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Bernard Washington, 2013

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2026-06-07 10:39:43
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33608

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Cameron Jones: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and Knowledge Squeeze, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm **Cameron Jones**.

Tretarius McCain: And I am **Tretarius McCain**.

Cameron Jones: And we are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Can you state some basic biographical information for the record?

Bernard Washington: Yes, I'm Bernard Washington.

Cameron Jones: If you don't mind me asking, what year were you born?

Bernard Washington: I was born in 1949.

Cameron Jones: Where were you born and raised?

Bernard Washington: I was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee?

Cameron Jones: What is or was your occupation?

Bernard Washington: Well I am a general agent. I run an insurance agency, selling various types of life insurance and investments.

Cameron Jones: Would you say it is a very prosperous business?

Bernard Washington: I've been tremendously blessed.

Cameron Jones: Are you or were you married?

Bernard Washington: I have been married. I'm no longer married now.

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Cameron Jones: What was your spouse's occupation?

Bernard Washington: She was a public school teacher.

Cameron Jones: Do or did you have any children?

Bernard Washington: Yes, I have two children: A son and a daughter.

Cameron Jones: Can you tell me what they were like?

Bernard Washington: They were good children growing up and normal children, various astute in certain areas. My daughter was rather shy and my son more like me.

Cameron Jones: Now let's talk a little about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Bernard Washington: Sure, I lived in this neighborhood growing up as a young man, a little boy, *per se*. I was born at 508 Hampton Street, which is basically around the corner and down the street. From there we moved to 544 Williams Avenue, which is directly across the street, across Lauderdale and, from there, we lived 1168 Riva Cold, which is in the Walker

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Bernard Washington: Homes area.

Cameron Jones: Did you feel safe in your neighborhood?

Bernard Washington: Very much at that time, yes.

Cameron Jones: What made you feel so safe and secure?

Bernard Washington: Well basically things **has** changed, times **has** changed. People seemingly were more **closer**, more considerate of each other and, basically, we have very close-knit families and friends.

Cameron Jones: What was your home life like?

Bernard Washington: I had a very good home life. As I've stated I was born an only child on my mother's side. Had other brothers and sisters on my father's side but a very caring and loving family.

Cameron Jones: Who were your parents and what were they like?

Bernard Washington: My mom's name was **Ruby Jean Stevens**. My father's name was **James Julius Washington**. My father basically worked in the trucking industry and, in later years, he became a chauffeur for Isaac Hayes. My mother worked quality control for Levi Strauss. That's where she retired.

Cameron Jones: Did you ever get to meet

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Cameron Jones: Isaac Hayes?

Bernard Washington: Many times.

Cameron Jones: What were the experiences like?

Bernard Washington: Great experience. I had the opportunity by my dad working for him of meeting many entertainers at that particular time. I also had a sister that danced. Her name was Helen Washington. She was basically known because at one time she had shaved her head for performance purposes. She worked with him as a dancer for many years and, being honest, Isaac Hayes was a very down-to-earth man, a very mild-mannered person to me.

Cameron Jones: Where did you go to elementary school?

Bernard Washington: I went to elementary school at La Rose Elementary, right down the street.

Cameron Jones: Where did you go to middle school and high school?

Bernard Washington: My junior high, I spent two years at Lincoln Junior High, one year at Porter Junior High at that time and I graduated in 1968 from Booker T. Washington.

Cameron Jones: What was school like for you?

Bernard Washington: Well I had a very good school life. Basically I did not participate in any of the sports

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or whatever due the fact that I've always had jobs. I've always worked. I started working at an early age, around nine, ten years old up until age I'm now.

Cameron Jones: Would you say working at a young age impacted your life now?

Bernard Washington: Repeat that.

Cameron Jones: Would you say working at a young age impacted your life now?

Bernard Washington: Well yes, greatly, because I've always liked money and I've never minded working for it, and I always believed that good work – not necessarily hard work but smart work – pays off in the long run.

Cameron Jones: How did segregation impact your educational experiences?

Bernard Washington: During the days of segregation, which I basically experienced some but, being honest with you, I was never taught from the home about certain things, able to deal with segregation but knowing that if I stayed focused that I would be able to overcome.

Cameron Jones: What church or churches have you attended?

Bernard Washington: I've been a member

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of this church, Greater White Stone Missionary Baptist Church, for 52 years and I was baptized here by Reverend **A.R. Williams**.

Cameron Jones: Would you say this church has a great impact in the community?

Bernard Washington: Great impact the church is known for is helping the community. It has always been a pillar in this community where people are concerned and through the leadership of our pastors and I have been able to serve under three during my lifetime, has always made contributions to the community and always have had people, in general, at heart.

Cameron Jones: Can you describe this church?

