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Ric Morgan, 2013

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| Item Type | Moving Image |
| Publisher | Rhodes College |
| Download date | 2026-06-06 13:40:16 |
| Link to Item | http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33364 |

Holmes: Hello. On the behalf of Rhodes Scholars, we'd like to thank you for coming to have this interview with us. Would you please state your name and where you go to church at and just – how are you a part of this community?

Ricky Morgan: My name is Ricky Morgan. I come here to the Highland Heights United Methodist Church. I am a graduate of the Treadwell High School. My grandfather built the home that I am currently residing in for my mother, when she married my stepfather in 1946. We lived there until 1951 when we moved to California. I lived in California until 1957, and then we moved back to Memphis, and I attended Treadwell High School and graduated from Treadwell.

[0:01:00]

Holmes: The house that you stayed at while you were here, is that in the Highland Heights community?

Ricky Morgan: It is at 3324 **Weiler** Avenue, just off of Holmes, which is exactly three blocks from this church, right in the middle of Summer Avenue here in the Highland Heights community.

Holmes: Do you have any recollection of how it was those early years growing up here?

Ricky Morgan: Back in the early '40s, there were a few houses on the street that had been built in like 1910, 1912, 1915 where the streetcar conductors lived, because all they had to do was walk down to National and catch a streetcar which went down the middle of the street onto Broad Street into downtown. Then, some of the other homes were built around it. The house next to us was built in 1902 – it was an old farm house which they tore down about four years ago. The original people that lived there, the **Findlays**, their mother and father, Dr. Findlay, lived at the other end of the street in the house that's still standing – it's still there.

[0:02:00]

It's occupied by some – it's kind of a little boarding house – the people that live there rent rooms out to different people. It's very well taken care of. And then, the area – when I was a teenager, I was at Camp **Kykima** in the Boy Scouts, and I had a appendicitis attack, and they had to bring me back to Memphis, and they took my appendix out at a hospital, which was a two-story home that was up here next to the _____ Supermarket. I think I was about

16 years old then. Of course, all of that's gone now. The whole area's changed a lot.

[0:03:00]

Doss: What was your life in the Boy Scouts?

Ricky Morgan: Ma'am?

Doss: What was your life in the Boy Scouts?

Ricky Morgan: I was the youngest and highest decorated Scout. I was 14 years old. I won the **fire, stone, encampment**. I was in Order of the Arrow. I was an **Eagle** with five _____, and I was a recipient of the God and Country Award. I was in two different scout troops. Troop 59 was sponsored by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, and the 35 was at the Highland Heights Presbyterian Church, which was down here at the corner of Holmes and Summer Avenue. My mother was the secretary there for 14 years, and she was also a scout master, and she was the first female recipient of the Golden Fawn Award – Silver Fawn Award for scouting.

[0:04:00]

I was the delegate to the Greek conclave jamboree in Marathon Greece in 1962. I was the State of Tennessee's delegate. Each state had a different delegate, and I was the one that's chosen to go.

Doss: What was the very first award that you have won?

Ricky Morgan: Oh goodness. I guess we won an award for the Mickey Mouse Club. All the kids got the statue – for – it was a television award for being – in the '50s for being an innovative, new variety concept show with all the kids on it and the different things that we did each day – each day we did a different thing each day.

[0:05:03]

Monday was cleanup day, Tuesday was guest star day, Wednesday was circus day, Friday was roundup – cowboy day, and we had songs, and things that we did each day. There were 39 Mouseketeers, and as we grew – when our voices changed and our looks changed, of course we were shifted. I was fortunate enough to have been chosen to be on what a TV series called Spin and

Marty, which was a dude ranch, and I was a snotty little rich kid that showed up in a limousine with matched luggage, and immediately got thrown into a horse trough. So, it was called Spin and Marty. Tim Considine played Marty. You can still see that today if you pull it up on the computer. Just pull up Walt Disney Mickey Mouse Club – Spin and Marty, and you can watch the whole episodes that we did on your computer.

[0:06:00]

Holmes: How is it that you came to move to California? Was it directly because of the Mickey Mouse Club?

