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Reginald Howard, 2008

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- Dara Chesnutt:* Appreciate it. Could you start by saying your full name and occupation?
- Reginald Howard:* Reginald R. Howard. I'm a real estate broker and real estate appraiser.
- Dara Chesnutt:* Okay. Where were you born and raised?
- Reginald Howard:* South Bend, Indiana, raised in Indiana, also, born and raised in South Bend.
- Dara:* Where did you grow up and did you move at all or did you stay mostly in –?
- Reginald Howard:* No. I stayed mostly in Indiana.
- Dara Chesnutt:* Okay. What are the names of your parents and their occupations?
- Reginald Howard:* My mother was a housewife and she worked for my father. My father's name was Adolph and he was a tailor and he had a dry cleaners, so we grew up sorta privileged little black kids. Even though we didn't have money, people thought we did for some reason.
- Dara Chesnutt:* Did you have any brothers or sisters?
- Reginald Howard:* Sure.
- Dara Chesnutt:* Okay, what are their names and occupations?
- Reginald Howard:* I had a brother named Carlton, who is deceased.
- [00:01:01] I have a brother named Dean, who's my youngest brother, who's just retired from teaching in Tucson, Arizona and I have a sister named **Alfreda** who's retired and lives in South Bend still.
- Dara Chesnutt:* Okay. Could you talk a little bit about what your home life was like?
- Reginald Howard:* I don't know. I had a very strong father and very knowledgeable father. We were raised in a predominantly Hungarian-Polish neighborhood and he – again, he had a business and during that era, it was the area of neighborhood concept businesses and so people came to us for service, came to him for the service, and he was well thought of.

[00:01:59]

My mother assisted him and she was very patient with me in particular. I was probably the worst child she had, but the exception of that, pretty much just a normal family life. We fought and argued, you know, like normal children do.

Siblings, you know, fight and argue and – but they instilled love in us and very strong family feelings, you know. Everybody was close. I did lose my oldest brother, Carlton; lost him three years ago. He was sort of an idol of mine in a lotta ways.

He sort of set the standards in the family, particularly among the males for conditioning; stayed in superb shape. He was 73 when he died three years ago. He looked five years younger than me.

[00:03:00]

But he was the type of person who would never say anything negative about another living human being and he would never use foul language; just beautiful person.

Dara Chesnutt:

Okay. What activities were you involved in as a child?

Reginald Howard:

Mostly athletics, basketball and football. I mean basketball and baseball, not so much football, basketball and baseball mostly.

Dara Chesnutt:

All right. Where did you go to elementary school?

Reginald Howard:

I went to a school called Linden, which is on the west side of South Bend, and it was a good school. We had some knock-down, drag-out fights and all that kinda stuff like all the kids do, but basically it was a good school.

Dara Chesnutt:

Okay. Where did you go for junior high?

Reginald Howard:

The same school. Mm hm.

Dara Chesnutt:

Okay and then what about for high school?

[00:04:00]

Reginald Howard:

Some – I went to a very famous high school called South Bend Central and I say it was famous and the reason for it, we've had some famous people who came outta that school.

First of all, John Wooden, the great UCLA coach, basketball coach, he coached high school there. Then we had a fellow by the name of – that just died about a month ago, Syd Pollack, the

director in Hollywood. He was – in fact, I saw him here when he was doing “The Firm.”

Let’s see. Who else did we have from there? Another fellow named Lloyd Haynes who was an actor who was on “Room 222.” I don’t know if you’re old enough to remember that, used to be a television show, weekly television show.

And we had Michael Warren, who was All-American basketball player at UCLA, and played in “Hill Street Blues” for years.

[00:05:03]

00:05:03 Beginning of segment 1

He was a young policeman on there, so we had a – for some reason, they had a good theatrical class there and they produced a lot of good actors. There’s a couple others who I really can’t think of right now.

Well, I do know we had Junior Walker, also, who was a saxophone player, the singer, Junior Walker and his All Stars, and he went on to make it, you know, nationally.

And, of course, we had the Brademas boys, John Brademas, who was in the Congress for a number of years and I think he retired about ten years ago from New York University as the president of New York University, and so it really was a famous high school.

I was never exposed to segregated schools. All the schools – and it wasn’t because the whites loved the blacks.

[00:06:03]

But at the time I grew up in South Bend, it was probably 8 to 10 percent black, so the cost of a dual school system would have been prohibitive for that few amount of students, so we just – they were – everybody was integrated and I didn’t know any better.

Dara Chesnutt: Do you remember there being any tensions between the white and the black students?

