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LaKevia Perry: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom at Rhodes College we would like to thank you for coming today and sharing your story with us. Today is July 21, 2010. My name is LaKevia Perry and this is Holly McGlown. We are both honored to be conducting this interview and to find out a little bit more about Memphis. Today's interview will be available online at www.CrossroadsToFreedom.org.

We're going to start with some basic questions about your childhood, just to get your memory going. What's your name?

James Jalenak: Jimmy Jalenak.

LaKevia Perry: And what year were you born?

James Jalenak: 1939.

LaKevia Perry: Where were you raised and born?

James Jalenak: Well, I was born in New Orleans, and when I was five we moved to Memphis and I grew up in Memphis.

LaKevia Perry: And what is your occupation?

James Jalenak: Well, it's kind of a moving target. I am a lawyer, but I've pretty much retired from active law practice

[0:01:00] and am now the CIO at the Memphis Zoo.

LaKevia Perry: And what kind of law did you practice?

James Jalenak: Mainly real estate, estate planning, corporate business law.

LaKevia Perry: Who are your parents?

James Jalenak: My parents were Leo and Rita Jalenak.

LaKevia Perry: What were their occupations?

James Jalenak: My mother was a housewife. I don't believe she ever worked outside the house, except for volunteer work. My father worked for the newspaper in New Orleans; he was the advertising manager of the old *New Orleans Item,* the afternoon paper. And when they moved to Memphis he went to work with my uncle in the auto parts business, the old Mills Morris Auto Parts Company, and

eventually started a division for office furniture and shelving and things like that, and then that got spun off as a separate company.

LaKevia Perry: *[0:02:00]* Do you have any brothers or sisters?

James Jalenak: I have one living brother that was nine years older than me; his name is – he goes by his initials, LR. And then I have an older brother who's 11 years older than me who passed away some years ago.

LaKevia Perry: How were they like when you were growing up?

James Jalenak: It was almost like having three fathers. I mean they were so much older than me that I, you know, I guess emotionally I was kind of an only child. But we've always been good brothers. We were very close.

LaKevia Perry: Now let's talk more about how you were when you were growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood that you grew up in?

James Jalenak: In Memphis we moved into a neighborhood called Hedgemore, which is right off of Long and Grove, near Galloway Golf Course. And at that time, when I was a child, it was out in the county. You know, old houses, big lots, no sidewalks, *[0:03:00]* that kind of a place. And actually we lived there until I went away to college. My parents always lived there.

LaKevia Perry: And what was life like at home?

James Jalenak: Well, it was pleasant. You know, we had a definite routine; my father went to work at the same time every day and came home at the same time every night and dinner was at the same time. We frequently watched television during dinner. I would not say there was a lot of conversation. Neither of my parents went to college; my mother went through about the fifth grade and my father – and she was from a very, very poor family with lots of children. My father was born in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and graduated from high school, I'm pretty sure in Port Gibson, and then his family moved to New Orleans. So they were not – they were, you know, *[0:04:00]* bright people, but not educated people.

LaKevia Perry: And can you share with us any childhood memories that may have influenced you later on in life?

James Jalenak: Well, you know, it's an interesting thing; I seem to have almost repressed everything that happened to me before I was 16. I have no explanation for that, 'cause I don't – I think of myself as having had a happy enough childhood, but, you know, we lived in sort of an isolated place. I spent a lot of time – my aunt and uncle had a farm, which is now where Saint Francis Hospital is, in that area, and I spent a lot of time there, raising – working with the cows and just all kinds of things like that, agricultural kinds of things.

One very happy memory I have is in the fifth grade,
[0:05:00] my aunt sort of put me in charge of this one calf, jersey calf, and it grew up to be a heifer, a teenage cow. And I entered it in the Mid South Fair and won fifth prize. And I've often said that that yellow ribbon that I won in the fifth grade is probably meant more to me than, you know, graduating with honors from law school and all that kind of stuff.

LaKevia Perry: Now I'm going to ask you about your educational experiences. Where did you go to elementary school?

James Jalenak: Well, I went to White Station through the fourth grade. I don't think I ever went to kindergarten. And actually I was bused to White Station in a yellow school bus; it was a county school. And about the time I was in the fourth grade or so East High opened, and that was my neighborhood school, so I transferred to East High in the fifth grade and went there through the twelfth grade.

