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Alphonzo and Ruthie Davis, 2011

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Jiawen Li: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us so that we can share it with others. I'm Jiawen Li, a rising junior at Rhodes College, and today we're at Mount Vernon Baptist Church with Alphonzo and Ruthie Davis. Mr. and Mrs. Davis, thank you very much for sitting down with us today. So, first of all, let's start with some biographical questions to get things started. Could you introduce yourself, tell us your names and where you were born?

Ruthie Davis: I am Ruthie Davis, and I was born in Memphis, Tennessee.

Alphonzo Davis: I'm Alphonzo Davis, and I was born in Shaw, Mississippi.

Jiawen Li: Okay. So, how long have both of you been living in Memphis?

Ruthie Davis: Is it 30-some years?

[0:01:00]

Alphonzo Davis: No, we've been living in –

Ruthie Davis: since '41.

Alphonzo Davis: – Memphis ever since 1941.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: We both came to Memphis the same year but different months.

Jiawen Li: I see.

Alphonzo Davis: I came to Memphis in June, and I think they came –

Ruthie Davis: January.

Alphonzo Davis: – in January.

Ruthie Davis: Mm hmm.

Jiawen Li: So, what brought you to Memphis at that time?

Alphonzo Davis: Migration from Mississippi into Memphis.

Jiawen Li: I see.

Alphonzo Davis: Some of my father's people, his friends, I'd have to say, because he had no brothers and no sisters, but his mother's people lived in

Memphis, and he migrated to Memphis because they lived here, and when he moved to Memphis, they –

[0:02:00]

moved to Chicago, so that left him here in Memphis mostly by his self, and her mother and father moved to Memphis the same year but in January.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah, my father just said he was not going to chop or pick any more cotton, so we just packed up and left, because he said, "No, I'm not going to pick any more cotton nor chop anymore," because we were farmers, and we were very small, however. We didn't do any, my sister and myself, we didn't do any of the chopping or picking because we were –

[0:03:00]

so small, because I think, when I came to Memphis, I was about –

Alphonzo Davis: Nine.

Ruthie Davis: – I was about nine years old. Yeah, and my sister was [inaudible] 12. Yeah, so we were small and we didn't do any, but my dad said he does not want to do any more, so we just packed up and came to Memphis.

Jiawen Li: Wow. That sounds like an adventure. So, you just talked about your parents. Can you introduce them more, like what were their names and what did they do for a living?

Ruthie Davis: Well, my mother, her name was Theresa Marshall, and my dad was Ernest Marshall. My mom didn't work –

[0:04:00]

at all, just a housekeeper. My dad worked at – oh wow, let's see. It was a finishing company he worked at –

Alphonzo Davis: Mahari.

Ruthie Davis: – it wasn't Mahari.

Alphonzo Davis: Wasn't it?

Ruthie Davis: No, it wasn't Mahari, it was Mahaffey Brothers. That's it, Mahaffey Brothers. He worked there, but mom didn't work at all. She was just at the house.

Jiawen Li: I see, and how many siblings do you have in your family?

Ruthie Davis: I had a sister, one sister and one brother, and my sister passed away, and the brother, he went away.

Jiawen Li: Oh.

Ruthie Davis: Right, so I really –

[0:05:00]

don't exactly know where he is, but my sister passed away in I guess –

Alphonzo Davis: In '92.

Ruthie Davis: – in '92, so it was just the two of us, really, that grew up together. It was just the two of us that grew up together, and he wasn't really my brother, he was really my nephew. Well, he went to school, also, here at Booker Washington –

Jiawen Li: I see.

Ruthie Davis: – and LaRose. No, he didn't go to Booker Washington. He went to LaRose. Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah, he went to LaRose, and then he just moved away, you know, how they just get lost.

[0:06:00]

Alphonzo Davis: He went in the service.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: He went in the service, and he –

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: – got all mixed up in the service.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: When he come out of the service, he went to Chicago and, in some kind of way, he just disappeared.

Ruthie Davis: And there he was, so that is where he was.

[1st Cut @ 0:06:22]

Ace Madjlesi: What about you?

Jiawen Li: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: We moved to Memphis in 1941. We moved, and our first home here in Memphis was on Third Street, here on Third Street, and if you go north on Third here, when you get to McLemore, you'll see a body shop on the –

[0:07:00]

west side of the street. That was our address there, and that little subdivision right there, what it called it the puzzle. It was a triangle of houses, and we just happened to be blessed enough to live on the main street, but everything behind us was just a triangle of houses they called the puzzle, and we lived there for four years, from '41 to '45, 1945. And my father, he worked at the Quaker Oats plant, where they make the Quaker oatmeal. It was out on Range Street, which is not too far from here now. It's out –

[0:08:00]

just as you cross Elvis Presley on Parkway, and my mother, she was a seamstress, and she also worked at a cleaners. She sewed for the cleaners, and she also made dresses on the side for herself. But my daddy made \$12.00 a week, and he had six children at that time, and after we were here, in –

[0:09:00]

1945, I believe, he had three more kids from '45 to '47. I think the last one was born in '47. We both went to Mount Vernon Church, or not Mount Vernon –

Ruthie Davis: New Salem.