Bernard Washington: In what way?

Cameron Jones: In any way you can describe it.

Bernard Washington: Well the church as a whole is a great I wouldn't say organization because the church really is an organism. It's an organism that is bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. Overall the church itself

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has been a – as I stated a – pillar in this community and, at the same time, the outreach ministry is always good. The people here I can say have always worked together for the betterment of the church and of its members as well as the community in telling men

and women, boys and girls, that the wages of sin is death but the gift of God gave all of us is eternal life.

Cameron Jones: What kind of activities were you involved coming to it?

Bernard Washington: Well I was a Cub Scout at one time. I was involved and did like to do a little swimming. I loved playing checkers. I was a great roller skater and even now, at my age now, I occasionally put on a pair of roller skates. As far as activities are concerned, we're involved pretty heavily, as I grew older, in the church, being involved in the church, worked with the youth ministry here at the church, as a superintendent,

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in your Young Peoples Division, whereas we have been able to expose them to some of the greater things as far as character-building and things of that nature so involvement, I'm pretty much involved, heavily, in the church here.

Cameron Jones: Can you share some of the memories from your childhood that influenced you later on in life?

Bernard Washington: Watching people as an individual – as a young man, a little boy who grew up and basically watching people -- that were positive in their thinking, regardless to some of the pitfalls that they were faced with and knowing that if I made God first -- and I often say this to people, especially young people – seek Him first that He has promised us that He would not make us last, and having God in your life, regardless to your situations, you are automatically victorious and you will overcome.

Tretarius McCain: Now let's talk about how life in South Memphis used to be. What does South Memphis mean to

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you?

Bernard Washington: Well to be honest with you South Memphis is the community that I was raised in; I saw great changes in this community. The community here, where this building is, as a little boy, before this educational building was built by our former pastor, Reverend AR Williams, there was a row of houses that used to sit here, beyond this door, out in this hallway, they sat on pillows. Myself along with some friends of mine who some of 'em are deceased now, as

boys we used to play under these houses, roll **ties** and **wrassle**. We had a lot of fun. In the community also where I was privileged to go school, which is down the street, La Rose Elementary School, that building was not there but I was fortunate that when the first school was built, down the street, our other school sat right across the street, on the hill. We called that

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Old La Rose and my class we marched from across the street down to the new building. I was in the first grade. The community as a whole has grown tremendously. I've seen a lot of changes in the community in that where I live there was people around the community that had great business, grocery stores, barber shops, beauty shops, eating places, Four Way Grill is open now that sits on the corner of Mississippi and Walker. At that time it was owned by a lady named Mr. and Mrs. **Cleaves**, basically owned it. Mr. Cleaves was the chauffeur for one of the city mayors, E.H. Crump. Mrs. Cleaves owned the food restaurant, they both did but she ran it, and there was businesses, a shoeshine stand there, shoemaker, we called him, repaired shoes at that time. There was a pool hall there. There was a barbershop across the street as well as a flower

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shop on of Wicks and Mississippi and John T. Washburn owned a service station. Further down the street you had Southern Funeral Homes, which in later years moved on Vance, which they are no longer. That building's no longer there now that sat on the corner of Mississippi and Williams. There was also a hospital -- Jane Terrell Hospital -- that was on Williams Avenue and Commissioner -- he's deceased now -- Commissioner **JT Benson**'s wife, Miss **Burr Tier** owned the beauty shop there that set a few doors down from the hospital so the community at large had many great black businesses that were owned that have done very well during those days, yeah.

Tretarius McCain: Are you comfortable with the reputation of South Memphis?

Bernard Washington: Comfortable, I can deal with it, things **has** changed tremendously, being honest with you. I would even say in some ways people has changed but knowing that

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the church has always stayed in any community should make the difference because this is the place where people go for help. That's where we go to meet our spiritual needs through the church. As we often say the church is a hospital for so many illnesses that we have and that's something that should never change, and those of us that firmly believe in the church are willing to stand on the Word of God being those changes that we have to deal with, even in our lives we will be able to overcome.

Tretarius McCain: How would you describe South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Bernard Washington: There were changes. In the '60s I was in high school – junior high school and high school. Big difference now, the young people now, their opportunities, I would say my opportunities were good but young people nowadays even

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greater. I mean young people now get much greater exposure than what we was able even to have, opportunities, but the good thing about it, those of us that were successful, I would say, had the stigma and the willpower, I would say, to overcome those obstacles.

Tretarius McCain: What was going on in South Memphis in the '60s and '70s?