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LaKevia Perry: And what did you do after high school? What school did you go to?

James Jalenak: After high school I went to Yale College, you know, for four years. And then I stayed and went to Yale Law School.

LaKevia Perry: And how is that, being up north versus being from the South?

James Jalenak: Well, I would not say that it was a regional experience as much as it was a cultural experience, a background experience. I've often – I don't know if you're familiar with the prep program here that sends Memphis City School kids to eastern prep schools, but I've spoken at some of their meetings and I've told them that when I arrived at Yale there was a sign on the tree that said, "Are you from Andover or are you just here?" And I thought, 'You know what, I'm just here.' It was a definite prep school/pubic school, rich/poor, Christian/Jewish

[0:07:00] kind of a division, you know, at that time. And I pretty much felt that. I knew two people out of the class of 1,000 when I got there; one who graduated from high school with me, and one who I had known from New Orleans. So I was, you know, scared to death, to put it bluntly.

But eventually I figured out that I could do just as well as those other guys, and got used to it and became part of the flow, so to speak, that there were plenty of people there like me, who were just as scared. So it ended up being a great experience, Yale College.

And Yale Law School, I think I mentioned earlier, Yale Law School I thought was as intellectually exciting as anything could be.

[0:08:00] You talk about dumb, I only applied to one law school. There was sort of an early admission process, so if I didn't get in I still had time to apply to others or do something else with my life. But it was a tremendously exciting experience, you know, Yale Law School.

And while I was in law school I was a freshman counselor. I lived on the freshman campus, undergraduate freshman campus, and had about 18 to 20 boys who were, you know, my little brothers for a year, and that was a very fulfilling, rewarding thing to do.

LaKevia Perry: How did integration or segregation impact your educational experience?

James Jalenak: Well, you know, growing up in Memphis at East High, to a great extent I was unaware of it. My parents never talked about it much,

[0:09:00] and a couple of experiences in high school sort of brought it into my consciousness, the fact that we lived in a segregated society. Nobody in my family spoke in favor of segregation, but certainly nobody spoke against it either. I mean it was just not a subject that was discussed.

Two instances that set in my mind before I went away to college; one was I worked in the summer in my father's office, and there was a lady there who was the widow of one of the truck drivers. And they just sort of let her hang around; it was almost like a pension, they paid her to do little odd jobs here and there. And so my job was sorting catalogs that we mailed out by what was then – the modern thing would be zip codes, whatever they were called then.

[0:10:30] And so I had to ask that lady to help me. So she and I are sitting down at a desk in the office, sorting these things, and that got to be a cause célèbre, because she was black and that was not her job; her job was to mop and clean and not to do clerical work. And I complained and screamed and hollered and, you know, was told by my uncle to calm down. And that made a big impact on me, that that was very unfair.

And another instance is some friends and I, I think we wanted to go to the fairgrounds one night, and they wouldn't let us in because it was Colored night. And we had never come face to face with that before. I think to a great extent one's attitude towards these things as a young person is formed by your personal experiences and the people that you know, as opposed to just

[0:11:00] theoretical, you know, social or political theories. But those two instances I think really had an impact on me before I went to college.

In college I was very much aware of the fact that there were no black students at Yale. There were maybe 5 in my class of 1,000, and they were all, you know – first of all there was all men; there were no women at Yale at that time. That's a whole other subject. And, you know, those five were, you know, the sons of ambassadors. You know what I mean? They were not working-class people or middle class people.

And I found myself increasingly interested in changing that and doing what I could to change that. And Yale did change,

[0:12:00] and eventually, by my third year in law school Yale really was the cutting edge of what we would now call affirmative action, going out and really finding qualified African-American students and trying to talk them into coming to Yale. And I was the only freshman counselor that had more than one African-American counselee. And I asked the dean, Dean Thompson, I said, you know, I was very pleased with that, "but why have you done that?" And he said, "One of the things that these boys need to learn is that not all white Southerners have horns, that there are good white Southerners. And I thought that was important for them to know that."

So that was a very rewarding experience, because, you know, here are two young men who are right in the middle of it and were dealing with it on a personal level.

[0:13:00] And of course, Yale Law School was a very leading force in the Civil Rights Movement in many, many ways.

LaKevia Perry: How was it a leading force in the Civil Rights Movement?

