sir.

Vernon Shaw: Great. Great group.

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My father was a farmer, I guess you can say from Summerville, Tennessee. He was, he passed away in 1976. He was a, he had came out of Summerville, Tennessee, went to Tennessee State, where he met my mother. They met on the campus of Tennessee State.

My mother would always give you the saying that she looked out of her window and she saw that man walking across the campus and she told her roommate, "That's the man I'm gonna marry." And they did. And that was back in 1951 or '52. And from my mother was a schoolteacher, but before she as a schoolteacher, she was a secretary here at Manassas High School, matter of fact.

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That was back in 1957 when I was born, 1956 and '57, when I was born. But my mother was a native Memphian. She's the only child of Reverend Emmett and Mrs. Clark. My father was, I guess you can say the tenth child of 14, from Reverend Shaw. So, both of my grandparents are ministers. I came up in that, that type of family.

Carlos Barksdale: All right.

Vernon Shaw: My father later became a worker at Armour and Company, uh, and then he became one of the first black supervisors at Armour Company here in Memphis, Tennessee.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, so, how many brother and sisters, brothers and sisters do you have? Tell me about _____ –

Vernon Shaw: I have one brother, an older brother, Floyd Shaw, who is in Houston, Texas, now. He has a family in Houston. I have a baby sister that is, I would like to say 16 years younger than I am –

[0:04:00]

[Laughs] That is in Nashville, Tennessee, now. And she is not married; she does not have a family.

Carlos Barksdale: All right, so, I guess growing up, can you tell like you said a little bit about your neighborhood. And how it was when you were growing up?

Vernon Shaw: I grew up in South Memphis. I grew up around the Carver Riverview area. At the time that I grew up, I guess you can say there was a lot of discrimination going on, still going on at the time that I grew up. One of the, the elementary school I went to was not, is even standing anymore, but that was Wisconsin Elementary.

I remember being in the second grade when John F. Kennedy got shot, and it was a thunderstorm and lightning hit a transformer right outside our classroom the moment he got shot. And the people came down the halls hollering, "The President's just been shot."

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"President's just been shot." And we were, believe it or not, my class was under the desk because the lightning that hit the transformer outside our building was right outside my room. And so, we thought that it was lightning coming into the building, so, we all had to get up under the desk.

When I was in junior high school, I went to Riverview Junior High School, and this was a time in which Martin Luther King was here in Memphis, and he was helping the sanitation workers. And at that time, I guess most black people in Memphis were also behind the sanitation workers.

My father was one of them. He marched with the sanitation workers, although he was not a sanitation worker. He marched with them because that's what he believed in.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay.

[0:06:00]

Vernon Shaw: So, most of the men in that, our church at that time we were all members of Oak Grove Missionary Baptist Church on Jobert. And so, all of these men were marching with Martin Luther King, and we were, my family and I were at home that evening, and we were watching the news breaking.

And they were showing the people being arrested and pushed and shoved and hit with Billy clubs and dogs being sicced on them on television in downtown Memphis, because they were marching downtown, down Main Street. Main Street wasn't exactly like you know it now.

Main Street wasn't one of the largest streets in Memphis, and we actually saw our father being hit on television. And my mother was quite upset and she was crying and everything. She was – we were trying to console my mother.

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And later on that evening, my father came home; he wasn't hurt or anything. He was fine. And that was one of our reliefs that she was happy to see he was at home. But throughout the protest years, during the Civil Rights, my parents believed in education. They believed in Civil Rights. Amongst anything, you had to be educated.

So, during the time we had what was called, "Black Mondays," where they told all the students that they did not go to school. You didn't go to school on Mondays. Not in my household. *[Laughs]* My household, you went to school. It was like any other day. And I think in the schools that I was attending, Riverview Junior High School, we had something like 600 kids there.

It was about 30 of us there on that day, on that Monday, and we all walked to school.