Bernard Washington: Well you had – as I stated we had – the church. We did have community involvements. People had certain types of gatherings in their homes as far as entertainment and this of that nature, is concerned. It all depended on what you wanted to involve yourself in. There were big differences in the '60s and

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even in the '70s that were there then that we don't perceive now. Our schools for an instance, our former Pastor Reverend **Joseph McGee** that's deceased helped to integrate the University of Memphis, which was then Memphis State. There were places in the '60s that blacks were not privileged to go. Dr. Martin Luther King's march came here in 1968. He was assassinated here. I was privileged to meet Dr. King several times in my life and I was privileged also to hear the last speech he made, which was right up the street here at the Mason Temple, a few days before he was assassinated. I had had the opportunity to also, in my life, during the Civil Rights struggle, which I enjoy talking about

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or meeting some of the other great leaders, Dr. Benjamin Hooks who was a personal friend of my family's and I had the opportunity of meeting Ralph Abernathy and Andy Young and so many others that made great contributions. We had local people here, Billy Cobbs, other great preachers that were involved in the struggle at that particular time but as a city and as a whole, we've been able to overcome and life and the struggles that people made back then has made life better for our people today, for our young people especially, and I will always say, "Take none of this for granted because there was somebody that had to make a sacrifice." I didn't go through the situations that my mother and grandmother had to deal with. I did go through some situations when I started college. I went straight to business school, in Memphis, and when I entered the college, in Memphis, there were only two blacks

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and I was the only black Tretarius McCain for almost six months in that school but that had no kind of deterrent for me at all because my thing was to get that learning and to make the best out of the situation, yeah.

Tretarius McCain: Were the people in South Memphis different then than now?

Bernard Washington: Well we had a different caliber of people. Normally in some ways the people are the same but we had a different caliber of people. I would say back then people were closer, close-knitted in some ways, than now. People then were not fortunate to have some of the things that we have now, even though people live different – smaller houses and not the luxuries that people now enjoy but they knew each other, they cared for each other, certain types of love that they had for each other and that's what makes the difference.

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That's what makes the difference.

Tretarius McCain: What are some places in South Memphis that make it a better place?

Bernard Washington: Well I would say Number 1, the church. The church will always stand. You've got the church. We have great institutions of learning. Booker T Washington, which is also my school that I attended, at that time we had great teacher, they had great people

that is going through that school that made a great impact on our lives. Many of our leaders here in the city, **W.W. Herenton** attended Booker T. Washington. Benjamin Hooks attended Booker T. Washington. Walter Bailey and his brother – one’s a retired judge and the other is a lawyer – they attended Booker T. Washington. We had teachers back then that rarely did care about us and they were interested in us learning and they taught and

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drilled in us that regardless to who you are you can be somebody if you want to so I mean I think the church and the types of schools and institutions that we had as well as at home because parents then were different than parents are now. We knew better *[laughter]* in so many ways to cut up and act the way I see some young people be disrespectful toward their parents that we’re seeing now. There were many homes that even where there were women that had sons but they governed those houses. It was a “Yes, ma’am” and a “No, ma’am.” Children now would say, “Yes,” and “No,” and I know they’re taught that in school but even at my age, 63 years of age, I’m still saying, “Yes, ma’am” and “No, ma’am,” *per se*, because that’s the way we was taught,

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you know, and I was taught to respect peoples’ position regardless to who we are. That’s not taking away from my manhood; it’s just a matter of respect, so that means times have changed but – and – so have people.

Tretarius McCain: All together how is South Memphis different now than when you were coming up?

Bernard Washington: Well there **has** been changes in South Memphis as far as growth is concerned because like I stated back then there were people that owned great businesses. A lot of those businesses are gone now. There **was** things where integration was good in great ways, it helped, but, in some ways, there it made changes where certain people were concerned, where businesses were concerned. South Memphis is a great community still, the only thing that I hate that so many of those businesses are not there as they were back then but we have a lot of great history even in this community. Old

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churches are still here. Some of the businesses are still here and then we have landmarks. Right up the street here Mason Temple, which was built in 1948, the Church of God and Christ leader was Bishop Charles Harrison Mason. The reason that that temple was built was because of the fact that when the Church of God and Christ met once a year for their annual meeting, which is called the Holy Convocation, they would have a place to meet an, at that time, they wasn't allowed to go into the nice places then, black people were not, so Bishop Mason along with some of the other leaders in the church had the Church of God and Christ construction had built and it was built by black contractors in 1948 and we're blessed here, right in Memphis, now to have that world-wide headquarters right here, right up the street from this church. When we did remodeling of this edifice,

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edifices, this sanctuary that we worship in now is the original building that was built in the '50s. The windows in this church are very unique in that they came with the original structure. This sanctuary today that we worship in now was enlarged back then and it was also built by black contractors, which at the time that we **was** – I was – a young man but do remember we had service in Mason Temple until the completion of that building and then this building was built under the leadership of a former leader, Reverend AR Williams, which we call this the Educational Building because this was our Sunday School Department on this level. Our young children, beginners, juniors, primaries

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assemble here every Sunday morning. Our young people assemble upstairs and each teacher is fortunate enough to have their own individual classroom. This was Reverend Williams' vision as our pastor, which he passed away in 1972 and that's when Reverend Joseph McGee became the pastor of the church, which he served as the longest-serving pastor that we've had here. He served for 39 years and then Reverend **Roger Brown**, our present pastor, became pastor at his passing.