Reginald Howard: Were there tensions?

Dara Chesnutt: Yeah, was –

Reginald Howard: Slightly, but nothing – it was so few, so few black students, you know, very few tensions.

- Dara Chesnutt:* Okay. Did you continue your athletics throughout high school? Did you continue with the baseball and –?
- Reginald Howard:* Yes and slightly – shortly after I got out of high school, I started playing with like semi-pro ball around home and then I got the bug to go to California so I could play winter and summer baseball.
- [00:07:01] So I went to California and I was playing in the winter league there and there's a park there called – well, at 51st and Avalon, South Park.
- All the guys would go there and work out around February getting ready for the upcoming baseball season, late January, early February, and I was there working out and everybody there except me almost had a contract.
- They were going somewhere and playing and I had nowhere to go and it was a guy there named Buster Hayward. Buster Hayward was the manager of the Indianapolis Clowns in the Henry Aaron era when Henry was playing for the Clowns. He was retired.
- He wasn't kinda – he wasn't managing or anything there and he just said, "Have you got a job?" I said, "No." And he said, "So you want to play baseball in the Negro League?" I said, "Sure. I'll play anywhere as long as I'm playing baseball."
- [00:08:01] So he said – well, you know, he made arrangements for me and that's what propelled me toward getting into black professional baseball.
- Denzel Young:* So you said that you – oh, and like playing baseball, what really sparked your interest in baseball?
- Reginald Howard:* Mainly two people, my father, who loved the game also, and my uncle. I had a uncle named Hubert Mitchell, who is deceased. Mitch was an outfielder with the Red Sox here, the Memphis Red Sox, in the '20s, late '20s, and he went north with a team called the Illinois Giants.
- [00:08:54] And Mitch said that he got tired of working – playing ball, excuse me, all summer long and then when the fall came – I mean when the winter came, he didn't have any job and when he would get a job, it would be time to leave again for spring training before he'd get, you know, meaningful employment.

So somehow he came into Studebaker's into South Bend where Studebaker's was and they offered him a job working at Studebaker's and while working at Studebaker's he could play for the Studebaker team and that's why he sort of dropped his anchors there and then shortly after, I guess, my mother **came to** _____.

Anyway, he went on and as he retired or got outta baseball, he started managing teams, you know, semi-pro teams around the city and when Carlton, my brother, and I were like 5, 6, 7 and 8 years old, we would go out with him on Sundays.

So we just grew up in baseball. So that was – you asked the question as to how I got involved in it.

[00:10:03]

It was just a part of my life and then as a boy, I became the visiting team bat boy for all the black teams that came there to play the Studebaker team.

Began Segment 2 00:10:20

So the names like Josh Gibson you hear people talk about, I can put a face with him.

I was just a child, but I can put a face with him. I remember when Jackie Robinson was playing shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs and that was like 1945.

I can remember when Minnie Minoso was playing third base with the New York Cubans, which was like 1947, so these are – you know, way back, I can remember players. I can remember Larry Doby when he was with the Newark Eagles playing second base, yeah.

[00:11:00]

So it was – baseball has just been a part of my life almost all my life, a significant part of it, too.

Denzel Young:

You mentioned Jackie Robinson. I'm wondering; how did you feel when the color barrier in the majors was broken? What was your like – I don't _____.

Reginald Howard:

At the time, I was elated. I was just happy because, you know, as a child, you view things one way, but then when you become an adult, you view them another way.

There were some aspects of _____ that as an adult I don't like very well, but as a child, you know, I didn't look at it from that

perspective and the reason why I say this – and I like to preface my remarks “in my opinion.”

[00:11:56]

In my opinion, at the time that this happened, nobody played a better brand of ball than was played in the Negro Leagues and I preface my remarks on the following: not only did they have the black stars, they had the Cubans, the Dominicans, the Puerto Ricans, the Panamanians, Venezuelans.

All Latin America was playing Negro League. They weren't permitted to play in what was called white organized ball, so subsequently, I feel they had really the best athletes.

So to go into the Negro League and take one player, Jackie Robinson, and that was less than one-half a percent of all the players that were playing and say that you integrated Negro League baseball is questionable to me today, but it wasn't when I was a child.

[00:12:59]

It's questionable to me today because it ultimately destroyed the Negro League, which was probably the largest or the second largest – I say the second largest; most people say it was the largest – black business in the United States of America at that time.

So, in essence, you could have went to any team of the 12 teams that were playing at that time and took anybody off that could have left their bus and went to the Yankees, the Dodgers, the Cardinals, anywhere, and made a significant contribution, but they weren't accepted at that time and I just don't like the way it was done.

