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James Webb, 2010

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Francesca Davis: Well, Dr. Webb, again it's a pleasure for you to just allow me to come and interview you on behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project. Again, just thank you for being so gracious in allowing me the opportunity.

James Webb: My pleasure.

Francesca Davis: So just to begin, could you state your name and your current occupation?

James Webb: James Webb and I'm a clinical psychologist but for the last, about 15 years, I've been more involved in publishing, publishing books, for parents and teachers of gifted and talented children.

Francesca Davis: And where were you born and raised?

James Webb: Born in Memphis, Tennessee.

Francesca Davis: And can you talk about when you were raised and – or what year you were born and that sort of thing and what area or **part of Memphis?**

James Webb: I was born in 1939 and Memphis back then was pretty different than it is now. I spent almost all of my life there in Memphis.

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I was reminiscing with my wife last night, though, remembering that when I was about age three, during – that'd be about 1942, during World War II – my parents moved down to Mississippi to a little town called Horn Lake, Mississippi. And that was one of the events that, as I think about, probably set me up for being interested in working with Civil Rights decades later because we lived – we moved down there because my father had had post-traumatic stress disorder and frankly, he didn't wanna be drafted. And he heard they were not drafting dentists – which is what he was – out of Mississippi but they were in Memphis. So we moved to Horn Lake and had a little house there but there was a African-American

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gentleman and his wife – well actually his wife had just died – his name was Charlie Taylor. He lived down below the – at the

bottom of the bluff in a one-room wood shanty with a big willow tree out in the front yard, I can picture it now every bit as clear as if I were there, and I used to – Charlie Taylor looked out after me. My mother would just have him look out after me all day. That was his job and I would play under that willow tree. He was the kindest old man. He must've been well into his 80s at that time but I remember my mother talking – even years later she'd shake her head and say, "I remember Charlie Taylor when – Jimmy, when you were bad, when you were naughty

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I'd be gettin' on you and Charlie Taylor'd say, 'Aw, Miz Webb he didn't mean anything by it. Aw, come on,'" and he was always taking my side. He was the warmest, most unconditional love that I could remember from that age. So anyway, we lived there a couplea years and then we moved back to Memphis.

Francesca Davis: Can you talk a little bit more about your mom and dad – what their names were and – you mentioned that your dad was a dentist but you –

James Webb: Right.

Francesca Davis: - can you describe more about what type of people they were, their personalities ____ ____?

James Webb: Well they were old-time southerners. My mother, her name was **Cleo Inez** Miller Webb and she grew up in Memphis – born and raised there her whole life. Her dad was in real estate and her grandfather was in real estate. And they had been really

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upper class Memphians and were for years until when her father died – as the family story goes – his two partners went in and cleaned out the safe which had the deeds to all the properties that they owned around Memphis and left just one. One deed, the house they lived in. So my mother went from being upper class, certainly upper middle class at least, to being middle class or working class. She played piano. She taught piano. She never graduated from college, although later she went back to Memphis State. But she did a lot of accompanying on the radio where they had live accompaniments back then and my

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my father, **Bunyan Monroe** Webb, he was born and raised in Hector, Arkansas which is north of Russellville by about 30 or 40 miles. It's very rural in the Ozarks and my dad – there were no black people there. There still aren't, by the way. I went back recently just for a visit and there are none. Well, his dad died just very shortly after he was born. His mother died a few years later, so his older brother raised him and his four siblings. He had three brothers and one sister and my dad worked his way – he went through Arkansas A&M and then went to medical dental school at University of Tennessee in Memphis

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which is how he came to Memphis and he decided to be a dentist after the first year and at that time, he was in a dental fraternity and some of his friends asked him, said, "Do you know any place we can meet girls?" And he – one of his friends knew my mother and said, "Yeah, I know this Cleo Miller and I'm sure she could find some girls for us," and so make a long story short, she got some girls together. They invited the fraternity over, his fraternity brothers, and the story goes my father walked in, met my mother, heard her play, watched her for a few minutes and said, "That's the girl I'm gonna marry." And sure enough, he set his hat to – he went courtin' and he married her. And they lived in Memphis their entire life

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but they were both clearly old time southerners. They grew up in the old ways.