Tretarius McCain: In your opinion, what is the best thing about South Memphis?

Bernard Washington: I would have to say there is a lot of heritage here. There is a lot of great history in South Memphis. I still enjoy riding through the neighborhood that I used to live. I enjoy looking at the school that I attended, La Rose Elementary, Booker T Washington.

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Even as a young man, a little boy, I had a paper route, when I was 12 years old and I picked my papers up, right up the street, at Wellington and Walker and I had the opportunity of servicing some of the people also that was members of this church, which I enjoyed greatly. I had a shoeshine stand across the street. As a matter of fact I was a paper boy and I shined shoes at the same time because, as I stated earlier, I like money and I didn't mind working for it and I say to young people now, "Wherever you – whatever your – goals are in life, you have to put out to receive. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices but I mean I can truthfully say that it paid off in any job. The job I work now, I've been in the insurance business for 23 years and I have clients all across this country.

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Many nights I went to bed late and got up early but it paid off so I mean if you make the sacrifice in your life, it'll definitely pay off for you. South Memphis has been good to me. I grew up in this neighborhood and I enjoyed it and, even now, I still sometimes when I'm just riding, I'll ride through and look where the Lord has brought me from. I'll never forget bridges that I have crossed and you never burn bridges that you cross because you may have to cross 'em again.

Tretarius McCain: What do you think would make South Memphis a better place?

Bernard Washington: I think -- being honest with you people – economics, people working together as a unit. I always will say – as I stated earlier – I think the church has a great impact on any community

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because, if you think about it, the home and the church is your greatest institutions of learning – the home and the church. Many of our institutions, many of our great learning establishments started in the church. When we – when our people -- **was** not privileged enough to go to some of the better schools, the church was there and this is why I always tell people never discount the House of God. Always respect it because it has been there for us for many, many years, mmm-hmm.

Tretarius McCain: Do you have any fond memories of your life in South Memphis you can share?

Bernard Washington: Fond memories, yes. Riding my bicycle through the street, roller skating

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on the pavement at La Rose School as well as through the neighborhood in which I lived. I enjoyed. There were some mothers in this church when I was a younger man that, back in those days, people used to burn wood and coal. I would chop wood for them and my great grandmother would tell me, which she was blessed also to live -- get in -- 98 years of age, she would tell me, "When you chop wood for mother so-and-so don't take her money, son, because she's a widow-woman," and I obeyed her, I didn't, and God has blessed me, and I think about that a lot of times, the good that I have done for people. I think people should always be remembered any time you do for the God's people, he said Himself that a hand to

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Him was a lend -- a hand to them rather was a lend to Him so I mean I had great memories of even cutting wood and taking their groceries home. I worked for a business at the corner of Wicks and Lauderdale, right across from St. Mark's Church. There was a lady -- Miss **Minnie Heinz** -- that owned a business. It was named Bell Sundry. I worked for her when I was just a young lad, 11 or 12 years old, from a bicycle delivering groceries, different items that she sold, and when I blessed by first year -- first collage -- first **call** when I started college, I continued to work for her because she gave me an opportunity when I was 10 or 11 years old, from a bicycle, and I just wanted to show appreciation and I continued to help her out when I bought my first car. These are memories that

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I always will treasure.

Tretarius McCain: Is there any advice that you would like young people to know?

Bernard Washington: Sure, being young -- first of all -- as I always say to young people, to my young children, in all your ways acknowledge the Lord and He shall direct your path. Whatever you want out of life, ask God, and I promise you if you make him first in your life, He will not make you last.

Tretarius McCain: Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Bernard Washington: I've enjoyed the conversation and I appreciate the time that you've given me to speak with you all in regard to this and we hope we – I hope I – have said something that would enhance all of your all's lives and make it more richer. Continue to go to school, make the best grades you can, believe in yourself and, mainly, stay focused on whatever your endeavors in life. Don't get sidetracked. You all are young and even as I always state at your age the Devil would desire to have you to do a lot of things. I know as a young man I could've made a lot of money but it wouldn't have been the right kind of money and I can truthfully say staying out of trouble, staying out of jail, being truthful, being honest, being respectable, keeping God first, it has truly paid off and the same thing He's done for me He'll do for you.

Tretarius McCain: Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom.

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