Alphonzo Davis: – New Salem Church, which was on Fourth Street. It was pastored by Reverend C.L. Franklin, a renowned pastor. You probably heard of Reverence C.L., Aretha Franklin's daddy.

Ace Madjlesi: Oh.

Alphonzo Davis: He pastored New Salem on 955 South Fourth Street, and we were members there, so you see we've been together for a long time. I think she was in the third grade and I was in the sixth grade –

[0:10:00]

Jiawen Li: Wow.

Alphonzo Davis: – and we were just friends and church members, you know, children in the neighborhood. I guess there was about 15 or 20 children. We all belonged to the same church, and we sung in the – they called it the junior choir then. It wasn't the main sanctuary choir. It was a choir for the children, and we sung there for a long time. We went to Booker Washington School together, both graduated. She graduated in 1950 and I graduated in 1948. I also graduated along with her sister. Her sister graduated the same time I did.

[2nd Cut @ 0:11:00]

Jiawen Li: Yeah, and you just mentioned you both went to Booker T. Washington together.

Alphonzo Davis: Right. Right.

Jiawen Li: Can you kind of describe what it was like back then?

Alphonzo Davis: Booker Washington was –

Ruthie Davis: The number one school.

Alphonzo Davis: – the school.

Ruthie Davis: The school.

Alphonzo Davis: The school, yeah.

Ruthie Davis: The number one school, the great school. Yeah, we had a great football team. Wow, they just played and played and beat everybody. We had so much fun going to school, and they had a beautiful band and majorettes and drum majors, and it was the school. What was the bandmaster name? I forget his name, but he was very –

[0:12:00]

good, and he taught the girls and the boys, and taught them how to – really, they marched and they danced.

Alphonzo Davis: At that time, they had a band, and what they called a drum and bugle corps –

Ruthie Davis: Yeah –

Alphonzo Davis: – that was –

Ruthie Davis: – the girls.

Alphonzo Davis: – girls only –

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: – and they marched behind, I mean the band marched behind them. They came first –

Ruthie Davis: They came first.

Alphonzo Davis: – and then the band came behind them.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: They had a twofold thing, and at that time they had – you may have heard of Nat D. Williams.

[0:13:00]

He was a teacher at Booker Washington at that time, and they had what they called the Cotton Makers Jubilee, which was different, and it was segregated at that time; the white had theirs and the black had theirs. So, we come down Main Street, the band marched down Main Street to Beale, and down Beale to Handy Park, which is W.C. Handy. They were in the spotlight at that time.

Ruthie Davis: Oh, yeah.

Ace Madjlesi: Out on the Chitlin' Circuit?

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah. Yeah, so –

[0:14:00]

Beale Street was really a segregated street. From –

Ruthie Davis: Main.

Alphonzo Davis: – Main to Third Street was mostly white, and the black was from Third –

Ruthie Davis: Third on down.

Alphonzo Davis: – on down to where Beale ended and just about at Wellington Street, so black was on one end and white was on the other end. It was good times. It was good times on Beale –

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: – and sometimes the black and the white got together, –

[0:15:00]

and we just had a good time.

Ace Madjlesi: So, were there, I mean I'm curious, were there barriers on the street?

Alphonzo Davis: No, ma'am.

Ruthie Davis: No.

Alphonzo Davis: No barriers.

Ace Madjlesi: So, you just knew –

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Ace Madjlesi: – which end was which.

Alphonzo Davis: The only barrier on the street was the places that you could go, and the signs, you know. It didn't say don't, it only said colored and white, and I never seen a sign that said don't, but the sign said colored and white.

Jiawen Li: Back then, was Booker T. Washington segregated?

Alphonzo Davis: Yes, always. Yeah, it was a segregated school until the integration started in the '50s.

[0:16:00]

Jiawen Li: Okay, and how did it feel, like going to school during the time of segregation?

Alphonzo Davis: Well, when it's the only thing you know –

Ruthie Davis: So it was no problem –

Alphonzo Davis: – it's no problem.

Ruthie Davis: – because that's all we knew.

Alphonzo Davis: Accept it.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah, we understood that. You just don't mingle, so it was no problem. We just stayed on our side and they stayed on their side. It was really no problem because of the fact that we didn't mingle at all, so it wasn't no problem.

Jiawen Li: Okay, so before school, did you hear about race and segregation from your parents, or are there any other ways that you have learned this before that?

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah, you heard about it. You heard about it –

[0:17:00]

– but I don't know how to really put it. I imagine when you had your interview from Reverend Netters, he gave you some –

Ruthie Davis: Oh yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: – he knew just how to put it.

