

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

Joe Ferby, 2010

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[0:00:00]

Treshain Norfleet: I'm Treshain Norfleet.

Ashleigh Taylor: I'm Ashleigh Taylor.

Treshain Norfleet: Behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project we would like to thank you for participating in this interview and this program and we're specifically talking about the Civil Rights Era. So let's start with some basic biographical questions to get your memory going. What is your name?

Joe Ferby: Joe Ferby.

Treshain Norfleet: What year were you born?

Joe Ferby: 1955.

Treshain Norfleet: Where were you born and raised?

Joe Ferby: Born in Memphis, Tennessee; raised in the **Douglas** neighborhood.

Treshain Norfleet: What is your current occupation?

Joe Ferby: Electronic technician for Federal Express.

Treshain Norfleet: Who were your parents and what were their occupations?

Joe Ferby: My mother is **Hazel Thomas** and her occupation was she was a full-time cook, part-time maid. My father is **Joe Thomas**. He was a full-time cook.

Treshain Norfleet: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Joe Ferby: Yes.

Treshain Norfleet: Do you – who are they?

[0:01:00]

Joe Ferby: Well starting from my oldest – I'm the youngest. My older brother, **Floyd Williams**, **Jeff Beasley**, **Mozella Beasley**, **Jeffatheen Beasley**, **Clyde Ferby**, **Larry Ferby** and Joe Ferby, myself.

- Treshain Norfleet:* So now let's talk a little about your experience growing up. Can you tell me how your neighborhood was when you were growing up?
- Joe Ferby:* It was a very close knit neighborhood where everybody knew each other. The neighbors knew you. From the kids' standpoint we played in the street and if you did anything that was not right your neighbors would tell your parents and sometimes they would even discipline you then tell your parents. Then you'd be disciplined again by your parents. So it was very close knit. Everybody knew each other and it was safe.
- [0:02:00] Not like it is now where you have to lock everything and bars on your windows. So back then it was really a loving, fun, fun, fun time.
- Treshain Norfleet:* What kind of activities were you involved in growing up?
- Joe Ferby:* Professional, organized or unorganized?
- Treshain Norfleet:* It doesn't matter.
- Joe Ferby:* It doesn't matter. Organized I would say would be Cub Scouts was my first organization I was in and that went from the Cub Scouts to the Boy Scouts. Unorganized just pretty much **sandlot** sports. You know what sandlot sports is, right? Just street ball, street football, street baseball. Wherever we could find a vacant lot of something like that we would play. Later on, after that, I was involved with a program that I really don't know what it was but a young man mentored me by the name of Matthews.
- [0:03:00] He gathered several kids in the neighborhood and he would pick us up and take us bowling. We spent a week long at **Milliton** at a camp. So that was another organization I was a part of. I'm not sure it didn't have a name – well it had a name but it's been so long ago I can't remember but it is very instrumental I guess in my personal life because in a black neighborhood he was a white guy. He was my first experience with anyone of color other than myself. Black neighborhood, growing up black. **I influenced** but he took the time and he came into the neighborhood and it wasn't until this year that I found out that he was affiliated with a church and his church was doing an outreach program in the black neighborhood at that time.
- [0:04:00] That was very instrumental in him mentoring me.

- Treshain Norfleet:* So I know you said earlier that your neighborhood was tight knit. Was your family also a tight knit group? How was it like growing up with your family?
- Joe Ferby:* Family from I would say yes and no. By that I mean tight knit for my sisters and brothers. Not so much for me because age separation. I was the baby and the age between me and my next sibling was like four or five years of age. But I could see the close knit between my brothers and sisters older than I because they were only like two or three years apart. So that put them together in a lot of things. But they were very close.
- Treshain Norfleet:* So I'm going to ask you about growing up with your education.
- [0:05:00]* Where did you go to elementary school?
- Joe Ferby:* Douglas Elementary.
- Treshain Norfleet:* And middle school, middle high school?
- Joe Ferby:* Douglas Junior High at that time.
- Treshain Norfleet:* And Douglas High School?
- Joe Ferby:* High school, Douglas.
- Treshain Norfleet:* How was school like for you growing up in the black neighborhood and going to the black schools?
- Joe Ferby:* It was – well being that's the only school I had I don't have much to compare it to. I wasn't very studious. At times I was, at times I wasn't. But it was the center of the neighborhood with everybody going to the same school from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through the 12<sup>th</sup>. It was something that we looked forward to. I can say that much. After summer was over I was ready to go back to school. Elementary was pretty intense.
- [0:06:00]* I can remember that where the teachers and the principal were very strict and made sure that you couldn't be in the hall. If you were in class it was very strict discipline wise. If you had any type of problem they would send you to the office and you would be paddled. I do remember that.
- Treshain Norfleet:* I just wanted to ask also that I know that Douglas was closed in 1981 and it reopened a couple of years ago. So how did you feel

after hearing that your alumni had closed down for like 20 years and reopened?