James Jalenak: Partially the admission of blacks. Many of the teachers were volunteers with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and active in civil rights in other ways. Some of the Supreme Court justices really paved the way for civil rights either taught at Yale or had strong affiliations with Yale. You know, the punch line I guess at that time was "If you want to get to Wall Street you can either go to Harvard and turn right or go to Yale and turn left." So the Yale Law School was really a very liberal place.

[0:14:00] I mean I had many black students who were in my class and it was a very healthy place to develop these relationships.

I remember the speaker at this, I guess you'd call it the Senior Banquet or the Third Year Banquet, was Thurgood Marshall. You know, I'll never forget the story he told. There was a teacher at Yale Law School named Charles Black, who was a native of Texas and a very active civil rights lawyer, but who actually taught admiralty at Yale. I never took the course 'cause I didn't know what admiralty was. But Professor Black introduced Justice Marshall. I think Marshall was already on the Supreme – sure, he was already on the Supreme Court at that time, or on the Second Circuit at least.

And Marshall told the story of when he first met Charles Black, that he was at a meeting of the Lawyers

[0:15:00] Committee of the Legal Defense Fund, sort of a think-tank to sort of plan their litigation and so forth, and Professor Black showed up. And during a recess of the meeting he went up to him and introduced himself and he said, "Professor Black, I couldn't help notice your accent," 'cause Black had a very strong Texas drawl, he says, "Where are you from?" And Marshall was now imitating Black, he says, "Well," he says, "Mr. Marshall," he says, "I'm from Texas." And he says, "Well, I'm happy that you're here, but why would a white man from Texas want to work for the NAACP?" And Black says, "Well, you know, Mr. Marshall, back home in Texas, where I come from, they say the NAACP is the key to the bedroom of every white woman in the South." He says, "I figure that's the organization I need to belong to."

Well, 'cause that brought the house down; people couldn't stop laughing. And so I tell that story as an illustration of the kind of

[0:16:00] good will that surrounded civil rights work at that time and in that place, that it was not – it didn't have a – it was a cooperative thing, it was a loving thing; it was not a bad, edgy kind of thing at all.

LaKevia Perry: What role did religion play in your life growing up?

James Jalenak: Well, I think religion has always played a very strong place in my life. I'm Jewish and I guess I should use the adjective "reformed," that I'm a reformed Jew. And reformed Judaism has always emphasized social action and, you know, the reformed Jewish movement has always been very much pro-civil rights and pro-equality and been involved in that. Now most

[0:17:00] prominent rabbis have been, including my rabbi here in Memphis. And so I think whatever involvement I've had in social issues has been shaped very largely by my religion.

LaKevia Perry: Can you tell us a little bit about your family, a little bit more about your family? At this time right now, like are you married?

James Jalenak: My family now? Sure.

LaKevia Perry: About your children.

James Jalenak: Sure. Well, when I graduated from law school I went to work for a big law firm in New York, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison. Typical of my decisions in life, it was the only law firm I applied to. I spent the previous summer at what was then Arnold, Forrest, & Porter in Washington. And both of those are big corporate

[0:18:00] firms who hold themselves out as being "liberal". And Paul, Weiss was supposed to be the most liberal firm on Wall Street. And if it was, it scares me to death to think of what the most conservative firm must have been like.

But at any rate I went there and I knew that if I'd found the right Yankee I'm going to marry her and come back to Memphis. I'd always intended to come back to Memphis, and that happened. So my wife is in Buffalo and I met her in New York and we got married and moved back here. We have two children; Natalie, who is now 41 and is married to Jason, and they live here in Memphis and they have two children; Ariel, who is 11, and Jonah, who is just 9.

[0:19:00] And Katie, who is married to Clay Levett from Houston, did live here for a while. They lived here for a while, but they then moved back to Austin where they live. And they also have two children; Anna, who is 10, almost 11, and Caleb, who is 9. The two boys are about three weeks apart.

And they're all good people; I'm very proud of my daughters and sons-in-law. They're all liberal Democrats, they're all involved in

_____ social causes that took some evolving. I mean my older daughter probably doesn't want me to tell this story, but when she went off to the University of Florida she was sort of, you know, she came out of

[0:20:00] an integrated high school and had plenty of African-American friends and quite a diversity of friends, but she was a little unsure of, you know, the stand she was going to take. And she eventually resigned from her sorority because she had sponsored a black girl to be a member of the sorority and the girl was not accepted and Natalie quit in protest. You know, I was very proud of that. I felt, you know, I felt that she was something here.