[3rd Cut @ 0:17:22]

Ace Madjlesi: Let's talk a little bit about the neighborhood surrounding Booker T. Washington.

Ruthie Davis: The neighborhood?

Alphonzo Davis: Well, the neighborhood around Booker Washington was all black.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah, it was all black.

Alphonzo Davis: It was an all black neighborhood. Only stores on the corner of Georgia and Mississippi, it was a Greek café –

[0:18:00]

there. A guy owned a Greek café, and there was a store, a cleaners', a whiskey store, and a theater. I think the building that the theater was in, it's still there. It was called the Georgia Theater. It's on the west side of Mississippi and Georgia, and right in the middle of Georgia, right in the middle of Lauderdale, where Lauderdale crosses Mississippi like this, it was a black drugstore there, and it was the only black drugstore in Memphis –

Ace Madjlesi: Do you remember the name?

Alphonzo Davis: – Champion's.

[0:19:00]

Champion's. It was the Champion's drugstore?

Ruthie Davis: Mm hmm.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah, it's on Elvis Presley now, just south of Norris Road, and I think there's one other black drugstore in south Memphis, and that was a Martin's Drugstore. It was on Florida Street, I believe it was, and they had a Pentecostal church, the mother church of the –

Ruthie Davis: The saints.

Alphonzo Davis: – J.O. Patterson, which was the head of the Pentecostal denomination. His church was on Georgia –

[0:20:00]

and Lauderdale, and beside it was T.A. Hayes Funeral Home. It's still there, and then the First Baptist Lauderdale is still there. Those are the only buildings that are still there, outside of the police school, and Booker Washington School that's in the neighborhood now that was there before Cleaborn Homes was built.

Jiawen Li: Yeah, and we also understand that your daughter also worked in Booker T. Washington.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: She was –

Ruthie Davis: The mayor –

Alphonzo Davis: – when the mayor, when –

[0:21:00]

Dr. Herenton got to be mayor, my daughter was working over in Arkansas. She was teaching school over in Arkansas, and she had some problems over there. I think our pastor, Reverend Netters – we had moved our membership down here at that time because we had moved from up close to New Salem. We had moved down to Whitehaven, so we moved our membership down here, and Reverend Netters told her, "Deborah, why don't you talk to Dr. Herenton about getting you a job at the school?" and –

[0:22:00]

she did. And, at that time, Booker Washington had no – their band director had retired, and for several years they didn't have a band. So, when she asked him about the job, he was superintendent of schools, Dr. Herenton was, and when she went to him and asked him about a job, he sent her out to Booker Washington to start a band, so she started a band at Booker Washington, and that was in the '70s. I can't think of what year in '70 it was, but she stayed there until she passed away in '08, November 1 in 1908, and she reorganized the band and the whole music department at Booker Washington.

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Jiawen Li:

So, based on your experience and your daughter's experience at Booker T. Washington, how would you say the school has been changed over the years?

Ruthie Davis:

Well, it has changed tremendously. The teachers, they seem to be really well – they're more caring for the children. It has changed quite a bit, because when we were going there, they were teachers. They were just teachers, and you get your lesson and that's just it. But now, Booker Washington, now the teachers seem to be, as I said, more caring for the ~~students~~ students and what they're doing and what they are all about.

[0:24:00]

The principal, she's very caring about the children, so it has changed quite a – just that has made a great difference in the school, just how they respond to the children. To me, that has made a great difference because the children seem to be more down to earth and more just relaxed. They seem to be more relaxed than they have been, really.

[4th Cut @0:24:40]

Ace Madjlesi:

Could we go back? You mentioned that your mother owned a piece of land near where Cleaborn Homes was built. Could you tell us about moving into that neighborhood and how she came to sell the land, and when Claiborne Homes was built?

[0:25:00]

Alphonzo Davis:

We moved into a home right behind Porter School. I'm trying to think of the name of the church that – it's on Linden and –

Ace Madjlesi: Oh, is that Beale Street Baptist?

Alphonzo Davis: – no, it's on Linden and Lauderdale now. I think it's Mount Olive.

Ace Madjlesi: Oh, okay.

Alphonzo Davis: I think that's the name of it. It was on Georgia. It was facing Georgia, and right go downside the church, –

[0:26:00]

or right behind the church was Saint John Street, and we moved on Saint John, which is directly behind Porter School, the school grounds. And, when my father passed in October of –

Ruthie Davis: '50.

Alphonzo Davis: – 1950, we got married in September of 1950 on the 2nd, and he passed in October, the 26th, and my brother got killed in December. A couple of years later, they planned to build Claiborne Homes there, and so she sold the property, the house to –

[0:27:00]

the city to build Claiborne Homes on.

Ace Madjlesi: And where'd y'all move to after that?

Alphonzo Davis: My wife and I moved to Castalia Heights, which is just off of Airways and east of Elvis Presley. She moved on Niese Street, which is just east of the expressway now, 240 going north and south down through the town.