And then some things have happened. I don't know if you're aware of this, but – and I know you're not aware of it because you're too young to be aware of it. Have you ever heard of policy, the word “policy?” Do you know what policy is as it related to blacks?

[00:14:02]

Well, policy was the lifeblood, financial lifeblood, of a black community and blacks controlled policy in this country for years and all the Negro League team owners were policy people. Most of them were.

They were what we call policy czars. Some people call them policy kings and these policy men – and let me put it to you this way. You'd better understand what I'm saying.

Policy – more black men became millionaires in the United States of America – and maybe you could do some research on this and find out if I’m right or wrong – in policy than anything else. The ball – well, let me use Al Capone as an example.

[00:15:03]

Al Capone set up a system in Chicago called the Renaissance Area and in this area, he placed 12 policy kings or policy czars and his intent was this. As black people came north – and black people were going north tantamount to Latinos today coming north for jobs in the stockyards and the industrial northern factories.

As they came north, they would move into this Renaissance Area and the area was to the north – if you’re familiar with the area – 35th Street. To the south would be 61st, Cottage Grove on the east and State Street on the west, and from within that area is where all these black people would live, you know, as they were coming up.

They had these 12 policy kings. Capone said, “Now, look. You’ve got to deliver those people to me at Election Day,” which helped him to control politics in Chicago.

Began segment 4 00:16:19

Now, these 12 people – there’s one other thing that Al Capone wanted in conjunction with that. He wanted to have a relationship with the black funeral directors.

And the reason why he wanted a relationship with the black funeral directors, if things ever went bad and they had a problem moving his whiskey, he could always move it in funeral processions because out of respect, the law enforcement people would not bother the funeral people, and also he protected the blacks against other members of La Cosa Nostra.

[00:16:59]

And also against the law enforcement officers ’cause he had – you know, he was paying everybody to operate, to do what he wanted to do. Now, I’m sure that you really said you understand policy, but I don’t think you really know what policy was.

Whites didn’t understand policy in this country ’til about 30 years ago really and then they took it over. Yeah, they took it over in the form and they changed the name of it. They refined it, up-scaled it and enlarged it and enhanced it. It’s called a lottery today.

The lottery was controlled in this country by black people. It was a game called policy and Capone would tell – hey, this was a black boy’s game. Leave them alone. Let them have it.

That’s their game, but blacks – if you ever look at some of the – and it’s interesting to me to see some of the old “Sanford and Sons” and hear Redd Foxx say, “What’s the numbers today? What’s the numbers today?”

[00:18:01]

Well, that’s what he’s talking about. He’s talking about the policy. Periodically, you’ll see that and they never could tell how much money was being made but they looked at the living habits of blacks who were involved in policy and they could get some kinda idea, but the policy kings would do this.

During that era, if – hypothetically, if my son, say, was at school and I didn’t have any money, it was hard for a black man to go to banking institutions and get money same way the whites could. They just didn’t do it. It just didn’t happen.

But you could always go to the policy king, so the policy people were the bankers of the black community. Black restaurants, black hotels, if you had inventory stock in your inventory stock, well, you couldn’t go to banks and get money, but you go to the policy man and get it.

[00:18:59]

If somebody died, there was no monies available for burial. The policy man would bury them. It was one of the better jobs that black people – it was an industry within the black community itself was the numbers and, again, it’s the lottery today, but the numbers were controlled by blacks.

Let me share a story with you about one of the owners. They had a guy in New York, excuse me, an owner in New York named Alejandro Pompez, Alex Pompez. He owned the New York Cubans baseball team and he had a cash flow problem and he went to Dutch Schultz, the notorious Dutch Schultz.

Said, “Dutch, I got a problem, cash flow problem.” Said, “What’s the matter?” Said, “I need about \$25,000.00.” He said, “How long you need it?” “Week, ten days, **something like that.**”

[00:20:00]

On the due date, he showed up and liquidated the debt service in accordance with the terms and conditions of the loan, so approximately two or three months went by and he found himself

with another cash flow problem and he went back to Dutch Schultz.

“Dutch, I got a cash flow problem.” “Well, you need another 25?” “No, better let me have 50.” “Need \$50,000.00?” “Yeah.” “How long you need it?” “Oh, 15 days, maybe 20 days most.” Okay. On the due date, Pompez shows up in accordance with the loan terms and conditions, liquidates the debt service.

“What a black boy doing to make this kinda money this fast?” Then they found out – that’s when they really, really started – they say and a lot of this is oral history – they started really watching numbers, but again, Capone was so powerful in the Chicago area, no, you don’t bother him. Leave him alone.

