Herman Gary, 2008

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Eric Neimeyer: On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom project, we'd like to thank you for interviewing with us today. I'm Eric Neimeyer.

Lauren Turner: I'm Lauren Turner.

Eric Neimeyer: Just to start off, could you state your name and occupation?

Herman Gary: My name is Herman Eugene Gary, retired.

Eric Neimeyer: And where were you born?

Herman Gary: I was born in Memphis, 2313 Wyona Avenue.

Eric Neimeyer: What part of town is that?

Herman Gary: About three blocks from here?

Eric Neimeyer: So North Memphis?

Herman Gary: Yes, in Hollywood, Southeast Hollywood Subdivision.

Eric Neimeyer: What were your parents' names and occupations?

Herman Gary: My father's name was Herman E. Gary. He worked at the furniture factory here in Hollywood. My mother, Fay Gary, was a housewife.

[00:01:05]

Eric Neimeyer: And growing up, what was the neighborhood like and do you have any specific memories?

Herman Gary: Such as?

Eric Neimeyer: Just growing up and neighborhood, family life?

Herman Gary: My growing up was general. My family life, my mother – my parents, they were excellent people. I went to Hyde Park Elementary School, which is right here in Hollywood. As a matter of fact, I've lived in Hollywood all my life. I've never – okay.

Eric Neimeyer: Never wanted to leave?

[00:01:59]

Herman Gary: Well, I did leave. I was born here in Hollywood on Wyona Avenue, which is about three blocks from here, and I've lived in this neighborhood all of my life other than the times that I was in the service from 1951 to 1957.

I came back home to Memphis and I relocated to Washington, D.C. because that was the only place that had a civil service job vacancy that I had applied for here in Memphis.

So I went to Washington, D. C. I worked for the U.S. Department of Transportation for 32 years, with a few other agencies in Washington that I also worked with.

[00:02:56] In a government job, if you reach the highest grade that – at any particular time and you feel that you're stuck there, there are other agencies that you can apply for a job and if you accept it, that's where you go, so I started work. My first job was with the National Labor Relations Board.

I transferred from there to General Service Administration and then – and Department of Commerce and I wound up at U.S. Department of Transportation and that's the Highway Traffic Safety Administration and I worked there until I retired in January of 1986. Then I came back to Memphis to take care of my elderly mother and I've been here ever since.

[00:04:00] I went – did I give you my schooling?

Eric Neimeyer: Your elementary school. Where'd you go after that?

Herman Gary: After elementary school, I went to Douglass High School, which is about ten minutes here, all in North Memphis. I left and went to Chicago for about three years and I was inducted into the military from Chicago.

But I had to come back to Memphis and go out to the military service. I went into the military service. I gave you dates of that, I think, didn't I?

Eric Neimeyer: Mm-hm.

Herman Gary: And I took you all the way to D.C. and brought me back home and I've been here since – back here since 1987.

[00:05:00]

Eric Neimeyer: Did you get the opportunity to graduate from high school before you went into the military?

Herman Gary: Oh, yes, I did. I graduated from Douglass High School in 1948.

Eric Neimeyer: And at the time, those were segregated schools, right?

Herman Gary: Yes, it was. Uh-huh.

Eric Neimeyer: Do you feel that the segregation in the schools affected your education?

Herman Gary: No, I don't think that segregation affected my education.

CUT 05:29

Lauren Turner: Talk to us a little bit about what activities you were involved in in high school.

Herman Gary: In high school, I played football, basketball and boxed. We had a pretty nice football team, a nice basketball team and a nice boxing team, so I did have sports activity while in high school.

[00:06:00] My post-education, I was – excuse me. After I was discharged from the – and honorably discharged from the military, the Army, I went to Greer's Business College, which is also here in Memphis, majored in accounting, and I did get a certificate of – as a junior accountant from Greer's Business College.

I – in the military, I went to college, also, Southeastern University, but I took the necessary subjects for my job performance

[00:06:58] And I have certificates for management, accounting and business administration and all that post-education was very helpful in my work. I retired from U.S. Department of Transportation, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration as a chief of accounts payable branch and that was about all at this point that I can answer about my post-education.

Lauren Turner: Can you – going back a little bit, can we talk about how religion may have played a role in your life when you were younger, about church life or any activities you were involved in church?

[00:08:05]

Herman Gary: My religious activities were – would you ask that question again?

Lauren Turner: Just were you involved in any activities in church when you were younger?