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If you get to Parkway, if you take the exit off of Parkway, Niese is the first street. You get off on Cummings, and the next street is Niese Street, so that's where she moved to, and she lived there until – I think in the '70s she moved down here in Westwood. But –

Ace Madjlesi: Did you witness any changes in that neighborhood?

Alphonzo Davis: Well, the whole neighborhood changed because everybody in the neighborhood just about moved out, or had to move out. Like they're tearing it down now and the people are moving out. ~~Wasn't~~ ~~N~~one of those people would hardly ever move back to whatever they build there.

[0:29:00]

Some of them might move back, but the majority of them will remain where they are, or go to something better. This is what happened – in that way, it took a lot of the children that were going to Booker Washington, it took them to other schools, and, also, they built three schools in that neighborhood, a grammar school. They built the Georgia Avenue school, which is right across in front of Booker Washington, then they built the Vance Avenue school, which is up on Vance, and they built Alonza Locke, which is –

[0:30:00]

I think it's on Saint Paul, almost right outside of Claineborne Homes.

Ace Madjlesi: Okay.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah, so that's the three grammar schools they built, elementary schools at least. Aand when we were going to school, they didn't have no middle schools. We went to LaRose and Porter were the only two grammar schools in the neighborhood at that time. But, you see, they built Georgia Avenue and –

Ace Madjlesi: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: – Alonza Locke and Vance Avenue, and every so often they would change them from middle schools to –

[0:31:00]

elementary schools to junior high schools, like that.

[5th Cut @ 0:31:07&]

Ace Madjlesi: Do you have some questions about the '50s to '70s?

Jiawen Li: Okay. Yeah, so we're also interested to hear about the 1950s to the 1970s, so are there any stories in particular from this period that you would love to share with us?

Alphonzo Davis: The stories of –

Jiawen Li: Where were you living –

Alphonzo Davis: – it changed from 1950 to the '70s, and a whole lot of changes _____ [inaudible].

Jiawen Li: – yeah, and where were you living during this time?

Alphonzo Davis: It was going on.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Ace Madjlesi: Was it hard to explain to your children? How many children did you have?

Ruthie Davis: Well, we had –

Alphonzo Davis: All our children was – I think Deborah was –

Ruthie Davis: –age, is that what you're trying to think about?

Alphonzo Davis: – in '63.

Ruthie Davis: What you trying to think about, age?

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah.

Ruthie Davis: Oh, yeah. Deborah, she was going to LaRose. No.

Alphonzo Davis: No, Deborah, she was going to Orleans.

Ruthie Davis: Orleans. Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: She was –

Ruthie Davis: She was about 13. Wasn't she about 13?

[0:36:00]

Alphonzo Davis: Which year are you wanting to know about in the –

Ace Madjlesi: Well, let's talk about 1967-1968, around –

Alphonzo Davis: Oh, okay. Okay.

Ace Madjlesi: – the sanitation workers ~~strike~~ and things like that.

Alphonzo Davis: Okay. Well, in 1968, Deborah graduated in '69, so she was in high school. She was in high school in '68, and one of the boys was in high school. No, Junior wasn't in high school in '68, was he?

Ruthie Davis: Nuh-uh.

Alphonzo Davis: Yes, he was. Yeah, Junior graduated in '71.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: Deborah graduated in '69 –

Ruthie Davis: In '69.

[6th Cut @ 0:36:57]

[0:37:00]

son, graduated in '70, and my baby boy graduated in '73 from high school, so they all were either in junior high or they were in high school. But they made it through without any problems, per se, but the problems was when the soldiers came in and they had the blackouts and the curfews, and the –

[0:38:00]

restrictions. You couldn't go here and you couldn't go there, and it was really turmoil, and, for me, it was really hard because you had decisions to make as far as work is concerned, and as far as going to church is concerned. You see, you couldn't really go out at night without confronting some type of danger. Through prayer, –

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we made it through.

[6th Cut @ 0:39:04]

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Ace Madjlesi: Do you remember talking to your kids about it at this time, or were they involved with integration movements, or anything?

Alphonzo Davis: They were really too young to be really involved in [the](#)–

Ruthie Davis: Movement.

Alphonzo Davis: – the movement. We discussed their involvement in that, but they would never really ask to –

Ruthie Davis: Participate in anything.

Alphonzo Davis: – Right.

Jiawen Li: So, were you involved in any activities during this time?

[0:40:00]

Alphonzo Davis: We went to meetings. We went to meetings, but as far as the rock throwing and all that –

Ace Madjlesi: What kind of meetings? Can you tell us about those, like church meetings or –

Alphonzo Davis: – yeah. Yeah, you know, they would tell you what to do and when to do and how to do, and what not to do, and things like that, and to stay in if you didn't have to go out, and all those type of things, you know?

Jiawen Li: And we're also wanting also want to know about the stories about your relationship with your church, so when did you join Mount Vernon?

Ruthie Davis: I joined in seventy –

[0:41:00]

Alphonzo Davis: Well, let's go back to New Salem.