Ricky Morgan: No. I got the Mickey Mouse Club – I was going to Bell Gardens Elementary School and I was performing in the Pasadena Children's Theater, and they were looking for kids at that time. They went through like thousands of auditions, and the one of the people that saw our show at the Children's Theater and asked us if we would audition, and that's how I got that. My stepfather was a part owner of a steel mill in California, in Los Angeles, so that's why we moved from Memphis in 1951 to Bell Gardens, California. We stayed there till 1957.

Holmes: Okay, so, basically it seems like you auditioned for the Mickey Mouse Club while you were in California and you got the job.

[0:07:00]

Were you paid directly for being in the Mickey Mouse Club?

Ricky Morgan: Oh yes. We got \$85.00 a week. That was big money. For 1955, that was a lot of money.

Holmes: Yes sir. So, moving back to Memphis, Tennessee, was it like a step down from the ladder of –

Ricky Morgan: Not really. When I came back to Memphis, there was the children's theater, which was in the kiosk over at the old fairgrounds by the swimming pool. I worked with the children's theater there, and I apprenticed to the old Front Street Theater on Madison Avenue at Madison _____. I was one of the young apprentices. I did wardrobe, I did costumes, I did scenery. If they needed a super to walk across the stage at one of the performances – back then, in the '60s, it was a professional Broadway company.

[0:08:11]

They brought in big names. They had Polly Holliday from Alice, several shows. Let's see. Delta Burke was here. So, some of the other – several of the big names in show business performed at Front Street Theater. Some of them are still on TV today.

Holmes: So, when you went to Highland Heights, were you the most popular kid because of –

Ricky Morgan: No. I was considered to be a snob, or snotty because I was doing stuff that not regular, normal kids would do.

[0:09:01]

It was – I was focused on show business, and doing stage. I just – once you stand on that stage and you look out into a dark house, or you can see the first few rows, which are lit by the stage, and you see those people, and the first time you hear a round of applause and have someone stand up and cheer you, you're hooked. It's the most adrenaline rush you could ever have. I think that most people that we ever performed to was like 5,500 people. No, I take that back, because I performed at the Pyramid twice with something, and there were 16,000 people at the Pyramid. So that's the largest audience I've ever performed for.

Holmes: Okay, so it seems like kids were maybe jealous of you maybe?

Ricky Morgan: Well, I would imagine. I was always being teased because I had – I wore makeup.

[0:10:00]

What teenager goes around wearing greasepaint? It's just part of being in show business. I performed at Memphis Opera Theater, Southern Opera Theater, Theater Memphis. I've been in eight motion pictures. I performed in – I was the Apostle Paul in Andrew Lloyd Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar. I was the Russian and Jewish dancer in Fiddler on the Roof. I danced in the foxhunt scene with Lucille Ball in Mame, and I danced in the **Yonkers** big dance routine and the ballroom scene in Hello, Dolly! with Barbara Streisand.

Doss: How was the show biz? Was it fun?

[0:11:00]

Ricky Morgan: Oh, it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of work because you have to rehearse all day, and then you get time for dinner or a little break, and then you have to get into character and costume and makeup, and then do the show, and the show usually lasted about two hours.

Holmes: So, you graduated from Highland Heights in what –

Ricky Morgan: I graduated from Treadwell High School in 1963. My speech teacher, Ms. Cooley, who was a member of this church – Highland Heights United Methodist Church – she gave me an F because she said I didn't belong in her class because I was a professional, and I had more over the rest of the kids. She would not let me be in any of the plays or musicals. She would not let me get up and read in front of the room. She wouldn't let me do anything. She just made me sit in the back of the room and do nothing.

Holmes: Well, that sounds like some hard ostracization right there.

[0:12:00]

I noticed that there was a principal there – Principal Maybury was it?

Ricky Morgan: Yes.

Holmes: He was principal for 30 years.

Ricky Morgan: He was there for quite a while, yes.

Holmes: Was he well-liked at your school?

Ricky Morgan: Oh very much so, yes. He was a wonderful man. I never had any – anytime I needed to go somewhere or to be somewhere, to be checked out of school, he had no problem with it whatsoever. I was very rarely trying to be a problem or anything, but he seemed to understand my point of view – the things that I was doing, and the people that wanted me to come out and talk with them, to give the little lectures and things. They would let me out of school for that.