*Joe Ferby:* The initial part was like a culture shock. I couldn't believe that it was happening. It was several things that I blamed for it and **we were victim** to it.

[0:07:00] So I was really upset by it because it's the lifeblood of the neighborhood. But when it opened in '81 it added some life to the community but we're still years away from where we should have been or could have been if we had stayed open. One of the things that I contribute to the closing was busing. My class was the first class to be bused, the class of 1974 which I think you guys being in college you can look back on your senior year or junior year, all the friends that you had. If you can just imagine half of them it meant being sent away. That's what I experienced. Half of them. **Chelsea** was the dividing line. You stayed on this line of Chelsea you went to **Treadwell** or if you stayed on this side of Hollywood you went to **Tressent**.

[0:08:00] So we went from a very large school to a very small school. We had over 200 students bused away and we were scheduled to receive 200 students and we only received 2. So at that time that was the beginning of the end of Douglas High School as we knew it because part of the closing justification was there wasn't students.

*Treshain Norfleet:* So that would be a way that integration impacted your educational experiences. Are there any other instances that you can recall of integration or segregation impacting your studies?

*Joe Ferby:* In **the** studies?

*Treshain Norfleet:* Or studies or –

*Joe Ferby:* Or life?

*Treshain Norfleet:* - or just life or –

*Joe Ferby:* Well that in itself is for me but it goes a lot deeper than that because you have a lot of small businesses that was able to survive because you look at the school as an institution or a business in the community.

[0:09:00] That's just like FedEx leaving Memphis, all the people that would lose their job. So that's like the community. When we lost the

school we had – man, I can't remember. I would – like I say – I would say at least eight or ten stores in our community. When the school closed those stores no longer had business because students would walk back and forth to school and they would stop on the way get supplies, food or whatever. Once we closed the school and they started busing all of the students out of the community kids would go to the bus stop instead of a store. So the stores closed. Also over the years you had an eight block, eight city block school that was just standing there and over years just deteriorate.

[0:10:00]

It was an eyesore. Broken windows, vagrants, unkempt property. So how would you like to live next to that? That's – I lived right across the street from the school. So that's what we had to look for instead of looking out of our window every day and seeing life. It was just looking across the window – out across the street and looking at death, a dying community, a dying school, a dead school.

*Treshain Norfleet:*

So the fact that the school is back now it must bring you joy although you can't bring back the 20 years that it was closed. But I guess the fact that the school is open now it must bring you – it must warm you heart a little bit to say the least.

[0:11:00]

*Joe Ferby:*

Bittersweet.

*Treshain Norfleet:*

So what role did religion play in your life growing up?

*Joe Ferby:*

I was baptized at 12 but I've always been in and out of church. Being the tight knit community everybody had a church in the community I should say and Douglas community we have something close to 20 churches and almost a church on every street. So I had a choice of two churches within a block of each other but my family chose a church which was right behind our house, next street over and we attended that church.

[0:12:00]

All my family members attended it. My brother now is – he still attends on a regular basis.

*Treshain Norfleet:*

Well at this point I'm going to transfer over to Ashleigh so she can ask you the target period, the Civil Rights Era.

*Joe Ferby:*

I was going to add one other thing if you –

*[Crosstalk]*

*Treshain Norfleet:* Oh yes. Go ahead.

*Joe Ferby:* Well with me being – you talking about church and religion. What I did I went to the military and with my military experience and my travels my church experience local in my neighborhood church and where my belief are now is somewhat that I seem to think of **lee** that maybe the teaching of our – in our community is sometime – you have prosperity teaching it and then you have the hard type of preaching and I think that in the neighborhood, in our neighborhood it's more or less not a prosperity type of thing, preaching.

*[0:13:00]* I think it ironically that we live in a community that's not prospering and maybe possibly it's because our teaching on the religion basis is not one that of a prosperous type of influence. That's kind of like with me, my influence, my belief that from an early age I thought I was condemned to hell because what I was taught. I was taught that it was easier for a rich man to go through an eye of needle than to go to heaven. So therefore I had to overcome that because I said I want to be rich.

*[0:14:00]* So now I'm being told, hey, if I'm rich I'm going to hell. So those are some of the barriers that I've had to overcome religious wise from my early teachings to where I am today. You can go ahead Ashleigh. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Okay.