Ace Madjlesi: Okay.

Alphonzo Davis: We both joined New Salem in I'd say '42 –

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: – in 1942, and we really grew up there at New Salem. We organized a singing group, myself and three or four more guys. There was five of us that – really, it was three of us at first. We just called ourselves –

Ruthie Davis: Patterson.

Alphonzo Davis: – C.J. Patterson, yeah, and we would follow him around –

[0:42:00]

going to different places, different churches that he had to preach, carry on revival, and stuff like that. We'd go one or two nights with him to sing while he preached, and finally we got to be known as the Pattersonaires, and we never really sung for money. We sung because we loved to sing, and this is one way we worshipped God, through our signing. We recorded two –

[0:43:00]

records on the Chalice label, which was a Stax Gospel label at that time, and I think that was in 1965, I believe it was. The one song really did well. It was in the top 20 for two or three years. It was a

song called "Why Not Try My God?" for on Him, we can depend, and it went all over the world.

[7th Cut @ 00:43:53]

Alphonzo Davis In 1980, we met –

[0:445:00]

a professor of music out to Memphis State, and he recorded us on High Water label, and that label really did us justice, and it really helped us out a lot, and in 1988, we were blessed to be invited to Paris, and we stayed in Paris. We did five programs in Paris, and that was an experience that –

[0:456:00]

I'll never forget, our trip to Paris. After that, we recorded a DVD, which was called "Why Not Try My God?" We recorded another CD; it's called "Book of the Seven Seals," and it's really a masterpiece. The majority of the songs that are on ~~there~~ that was written by Dr. Brewster. You may have heard of Dr. Brewster.

[0:467:00]

Ace Madjlesi: From the University of Memphis?

Alphonzo Davis: No, he was a renowned preacher in Memphis, Dr. Herbert Brewster. He's pastor of East Trigg Baptist Church. He wrote a lot of songs and a lot of messages, and he wrote a message and a song that Dr. Lee from – I believe his name was Lee, from Mississippi Boulevard Church. What was the name of the song –

[0:478:00]

that Dr. Brewster wrote that Quincy Hanson used to sing all the time?

Ruthie Davis: ~~————~~ [inaudible].

Alphonzo Davis: Nuh-uh, not that one. Not that one.

Ruthie Davis: Okay.

Alphonzo Davis: But, anyway –

[8th Cut @ 0:48:18]

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Ruthie Davis: I was working at Plough. It was Plough Incorporated. I worked there for I think it was about 24 – wasn't it about 24 or 25 years?

Alphonzo Davis: Twenty-five years, yeah, 26.

Ruthie Davis: Twenty-five. I worked there 25 years, and I had a number of jobs. They were on conveyance belts.

[0:489:00]

I worked maybe six or seven years doing that, and then I went to taking care of the people that was in uniforms. I would give them their uniforms, and we would work on belts, and it was very nice. It was very nice. I worked there – well, we really didn't have anything to – we had a cafeteria, and it was very nice work. It was very nice work.

[0:4950:00]

Ace Madjlesi: And what about you, Mr. Davis?

Alphonzo Davis: I worked for Nat Buring Packing Company, which is the maker of the King Cotton products.

Ace Madjlesi: Oh, okay.

Alphonzo Davis: We were downtown at that time. Their plant was down there on Wagner Street.

[8th Cut @ 0:49:31]

Alphonzo Davis: You know where Wagner Place is downtown?

Ace Madjlesi: Nuh-uh, but I know where the old King Cotton factory is. I wasn't sure what street that is, but I know where the old factory was.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah. Right. I think it's an apartment now. Yeah, it's 43 or 40-something Wagner Place, but I worked there.

[0:504:00]

I started in the smoked meat department, which was making of bacon, ham, and anything that had to do with smoked meat – hammers and turkeys, whatever you smoke – and I moved up in rank. When I started, I was making .75 cents an hour, and I guess that was pretty good money at that time, but I moved from there up to –

[0:512:00]

assistant superintendent, and it was segregated at that time. It was segregated at that time as far as salary is concerned.

Ace Madjlesi: What do you mean? So, were there whites and blacks, both working –

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah.

Ace Madjlesi: – but blacks would have been paid less?

Alphonzo Davis: Right. Right.

Ace Madjlesi: Did that change after –

Alphonzo Davis: That changed. It changed to a certain degree, but it never, it did change. It changed. Before the plant closed down, –

[0:53:00]

[0:52:00]

dictated a different, you know, it dictates something different. I remember a white lady was working beside a black man, and she didn't want that to happen. She said that she was not going to work beside a black man because her husband did not want her to work beside a black man, so it got to Nat Buring, and he came down. He took her on the outside of the building –

[0:53:00]

"Who name you see up there?" She said, "It's Nat Buring Packing Company." He said, "That's me, and if you don't want to work beside that black man, then you tell your husband to buy him a packing company where he can –

Ruthie Davis: "Dictate –

Alphonzo Davis: – dictate who you work beside."