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Francesca Davis: A lovely story. Do you have any other brothers and sisters in your family?

James Webb: I did have an older brother. My older brother, Bunyan Webb, Jr., he was four years older than I. He went to Rhodes, also graduated from Rhodes College, three years ahead of me and he was an interesting fellow in his own right. He became a classical guitarist, self-taught. He first taught himself country and western and then jazz and then went into flamenco and then taught himself classical and was so good at it, so talented, that he studied with Julian Bream and with

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Andres Segovia and conducted master classes around the country and actually did a concert in Carnegie Hall. And unfortunately he died in a shallow-water blackout when he was only about 44 and he was an interesting rascal in his own right.

Francesca Davis: I bet. Can you – so you said when you were three, your family moved to Horn Lake, Mississippi, correct? And then you moved back to Memphis after that?

James Webb: Right.

Francesca Davis: Can you talk about the neighborhood that you grew up in Memphis?

James Webb: We grew up at 991 North Avalon, which is over by Vollintine School and it was a very small little house, still there; had two bedrooms and I remember we

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rambled through the neighborhood and I remember – to give you a spirit of the times. Now this – I haven't thought about this in a long time but we used to have people walking through the neighborhood, almost all of them black, who were selling vegetables and they literally – you'd hear 'em in the mornin' with the windows open – of course we didn't have air conditionin'. No one did back then – and you'd hear 'em singing out, "Watermelon, watermelon." And each one had his own cry and my mother would go out and we'd buy fresh fruit from 'em – or whatever they were selling – fresh vegetables. There were lots of kids in the neighborhood and one of the things about that neighborhood was that – back in that day and time – parents could count on their neighbors to look out after their children. And so

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if I went down the street to play with the **Broogy** Twins as we called 'em, Ronnie and Donnie Broogy, my mother knew that if I misbehaved, Mrs. Broogy would lay hands on me and then she'd pick up the phone and call my mother who would then lay hands on me. So there was account- there was freedom but there was accountability, also.

Francesca Davis: Sounds incredible. It's so not how the neighborhoods are nowadays.

James Webb: No, not at all.

Francesca Davis: Can you talk about what school you went to – your elementary school?

James Webb: I went to a private elementary school, Pentecost Garrison. The principal was a lady named Althea Pentecost. Now Pentecost Garrison was old time Memphis. It was on – I'm trying to think – I think it was on Central Extended, either Central or Pop- no, it was Poplar. Poplar Avenue Extended, there. No longer

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exists, but Althea Pentecost was the headmistress and she looked like an Althea Pentecost should look. She scared me to death, as she did every one of the students there. She was stern. And it was an all boys' school, very small, and Miss Pentecost was a patient of my dad's. She got all her dental work done and I think that's probably how I came to go there. Then after Althea Pentecost retired and sold the school, I went to Presbyterian Day School, which is way on out – I think it's First Presbyterian Church. It's out where Central and Poplar come together. And I went there for seventh, eighth and ninth grade and – I'm sorry, sixth, seventh, eighth.

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Then, I went to Central High School for nine, ten – no I'm sorry, at Presbyterian Day School 7, 8 and 9 and then for 10, 11, 12 at Central High School and then went to Rhodes College, which at the time was called Southwestern in Memphis and that was in 1956.

Francesca Davis: Were you involved in any activities while you were in school, either sports or were you involved in your church, heavily or anything like that?

James Webb: Both, really. I was involved in all kinds of sports growing up; a lotta hunting and fishing with my dad. That was a favorite thing that we used to do. In junior high I played football. I went to Central High School and tried out for spring practice but you may remember that Central High School is a rather large high school and it has a

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wonderfully big football team and I weight a bruising 125 pounds. After – I made it through spring practice but after that, that scratched my itch plenty good right then for football. So I went into – I was on the wrestling team, on the rifle team, very active in ROTC, trying to date every girl I could in Central High School, I think.

Francesca Davis: [Laughter]

James Webb: Going to all the dances and proms, dances were on the top of the Peabody Hotel and the King Cotton Hotel and the country clubs – oh it was quite something.