[00:20:58]

As long as the marriage between Capone and the numbers people where they were producing people on Election Day for him to control policy in Chicago, that was it.

There’s a good book out on that if you ever get a chance to – a fellow named Norman Thompson wrote it. It’s called *When We Were Kings*, which relates to policy.

Began segment 5 00:21:19

So I’ve gone way out to left field and third base and everywhere just to tell you a story about what policy was about and how it related to baseball.

But most of it **controlling politics** people. There was a lady that went into the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in 2006 named Effa Manley. Her husband was Abe Manley (Abe “Cap” Manley). Abe was a big policy man in Newark.

They had a guy in New York by the name of – besides Pompez, another one in New York, by the name of **Selmer**, Jim Selmer. They called him Soldier Boy. I don’t know why these guys all had nicknames, Jim “Soldier Boy” Selmer. His partner was Bill Robinson.

[00:22:00]

Bill Robinson, Bojangles, did several movies with Shirley Temple and was a tap dancer. They jointly owned – together they owned the New York Cubans and then there were people like – there was a fellow in Pittsburgh named – oh, boy, Red.

They called him Red. He was a reddish-looking black guy. Greenlee, Gus Greenlee. He owned the Pittsburgh Crawfords and built a brand new ballpark in the heart of the Depression in 1931 called Gus Greenlee Field.

A quick story about Gus Greenlee. There was another team in Pittsburgh called the Homestead Grays and Gus Greenlee was a huge numbers man and he had what we would call – today, we would probably call it a casino.

It was called Crawford's Grill. He named his ball club the Pittsburgh Crawfords on Crawford's Avenue.

[00:23:00]

Crawford's Grill was where you had food, drink, entertainment and gambling, just like a casino, just a miniature casino, I guess, but anyway, and he had his numbers. All the good ball players that the Homestead Grays would come up with, Gus Greenlee would offer more money and they would leave the Grays and go to his team, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, because he could pay out more money.

So to counteract that the fellow who owned the Homestead Grays, Cumberland Posey, who was not in the numbers – he was one of the few who wasn't in the numbers – he joined forces with another guy named Rufus – there's the nickname again – "Sonny Man" Jackson, who was a numbers man.

So the two – and that way he could compete with Gus Greenlee for players, but Gus Greenlee was like George Steinbrenner of the Yankees.

[00:24:01]

He just couldn't pay enough for players. He just wanted good players. He'd pay out enormous amounts of money for good _____ during that era for players.

Denzel Young:

That's _____ almost shocked and learned a lot right there, but I also wanted to ask you about something else. As a baseball player, I'm sure you traveled a little from game to game. I was wondering whether you encountered any problems with – I know that within the Negro Leagues it was pretty much the same kinda people.

There was not much conflict about it. The outside world may not have saw it that way, so did you have problems traveling and trying to stay in hotels?

Reginald Howard: Oh, yeah. There was hotels we couldn't stay in. You just – but you knew you couldn't stay in them, so you – it was just – you know, you reopen up a can of worms with me, in a sense, but I'll share one – another story with you.

[00:25:02] We had a fellow named Jim Cobbins who used to drive the bus and he's been very successful, a millionaire several times now. My age. I'm just as jealous as I can be. No, we're really friends. We're really good friends, but Jim used to drive the bus and we would always have – one person would stay awake.

Like when the bus driver gets sleepy, one of the players would drive the bus. Well, that would always be Jim and I would always what we call ride the can with him, just a simple can that you set up by – in what would be the passenger side of an automobile.

You set the can up there with a pillow on it and you got a map and you're saying, "Hey, 31 North goes left," you know, and that kinda thing or making sure that he stays on the right road and make sure he stays awake, you know, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning, 2:00, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning like that.

Began segment 6 00:26:05

And Jim was one of those guys – why can't I have it? You know, he would go in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, anywhere. Why I can't I – in the '50s. Why can't I have that? If there's any – you can't eat in there. Why can't I eat in here?

You know, he used to tell me, "You don't stand up for your rights. That's wrong." I said, "Jim, we don't have any rights." *(Laughter)* But I was always afraid. He kept me on pins and needles because people used to get us mixed up all the time.

You know, there was a – particularly when we were younger, there was more of a facial resemblance between the two of us and I always just knew he was gonna do something wrong and they were gonna come and kill me for it. *(Laughter)*

So that's why I say you're getting me to thinking about and I was – some really colorful eras. Then we had – I never will forget we had a pitcher from Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica, Don Wilson.