Ruthie Davis: – who you work beside."

Alphonzo Davis: See, that's the kind of man that he was, and they had integrated –

Ruthie Davis: Cafeteria.

Alphonzo Davis: – no, water fountains. Everybody ate at the same cafeteria.

Ruthie Davis: Oh yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: But they had integrated water fountains. Somebody painted one of the water fountains black.

[0:546:00]

They shouldn't have did that. He called a meeting in the cafeteria, and I guess he cussed up there about 30 minutes. Nobody said a word. Nobody said a word. He said, "When I leave out of here, that water fountain better be like it was." [Laughter] I don't know where they got a water fountain from, but that water fountain was changed. So, that's the kind of person he was.

[9th Cut @ 0:54:42]

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Ace Madjlesi: Did integration affect your job at all? Or...

Ruthie Davis: Well, yeah, it did mine because I wasn't a supervisor or anything, but I was working—

[00:558:00]

Ruthie Davis: --of the time they would always get there first and we had to punch the clock so they would always punch in first and then the blacks would kinda lined up. Well it was so many people, they were lined up behind them to, you know, punch the clock. So one particular day, the white – you know, they rushed in and it was punching the clock and everything and the supervisor, he noticed that we – the blacks were lined up behind them, the white, and they were waiting for them to, you know, finish. So he said, "Well what is the problem?" And we said, "Well, there's isn't really no problem but they were here, first." He said, "Well, it's not a matter of first or second. Not here.

[00:569:00]

Ruthie Davis: The point of it is if you get here first, then you punch in first." So we says, "Well no, you just had the one clock so that was almost impossible to do. Well, the people they began to tell 'em, they said, "Well you can't do that because of the fact that you just have the one clock and you have to wait until they're finished and then on and on." Well, he said, "Well I tell you what, this won't happen anymore." And we, you know, was kinda puzzled. "Well, how's that happen?" He said, "Because we're going to use two clocks." He said, "A clock here and a clock there and both punch in and you get the same results because they have the same time on the clock."

So that was the end of that. When we come in, there was no more waiting.

[004:5700:00]

Ruthie Davis: If you come in, you punch and you go. Punch and go. Punch and go, so there was no anybody waiting for anybody to finish because we had the two clocks. 'Cause he went that day and installed a clock. He went that afternoon. Well, it was in the afternoon and installed a clock, another clock, right beside the one that we had and he says, "Well now, everybody just can move at the same time." So that was the end of the clock situation. We didn't have to worry about punching in or waiting or anything like that. He says, "No, this won't happen again." Because of that fact that every person here is – I mean I need all of you to make this place run, so it's no – it's no need for you to have to stand and wait—

[004:5804:00]

Ruthie Davis: --because I need you in your work area." So that was the end of the clock punching time. We didn't have to stand anymore. We didn't have to wait. We just punched in and went on to our work area and the work started immediately after when we got there because we had to wait at least – oh it was at least 10 or 15 minutes before, 'cause there were so many people there and they were all lined up. And he said, "Well, no, this won't happen anymore." So he – I think he - he was a nice boss, so to speak. He always looked out for everybody. He looked out for everybody 'cause he wanted all of us to be for what he say – he always said, "This is a big happy family." He referred to us as family and he said this is the Plow family.

[004:5902:00]

Ruthie Davis: So that's where we were considered as the Plow family. Because he always looked out for everybody and so wanted us to be on an equal base and we were, as far as that was concerned but we still had problems with, you know, getting, 'cause we were assigned to lines. We had little problems getting to – I mean being able to get on your line. Sometime the white would rush in by them getting there first and clockin' in first they would – before he got there with the clock, they would rush in and get on maybe my line, you know, and somebody else line. And he said, "Well what's happening here?"

[01:0003:00]

Ruthie Davis: And that was a problem there. And they would rush in and get on your line if it was a good line. And it made a lot of money, then

they would get on that particular line and he sorta stopped that, too and he said, "Well we're just a family, here. We're not – no blacks, no white. We're family, 'cause it takes all of us to make this operation what it's supposed to be so we were – and we were not segregated anymore there. Mm-hm, so I think that he also was the type of person that really didn't want segregation but because of the time, I think that he had to go along with the movement.

Alphonzo Davis: Mm-hm.

Ruthie Davis: Because there was some good white people, you know?

[01:014:00]

Ruthie Davis: Uh-huh, there really was and they just had to go along with the movement.

Alphonzo Davis: Mm-hm.

Ruthie Davis: And I think

Alphonzo Davis: Mm-hm.

[10th Cut @ 1:014:15]

Jiawen Li: Yeah and recently we understand that both of you were invited to President Obama's commencement speech at Booker T. Washington.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Jiawen Li: Tell us about that experience?

Ruthie Davis: You wanna talk about that?

Alphonzo Davis: That was another unique experience.