[0:08:00]

And while walking to school, the Black Panthers would be circling the block in trucks and cars and everything with their guns drawn. At that time, it was legal to display your rifle if you carried a rifle. It was legal to display your rifle and they knew this. So, they all had rifles and that's what they did. They were, they just pointed the rifle at you and asked you why you're going to school.

And we always told them, "Because my parents made us go to school." They usually left us alone, because they knew us. They knew who our parents were.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay. So, in school, high school, middle school, what activities were you involved in?

Vernon Shaw: I was involved basically in high school. I was involved in band and in sciences. I played in the band; my brother and I played in the band. My sister wasn't born until my 11th grade in high school.

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And my brother and I were in band. We played in Carver High School Band. And we had jazz band as well as marching band. And we were very involved in that. In our bands, you had to play two instruments to be a band member. And I was a drummer and a tuba player, and that's the way I made it through college is going on a band scholarship.

But I also was a very engaged in sciences. At Carver High School, I took physics, Chemistry I and II, Biology I and II, Physics; we had Geometry, Algebra, Calculus. I had to take it all. Unfortunately, I did go to a, I tried to graduate early, and I went to summer school to be put up a grade, and I tried to graduate early, but my father did not want me to graduate early.

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I tried to graduate high school at the age of 16, but that was too young, they said. But I was, so, I spent my senior year with hardly anything to take anymore, because I'd taken every, took everything there was. So, I had to take Physics II, Chemistry II, Biology II and also Music Theory III. So, that's the only classes I had to take. The rest of the day I was just free.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, okay, now, why you were in high school or middle school, how did integration and segregation impact your school life?

Vernon Shaw: Oh, boy, your school life was very, very impacted. In middle school, well, it wasn't middle school back then. We had junior high school; we had seventh through ninth.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay.

Vernon Shaw: In junior high school, we had a lot of things, I mean, we really weren't aware of we were being – segregation.

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We weren't aware of what was really happening to us. We thought that was normal that we received second-handed things. We received second-handed books. We never did get any new books. All our books were old, and they were usually from Central High School. I used to say that our food was even old that we had.

Because usually, when we were in the junior high school, the food, the milk would be sour. The food would be stale, and it seemed like that it was, you know, it was something that they had from last week. We organized a formal protest in junior high school where we boycotted the cafeteria. All of the students, grade seventh

through nine, brought their lunches in bags. Be brought sack lunches.

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And we bought the milk at the school. And then finally, we had to stop doing that because the milk was totally sour. We're talking about milk that was curdled, had turned curly –

Carlos Barksdale: Right.

Vernon Shaw: So, that was totally sour. So, we stopped bringing, we stopped buying milk at the school. And we had a protest that we started in junior high school. I was in the ninth grade. And we had a protest that we started where we just told them we're not gone take this type of abuse from the cafeteria anymore.

We can't eat this food. And we marched out. We actually, everyone that was in the cafeteria started leaving the cafeteria. We marched outside. And went outside and went down the steps of Riverview Junior High School onto the street. When we, when the students in the other classes saw that we were outside standing up talking or chanting, and singing, they came out with us.

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So, we saw that we had more students than we ever realized. We went around to the back of the school. So, they say, "We're marching." *[Laughs]* So, went around to the back of the school and we went up on the hill at Riverview Park. And there is where the principal, by that time, every student in that building came outside and came with us.

And so, the building was emptied; we emptied the building out, and the principal came out once we organized on top of the hill. The principal came out to speak to us. He did listen to our demands; he noticed that there wasn't something was right in the cafeteria. He noticed that that wasn't right.

And he said that something will be done about it. A week later, we had better milk. We had better food. So, we found out that, I guess you could say a peaceful protest can bring about change.

[0:14:00]

Carlos Barksdale: Okay. The neighborhood that you grew up in, how has it changed over time?