Francesca Davis: It sounds like it.

James Webb: And for church – we grew up at, mostly – well early it was at Epworth Presbyterian Church and then from about age ten on, when we had moved – when I was ten we moved from 991 North Avalon to Chickasaw

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Gardens – 99 Cherokee Drive. And at that time, we transferred over to St. Luke's Methodist Church which is very close to – let's see, it's Central and Highland, just a little bit south on Highland there and I was very active in Methodist Youths Fellowship; the MYF. A lot of church and social activities – I'm trying to remember if I was ever president of MYF but I don't think I was. I was just very active. And actually that was one of the first places that we got involved in civil rights.

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Francesca Davis: I was just gonna ask you that about school and being in Memphis in a very turbulent and trying times. Did – in terms of your schooling, did integration or desegregation affect how you went to school? Can you talk a little bit about what that –

James Webb: It wasn't even an issue, then. I don't think it was –

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it was such an unthinkable thought for the white folks in Memphis, at least the white folks we ran around with – that was

just unthink- it never gonna happen. Why, why would it ever happen? The only place it began to come up – and this would be in the early 1950s, 1952, 3, 4, was, at St. Luke's Church where there was an associate pastor who was young and he arranged for some of us – anyone who wanted to in the MYF – we would go visit other churches – part of the ecumenical outreach. We went to different churches: Lutheran, Catholic, but we also went to some black churches.

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Oh, that was kind of, really pushing it at that point. And when we went, we had to sit in the balcony, which was kind of interesting. We had – it was the first experience with being a minority. Now we never reciprocated, of course. I don't think I ever recall any blacks coming to St. Luke's Church for a visit but that was a very first involvement and then after that, going to Southwestern, now **Rhodes**, and some of the professors beginning to raise questions about this – now where they got their ideas from to begin doing that, I don't know, but I remember an English professor at **Rhodes**, Dr. Dan Ross.

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He gave us all a writing assignment. This was my freshman or sophomore year; I don't remember which. I think it was sophomore. And one of the topics that we could write about was whether miscegenation was wrong, you know, inter-marriage. And I remember writing an article – writing a little term paper back for him saying, "Well, you know, I do a lot of duck hunting and when we go out duck hunting, we see mostly that the mallards stay with the mallards and the black ducks with the black ducks and so forth but, you know, we see that there's – they cross over the boundaries sometimes and it works fine and everyone's happy. What's in it?" Anyway, apparently Dr. Ross thought that was just great and he gave me an A on my paper. It was the first A I'd gotten, I think, ever –

Francesca Davis: [Laughter]

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James Webb: - there at Southwestern. I hadn't thought about that in a long time.

Francesca Davis: Wow. Can you talk a little bit more about your experiences at Rhodes? You – I remember you mentioning back when you went

to the church and you – the black church in Memphis – that was the first time that you felt like the minority. Did you ever have any instances or occurrences that happened at your time at Rhodes or –

James Webb: Oh yeah. I – I felt like a minority but in a totally different way.

Francesca Davis: How was that?

James Webb: My brother went to Rhodes. He was a senior when I was a freshman and I joined a fraternity, joined Pi Kappa Alpha. I was the pledge class. One, one person. Pi Kappa Alpha, at the time, was composed primarily of nerds and geeks [*Laughter*] people who were just kind of, you know, they were nice folks

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but they were not the big men on campus. They were not handsome. They were not socially suave. And so I **went** there because my brother went there and okay. Well, I felt a little bit like a minority there in that sense. But I think other than that, that's the only experience I really had as a feeling a minority, feeling different.