They're really good people.

LaKevia Perry: Okay, now we're going to talk a little bit about the 1950s through the 1970s. Are there any stories that you remember from this time period that are really significant?

James Jalenak: Well, I mean – you mean stories in the news or?

LaKevia Perry: Just anything. Anything that you can remember from this time.

James Jalenak: I mean, yeah, I have a lot of – some regrets in a way too. I mean, for

[0:21:00] example, I was at Washington the summer of '63, but because that was the schedule; my uncle had passed away, I needed to come home, I could make various excuses, but the bottom line is that I didn't stay for the 1963 March on Washington, and I very much regret that. I mean I've seen films of it and, you know, I should've been there.

So I've never been much of a demonstrator, I'll put it that way. And I can think of occasions when I wish I had. I don't know if it's just my conservative, you know, demeanor. I don't know what the reason is. But certainly, you know, I was very much in favor of all the various

[0:22:00] civil rights movements of the '50s and the '60s and '70s, and contributed to them what I could. I was a very active member of the Urban League and went on some national conventions with Reverend McDaniel, who was the executive director of the Urban League at that time, and felt then and still feel that the ultimate answer to the equality question is economic.

You know, that's the hardest one to solve at least; the voting and political is, you know, we've done a good job solving that in Memphis, and we still have far too many poor people and far too

many people who are disadvantaged, and largely because of race. So those events, you know, had a lot to do with shaping my world.

At Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, they – while they did
[0:23:00] sort of do it on – had us do it on our own time, and then I can't say the firm really endorsed participation in various civil rights activities, they did a lot of that. And for example, a lot of forms and corporations and did some work with Constance Baker Motley in organizing rent strikes in Harlem and those kinds of things in those days. And the firm I will say encouraged that. They didn't pay me to do it, of course, but they encouraged it, they allowed it.

And then the law firm had a lot of, you know, national leaders. Garrison was one of the all-time leading civil rights lawyers in the country. And, you know, they all were. I was a little unhappy with their attitude in that the firm
[0:24:00] as such did not contribute people or effort. And in my law practice here, you know, I've had a number of instances where I've been part of – hopefully part of the solution.

Does that answer your-?

LaKevia Perry: Yes, sir.

James Jalenak: I can think of one personal experience which I thought was, oh, I don't want to say life-changing, but certainly had a long-lasting impact on me. And that is – I'll tell this story because I've told it to him now in recent years, is that I don't know if you know Art Gilliam, who is a wonderful, wonderful man who lives here in Memphis and is African-American and a very successful businessman. He owned the first black-owned radio station in the country maybe, certainly in Tennessee,
[0:25:00] WOOK.

And anyhow, he was two years behind me in Yale and we got to be friends. And he and I were flying back together, my guess is going to be my senior year or junior year and his freshman or sophomore year. We were flying back together Christmas vacation and the plane, because of weather, had to land in Nashville, and they put us on a bus to Memphis. So this would've been 1959, maybe 1960. And the bus stopped at the bus station in Jackson and I said, "Art, I'm going to get off and go to the men's room. I'll be right back." And he said, "Okay." I said, "You need to get off?" and he said, "No, I'll wait here."

And as I got off the bus I looked up and I saw signs that "Whites Only" and it hit me like a ton of bricks that they're excluding my friend. It's not black people. I mean, you know, I oppose that. But they're excluding

[0:26:00] my friend. And I turned around and got back on the bus and said, "You know, I changed my mind. I'm not going to go." And that was a little personal act that really stuck with me. At my age I couldn't do that today; I'd have to find some other way to express myself. But I don't know, that just kind of brought it together for me.

LaKevia Perry: You spoke about your daughter and her dealing with racial issues. Did you find it difficult to explain racial issues to your children?

James Jalenak: To some extent. Now remember, one of my children – my children always went to integrated schools. We felt very strongly our children should go to public school. And I'm not going to pretend that I made some great sacrifice; they went to White Station. They went to Shady Grove; they went to very good schools. You know, but they were certainly integrated and we were happy about that.

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But, you know, I remember one of them came home one day and said, "Daddy, why do the black children smell worse than the white children?" And I thought there was – you know, I could talk about home life and bathing facilities and whatever you want, but you've got to display it in terms of discrimination. Now I can't deny her senses; I can't say, "Oh no, dear, they don't smell worse," 'cause they probably did. And we worked our way through that. It took a lot of discussion over a long period of time to do that. And that kind of thing. It is difficult to deal with a child's reality and still you know, maintain good values.