Vernon Shaw: In South Memphis, in the Carver area, there were families there, and the families were going to the different schools in the neighborhood, the neighborhood schools. I guess when integration

came and busing came and everything, students started leaving the neighborhood. The students, when we got a chance to, and they opened the chance up to us in the '70s that the students can go to Central High School.

They can go to any school that they wanted to. The students started leaving the neighborhood. They started going to these other schools that they weren't allowed to go to in the first place. So, when they started going to those different schools, they started moving out.

So, the families moved out of the neighborhood. The families that were there left in the neighborhood, you know, we did continue to go to school there, we graduated from there and everything.

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But as we grew older, we left the neighborhood also. Because we found other places that we wanted to live, and a lot of us left Memphis. But our families, or our parents were still there. Well, those people died out. So, there was no one left in the neighborhood anymore. I think at last year, there was only my mother and two other ladies that were from the old neighborhood that was still there.

There was only three ladies that were there from the old neighborhood. Now, as of October, my mother passed away. So, now, there's only two ladies from the original neighborhood. So, the neighborhood has changed a great deal. A younger generation has moved in. It's not the people that we want in the neighborhood, but they're there.

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The neighborhood has changed. I can see just by driving through it, there's more things in our neighborhood that really didn't, I really don't like to see. Drugs and everything else in the neighborhood. So, yes, it has changed a great deal since I was there.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, well, I guess we'll transition to religion in your life. I heard you say earlier that your grandparents were ministers?

Vernon Shaw: Yes.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, well, I guess what, what church did you belong to, and how did the religion play a role in your life when you were growing up?

Vernon Shaw: I belonged to Oak Grove Baptist Church. It was pastored by Reverend Clark in, in the neighborhood. Religion played a great

deal in my life. Religion was all there was. My father read his Bible almost every night. And it was instilled in us at a very, very early age. My father did a lot of things that I guess you would say that was –

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Actually, everything that he did to us was actually taken out of the Bible, everything. I came home in first grade and I told him that, "I hate that girl. I hate that girl." And my father said, "Boy, the Bible said you should not hate nobody. You should not hate nobody." It took me 20 years to find out that that's not what the Bible says. *[Laughs]* But that's what he told me, that I shouldn't hate nobody.

And I grew up thinking that I shouldn't hate anybody, because of that, that's what I says in the Bible. And I read that Bible from cover to cover. That's not where it says that. That's something else. I should love my fellow man, but it didn't say I shouldn't hate him, but that's what he taught, that's what he taught me. And we lived, oh, Lord, your life was the church. Your life was the church. No matter what, you went to church.

[0:18:00]

You went to Sunday School every Sunday morning. You went to church. You had 11:00 service. After church, you got BTU, or you might have a 3:00 program, then you have BTU, and this was your life. Saturday morning, we always had some type of bake sale or cook sale because somebody was raising money for the church.

And so, the church was part of your life; it was part of the neighborhood. The people that were in your neighborhood were your church members. And there was a church right across the street from my house, but it wasn't my church.

Carlos Barksdale: Right.

Vernon Shaw: My church was six blocks away. And no matter what, you went to church. Even when we were in the country, my father would take us back to the country at least about once, one Sunday or once a month, and we went to church in the country, went to his church in the country.

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And once again, same routine. You went to Sunday School in the morning, you went to 11:00 service, and it might be a 3:00 program or after that, you got BTU at 6:00. And in between the 11:00 program and 6:00 in the country, everybody opened the back of their station wagons up or the back of their, the tailgates of their

truck and they fed you. You didn't leave that church grounds for three hours.

No matter what you wanted was out there. Anything from greens to ice cream. They had everything. Cakes, pies, beans, greens, roasts, turkey, chicken, anything that you wanted, and you ate from every cart. You just ate from every cart. After you finished eating, okay, it's about 6:00; time for BTU. After BTU, you went home.

[0:20:00]

Carlos Barksdale: What activities were you involved in at church?