Ace Madjlesi: She wasn't mic'd so could you tell us on your mics what you're talkin' about?

Ruthie Davis: Oh, okay. Well –

Alphonzo Davis: We're talking about the invitation to the Booker Washington graduation of ———[inaudible] like the 9-11.

Jiawen Li: Yes. Okay.

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[Laughter]

[01:025:00]

Alphonzo Davis: You know, we happened to be the parents of Deborah Davis who was the band director of Booker Washington High School in – for 28 years and we happen to know a principal of Booker Washington High School. We happen to know her grandmother. We went to school with her grandmother and we sang as a singing group, she belonged to another [inaudible] but they had a singing group as we had a singing group and we got to – we, you know, sang together.

[01:036:00]

Alphonzo Davis: We possibly lived in the same neighborhood for some time together and we had been knowing her grandmother for a long time. So between knowing her grandmother for a long time and being the parents of one of her employees at Booker Washington High School, she never – she didn't forget us. When something happened, they'd say as important as the President coming to their graduation, so she set aside two tickets for papa and grammy.

[Laughter]

Ace Madjlesi: And what was that like to see President Obama here?

Alphonzo Davis: Oh it was something.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: It was like something that –

[Laughter]

[01:047:00]

Ruthie Davis: It took my breath away.

Alphonzo Davis: You know you never think that – in the first place you never think that –

I never thought that I would live to see a black President.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: You know my grandmother and my auntie, my daddy's aunties, you know, they used to say, "You might get to be the President

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someday," but that's the farthest thing in my mind that I would see a black President, not only be a black President.

[Laughter]

And then he would come to—

[01:058:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --give a commencement speech in a all-black school, which it is an all-black

Ruthie Davis: I think so.

Alphonzo Davis: - white students or not but it is a predominantly black or all black school in a all-black neighborhood and that's top to my life off.

Ruthie Davis: Mm-hm.

Alphonzo Davis: You know, 82 years old, and I got to see a black President.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Ace Madjlesi: In your high school.

Alphonzo Davis: In my high school.

Ace Madjlesi: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: And like my daughter would say there's no other school like Booker Washington. She slept—

[01:069:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --and ate and everything that you can name for her was Booker Washington.

Ruthie Davis: Mm-hm.

Alphonzo Davis: She was Booker Washington through and through.

Ruthie Davis: Mm-hm.

Alphonzo Davis: I graduated from Booker Washington; my wife graduated from Booker Washington, her sister and all of mine and then, you know, graduated from Booker Washington, so –

Ruthie Davis: It was the school.

Alphonzo Davis: Booker Washington – wasn't just any black President come to –

Ruthie Davis: Coming to the ~~_____~~ [inaudible].

[Laughter]

Alphonzo Davis: It's unexplainable.

[11th Cut @ 1:069:41]

Ruthie Davis: Whole – yeah, and I have arthritis very, very bad and let me tell you people, there is no place, no person I would have walked to hear or see other than the President.

[01:0740:00]

Ruthie Davis: I think I walked almost three blocks, wasn't it?

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah, but you walked to get, yeah, yeah.

Ruthie Davis: Yeah. It was three blocks.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah. We were

Ruthie Davis: At all times.

Alphonzo Davis: If there's a party, his life would be late.

Ace Madjlesi: Is this your son Anthony?

Alphonzo Davis: No, no.

Ruthie Davis: No, it's not Anthony. This is Alphonzo.

Ace Madjlesi: Okay.

Alphonzo Davis: It's the oldest boy. And he got us down there but we tell him we wanna be there – we had to be there at 10:30. Well, at about – I guess about 10:00, when he got us down there and they had blocked off all the streets. Now we didn't know what street we had to – we could go down. We could have went down Second Street to Exchange and got out at Exchange, which would've been—

[01:0844:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --closer to the Cook Convention Center, but he let us out at –

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Ruthie Davis: Right there on Gales.

Alphonzo Davis: No, it's Madison. In Madison. No, not Madison but Washington.

Ruthie Davis: In Washington?

Alphonzo Davis: He let us out at Washington, which is just south of the Federal Building.

Ace Madjlesi: Right.

Alphonzo Davis: Yeah and we had to walk from just south of the Federal Building on Washington all the way down to Exchange, which is why they couldn't make it —[inaudible].

Ruthie Davis: And never I tell you –

Alphonzo Davis: And she prayed all the way down there.

[Laughter]

Ruthie Davis: I really did. I really did. I say, "Lord, if you ever heard me,

Alphonzo Davis: And when they – when the reporter –

Ruthie Davis: Please hear me now."

Alphonzo Davis: - the reporter stopped us there at, yeah before we got to the Convention Center, the reporter stopped us at where the picture was taken—

[01:0912:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --and she was praying.

Ruthie Davis: I was praying. I said, "Lord, I know that you've heard me many times

please do not fail me now.

[Laughter]

Ruthie Davis: Ooh. Ooh, Lord.