*Treshain Norfleet:* It was okay.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* So do you remember the Civil Rights Movement at all?

*Joe Ferby:* Yes.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* So how did you actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement especially during your time at Douglas?

*Joe Ferby:* Did not.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* You did not? Were there other students who were involved in it though?

*Joe Ferby:* No.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* There wasn't?

*Joe Ferby:* Well I can't say because during the Civil Rights Movement I was young. I was in elementary school. So I don't know of any other students participating not in a positive fashion.

*[0:15:00]* I do remember when King was killed and I do remember the riots. I do remember the streets being set on fire and I'm like, "Why are they burning our neighborhood?"

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Really?

*Joe Ferby:* Yes.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Can you take me back to the day that you saw the riot happen and the feelings that you felt and the people that you saw as the sounds and just the frustration that you may have had or the complete bewilderment that you may have had.

*Joe Ferby:* I guess you're right. It was bewilderness for me because I really didn't – truly didn't understand it because I thought we would take a different approach being that Martin Luther King stood for non-violence and that's all that happened that day. That particular day I remember Chelsea which is a main thoroughfare the different parts of Memphis.

*[0:16:00]* It was pre-interstate day that part of the thing that was happening is that fires was being started basically out of trash. They were taking and put up blockades in the streets with trash. I didn't realize what they was doing but I guess now that I'm thinking back on it they would blockade the streets and say like if a white would drive through they would brick their car and try and pull them out and beat them up and things like that. That was part of one of the things that frustrating for me to see because the way we reacted.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Do you think that the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King has helped or hurt our city?

*[0:17:00]*

*Joe Ferby:* I think it helped.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* How so?

*Joe Ferby:* You have – without struggle there's no gain. That's even with our – the closing of the school. I say it's a bittersweet but even

through the closing now we have a state of the arts school, one of the best built school and all the accommodations that a lot of older schools don't have. So that's part of the bittersweet. The thing with the riot we probably had to go through to get to where we are today. You had to go through some struggle to have gain.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Very true. So let's talk about the integration factor that happened. Why do you think that the white students, they were so reluctant to keep up their end of the deal and actually come to Douglas while students from Douglas that were being sent to elsewhere?

*Joe Ferby:* I didn't understand it at the time but now I do; that's even today.

*[0:18:00]* For example, my niece stay on the same block that Douglass High School is but she go to Central. What the whites would looking at it as education they wanted their kids to get the best education that they possibly could have. They don't want to integrate. Then they was looking at security. Now and even then we as a community had and still have a violent – in nature some time I should say. Example, we just had a student to get shot a couple of weeks ago. A 12 year old student get shot.

*[0:19:00]* I love my school but I'd be hesitant to send my own kid there.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Really?

*Joe Ferby:* Yes.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Even despite the reopening?

*Joe Ferby:* I – it's tricky. I will say even in spite of the reopening the community still suffers. The community still suffers from years of it just being closed, years being neglected. The crime is elevated. The gang presence is very wide open. So being that I want the best for – I guess now in this situation I'm looking at my son. He's in college. For my grandkids I would say if I had an option I wouldn't send them there.

*[0:20:00]* That's just my opinion.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* So can you compare and contrast the Douglas neighborhood when you were living there and now and the type of hope and sentiment and pride that people had and has it gone down? Has it gone up or has it just stayed the same?

- Joe Ferby:* It has gone down. The makeup of the community is totally different because I can remember the quality of people. Individuals were of much higher standard. You had teachers that stayed in the neighborhood that taught at the school or taught at other schools.
- [0:21:00] My pastor, he stayed on the next street. Several pastors stayed in the community. Now it's like all the talent has left. Back in the early '60s or '70s I think we talked about white flight where the whites moved to the suburbs. We have experienced a black flight where the blacks have moved to the suburbs or moved too since I guess economically we could afford it. So we left behind some people and the ones that we left behind struggled. So you don't have that same neighborhood in the sense of to make the \_\_\_\_\_ and to bring up the standard of faith.
- [0:22:00] If you brought back – if you put in our neighborhood guys or families like myself that were middle class people on the middle class level that would change the economical make up of the community. The community now is pretty made up of low income people that's basely in the – stuck in the welfare system or some type of disability. So if you can imagine that that has an effect. People have a tendency to prey on the lost and – in the form of introducing them to drugs, alcohol not to mention that due to their stress level the mental illness in the community is very high.
- [0:23:00] I don't see hope there because if hope was there you would care for those people. But by hope not being there they're just left to wander. By meaning that you have homelessness and people just look at it as like the norm. Where you have someone staying in a vacant house, kids staying in houses with no utilities and you don't have anybody trying to do anything.
- [0:24:00] So I think it's – hope is not really there. The school actually is bringing back hope. I can see some changes, some forms of caring because with the instance of the young man being shot, the 12 year old we did have a meeting with the local authorities and they came out. We had some community support. But I wanted to say maybe five, six years ago we had a similar incident that happened where a kid was shot in the head on a bike and was killed and I don't remember anybody rallying behind that death. It was just another person dead.
- Ashleigh Taylor:* Do you think that the Memphis – the elected officials and the Memphis government do you think that they have forgotten about the Douglas community?