Vernon Shaw: Ooh, wee. Almost all of them. My father became one of the trustees of our church, and even before that, I was Sunday School teacher, I was a boy scout, I was a trustee, I was a, yeah, yeah, and everything, no matter what, you were involved in it. Youth programs, you were involved in that as a youth.

Children's programs, you were involved in that. Anything that came up, you were involved in it, no matter what. You were involved in it. Choir day, you did something for choir day, even. So, no matter what it was, you did something.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay, I guess can you tell me, I guess about your family, I guess when you got older in the church. I'm guessing that you, you said you became a Sunday School teacher in the church. At what age did you become a teacher in the church?

[0:21:00]

Vernon Shaw: Oh, I was in high school when I became a Sunday School teacher.

Carlos Barksdale: Okay.

Vernon Shaw: I was in high school, a Sunday School teacher. Even after I went to college and came back, I was still a Sunday School teacher.

Carlos Barksdale: And were you married at this point at all?

Vernon Shaw: No, no, no, no.

Carlos Barksdale: _____, all right.

Vernon Shaw: No. I became Sunday School teacher, and that was the time while I was in college and my father passed away. And so, they decided to make me a trustee in his place. So, I became a church trustee,

also the church secretary. I kept the books and took all the minutes of all the church meetings.

Carlos Barksdale: All right, well, I guess I'll transition this over to Missy at this time for her questions.

Missy Murray: All right, I guess we're gonna keep going on time wise.

Vernon Shaw: Okay.

[0:22:00]

Missy Murray: You said you went to TSU; is that right?

Vernon Shaw: Yeah, I went to Texas Southern University.

Missy Murray: Texas, Texas Southern University.

Vernon Shaw: That's the other TSU.

Missy Murray: All right, well, can you tell us a little bit about what you're involved in at Texas Southern?

Vernon Shaw: On the air? Okay, I did go as, for, in the band, for a band Scholarship. I chose Texas Southern for a couple reasons, because my brother had already, was already attending Texas Southern, and Texas Southern also had one of the most outstanding schools for pharmacy.

I chose Texas Southern or Florida A & M. Those two schools had outstanding schools of pharmacy. That's what I was gonna major in. Since I had all this science background, I was gonna use it and I wanted to use it to become a pharmacist. So, that's where I enrolled at. I was in the band at Texas Southern, played in the Ocean of Soul Marching Band.

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And that was one of my dreams as a kid. Every since I was a little kid, I always wanted to play in the marching band, and that was, that was amazing that I finally fulfilled where I was able to see one of those dreams come true. And it was probably one of the most, I guess extra ordinary experiences anybody could ever have.

That one of the dreams that you had when you were a child has finally come true as a young adult. And I got a chance to march in my first show in September of '74. It was, I did a lot at Texas

Southern. After a year or two as a pharmacy major, found out I didn't want to be a pharmacy major. And I changed my major.

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I always wanted to be, I also wanted to be a photographer. My brother was an artist. My brother was selling pictures when he was a kid in elementary school. That's how much of an artist he was. And so, I wanted to do something that would be similar to art, too. So, I picked up a camera. My father taught me how to use a camera.

He taught me darkroom skills, also, how to develop film and print, and make prints. And so, I wanted to be a photographer. Texas Southern has a photography curriculum. And so, I changed my major then I called home, told my mom and daddy I've changed from pharmacy to photography. You change your major first; then you call home.

You don't call home and ask for permission. No, you don't do that. So, I did that, and I started working on, and started working on the field of photography. Worked in the field of photography as well as in, also dealing with television production also.

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I worked with colored photography, black and white photography, infrared photography, different types of aspects of photography at Texas Southern. Because of at Texas Southern, I was able to be mentored by one of, one of the persons that I thought was a great man at that time, but he still is to me. Mr. Evans, Dr. Evans. He was my mentor in photography.