LaKevia Perry: Do you remember anything about when Martin Luther King was assassinated; where you were, what you were doing, how you reacted?

James Jalenak: Very much so. I was living on Carnes in largely

[0:28:00] either an integrated or on the edge of an integrated neighborhood; it was just off of Hyland. And, you know, the curfews, we were scared to death. We were terribly sad. I mean, you know, this horrible, horrible tragedy has occurred in our city. We were embarrassed, we were ashamed. You know, we have friends up east that are, you know, pointing their fingers at us. You know, it was just this whole wealth of emotions.

But I remember there was a march down Main Street maybe three or four days after the King assassination, and Rabbi Danzinger, a real close friend of mine, and I were standing there on the street, watching this march. And we wanted to get off that sidewalk and join that march so bad we couldn't stand it.

[0:29:00] And we talked about should we do it and what would the congregation say and what would my mother say and ______ _______.

And we didn't do it, and I've regretted that all my life. I felt that – I mean while there were plenty of times that I did take a stand and, you know, stood up for what I thought was right, that's one where I didn't. So that's one of the memories I have of that short period of time.

That was around the same time that the city formed a city government. No, the city government had changed. That was shortly after the city government had changed. I think we already had the mayor council at that time. I'm pretty – I'm sure we did.

Do you know Fred Davis, who that is? Fred Davis is

[0:30:00] now – Fred is older than me. It's hard to believe that anybody would be older than me. Fred was on the city council for many, many years. And when the city government changed from a mayor commission to a mayor council with a real legislative body, part of the intent of doing that was to bring black folks into city government. At that time the city was probably I'm going to guess 45-percent black; less than 50 for sure. And the districts were drawn so that three black councilmen would be elected. There were three majority black districts. Let's see, there were seven districts, so there were four majority white districts. And I think seven councilmen were elected with districts and six at large.

[0:31:00] Maybe it was eight and five; I can't remember.

But basically anybody at large was going to be white, and that was true for many years, until Marvin Lowry was the first person I think to be elected citywide. And so District 4 was the most closely 50/50 black and white of all the districts. And I think it was majority white; I think it was about 55-percent white, and a lot of people were running, about 15 people were running, and Fred was one of them. Fred's African-American.

And my friend, George Lapides, who lived next door to me on Carnes, the sportscaster, he and I were looking at the list of people in the paper, these 16 people, and we said, "You know what, clearly Fred Davis is the one who should be elected." We didn't

[0:32:00] know him from Adam. So we went and knocked on his door and introduced ourselves and said, "We want to campaign for you." And Fred said, "Great. I'd love to have you." And so we spent three or four months going door-to-door, what they used to call Coke parties – in those days Coke was a drink, a soft drink – in peoples' backyards. I mean we just worked every night. It was before we had kids; we worked every night in that election.

And it resulted in a run-off. And Fred was running against a white retired Navy colonel or captain or admiral or something, a retired military guy; I've forgotten his name now, but ran a bit of a racist campaign. And we stepped up our efforts and Fred got elected. And it was one of the proudest moments of my life. I mean he's still one of my very closest friends.

[0:33:00]

But you see, it was not just that I was proud of him, but it was fun. He was my friend. He became my friend. I was working as much for the city as I was for my friend, 'cause he got reelected, he got reelected. He's, you know, no longer on the council, of course, but he's been on the Park Commission, he's got a successful insurance company, and he's still going strong.

But that was an instance of involvement around the period of the King assassination.

LaKevia Perry: You mentioned, again, that you had another regret. So I was just wondering, do you think that your regrets have motivated you in the future, like after things have happened, to social justice?

James Jalenak: Oh sure. Sure. And I think they've made me be more and more willing to stand up and be counted.

[0:34:00]

LaKevia Perry: How has segregation and integration impacted your life outside of school?

James Jalenak: Well, I mean I've had people, you know, clients who have said, "If ya'll represent so-and-so I'm leaving you," that kind of thing. I mean we had, you know, I don't know whether you call that a boycott or what you call it, but we've had – you know, we've had some instances of that.