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Well, except – and actually, I've written an article about this on existential depression in gifted children and adults. When I was in college, my sophomore year, I really – and this was thanks to

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the professors at Rhodes – I began to question – I began to think for the first time, really, and began to question a lot of the things that I was seeing around me and being aware how much hypocrisy I was seeing in society – how much hypocrisy I was seeing in my own family where they would say one thing – "Oh we're good Christians and we believe in equal rights for everyone," but then I'd look at how my dad, for example, would treat black folks – he didn't call 'em that. How my mother – who was much kinder – she would call 'em black folks but you always had to come to the back door. She'd never let you go hungry and she'd always find some work but you had to come to the back door and you had to show respect. But that didn't fit with what

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she said she was about and liked. Well anyway, so the hypocrisy and I roomed with a – I lived on campus one semester and roomed with a fella named Richard Christie, to whom I owe a great deal. Richard had been in the navy, an older fella, came back, and he – I was trying desperately to get him to be one of the good ol' boys. He very patiently and quietly would just ask questions. I was also trying to convince him to be a good Christian. And he would ask me questions about the origin of sin and how someone omnipotent and omniscient and all good could allow evil in the world, could create evil if everything came from God, and he introduced me to books like *Voltaire, Candide* and

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The Bridge of San Louis Rey and all of a sudden, I found myself questioning so much of organized religion, of the society that I was growing up in, of the values I'd been raised with and I went into a depression where it was, what is life about? What's it like? Now **Rhodes** professors also – at that time, they introduced you to existentialist theologians. I hope they still do, and so I went into this depression and a professor there, **Lou Queener**. Dr. Lou Queener, who's now dead, allowed me to just come in his office and talk. And my parents did not believe in psychology 'cause that was for weak-minded folk and so they wouldn't pay for any counseling or therapy but I went and Dr. Queener helped me in so

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so much thinking through this and this is a large part of why I went into psychology later on. But also with this, it made for a fertile ground for new ideas. I was looking fresh. I also felt like a minority because most of the other folks at Southwestern were still concerned, primarily, with what they're gonna wear to the prom; who is going to be elected homecoming queen; who scored the touchdown; real superficial things. I was concerned with that, too but I was far more concerned, now, with what was going under the surface of the – what was happening in society. And this is why I

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went into psychology and decided to go to graduate school because I didn't wanna be drafted to Vietnam at the time – this was 1960 – and so I applied to 13 graduate schools. I was turned down by 12. I was accepted at one on probation. That was the University of Alabama.

Francesca Davis: [Laughter]

James Webb: And the reason they accepted me was because they were a brand new program, brand new accredited by the American Psychological Association. Okay. That's fine. I'll go. And when I got to Alabama, it was like you took a fish and put him into water, as far as the academics. I was home. I really loved the program, what I was learning. I – my first semester, I got two As

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and two Bs and after that I got all As. I also got very active in civil rights.

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Francesca Davis: You've been kind of – you mentioned – that really interested me – the hypocrisy of what you were seeing in Memphis of your professors and perhaps the relationship with your parents and organized religion. Do you think that set you up to be in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and just to be in that environment and do want to get active and get involved?

James Webb: Yes. Absolutely. I didn't see so much hypocrisy in the professors. I saw it much more in my parents, their friends, organized religion, as it was practiced in the south. And yes, that totally set me up and then when I went to Alabama, in the – now in Alabama in 1960, George Wallace was governor and Tuscaloosa

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was an island of thoughtful liberalism in a sea of unthinkingness. The University, particularly the Psychology Department but there were other departments too, they were thoughtful, high values, seemingly consistent in what they were thinking and very idealistic and I resonated to that. I was home.

Francesca Davis: How did you get involved in any way in Tuscaloosa? In joining the civil rights movement and –

James Webb: I was corrupted by a mentor.

Francesca Davis: [Laughter]

James Webb: One of my mentors, a fella named Dr. Ray Fowler, who went ahead to – and he's someone, at some point, you might enjoy interviewing.