He taught me a lot, a great deal about photography and in, not only in photography, but also in myself. He gave me the confidence that I needed to pursue that field. I was still in the band. I was marching in the band. I was also, like I said, I was on scholarships. So, one of the things you had to do was what we call work-study.

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So, you had to work, you know, because of your scholarship. I was a photographer, and I also had to play in the band. Those were the three things you had to do in one day. And then you had to get your class work. And in doing that, one of the areas of photography you had to go to was architecture, and mechanical drawing.

So, I was able to run it through one of the professors that was from Nashville, Tennessee, who taught me architecture and design. And so, now, I was doing three things. Architecture, design,

photography, playing in a band and working through. So, I learned how to do a lot of things in school.

And in the off season, when I wasn't playing in the band, because I stopped playing in concert band. I did that for one year. After that, I didn't do that anymore. So, I had to, had to get some money from some kind of way.

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So, I started working at McDonalds. And I worked at McDonalds, and we didn't have a car. So, I had to walk to McDonalds and work. When I started working at McDonalds, I found out that they would let you work all the overtime you wanted to, and overtime means extra money.

So, wow, I worked overtime. Little did I know that you also have to study, too. You have to study. And so, like, I was doing three things, doing three things again. I was working, taking pictures, studying and work, and also going to school. So, I had to do those things. I had to do what was necessary in order to get to where I wanted to be.

And I remember, I have a close, what we have closing. I would close the McDonalds up at night. And so, like, at 12:00 and 1:00 in the morning _____ time, I'd walk to my dorm.

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But one thing, when you close at night, all the food that you were gonna throw away, they let you take it home. So, I have a grocery bag full of McDonalds hamburgers and fries. And I'd take it to the dorm and everybody in the dorm was loving when I'm coming home from work every night. I'd smell like grease, but at least I'd have a sack full of burgers.

I fed everybody on that dorm floor. But you, I learned a lot of work ethics from watching my father a lot. And my parents did not want us to actually work. They didn't want us to work as hard as they did. They didn't want that, they didn't want that for us. But I watched what they did all the time and I, you know, it didn't kill them, and I wonder what was wrong. Why can't I do what you do?

[0:29:00]

I know do it, I know you're saying, "Do what I say, not as I do," but you're out there working. I want to work, too. I want to help you, you know? Cause you always want to help your parents. And so, that year that I got a chance to come home to Memphis, and I got a chance to work with my father at Armour and Company. By that time, he was what they all meat-by-products supervisor.

He was the head of a whole department. He hired me. I got a chance to work at Armour and Company. They probably shouldn't have done that. *[Laughs]* I was 18 years old. Yeah, it was my second year. I was 18 years old and I was working at 6:00 in the morning till 2:00 in the evening. I was bringing home, every week about $1,200 in a paycheck.

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I was 18 years old. I was bringing home $1,200, but I was too tired to spend it. I couldn't go any place. I smelled like pigs or blood. So, the only thing I could do was come home in the evening and go to bed. Wake up in the morning, started all over again. I, that was fun to me. That was fun. I wanted to do that. That was what I wanted to do. I come home, give my check to my mama and keep on going.

I didn't need anything, but I had plenty money. Back then, we're talking about 1975. That was a lot of money. That was a whole lot of money.

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And I remember my parents were going, my sister was born, my sister was a baby. My sister was my father's joy. Every time my father would come home, he would have to grab his daughter. That's his every – he had to hold her. He had to hold her and, you know, he'd go to sleep with her laying on his chest. My father loved that child.

And my father asked us about in July, said, "We're going on vacation. We're going to go to New York and Washington, D.C." Said, "You want to come?" I said, "No, sir. I don't want to go. I want to stay here and work." My father said, "Okay." My mother was just begging me every day, saying, "Come on, come on, come on." I said, "No, mama, I got work. I want to work."

And, "This feels good to work like this." My mother begged me every day to come on on vacation. "No, no, no." My father wouldn't say nothing. Little did I know that my father was plotting against me.