Herman Gary: Yes, only I was in the choir and a Boy Scout and, in fact, the church that I grew up in was Hill's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, which is just across Hollywood Street on Dexter, and I grew up in church, very religious, and that helped me to this point in my life.

[00:09:03] In addition to my church activities, I am also now a 33rd degree master Mason and it's based on religion, also, and that is the light that I try to show as of today and my religious activities and my religious beliefs has helped me tremendously.

Lauren Turner: Do you want to talk to us a little bit about your parents or did you have any brothers and sisters?

Herman Gary: Yes. I have one brother. His name is Charles Edward Gary.

[00:09:58] I had a sister named Juanita Evelyn Gary, but she deceased about – she is deceased and that's it. It was just the three of us and currently, excuse me, my brother still lives in Washington, D.C.

He's a restaurant owner and he's been in that business since 1967 until today and his restaurant is located on Georgia Avenue adjacent to Howard University and he's a successful business owner.

CUT 10:59

[00:11:00]

Eric Neimeyer: So did you and your brother move up to D.C. together?

Herman Gary: No. I went to Washington, D.C. first and my brother was in the military, the Navy, and he came to D.C. after being honorably discharged from the Navy in Chicago, Illinois.

Lauren Turner: Can you tell us a little bit about race relations while you were here in Memphis?

Herman Gary: Well, race relations, but it didn't affect me too much because I knew what you could – it was not hidden. It was obvious and you knew what to expect for the things – the way that you lived and the things that you do.

[00:11:57] So having knowledge of that, it – you just lived through it day by day, each day. If anything changed, it changed; if it didn't, it didn't. You still went on, you know, along in your – with your life, so there's not too much that I can express about the segregation as I before said, you knew it.

You understood it and you acted within the laws at that particular time and you were – just lived life and lived through it. You knew that – well, I can't explain it any further because that was just it.

[00:13:00] You knew the things that you could do being black, where you could go, where you couldn't go and you governed yourself accordingly. If you didn't, the consequences were whatever they were at that particular time, so I didn't have any problem with it because I didn't know any better and I just lived through it.

I can't say it was an unhappy experience because it gave me the opportunity to enjoy the freedoms that I received in cities, countries other than Memphis, Tennessee or being in the South.

[00:14:00] Well, I guess that's all I can say about that because while I was in the military, I went to Korea, went to England, and those were the days that I enjoyed subsequent to, you know, living in the South because the South was the South *(Laughter)* and that was that.

And it really – the experience of getting along with other people, even though segregation was a part of you in the South, but it didn't follow you everywhere that you went and those are the freedoms, you know, that I enjoyed at that particular time.

Lauren Turner: Being in the service, how did those memories of the South – being in the service, how did that help you?

[00:15:00]

Herman Gary: That was part of the freedom that I was speaking of because you were free to do anything that you liked within the law and you understood oppression and after I was in the military that was part of the freedom and you – I grew up as a man, and due to the fact that was wartime.

So you didn't have too much time to think about any former segregation that existed or you had gone through because that was an act of freedom.

CUT 15:48

Lauren Turner: While you were here in Memphis, do you remember anything going on in terms – like while you were in high school, anything going on in terms of change here in Memphis?

[00:16:05]

Herman Gary: I can't say that I noticed any change because segregation didn't end until after I was – had graduated from high school, if I'm correct on that, because segregation in Memphis didn't end until after the death of Martin Luther King, as I see it. Yes, I think those years are right.

[00:16:58]

Lauren Turner: So while you were away, how did you feel hearing about segregation finally being over while you were away?

Herman Gary: I felt very bad about it and the demonstrations that existed at that time showed exactly how I felt or how we felt. I was in Washington, D.C. at the time and I found out about it on a break from work in the restaurant that I was – it was around lunchtime, I think and everything just ended.

[00:17:56] And all the demonstrations just started, all – it just went – everybody was crazy, burning, fighting, looting and as I remember, the National Guard and everything was out protecting the dangers that were occurring.

You had to go home and couldn't linger in the street and – because everybody left work. Work – it was a work stoppage immediately after that because everybody was so angry about it that they demonstrated it and that was about it.

Lauren Turner: What do you remember hearing about during that time?

[00:18:59]

Herman Gary: What do I remember hearing about?

Lauren Turner: Yes, in the –

Herman Gary: About his left – that he had gotten assassinated here in Memphis?

Lauren Turner: Mm-hm.