I mean I think it has affected my personal life. I think it has enriched my life tremendously, the being involved, in that I have a

much more diverse group of friends than I might otherwise have had, and much more interesting people. I've been on

[0:35:00] various organizations. I just got released, retired from being on the board of LeMoyne-Owen for ten years, and, you know, hope I made a contribution to that and that I did that during a period when the school was really going through some tough times. That's another story, but it was _____ coming on top.

I think that, you know, as a personal matter my life has been greatly enriched by being involved in the community.

LaKevia Perry: You had talked about you had some regrets, but you also did stand up. Like can you talk about some of those times where you did stand up?

James Jalenak: Well, I mean I don't know that – it's just been sort of a recurring pattern. Like I said, I've been very active in the Urban League for

[0:36:00] many, many years. And it's interesting that one of the things that I think I've brought to the Urban League is they have a lot of need for real estate lawyering, and so I was able to make that contribution and sort of bring my day job into focus on their things. And LeMoyne-Owen and, you know, lots of other things. City schools; I've been very, very active in city schools, both as a parent and I guess as a citizen, and was president of the Memphis Public Education Fund.

I've tried to support political candidates that I thought were going to do the right thing. Harold Ford Jr. claims I'm the first white person there to come out publicly and support him. That may be true or not; I don't know. But he and I are very good friends and

[0:37:00] he clerked for us one summer and we just got to be buddies.

I think that, you know, I'm not sure that I could reconstruct lots of instances. There have been lawsuits that we've handled that – I don't know if you remember, but sometime after the King assassination there was three black teenagers were out one night riding around in a pickup truck, and for some reason the police started chasing them. I can't remember, something about their license or something relatively minor. And it got to be a big deal. And by the time the thing was over with 20 police cars were chasing these kids and the police finally caught up with them and ran them off the road, and one of the policemen shot and killed Elton Hayes. And we represented his family

[0:38:00] in filing suit under the Civil Rights Act and under the Wrongful Death Act.

And that was an unusual thing at that time. I mean those suits are now fairly routine, but back then that was a rather cutting-edge kind of a lawsuit in Memphis. That's just another instance of kind of involvement.

LaKevia Perry: Is there anything else about the Civil Rights Movement that you remember, that sticks out in your mind, maybe seeing something on TV or something in the newspaper?

James Jalenak: Well, I don't know that I could isolate any particular event. I mean living in Memphis in the time of the King assassination sort of overshadows everything else. And of course, I strongly believe that a major

[0:39:00] answer to the kinds of problems that the Civil Rights Movement wanted to solve is political. And I don't know – my senior thesis at Yale was on what we called in 1960 "Negro political activity in Memphis". And it was about the Shelby County Democratic Club and the emerging black political leaders, A.W. Willis and Russell Sugarmon and Ben Hooks and my all-time favorite, George W. Lee. I wish you all could have known Lieutenant Lee; he was one of the most fascinating people I ever knew.

And to be able to interview those folks and get to know them well and write the thesis about them, and there's a copy – I gave a copy to the Crossroads program, I think through Russ Williams. But that sort of made me feel that politics was really the way to advance the cause

[0:40:00] more than anything else. And so I've, you know, watched the political aspects of this day a lot.

LaKevia Perry: I want to go a little bit back to when Martin Luther King was assassinated and what the city was like after that. We've had a lot of people talk about how they saw tanks. Do you remember seeing the tanks and the military and police out on the streets?

James Jalenak: Sure.

LaKevia Perry: Is there anything you remember about that or that you can talk about that?

James Jalenak: Sure. The instance when I was talking about when Rabbi Danzinger and I were standing on the street corner, you know, wanted to join the march. There were, you know, Marines there with bayonets and guns and all of that kind of thing.

I remember the just tremendous pride I felt in Rabbi Wax, who was then the – who was a rabbi in my synagogue and who

[0:41:00] happened just by coincidence to be the president of the Memphis Minister's Association, led a march of ministers to City Hall, from Saint Mary's Cathedral to City Hall, you know, and sort of stuck his finger in the mayor's face and said, "You've got to stop this terrible thing. You've got to give the garbage workers, you know, what they want" and so forth. I was very proud of that. And that was a courageous thing. I mean there were many people in the congregation who just disagreed with him, and that got to be a fight that I got involved in, you know, 'cause I was on his side.

But sure, the city was – you know, and there were riots after the Elton Hayes killing. There were riots here for weeks.