Holmes: So, it seems like of the few people that gave you a hard time, Principal Maybury sort of saw your potential?

[0:13:05]

Ricky Morgan: Oh yes. Very much so.

Doss: Did your school integrate while you were there?

Ricky Morgan: No, it did not.

Doss: What were your views about integration?

Ricky Morgan: A lot of my best friends – even though they were segregated from us, when we got together at the theater, we were all just a family. They were some of my best friends.

Holmes: So, are you speaking of – more specifically, black people?

Ricky Morgan: Yes, yes.

Holmes: So at the theater, it seemed like –

Ricky Morgan: Yeah, you were not black. You were not white. You were a family. You were one person.

[0:14:00]

Holmes: Do you think maybe this sort of – this worldview being different from many people here in Memphis, sort of catalyzed your being set apart from the rest of the group?

Ricky Morgan: My family was one – my great grandfather was a real estate mogul, and he owned properties all over the city of Memphis. He had property in Hyde Park; he had Chelsea and Hollywood area. He had **Killewatt** Lake. He had Hollywood Dump. He had properties over south of Central Avenue towards Lamar Avenue. A lot of the homes that he had rentals were over in the corridor where the 240 expressway is now between Jackson and Lamar.

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All of that area in there, there were a lot of his rental homes. He primarily – all of the people that he rented to were African-Americans. He also donated a million dollars to Rust College for their education.

Holmes: So, it seems like your family was –

Ricky Morgan: We were not prejudiced at all. I was brought up to respect my fellow person and to be very – to the older people, to listen to them

because they had a story to tell. They knew the histories of the City of Memphis. They knew the histories of their families, and I could sit and listen to them for hours talk.

Doss: Were you here during the sanitation strikes?

[0:16:02]

Ricky Morgan: Yes, I was. I was the interior decorator for the Haverty Furniture Company on Main Street at Main and _____. I was in the window of the Haverty Furniture Company when the march came down Main Street, and the thing exploded. I had shoeprints halfway up my glass windows with people trying to break the glass to get into the store because we had to lock the doors. People were flooding through the front doors trying to get into our furniture store. People were running up – you could see handprints and footprints where they were trying to jump to hit the glass so that they could get away from the mob, because it was chaos. It was really, really bad. People were being hurt, trampled. It just was not something you wanted to see, but it's embedded in your mind once you see it. It's something you won't forget.

[0:17:00]

Holmes: So, during the aftermath of the march, when the peace talk – or not the peace talks – when the talks between Mayor Loeb and the sanitation workers were coming at a standstill, what were your thoughts about the whole political atmosphere of Memphis at that time?

Ricky Morgan: To me, of course, I was just out of my – I was like late teens, early 20s. It didn't make sense to me because I did not really understand why they were not being treated equally, because they were not given a fair wage. They were not being treated – I'm sorry – I'm gonna say this – you'll have to excuse me. They were considered a garbage person, a garbage man.

[0:18:00]

And that, to me, is a stigma. It's a stereotype. I don't feel that's right.

Holmes: Were you ever able – excuse me – to voice your opinions –

Ricky Morgan: No. No. Not at all. My mother was the secretary of the Highland Heights Presbyterian Church, and this was something that was not

known publically. Dr. Martin Luther King, and the Hooks, and several of the NAACP, and if I'm not mistaken, I want to say that there were a couple prominent, high powered people that were here at – Jesse Jackson and several of them. They had a meeting with Reverend Anderson at the Highland Heights Presbyterian Church, and my mother was a secretary, and she took the notes – she sat in on that meeting, and she took the notes, and was going to type them up and have them – I guess, what do you call – put in the documentation.

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Well, before that could be done, before she was going through the process, the FBI came in and took those documents, and they've never been seen since. That is something that is not known. I've never told anybody that before.

Holmes: Mm-hmm.

Ricky Morgan: I know that because my mother was the secretary, and she's the one who took those notes.

Holmes: So, did she tell you anything about –

Ricky Morgan: No, she would not tell me anything. That's all I know.