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Then, when you work at Armour and Company, you kill so many hogs. I worked on the hog kill, not on the cow side. But you kill so many hogs per day, per eight hours – 2,686 hogs in less than eight hours. He told them to speed the belt up. And we killed 2,686 hogs in five hours. And you, and once you reach that number, you're through for the day; you go home.

I worked on the hog kill. They speed the belt up. I was working beside these guys that were ex-football players. We're talking about pro football players. Guys whose arms were big as my chest. I was working next to them. It took them exactly two weeks to hurt me. And they did. I was doing what we call pulling fat.

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That's taking the inside fat off the chest cavities of the hog. I did that for two weeks, as they sped the belt up. And the day before my parents were ready to go on vacation, I said, "I think I'm going on vacation with you, but there's gonna be one problem. I can't help drive because my hands are closed." I couldn't open them.

They stayed like that until after I went, and I went back to school, too. I had to go back to school and it was hard playing the tuba with your hands like this and you can't, you can't move your fingers. So, I played like this for about a month, like, and I drove to New York, like this, too. I was driving just like that. And that, I later found out that my father told them to kill me.

Missy Murray: Wow.

Vernon Shaw: He wanted it so that I would not be, I would not be at home.

[0:34:00]

He wanted me to go to school. And so, if I would get hurt on the job, I would go back to school. He was right. He was absolutely right. You know, we hate to say our parents are right and everything –

Missy Murray: Right.

Vernon Shaw: But they just didn't want to see us work like that. They wanted us to do something else. They wanted us to get our education. And I understood that. They could have used different means of doing it, you know, they could have just told me. They didn't have to show me. My father was like that. He, you know, he's say, "Okay, look out," because that means something else is gone happen.

He was a man of few words. He didn't say a lot, but he meant a whole lot. One day, I told him I, you know, didn't feel like going to school. I didn't want to go to school. I was in first grade.

[0:35:00]

I told him, "I don't want to go to school." And I said, "You can't make me." He said, "Okay." He had his day off. We got in the car. We drove to his brother's house. In the back of his brother's

house was about 80 acres of cotton. And they, we got out and went to see my aunt who was there in the cotton field. Everybody was picking cotton.

They showed me how to pick cotton. Needless to say, I never did miss a day of school after that.

Missy Murray: What, could you compare or contrast Texas and Tennessee during the civil rights movement? Do you think they experienced things different, as states?

Vernon Shaw: *[Laughs]* Oh, yes. The states and even the cities. I was in Houston, Texas, the middle of Houston, Texas. Believe it or not, I had to go to Houston, Texas to see the Ku Klux Klan march down the middle of Main Street.

[0:36:00]

I didn't see it in Memphis, but I saw it in Houston, because that happened every year. That happened every year. I didn't know it. And, and you won't know it until you actually see it. You know, and you think that there wouldn't be any problems in Texas. Oh, yes, there were, there were plenty of problems. There were some areas of Texas we, of Houston that we couldn't go into.

It's not like that now, but it was at that time. But I was I guess I was young and naive. I walked from Texas Southern to downtown Houston and walked back. We were in Fifth Ward, and not supposed to be walking around Fifth Ward at night, but we felt, you know, we felt safe. And we could do that.

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But there were some parts of Houston that I could not walk down, and it wasn't Fifth Ward. But in Tennessee, you know there – even though my parents were directly involved in the Civil Rights Movement, I did not believe that no one human being can dictate to another human being what you can and what you cannot do.

That's not what they instilled in us. They instilled in us that we're all are free. We all have rights. And with education, we can do anything. Didn't matter. With education, we could to any place. It didn't matter. Only thing that matters is you did what your parents said. That was it.

Missy Murray: So, you've already shared some of your memories and experiences.

[0:38:00]

Are there any others that stand out in your mind that either you participated in or your parents did?