[0:42:00] And I don't know that the military was brought in, but it was a very tense situation.

LaKevia Perry: How would you describe tensions between blacks and whites before and after the assassination?

James Jalenak: Well, you know, there was a lot of good will, both before and after. But I think that the King assassination got an awful lot of white folks off their rear ends and really to take a – well, to step forward and take a risk. And there were some meetings, there were some rallies, there were organizations formed. And I think that we made some progress in reducing tensions and increasing goodwill after the King assassination.

[0:43:00]

And before the King assassination it was – a handful of people were willing to stand up and be counted, but basically it was pretty much of a fence between blacks and whites.

LaKevia Perry: With all the social justice work that you've done, what have you taken back from it?

James Jalenak: Well, I think that I'm not a modest person, so this comes across as modesty, but it really isn't; it's realistic, is that, you know, I don't know that I've made much of a dent. You know, I've tried to do my part and do what was right, but, you know, by and large, you know, I, like everybody else, I live day-to-day, I go to work, I come home, I go to

[0:44:00] the movies. I, you know. And so you know, if everybody did a little bit I think we'd make a lot of progress. So I don't feel as if I've made, you know, any tremendous contribution. I've just sort of done my part.

LaKevia Perry: What advice would you give to students or young people like us about social justice and really being active?

James Jalenak: Well, I would certainly urge you to be active. I mean I think that the biggest problem we have in this country – I mean I think there's a lot of hatred in this country, and I see it more today than ever before. And it's not necessarily black and white; I think it's Latinos, it's religious, but it's

[0:45:00] very much liberal/conservative. It's the Tea Party, it's all that stuff. I mean I think the attitude – I think the Senate is absolutely dysfunctional. It's shameful. It's inconceivable to me that not one Republican would vote for the Health Care Bill. And to me the statement they're making is that "We don't give a damn about the people that that bill is going to help."

So I would urge young people to do whatever you can to soften that attitude and get the country back into a sense of unity and a sense of harmony. So I'm very disturbed about the mood of the country today. I get the feeling that there's an awful lot of people in the Republican Party and maybe elsewhere who are just out to get Obama. I mean just, I don't know if it's 'cause he's black, I don't know if it's 'cause he's liberal, but they just – there's nothing he can do that's

[0:46:00] right, just 'cause it's him. And I think that's horrible.

So I think that if we're going to help that situation, it's going to be up to young people to do it. Old people have screwed it up.

LaKevia Perry: Well as our interview comes to a close is there anything else that you would like to say that hasn't been asked of you or that you haven't stated before?

James Jalenak: No, I think it's a wonderful program that Rhodes is doing, and I think that there are stories that ought to be told. I think there's – like I said, I think there's a lot of good people in Memphis and, you know, I'm constantly amazed at how most people don't know about the plight of black people in this country and what it's like to be black in America.

[0:47:00] I've only been to one reunion at Yale; I went to my 25th law school reunion, and they gave an award to Leon Higginbotham – I'm not sure I'm pronouncing that correctly – who is a – I'm not sure if he's still living, but he was at that time a federal judge in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, I think, and a Yale graduate. And so here's a room full of 1,000 Yale Law School graduates, you know, who are probably, if I don't sound too arrogant, the intellectual elite of this country, and Judge Higginbotham is telling his story,

and people are crying. And I could tell that these people had no awareness that people like Leon Higginbotham existed.

I mean he told about going to segregated schools in New Jersey. He told about when he started college at Antioch, which is supposed to be such a liberal school, there were three-

[0:48:00] black students in his class. So he would be – if he's living now he's much older than me; he'd be in his '90s. So this was, you know, he was talking about in the '40s and '50s. And that they gave him an unheated room in the attic of this dormitory. I mean just blatant acts of discrimination. How on his first job interview he didn't own a suit, and one of the professors of the Yale Law School took him to like the Goodwill and bought him a suit so he could have the job interview.

These people had never heard this story. I mean I've heard this story hundreds of times. And these people are in New York and they're in Los Angeles and they're in their big law firms and they didn't have a clue. And I find that very shocking. And so I think these are stories that need to be told and people need to know, you know, just exactly what life is like for so many Americans. So I commend what you all are doing.

LaKevia Perry: Well we would like to thank you for taking your time to come and interview with us. Your interview is going to be available on the Crossroads-

[End of Audio]