Holmes: Wow, that's something. So, I'm going a little bit forward to when Martin Luther King was assassinated.

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Were you still here in Memphis?

Ricky Morgan: I was at the Haverty Furniture Company on Main Street at that time of the day, and I was upstairs on one of the floors, and all we know is we were told to close down, that there was an incident. We were not told what that incident was, we found out later what had happened. They literally went all the way down Main Street and shut every business down. If there were customers in the stores, they made them leave.

Holmes: So, during curfew, how did you pass the time here in Memphis?

Ricky Morgan: At the church. I was very involved in Boy Scouts and youth groups, and different things like that. And we couldn't go to the theater – go to the children's theater 'cause we couldn't leave the

house, but we could go up to the church 'cause it wasn't but two blocks away.

[0:21:06]

Holmes: So you said you were active in the Boy Scouts at this time when you were a teenager still. How would you describe – did any of the other boys in the Scouts during this episode of turmoil for Memphis – did any of them voice their opinions of –

Ricky Morgan: No, it was never discussed. That's one thing that – we were strictly there for one reason and one reason only, and that was to have fellowship and to learn the Boy Scout way. That's what we did. Fred Morton was one of our Scoutmasters. I think I had four to five Scoutmasters in the two different troops I was in. I was with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company – Troop 59 at the Highland Heights Presbyterian Church ____ 35.

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There were several very prominent people that came out of being a Boy Scout. There are learning experiences from being a Boy Scout.

Holmes: It sounds like Boy Scout Troop and church was a way of escape from all of the –

Ricky Morgan: It kinda was, yeah.

Holmes: Did you know of anybody who voiced their opinions who was not happy with Dr. King being here in Memphis? I'm not specifically asking for any names, but just any reactions.

Ricky Morgan: I personally did not hear any negativity from anyone about that, but I'm sure that there were people around me that had their opinions that may have talked with each other, but not to me.

Holmes: So they kind of just – 'cause I'm sure they knew your viewpoint, so they kind of –

Ricky Morgan: Yeah. Exactly.

Doss: Can you describe your participation in the community now?

[0:23:00]

Ricky Morgan: I try to be very active here in the Highland Heights community. I of course attend church here on Sundays, and we have a food pantry and a bible study, and a table talk luncheon – a free luncheon to the community every Monday. The second Monday of the month is Highland Heights Day, which is the day that I cook. I’m their chef, and I’ve been doing it for ten years. Each Monday, we have someone different prepare the food and we range anywhere from 75 – last Monday we had 108 people for lunch.

Doss: Do you love to cook?

Ricky Morgan: I’m a master chef.

Holmes: So how did cooking – your experience in cooking – did you use that for any sort of job or anything?

[0:24:01]

Ricky Morgan: Yes I did, for 23 years I was the roadie backstage caterer for Mid-South Concerts, and for several television and movie companies. I worked for the Memphis Tape and Film Commission, for **Lynn Sidler**, and I did the wrap parties for all of the movies that were filmed here in Memphis, Tennessee – The Firm, The Client, Rainmaker, Larry Flynt, The Castaway with Tom Hanks. Any of the movies that were filmed here in Memphis, I fed those people.

Holmes: That sounds pretty exciting.

Doss: When Dr. King died, how did it feel to –

Ricky Morgan: It was a shock, because he was here on a specific mission: to better the lives of the people here in the City of Memphis. It was just something that I couldn’t really wrap my mind around because I did not understand why this had happened, because he was here to do good – to better the people of Memphis, and it was a blow to the city.

[0:25:15]

Doss: When you were going to church, was there only whites there, or was there whites and colored?

Ricky Morgan: No, we had a mix. We did.

Holmes: How was that like, having the city itself being segregated, but your church not being segregated?

Ricky Morgan: You know, back in those days, you did not even think about something like that, because that's just the way society was. It just evolved that way. You had your group here, and you had your group here. Sometimes those two groups would come together. Most of the times those groups would stay apart.

Holmes: So, there wasn't any sort of questioning from the pulpit or questioning inside the church of the society outside of the church doors?

[0:26:02]

Ricky Morgan: No. Not at all.