Herman Gary: How do I remember hearing about it? Oh, it was on television, radio and any type of communication that we had at that particular time and it was a terrible moment.

It was so unbelievable and so hurting that that is the reason why I said that everybody just went crazy and wild; couldn't believe it and hated that it happened at that particular time for the purpose that he was in Memphis for, demonstrating against – I think it was the garbage strike.

[00:20:13] Yes, it was the civil right movement and everything just exploded.

Lauren Turner: Do you remember talking to people from back home and how they were feeling or what was going on in the city?

Herman Gary: No, because it was all on television, so we didn't have to ask any questions, just had to watch, you know, to see what they were doing, the demonstrating that they were doing and the damage that was occurring at that particular time.

CUT 20:56

Lauren Turner: We are going to shift gears a little bit.

Herman Gary: Hmm?

Lauren Turner: We are going to shift gears a little bit.

[00:21:00] Has – the sit-ins and the demonstrations and things, how did you feel about people getting involved in them?

Herman Gary: What's that?

Lauren Turner: The – like the sit-ins and the demonstrations and the fight for equal rights. How did you feel about people getting involved in those types of things?

Herman Gary: I believed in it. You're speaking of the demonstrations for civil rights?

Lauren Turner: Yes.

Herman Gary: Yes, well, I believed in it as long as it was nonviolent. As far as demonstrations are concerned, I've never participated in one

because I was a single demonstrator in my own way and my own reactions and my own – my thoughts.

[00:21:57] I would correct any misdeed to the person that – where it existed. As I said, segregation was everywhere. Some of it was known and some of it was unknown. You would have a suit on business in Washington, D.C. in the offices and all around in the city in the daytime.

But at night your actions were like Klu Klux Klan, like you had a white robe on, but that type of segregation existed and you didn't know about it, as opposed to being in the South, it was widely known. It was known as everyday life.

[00:22:58] But in the Northern cities or cities other than the South, it was just sugarcoated. It was not seen, but it still existed, and you only knew that by personal contact, you know, with the people that you were dealing with or talking to or whatever in that sense.

Eric Neimeyer: Do you remember any particular personal contact with segregation while you were in Washington, D.C. with racism working for the government?

Herman Gary: Oh, yes. The primary knowledge that I had was involved with, for instance, in hiring and promotions in the position that you were in.

[00:24:01] I had to go to school and take courses for a promotion to get, you know, farther in my field and I could – if there was a white person that wanted – that was working with me in the same classification, they had more opportunities of getting the job than I – that I did.

I would train and teach a white person and they would get promoted over me doing the same job, but it was so common and it wasn't hidden, but it was segregation in that sense.

[00:25:03] So as I told you before that I would be probably a Grade GS-4 or GS-5 and another person, a white person, in my office would get promoted to GS-6 or GS-7 and didn't have to do anything for it and I had taught them that job and, frankly, when I – a good example is when I retired.

I retired as a supervisor with the accounting branch and someone in the Budget Department had brought a white fellow down to take my job, so I found that out. Now this is part of the

CUT 25:58

– in the sense that segregation between – that was known.

[00:26:08] And that was a part of it because my job was gonna be given to the white male and when other individuals in my unit that was supervising had the experience and knowledge and everything of the job that they were doing.

They could take my place, so after I found out that they intended to give him the job, I didn't accept it, so I say, "Well, I'll – just get the class like, like we're doing now and whoever qualified for the job would have it." And it did turn out to be that way because one of my employees did get my job after I retired.

[00:26:58] So the question that you asked, that was some of the – one of the incidents that I remember as being a demonstrator, but a one-man demonstrator and that was my demonstration.

That's what I was speaking of because I believed in the right way of doing things, so that was part of my demonstrating for civil rights, just that act, you know, within itself, as I see it.

Lauren Turner: How did you deal with that kind of hidden oppression?

Herman Gary: Well, I always, as a person, me being me, avoided it and not let it be shown that it affected me because I went about my way which it was my way or no way.

[00:28:09] So I didn't – it didn't affect me too much because I was born in segregation and when it was eliminated, it was just eliminated even though it was still there.

For example, I think about and talk about this all the time is that when I would come to work and I'd get out of the elevator and the people that I was dealing with, wouldn't speak, for instance.

You know, I'd say, "Good morning" and they wouldn't say anything, the white – I'm speaking of the segregated part of this and wouldn't say, you know, anything. Just go on, you know, on to their office or whatever the case may be.