[00:27:04] He used to call me Sir Reginald – Sir Reginald – all the time with this strong Caribbean British accent, you know, and he would – I

remember when we were in Mississippi somewhere and he went in the store. I said, “Man, let’s get outta here before Jamaica get all of us killed.”

He went into the store and they really led him out so he got back on the bus. “Sir Reggie, are we down South?” I said, “Yes, we are.” *(Laughter)* Oh, those were some interesting days.

Denzel Young: Well, after it was all said and done, I mean what did you do when baseball was over? I mean was it hard to like find something else to do? Did you go to school? Did –?

[00:28:01]

Reginald Howard: I was working with my father. I went back and worked for him for a while and I wanted to modernize and go real big and I couldn’t get the capital I needed to go the way I wanted to go, so – and he was getting older.

And I said, “Well, what can I go into which initially doesn’t require a lot of, you know, capital but yet would provide you with a fair income,” and not no _____ *(Laughter)*, but **so I could go in** real estate, so I went into real estate.

Denzel Young: Oh, but your real estate, it was more like out of the blue just trying to – or did you have any –?

[00:28:54]

Reginald Howard: Well, to be very candid with you, the fellow that I was trying to get the capital from was sorta like a president of Small Business Administration when that stuff was really going on in the early ’60s, I guess, late – yeah, early ’60s and I went to him and he was a real estate broker.

And the way he operated his office, it was just – ooh, it was so – everything was impeccably organized and I was just intrigued by him, you know, and I – and so I wound up working for him, wound up starting for him, working with him.

And, of course, he was an appraiser also, so I started selling real estate and doing appraisals for him, and back in that era, the business wasn’t as regulated as it is today. Yeah.

Denzel Young: Did segregation or racism actually interfere with you selling real estate?

[00:30:00]

Reginald Howard: Oh, boy, yes. I actually remember – that brings up another one, too. I remember one lady – well, there was another fellow in the office with me. He has a law degree, too, Fred Bohannon. He's deceased now. Gosh, you're taking me way back 'cause I was in my late 20s then.

Fred Bohannon. We had listed a party's house for sale in a predominantly white area and the lady who was selling the house said, "Now, look. I want to be able to choose the people who are buying my house."

She said she wants it to be a dark-skinned black family and she wants them to have a lotta children. In essence, she was mad at her neighbor. *(Laughter)*

[00:31:00]

So that's the kinda stuff we ran into. Periodically, we ran into that kinda stuff. There were all sorts of funny things we ran into.

Dara Chesnutt: Well, when did you move back to Memphis? You said –

Reginald Howard: I never lived here. Now, I wasn't from Memphis. I was from Indiana. I was heavily involved as a youngster in politics and sometimes I said some things that I shouldn't have said and I discovered one time it was getting to be difficult for me to make a living at home.

I said, "Wait a minute. Somebody's doing something to me, so let me get outta here." So I felt it was best that I make the change and that was about – it's almost 30 years ago now.

Dara Chesnutt: So how did you choose Memphis of all places?

Reginald Howard: I had been to Memphis on a couple of times working with a fellow named Harrel Moore, who's a real estate broker here in – still going, still active.

[00:32:02]

He's probably about my age, maybe a little younger than I am now, and we were working on a housing project down here and I liked the city. I came in and just loved the city. I fell in love with the city and I said, "Well –."

You know, I had been through, you know, a couple of times playing ball years ago, but, you know, as a child, a youngster

rather, you just – you're here and you're gone, you know, but – and I spent time here and I liked what I saw.

Dara Chesnutt: Did you notice a difference in the way race and relations were here in Memphis from where you had moved from? Did you notice – did you have any problems coming down here?

Reginald Howard: Not really. I really – the only problem I had when I initially got here – and it has left me now; I've lost it – and that was understanding people, the language. It was difficult for me to understand when I first got here.

[00:33:02] But – and when I would go home – when I go home now – and, well, I still call South Bend home. When I go home now – you sound Southern. Yeah.

I don't hear it, but they hear it and when I first came here, I would hear Southern accents. I don't hear them anymore, but I hear the difference there when I'm in the North now than I heard before, so.

Dara Chesnutt: All right. Well, we just want to thank you again for coming in. We really appreciate it and is there anything you want to add or –?

Reginald Howard: Hmm?

Dara Chesnutt: Is there anything you want to add or –?

Reginald Howard: Anything I want to add? Not really, not that I can think of right now.

Dara Chesnutt: Okay. Well, we really appreciate your story and it's really been a pleasure listening to you.

Reginald Howard: Okay.

[End of Audio]