Holmes: Do you think that Dr. King's approach of talking to the churches and trying to get them to have a movement within Memphis – do you think that was effective?

Ricky Morgan: I think that quite possibly, the people did not understand what they were trying to accomplish, and they were fearful of it. That's something that – they were not wanting change. They wanted things to stay as they were.

Holmes: This is black and white?

Ricky Morgan: Yes. Both.

Holmes: Both. So, when – you already mentioned that most people knew your thoughts about integration, and you talked about equality.

[0:27:00]

So, I'm just going to ask you: if it came out ever in a conversation about the differences between whites and blacks within a community at school, or Boy Scout troops or anywhere, what was your position in the conversation? Were you silently –

Ricky Morgan: I would sit and listen to what they had to say. I would – if asked – voice my opinion, and I would hope that they would take what I told them in a very positive way.

Holmes: So, I'm going back to – you said you lived in two places, you lived in California – Pasadena, California, and –

Ricky Morgan: I lived in Bell Gardens, California.

Holmes: And Memphis, Tennessee – were the two places similar?

Ricky Morgan: No, not at all. They are two completely, totally different societies. The society in Memphis was very undertoned.

[0:28:00]

The society in California was very over the top. Everything had to be bigger, and better, and – look what I’ve got, and hah hah, you don’t have that – type of attitude.

Holmes: Was there integration within your community in California?

Ricky Morgan: No.

Holmes: There wasn’t?

Ricky Morgan: No. Not at that time. Not in the ‘50s.

Holmes: So even in California, so throughout your whole experience in your early childhood, to your teenage years, segregation was the norm for you?

Ricky Morgan: It was. If you were an African-American – a black person in the ‘50s, in the entertainment industry, you could perform in front of an audience – a white audience, and entertain them, and get accolades from them, and it just – they would praise you, but you couldn’t sit down and eat next to them. You could not eat in the same restaurant they ate at.

[0:29:00]

Holmes: Did that affect some of your fellowship with your fellow actors?

Ricky Morgan: No. I was too young back then. I just – we didn’t even think about that. We were just concerned with – oh my god, am I gonna say my line? Or, am I gonna look fat on camera? All kinds of strange, funny things.

Holmes: So, as far as what you do in the community now, would you say that your role in Highland Heights now is having a positive effect on the community?

Ricky Morgan: I would hope so. I truly do.

Holmes: Could you just tell us some of the specific things that you do in this community today, as far as Highland Heights?

Ricky Morgan: Well, I'm trying to be active in just different functions. I belong to the Center for Transforming Communities – Shalom, The Corners of Highland Heights. I try to be active in the neighborhood association – doing whatever I can for that.

[0:30:05]

And of course, the things here at the church.

Holmes: Okay, so just, in closing, do you see this – what are your thoughts about community now, as opposed to before – positive and negative?

Ricky Morgan: The sad thing for me is: we don't know our neighbors that live in the same block that we live on. We are very closed into our homes. We go to work. We go to the grocery store. We go to church – or just wherever we go. But, we do not interact with our neighbors. In the last ten years, I couldn't tell you who more than the three people who live on my block are because they don't have any interaction with me at all. If I'm walking down the street, and I wave at them, they just ignore it.

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They won't acknowledge that I've done it, which – it upset me a lot at first, but I've kinda gotten used to it now.

Looney: And what about positive things in the neighborhood as far as Highland Heights – your viewpoint?

Ricky Morgan: I think that the cleanup of the community has really turned around because the blighted homes all around in our area that you couldn't – half the times, the windows were broken out. You couldn't see the 'cause yards are so grown up, and people have taken the initiative to where they are cleaning this neighborhood up, and it is beginning to look more like somewhere that you would want to live now.

Holmes: And with cleanup the neighborhood, are you getting to know more of your neighbors as well?

Ricky Morgan: Not specifically my neighbors that live on my block, but the people who did live around in the area – it's them coming together, and they're meeting other people who live in other areas of this community of Highland Heights that I didn't know before, that I know now.

[0:32:09]

And of course, we keep in touch with each other. If there's anything that needs to be done, we can tell them, they'll tell somebody else, and they'll tell somebody else. Eventually, it gets done.

Holmes: So thank you for –

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