[00:29:02] But the same people, the whites that had to deal with me, would have to come to my office and do it, so I'd be sitting at my desk doing whatever I was doing at that particular time and he or she would come into my office and if I were working, I wouldn't stop working even if I know that they was coming in there to see me.

But I made the point that they would have to speak to me in my office as opposed, you know, to being outside, so that was a retaliation to segregation because they would have to speak to me because I'm the supervisor and they had to deal with me.

They came to see me, but you're going to speak to me before I talk to you and that's what they would do, had the freedom to do so. I didn't come in your office; you came in mine, so.

[00:29:59]

Lauren Turner: Were you married or single at the time?

Herman Gary: Yes, because I got married in 1953 and I have two children since then, a boy and a girl, if that's answering your question. I don't know.

Lauren Turner: So you raised your family in D.C.?

Herman Gary: Well, my first child, my daughter, was born in Memphis down the street where I live now in 19 – when was Sandra born? Nineteen fifty-four.

[00:31:01] Her name is Sandra and I have a son named _____ that was born in Washington, D.C. and he's 45 and my daughter, Sandra, is 53.

CUT 31:22

And my son lives with me now and my daughter is in Washington, D.C. working with my brother in the restaurant and she just left here. She was here for the weekend and she's gone back to D.C. She got back yesterday.

Lauren Turner: What was it like raising a family during this time period?

[00:32:00]

Herman Gary: Well, I can't say too much about that now that they are grown, so I've forgotten all of that, the hard times there. There have been hard times and good times, but the good times outweigh the bad times, so I was working.

I was a family man and took care of my family and they were taught to the best of our ability, you know, what to do, work, get an

education and that's about it, just like it is now. It's no different, your objectives, then as they are now, I suppose.

[00:33:01] Because all the bad memories I have, I guess they've gone, you know. I don't rehash it, you know, to think of it again because it really hasn't been too bad, I mean unbearable, what I've gone through up until this date.

In fact, next month, I'll be 78 years old anyway, so 78 years, you know, is kinda rough to remember, well, about anything specific.

Lauren Turner: Do you remember at all explaining race relations to your kids?

[00:34:00]

Herman Gary: No. At their ages, I didn't have to explain anything because they were old enough and large enough to know because they had gone through it. Oh, no. When my son – when Martin Luther King was assassinated, what was_____? My son was only about 8 or 9 years old, I think.

[00:34:58] But he didn't know the difference because we as parents, everything was – you know, was okay because my wife worked in the government at the Department of Agriculture and I was working in government because in Washington, D.C. as far as that's concerned, the main occupation in Washington, D.C. is government work.

That's not much laborers other than, you know, in restaurants and things like that and manual jobs because that's the capital of the United States and all 13 – what would you call it? Thirteen government headquarters are and the federal government is in Washington, D.C.

[00:36:03] And that's where 90, 95 percent of the people, you know, work and so far as Washington, D.C. proper, it's about 90 – always has been about 90 or 95 percent black anyway because the whites live in Virginia and Maryland, which is just across the street in Maryland and just across the street – the bridge in Virginia.

But they all come to Washington, D.C. to work, so that's where the integration is there even though it is segregation, but if you can see the picture, you know what I'm saying, so as far as the kids and the – what'd you say? Race relation?

Lauren Turner: Mm-hm.

Herman Gary: They all went to school together and worked together. Even though it was segregation in the South, it still was the same in Washington, D.C., so that's where they grew up from children, you know, until they were grown.

[00:37:01] I guess it's the same way in Pennsylvania, right?

Eric Neimeyer: Right.

Herman Gary: Right.

CUT 37:10

Lauren Turner: Can you talk a little bit about coming back to Memphis and – from D.C. when you came back? What was going on?

Herman Gary: In 1977. The livelihood has changed tremendously because so far as gang violence, drug-selling, that wasn't prevalent. Of course, it's everywhere now, but it was nothing like it is now. It was much different.

[00:38:00] Let's see. For instance, now this whole neighborhood is – has gone tremendously into drug and gang activity, but when I came back home it wasn't like that and as – well, one reason is because most of the elderly people that were in this neighborhood or in this vicinity or that I deal with daily, they're deceased.

And so, for instance, on this street, I doubt it's more than – the most is 20 people that are living now as opposed to when I first came home.

[00:39:10] And all these dilapidated houses didn't exist. That's just – they used to have an organization called City Beautiful, I think it was, speaking of this street alone.