*[0:25:00]*

*Joe Ferby:* I wonder. Well I would say yes but it's – I think there's two sides to it. It's like the squeaky wheel gets the attention and Douglas don't have **one** a voice; North Memphis don't have a voice. I've seen recovery throughout the city. Everybody's taking back the neighborhood but the – if you ride through North Memphis, Douglas, **Hyde** Park we're still 20 years behind recovery.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Why do you think that is?

*[0:26:00]*

*Joe Ferby:* I'm not sure. We have a very high concentration of drugs in those areas and you have a tendency to not invest in the areas that blight. I'll give you an example. I heard that Walgreen's in North of Hollywood and Jackson and it was like okay then, City Councilwoman Barbara Swearingen Ware fought to get that Walgreen there. But the Walgreen has the highest number of theft of any Walgreen in the city. So that's what you're looking at for businesses, any type of business.

*[0:27:00]*

If you want to relocate your business there, if you want to relocate your family there that's not what you want. You don't want to buy a house and every time you turn around somebody breaking in your house, somebody stealing your battery out of your car. So those are some of the things that keep other people investing in it and I think that's some of the things that have kept other entities from investing in it. I think until individually people in the community come together and demand for more I don't think we'll get anymore than what we're getting.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* In your opinion do you think that the Douglas community or even North Memphis as a whole do you think that it can be saved?

*Joe Ferby:* Oh yeah. Yeah, I believe it can be saved. There are a lot of good people in here recently.

*[0:28:00]*

I've seen some things on the Internet. For instance, **Springdale** Baptist Church, they have formed a group to take back their community. As recently as last month the Douglas community had a community rally and they're forming to take back their neighborhood and they're working to form as Springdale did a coalition with the police department because from what I'm hearing in the neighborhood and have experienced a lot of people

are afraid because when they try to do the right thing there is possible repercussion due to the fact that if you –

[0:29:00]

In the past, I'll give you an example, you don't want anybody selling drugs or anything like that in your neighborhood. The first thing you're going to do is what?

*Ashleigh Taylor:*

Move.

*Joe Ferby:*

Call the police before you move. If you call the police and say, "So and so's selling drugs down the street," and the next thing you know they're coming to you saying, "Well the police told me you called the police on me." You stop calling the police. Right? So that's pretty much – you have a community in fear now because gangs and drugs. It's a very dangerous thing. So you have people living in fear. So that's why a lot is not being reported.

[0:30:00]

That was one of the things that when we had the meeting the lieutenant pointed out that crime is down in the neighborhood. It's not actually down. The reporting is down because of fear or repercussion or fear of people not caring. I work with the elementary school and one of the teachers told me that they saw someone smoking dope behind the school. The police was around in the front to say, "Hey there's some people in the back of the school smoking dope," and she was bewildered by the response of the policemen that said, "What do you want me to do?" So you have people that want to do the right thing but when you have law enforcement not enforcing the law you have a tendency not to call.

[0:31:00]

*Treshain Norfleet:*

So can you tell us about your involvement with the Douglas Alumni Association?

*Joe Ferby:*

Now I'm a what they call – what we call a Chairperson of the Scholarship Committee and that's one of our major goals as alumni, to give scholarships to students. In the past we have given scholarships to students of alumni members or in good standing alumni members that students would be recommended for scholarships. This year with our first class, 2010 graduating we took a different approach. Instead of kids of alumni members we're only giving scholarships to seniors that graduated in good standing from Douglas High School that has been accepted to a school of higher learning.

[0:32:00] But that is one of my goals. Being Chairperson I work with the high school, middle school and elementary school with the guidance counselors and the principals to prepare, help prepare the students for scholarships and to make those scholarships available for them other than the alumni scholarship because our focus point is that alumni can give scholarships but a lot of the students and parents are not aware of some other scholarships that available for them. So we want to not only prepare them for a scholarship that we have for them but to prepare them for other scholarships and grants as well.