Vernon Shaw: Well, there are quite a few things. When I was in school, I wanted to, one of the main things I wanted to do also I wanted to fly a plane. So, I wanted to join the Air Force and I, because I had a high GPA. I wasn't in the top ten, but I was in the top 12.

And so, I wanted to join the Air Force and I wanted to be a fighter pilot. They came up with a rule back then to stop that. They said that your feet were too large to go into the cockpit of a jet. So, you could not be a pilot. You can be a mechanic, but you can't be a pilot.

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And that was a form of discrimination also. Later on, I found out that there was no such rule. But that's just what they said; that's what the recruiters said. But there was no such – and plus, my feet still weren't that large. *[Laughs]* That's just one thing that stuck out in my head. A lot, yeah, boy, got a lot of –

My parents are, like I said, graduates of Tennessee State. So, every year for Homecoming, we always had to go to, well, they went to Tennessee State. They didn't take us until we got of a certain age. There wasn't an expressway. Interstate 40 wasn't going from Memphis to Nashville at that time.

And I think it was '70 or '78 that we had to take to Nashville. When you're driving on those highways back there, you didn't stop at night in certain areas.

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And by all means, there wasn't any restrooms that you go to. And my parents stopped to get gas one night and once we left the service station, you know, we took my brother and I were in the backseat and we were telling them we were ready, we had to go and use the bathroom. They said we couldn't use the bathroom there. And I said, "Why not? It's a restroom right there." They said, "No, you can't go in there."

And so my parents had to drive down the road a little bit and then pull over to the side and my mother gave me a Coca-Cola bottle to go on the side of the road. And I didn't know what that meant, but later on I found out, you know, we weren't supposed to use that.

Downtown Memphis was, had this all over the place and I didn't know at that time, either. Downtown Memphis was Goldsmith's. Only the Blacks were allowed to go into the basement of Goldsmith's and you, the water fountains, as you know, it was always colored and white.

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And there was certain water fountains and certain restrooms that you could use. And one time I walked into the whites only restroom in the basement of Goldsmith's, and they came and got my mother and everybody, "What is this young nigger in there," you know, oh, it was a big to do about me being in the wrong restroom. I didn't know. I didn't care. I had to use the bathroom. And so, I went in the first one marked, "men." I didn't know it said, "white men only."

But wasn't no sign that said, "white men only." That, I mean, the door said, "men." The sign that said, "white men only," was over there on the side. And so, I didn't see that one. I'm looking at the door that says, "men" only. But yeah, we, Goldsmith's was something else. Goldsmith's was the place where a lot of the ladies liked to go and shop, but you couldn't go up stairs.

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Goldsmith's and Lowenstein's was like that also. Lowenstein's you could only go into the basement. Gerber's was about the only store on Main Street that allowed the Blacks in it. Gerber's and Woolworth. That's where my mother shopped. And that was, ooh, that was during the '60s.

That was during the '60s, and, and it seemed so strange back then because of when we were, when my mother went to Goldsmith's to shop or Lowenstein's, I remember my mother parked on Gayosa. And we would, my brother and I stay in the car. We'd be in the car. We didn't die. *[Laughs]*

We didn't die, but we stayed in the car while my mother shopped. And this was in the evening time after she got off work. After she'd leave work, we'd go to Goldsmith's. And she'd leave us in the car.

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The car would not be running; we didn't have the keys. We could – but see, at that time, we could roll the windows up and roll them down.

Missy Murray: How would you compare race relations then and now in Memphis?

Vernon Shaw: Actually, race relations then, it was more open. _____ you're supposed to know your place as they say. And as my grandparents used to say you _____ have to know your place and places that you, things that you could do and you could not do.

Now, nobody is going to stop you from doing those things that you want to do and that you have the rights to do, but they're gonna put something else on you that's going to make you not do it.