Alphonzo Davis: And later when —[inaudible]— asked us – and she really talking to us, she wasn't talking to —[inaudible].

[Laughter]

And she say, "Lord, I wish she'd shut her mouth."

[Laughter]

Ruthie Davis: Oh, Lord.

Alphonzo Davis: So I can go on and —[inaudible].

Ruthie Davis: I tell you.

Alphonzo Davis: And I had no idea – I had no idea that they were taking picture – he had taken that picture. Only thing – she asked us a few questions, you know, who we was and where we were going and were we childhood sweethearts and – I mean, high school sweethearts. And how long we had been married and how old we are. Just normal questions. And – but I had no idea that they were gonna put that in the paper. And no idea—

[01:103:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --that they had taken a picture.

Ruthie Davis: The periods.

Ace Madjlesi: And then y'all are gonna be famous with it.

Ruthie Davis: I tell you.

Alphonzo Davis: I had no idea.

Ruthie Davis: Oh, yeah. I wish they had –

Alphonzo Davis: But when we got back home, my cousin.

Ruthie Davis: Nephew, no cousin.

Alphonzo Davis: Nephew, not cousin and my nephew, he called me and said, "Okay," he said, "You know y'all in the paper?"

[Laughter]

I say, "In the paper? We get in the paper today?" No, no. He said, "Well, y'all in the paper." He said, "I'm lookin' at it right here. Because when they put it on the – in the commercial building – when they put it on the – into there –

Ace Madjlesi: That's right, mm-hm.

Alphonzo Davis: - on the website, when they put it on there, said –

[01:114:00]

then they put it in the paper the next day. And he read me whatever it said. I said, "That can't be right."

Ruthie Davis: Then I began to wonder how did I look 'cause I had prayed all the way.

[Laughter]

And I began to wonder, I said, "Oh my God. I mean, what if I get out a little in the paper," so we went on this Internet and I began to look, wonder how it the world did I look? You know, for picture in the paper. But honey, I prayed all the way. I said, "Now, Lord, I know you hear me because you have never failed me."

Alphonzo Davis: [Laughs]. She pray loudly and there everybody talk about wanna help her.

Ruthie Davis: I wasn't afraid of people.

[01:125:00]

Ruthie Davis: I was praying I – I was praying out loud, too.

Alphonzo Davis: So we got in the door. So we got in the door, the lady said, "Yeah, come on, let me get you in." [inaudible] to the elevator.

Ace Madjlesi: I think your mic is down, Mrs. Davis.

Ruthie Davis: Oh, it is?

Ace Madjlesi: Mm-hm.

Ruthie Davis: Okay.

Alphonzo Davis: Help you out, here.

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Ruthie Davis: —[inaudible] anyway.

Jiawen Li: So the [inaudible] good.

[12th, Cut @ 1:125:20]

Jiawen Li: So our last question is do you have any advice or message for the younger Memphians? The younger generations? Do you have any advice?

Ruthie Davis: Okay. Now what was that again, baby?

Jiawen Li: Do you have any advice or message to deliver to the younger Memphians?

Ruthie Davis: Well, my advice would be to just take it as it come because it will get better one – it always gets better. And whatever the situation is—

[01:136:00]

Ruthie Davis: -- or whatever the problem is or whatever you're going through, it will – it won't last. There is an end to everything. So just go on and be happy and take it as it come and it will get better. It'll certainly get better because we are living proof that no matter how bad everything has been in our life – and one thing I can say about my life, it has been a good life because I didn't frustrate myself. I didn't worry about what's happening now because I just felt, you know, you're saved, you're a Christian so you gotta believe that things will get better as you go and they really have. So I haven't had—

[01:147:00]

Ruthie Davis: --rough or frustrated life. I've had a good life, very good, very good. So just keep that one little thought in mind that how - whatever's happening now, it won't last always. It'll get better.

Ace Madjlesi: And what about you, Mr. Davis? Do you have any advice?

Jiawen Li: Yeah.

Alphonzo Davis: Mm-mm.

[Laughter]

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My advice for young people is to live a truthful life. If you are truthful, then you can be fruitful and if you don't be a truthful, you won't live fruitful. So live truthful. Be truthful in what you say—

[01:158:00]

Alphonzo Davis: --and what you do and follow the instructions of God which is the Bible. Yeah, if you follow that instructions, in them you will find the truthful and the fruitful way of living.

Jiawen Li: Well, thank you so much for participating in Crossroads for Freedom and your story has been a very important part of Memphis history. So thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Davis. We've learned a lot from you.

Ruthie Davis: You're welcome.

Alphonzo Davis: Thank you. Thank you for letting me –

Ruthie Davis: Letting us.

Alphonzo Davis: - letting us –

Ruthie Davis: I'll say it.

Alphonzo Davis: - express ourselves and to receive—

[01:169:00]

Alphonzo Davis: some of the fruits of our labor.

Ruthie Davis: Right.

Ace Madjlesi: Thank you.

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