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I'll tell you why. Ray Fowler was a young faculty member. At the time he had just become Director of Clinical Training in the Psychology Department. Ray Fowler helped encourage our questioning and interest in civil rights and got so many of us – so many of us being the graduate students in psychology – involved in the movement in various ways. And he was so committed that he even bailed some of the students out of jail, some of the white graduate students, when we got – when they – I never got arrested but they got arrested – he'd bail 'em out of jail. Interesting guy who was very involved in civil rights, more than most people would know. At any rate, he told me about this group

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that they were just forming called the Alabama Human Rights Forum and the whole purpose of it was to try and have a dialogue about integration and segregation, voting rights and all of these very hot topics that existed and so we met at, on campus University of Alabama. Another fella who was very active behind the scenes was Dr. Dave Matthews, who was Dean of Students at the time. Now David Matthews went ahead to become the Secretary of Education under Carter, President Carter, if my memory is right, but without the Dean of Students or Dean of Men –

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I think he was Dean of Men. Without that protection – he let us walk under his umbrella because I know he got a lot of pressure from Governor Wallace's office and they allowed us to form the Human Rights Forum. In that Human Rights Forum, I began to hear other people talking about what was happening and of course at that time, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC, CORE, NAACP, all of 'em, were beginning to get active; SNCC just beginning. And from there, I don't remember how this came about but someone asked me, said, "We've got some of the," originally I think it was SCLC workers but later SNCC, "We've got some

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folks coming down to help people register to vote but they need a place to stay. Anyone here got an extra bedroom?" Well I had extra bedroom, sure. So folks – I had civil rights workers staying with me and then several of us would go to the Monday night mass meetings at the – I think it was Mt. Zion AME Church. It was an AME church, and once again, we had to sit in the balcony or off to the side but I heard some of the most incredible speakers: Hosea Williams, one of the best speakers I've ever, ever heard. He could bring it on. I heard – see T.Y. Rogers was the pastor of that church, as I recall. I heard Andy Young also at

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Spelman College. Stokley Carmichael came in and, one time for a meeting there, I got to meet him and hear him speak. He was a speaker, too and he could get people really goin'. So I got more and more active, just gradually until in – well, back up. One of the things that I saw and I think I mentioned this to you before we did the other day when we were talkin' – when Vivian Malone integrated the University of Alabama – this was 1963, I believe, and George Wallace made his stand in the schoolhouse door – I was a grad student at the Psychological Clinic, which was about 100, 150 yards away from where the actual stand in the schoolhouse door took

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place and the campus was very much on lockdown. They had Highway Patrolmen, Alabama Troopers, everywhere and people were terrified that it was gonna be explosive and I went out back behind the clinic and walked up and began talking to the State Trooper who was sittin' there, he had his door open, he was smokin' a big ol' cigar.

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Oh he was quite a character and I said, "This is scary stuff." He said, "Aw, psh. This ain't scary. Ain't nothin' gonna happen." "What do you mean?" He said, "It's all scripted out." "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, there's a line up there and the governor, he's gonna come up and here's what he's gonna say. And then there's another line up here and that's where that Nicholas Katzenbach is gonna come up and here's what he's gonna say.

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And then the governor's gonna say this and then the governor's gonna step aside and that's gonna be it." Phew. That's exactly what happened. It was all scripted out. If you saw the evening news, though, wherever you were in Nashville or Buffalo, New York, it looked like this was explosive but it was all scripted out and it really made me realize that, once again, what you see is not always what's really goin' on.

Francesca Davis: How did your friends or family react to you participating? Were they supportive? Did you lose friends? Especially your parents, how did they feel about –

James Webb: Well, my parents did not know. We – when I was at Rhodes and beginning to question about civil rights and segregation

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and so forth, it was clear we had nothing to talk about.

Francesca Davis: You and your parents?

James Webb: That's right, on that. They were old time south. There was no way they were gonna change and they – my mother used to say, "Memphis has more black millionaires than any other city in the country, what's can be the problem? Separate but equal's quite fine. Yeah, they have to drink out of the colored water fountains but that's all right and down here, we'll never let any of these colored folk go hungry. Now they have to know their place and come to the back door, but they won't go hungry." That was her attitude. My father couldn't even get that close. He'd say, they're – in so many words, basically, they're inferior. They will never catch up and

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they're just second-class citizens. That's the way it should be. But he didn't think much anyway on that. His whole career was focused on dentistry and that was it. He was a wonderful dentist but he –

Francesca Davis: Were you ever afraid to kind of go against your parents' thinking or were you ever afraid to participate in fear that you would get hurt or others around you would get hurt?