[0:33:00]

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Did you attend the 2010 graduation?

*Joe Ferby:* No I didn't.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* You didn't. So how – do you know how many students graduated from Douglas?

*Joe Ferby:* Yes. It was – I don't know exactly. I want to say it was like 116 or 120. We had – I get different reports because you know the last month was pretty hectic with our first class and trying to get all of the data together. Into – in my defense for not attending I was on a trip to Atlanta. I took a group of middle school students –  
[coughs] excuse me. I went with the middle school to Atlanta. We took 37 students to Atlanta to visit Morehouse and Spelman that weekend.

[0:34:00]

Originally, when I signed up for it I did not know that the graduation was going to conflict with it but they needed a male chaperone and I volunteered and I ended up missing the graduation due to that field trip.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Were most of the graduates college bound?

*Joe Ferby:* I'm trying to think of maybe a percentage. I would say the last count that I had out of the 116 students or 100-odd students we had – excuse me – there was pretty close to 50 and the numbers was growing because what happened is that students waited till the last minute. We had a lot of **mid-day** earlier part of the year –  
[coughs] excuse me – earlier part of the year to get the paperwork in but then once they started some of them started saying, "Hey my friend got accepted." Everybody excited about that, their acceptance letters.

[0:35:00] Then you have more students to come forward and start applying. So all the way up until the last day – it was even passed the last day – I spoke with the student counselor and even in the summer, early part of the summer she was still doing paperwork trying to get more students accepted and going through the acceptance letters that she had received after school had ended. So I would say I know we had pretty close to 50 which is almost 50 percent being accepted into schools for higher learning. Also, too, I only spoke of Douglas alumni in the sense of the local. I am the Chairman of the Local Alumni Association. We have – which fall under the umbrella of the National. The local gave five scholarships.

[0:36:00] We increased it to seven. The National gave 23 scholarships. So we had a total of pretty close to 30 scholarships that we gave.

*Treshain Norfleet:* So how strong is the alumni association?

*Joe Ferby:* Strong in according to our counselor, Ms. **Meeks** which work with a lot of other different schools and in response to how we did the first class and everything she was like – she was really impressed with the alumni association. She said the only other comparable alumni in the city of Memphis would probably be **Melrose**.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Really?

*Joe Ferby:* Mmm-hmm.

*Treshain Norfleet:* That's \_\_\_\_\_.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* So if you could explain your experiences at Douglas High School and in the Douglas Community in one word what would it be and why?

[0:37:00]

*Joe Ferby:* My experience?

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Mmm-hmm, in one word though.

*Joe Ferby:* As to the present experience?

*Ashleigh Taylor:* No. Your experiences while you attended Douglas High.

*Joe Ferby:* While I attended?

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Mmm-hmm.

*Joe Ferby:* In one word?

*Ashleigh Taylor:* In one word. It has to be a good word.

*Joe Ferby:* *[Laughs]* It has to be a good word. I would say awesome.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Awesome. Why awesome?

*Joe Ferby:* Why awesome?

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Mmm-hmm.

*Joe Ferby:* What I learned is that from what I learned at Douglas I've been able to take it everywhere with me. I went in the military and I went into electronics and I went into a field that was – is very challenging. I went to school with Iranians, Iraqis, Chinese and the reason that all of us joined together because this is only one of a type of school in the country offered by the Air Force.

*[0:38:00]* It was a 50 percent failure rate due to the demands of the curriculum. I completed that and I was competing with all of the foreigners. I had students from top private schools but I completed the course whereas a lot of my co-students or some of my fellow airmen didn't. I contribute that from the drive that I got from my neighborhood and my school.

*Ashleigh Taylor:* Really? That's nice. So if you could give advice to your younger self what would you tell yourself and why?

*[0:39:00]*

*Joe Ferby:* I would have probably did a little bit more focusing in school because I found out that we really had a lot to offer school wise. I just really feel like for me I was just looking for an easy way out. I had a friend of mine that played football with me and we took a math class together and he was only in there two weeks and he transferred out. I said, "Man, why you transfer?" He was like, "It was too easy." I didn't even know I had an option to take harder classes or more advanced classes but everything's for a reason. So that would probably be what I would probably do.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't covered in the interview?

*[0:40:00]*

*Joe Ferby:* Anything I'd like to add that you didn't cover. No. The interview was pretty thorough. I'm interested in seeing the outcome and some of the opinion of some of the other interviewees.

*Treshain Norfleet:* Okay. Well we thank you for participating in 2010 Crossroads to Freedom Summer Project and this concludes –

*[End of Audio]*