And as far as my mother's concerned and the neighbors, all you – they'd see was beautiful flowers and flower gardens in the yard and what have you in the backyard and my mother even won a citation for the most beautiful, you know, yard and what have you and stuff. None of that stuff even exists anymore.

[00:39:59] And so it's – everything has changed with the times and what existing now, but I'll say everything's out of control now and it

wasn't like that 20 years ago, 15 years ago, because I've been home, I think about 22 years. Yeah, since '77.

No, that's 30 years, and there's nothing like now that it was when I came back to Memphis, when I came back, so that's all I can say about that, if I answered your question.

Lauren Turner: What about the racial climate of the neighborhood when you came back?

Herman Gary: Oh, the racial climate in my neighborhood, in this neighborhood?

[00:41:01] It was – I'll say it was probably hidden segregation but it still existed. That's why all the whites in this neighborhood, which was about 60/40 has moved out, you know, to Collierville out in East Memphis, you know, out of the neighborhoods because you can't find – goodness.

In fact, you can't find 50 whites living in this neighborhood and it was about 60/40 when I first – when I came back home.

[00:42:11] So that has existed within the last 20 years. It's nothing but all black now.

CUT 42:21

]Right? You can ride around here all day. You're not gonna see any whites, homeowners or businesses. This was – what's the classification? Rich, poor and medium. What are the three classifications? Rich, poor and, oh, my goodness.

Lauren Turner: Middle class?

Herman Gary: Huh?

Lauren Turner: Middle class?

[00:43:00]

Herman Gary: Yeah, right, right, but this was a middle class neighborhood owned by the people who lived in this neighborhood. Hollywood, that's what we call it, but it is – what is it? East Hyde Park, so far as tied – you know, like you're tied to your house.

We've always called it Hollywood because that's Hollywood Street right there and everything over here, we called Hollywood,

but it's really East Hyde Park, which is the next neighborhood connected to this neighborhood and it was owned – always owned by the homeowners.

You know, the businesses, they were all black, all of Hollywood Street, and Springdale the whole neighborhood, really, and that's the truth.

[00:44:05] They've given this subdivision a different name anyway. What is it now? North Midtown? Within the last six or eight months, nine months, so you wouldn't know what I'd be talking about when I say Hollywood because it isn't Hollywood anymore.

Lauren Turner: Do you feel like the neighborhood has declined since you've _____?

Herman Gary: Ninety-seven percent. It has.

Lauren Turner: Like racial discrimination had _____?

[Crosstalk]

Herman Gary: No. That had nothing to do because there was nothing to discriminate against. Who you gonna discriminate with on Shasta Street, Dexter, Vandale, Hunter, Eldridge?

[00:45:01] It's right where the _____ – who you gonna discriminate against? Is that right?

Lauren Turner: You're right.

Herman Gary: As I know it. *(Laughter)*

Lauren Turner: _____. Could you tell us about maybe your proudest moment looking back on the things you've experienced or your proudest moment?

Herman Gary: My proudest moments. All right, in what – my proudest moment in my life?

Lauren Turner: Mm-hm.

[00:46:00]

Herman Gary: I guess was when *(Laughter)* – oh, my goodness. Probably when I became a father. *(Laughter)* That's one.

CUT 46:14

My being able to work and retire, to perform in the military service. I don't know. My proudest moments. Well, that was three of them.

[00:47:00] That's about the main three of the list unless you wanted to ask questions 'cause I have a whole list of proudest moments. *(Laughter)* But if there's, you know, anything specific that you want to ask about as far as questions are concerned or ideas.

[00:47:59]

Lauren Turner: Do you have any advice you might give the younger generation looking back on all the things that you've experienced?

Herman Gary: Get an education. Make good choices. Making good choices, that would be in the broad sense, but respect – being respectful. Try to accomplish your goals and if you have children, being respectful, you know, to them, being a good mother or good father.

[00:49:00] And just try and do the right things in life and excel in your choices. I'd say be respectful and obedient and just try and do the right things and make good choices because you're responsible for your own actions and to know the consequences of, you know, what – the wrong things that you do in life.

I'm not going into policies like being a good citizen and all type stuff, you know, but I'm talking about the primary – as I see it, the primary things in life that will help you succeed in your ambitions and your goals and learn the basics, you know, of all of that.

[00:50:08] That's self preservation.

Lauren Turner: In closing, we'd like to thank you for participating in this project with us.

Herman Gary: I really appreciate having the opportunity to try and be helpful.

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TIME CUTS:
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