James Webb: I really wasn't afraid of getting hurt with one exception. Afraid of talking – and I'll tell you about that in a minute – afraid of talking

to my parents, no because my brother had been in power struggles with my parents about a whole bunch of issues and I had been in power struggles and we had agreed to disagree a long time ago. So we just didn't talk about those things. Matter of fact, back then

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we didn't talk about a lotta things. Things were tense between my family and me. But I'll give you – tell you a story that will describe not only that but what was happening at the time. This would be about 1965 and my mother, who was very interested in genealogy, gave me a call and said, "Jimmy, I want to come down to Tuscaloosa and stay with you because I wanna do some genealogy work down in Utah, Alabama," I think was the name of it. "Can I come down?" And of course, what do you say to your mom? "Well come on. Sure." Well, what she didn't know was how active I had been in civil rights 'cause I had been in several marches

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in Tuscaloosa. I had been to a lot of them, the mass meetings, Monday night mass meetings. I also knew that the Imperial Wizard of the KKK lived in Tuscaloosa and Bobby Shelton and this was – there'd been a lot of violence. I don't remember whether this was after Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney got killed or Viola Liuzzo or – but it was – there had been a lot of violence. So I went in and talked to Ray Fowler, Dr. Fowler, and told him the situation and he said, "Well, Jimmy let me make a call or two. I think I can help you out." So he called me back a little bit later and he said, "It's all taken care of." "What do you mean it's taken care of?" He said, "I've talked to the head of the Black Deacons for Defense."

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They were a group – they were not non-violent. They were ones who wanted to – they're kinda like the Black Panthers, a forerunner of the Black Panthers. And he said, "I talked to them and they have put – they have told Bobby Shelton," the head of the KKK, the Grand Imperial Wizard, that for this-

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Francesca Davis: Okay, here we go.

James Webb: Okay. Are we live?

Francesca Davis: Yes.

James Webb: There was one other thing I was thinking about that is relevant about – in the future and that is I mentioned these days I publish books for parents and teachers of gifted and talented children, particularly dealing with parenting issues and of course, historically, African-Americans have been underrepresented in the gifted population in schools. They score lower on many achievement tests and the like. There's also been a historic distrust by African-Americans of schools for good reason. Well, one of the books that we have coming out, and it will be out this fall, which will be November

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of 2010, is by an African-American lady named Dr. Joy Davis and it's going to be a guide for African-American parents of gifted children. The first book out there like that and I am so excited about this, hoping that it will help parents in terms of nurturing their children's abilities, gifts, talents, not necessarily through school – yeah that'd be fine – but that's only one way to do it. And so I guess my passion – my idealism has kinda come full circle. My wife tells me I have a terminal infection of missionary zeal.

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I tell her there are worse things to die of, than missionary zeal. But I'm look- the book is about halfway done now by this author and this is one where it had to be by a black author to give it credibility and she has a wealth of wisdom. And embeds it in a lot of black history, including the civil rights movement.

Francesca Davis: _____ . Anything else you wanted to share?

James Webb: Well I'm really curious about the project, the Crossroads project, now that I did not know about and I'm so proud that Rhodes is taking a leadership position in this – at least I assume they are. And I'm hoping that this gets – this project – gets publicized, broadly this is the sort of project

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that it could easily be shunted off to a back room or a closet somewhere and there are a lot of folks out there nowadays who, including my own grandkids, who really cannot fathom what it was like when you had colored and white restrooms; when you had colored and white water fountains; when blacks had to sit in the back of the bus or had to get off the sidewalk if a white person came toward them. They had to step in the street. The mean-spiritedness that existed back then; there still is mean-spiritedness but it was more institutionalized and accepted back then. Now it's more subtle. So I hope that this will help them get some sense of perspective and also inspire them to keep on keepin' on.

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Don't let nobody turn you 'round.

Francesca Davis: Thank you, Dr. Webb. It's been a great pleasure and such an honor to meet you and interview you.

James Webb: Thank you.

Francesca Davis: Thank you so much.

James Webb: It's been my pleasure. You never knew you were gonna get all this —

Francesca Davis: [Laughter]

James Webb: - _____ in _____.

Francesca Davis: I did not.

[End of Audio]