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We had a right to education back then. And that's what everybody wanted to do. Everybody just wanted, they wanted to go to school. Now, we don't want to go to school. We don't. We, everybody, students today have the more opportunities to go to college than we ever had. You know, my son, I have a son at Tennessee State who does have a band scholarship.

But also, he has the, what is this we call it – the Lottery Scholarship. I have a son at Xavier, another boy; my baby boy is in Xavier. He has an academic scholarship at Xavier. He could have had a band scholarship, but he didn't want a band scholarship. He has an academic scholarship. There are grants. There are loans and everything. There was only one type of grant when I was in school, and everybody, most of them had that.

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But you could only go to your black historical colleges. You couldn't go to any school with those grants. And so, now, they can go to any school they want to. They can go to any school they want to. The schools that I wanted to go to were schools like Michigan State, UCLA. I wanted to go to that. But even though with the good grades I had, I still didn't have enough money to go there.

They didn't offer the scholarships like they would offer it right now. But now, students can get $10,000.00 worth of scholarships. I couldn't do that back then. Only to your, I guess, your black historical colleges, but Michigan State, Wolverines, no, that wasn't happening. That wasn't happening. I didn't even want to go to, what's the school in Florida?" *[Laughs]* Florida State. I did want to go, I mean, University of Florida, that's what I'm saying.

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I wanted to go to FAMU. I wanted to go there, Florida A & M; that's where I wanted to go to. I wanted to go to Texas Southern or Tennessee State. I wanted to go to Jackson. I take that back; no, I didn't. That'd be the last *[Laughs]* it was still only Tennessee, Texas or FAMU, yeah. I didn't want to go to Jackson. I'm sorry. *[Laughs]*

I'm sorry, even before that, I was – because of my parents went to Tennessee State and a lot of things I saw came out of Tennessee State, I had to go to a black school. I had to. I really couldn't at that time see myself going any place else. I didn't want to go to

Kentucky University. We didn't have no television deals. I didn't want to be seen on television. *[Laughs]* I just wanted to march in a band.

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That's all I wanted to do. And I also wanted to go to a pharmacy school. Little did I know I didn't want to do that either.

Missy Murray: You mentioned earlier that a lot of people, when they get the opportunity to leave, they will and won't come back to Memphis. What do you think will bring them back?

Vernon Shaw: Basically, what will bring them back is their home. A lot of times we leave because of our, we think that this place has done this to me. This is not worth it. They don't do nothing here. We are being abused here. A lot of times they haven't realized that this is probably the best place in the world for them. Memphis is probably the best kept secret there is. I've lived a lot of places.

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I've lived a lot of places and Memphis is still the best place I've ever seen in my life. I've lived in Virginia, New York, Texas, even a little overseas, but this is the best place I've seen in my life. There's no place like Memphis. There isn't. Although we have problems, you know, everybody else does too.

Everybody else does too, but our problems, if you look at the other problems around the world, our problems are nothing. We're looking at nothing. But this is probably the best place there is. I say that because economically, this is the best place there is. Culturally, this is the best place. And if you don't believe me, try living someplace else and see what's gone happen. *[Laughs]*

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Missy Murray: All right, I guess just one more question. If you feel like we left anything out, is there anything that you want to add?

Vernon Shaw: No, I don't think you left anything out. I think you covered quite a bit and I think I've said quite enough. *[Laughs]* I've gone on and on and on this short amount of time. I didn't mean to say so much, but Memphis has, there's quite a history here in Memphis. There's a lot of things that people really don't understand because they've not had that opportunity to see the rest of the world as it is.

And so they really don't take advantage of the things that they have here. Yeah, I do suggest that we continue our education. I think that education is the key to everything. But I do say that as you get educated, look at things.

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Look at everything there is. Look at what's around you. A lot of times we do not see a lot of things. Somebody told me a long time ago. They said, "Boy, you don't actually see me. The only thing you see is light reflecting off of me." As, as human beings, we need to look at that light. That's all.

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