

MFP-059

Interviewee: Tanya Evans

Interviewer: Marna Weston

Date: May 27, 2010

Editor's note: the introductory part of this interview begins at about 17 minutes and 40 seconds into the interview.

E: Jones County was the Klan headquarters for this part of the state. Byron De La Beckwith is now in jail, he's the one that shot up that building next door and had the boldness to come the next day and try to get the pastor's wife to talk to him. She was sweeping up the glass from all the windows they had shot out.

W: To establish an alibi, or just to be bold, like—

E: Just to be bold. [Laughter] And she knew who she was and she did not come down off, out of the house to see him. So, we have that man. She said he just stood there that acted like ain't nothing went on the night before, you know? But we are—St. Paul United Methodist Church is 104 years old. It is in what used to be, at some point in our history, the black historical district. Where fifty-nine is, we had our first mortuary, funeral home. Brother Christian, who is a member here—or was—his wife is still one of my historians of the church. She keeps me posted on the history. She's the one that helped us get the plaque put out front. She taught history and was a big part of that Movement. She talked about how well-guarded [Martin Luther] King was the day he came and how the corner was blocked off; they were watching who came in and who went out. But St. Paul is a church where we're trying to live the history, also tell it, so the next generation will know the things that have come down. Very few of our young people are aware that the church and the parsons was shot up in [19]67, bombed in [19]68.

Of course, most people know that this is the home church of Leontyne Price, the opera singer, and her family home is the green house across the street. She still—when she has an opportunity to come home, she comes, and she worships here. She hasn't forgotten her home. [Laughter] [Phone rings] This is probably about a meeting, but I'll talk to y'all later. A young lady just did an opera, I mean, a doctoral presentation on Leontyne and Marian Anderson just a few weeks ago, right in November. She came in some here and talked to some of the members that remembered Leontyne as a little girl and they went and took pictures of the house across the street. The church hasn't changed much from the original building. We still got those lofty roofs in the sanctuary. [Laughter] Very acoustics for not having a piano. But we are a historical church for those reasons. We are church involved in the education of our children. It seems that our education system seems to be going backwards instead of forward. We are graduating less children than we did fifteen, twenty years ago. We seem to not have the drive to tell kids to go to school; they spend more time at home doing nothing or cutting class, and it is my desire, if I stay here as pastor, that we initiate—it's back to the basics again. It's time for us to go back and teach our children. Not just education for man, but also what God requires. But it is going to be a journey because we are in a generation of un-churched people. We are almost in our second generation of un-churched individuals. It's amazing to find them people that's in their twenties and don't know the Lord's Prayer or the twenty-thirty psalm because nobody ever took them to church or introduced them to God. So, it's a different generation, but what hurts me more than anything is our young people

don't know our history. They don't know the number of black men and women that own businesses in this area. Two miles down the street was the only black hospital. My member grandfather owned that lane and helped with the hospital.

W: What is the name of the hospital?

E: It was Brown Memorial. It was a training hospital and the only black hospital in Laurel for blacks, is right down the street. I would love to see it become a training site again for our future nurses and future doctors. So, it's something that I see us trying to do again because we are not graduating enough of us in general practice that's gonna deal with us and people with low income. Oak Park Elementary, or Oak Park High School, was the only high school that most of the blacks in this community went to. It's within two miles of this building, as well. I say, everything was in this community and we took care of each other, but we have let that go and we are letting government and other people take care of our community instead of us.

W: Do you think that there has been a shift from, in the past, more of an obligation of black communities to uplift and serve and educate to just kind of people standing on their own more?

E: Yeah, it's that, they want to stand on their own. We actually stand on the success of the people that were behind us and we fail to recognize that. We've got too many young people that say, I did it on my own, and if there wasn't people like Dr. Charles Drew and my Minister of Music, Dr. Eugene Owens, who was the first superintendent of Laurel's schools—blacks attended Laurel's schools—if we

didn't have people like him and Mr. Christian, who owned the first funeral home in time. Ms. Williams—I think her last name is Williams—I just recently learned that one of my members owned the only black hotel in town. See, I'm going, how come nobody has written this down? Well, Patton know, I'm not from Laurel or Jones County, I wouldn't know that if you don't say something about it. At one point, Laurel was larger than Hattiesburg. It had a transit system that ran from Laurel to Ellisville, but when the Civil Rights Bill passed and they had to integrate the businesses and storage, Laurel almost folded completely because that mindset, they couldn't bend from it. And a lot of businesses actually left. So, we are trying to re-establish the history and let people know. A lot of parts of Mississippi have those histories that we don't want to talk about, but that's in everybody's life, and in every state there are areas that had that. The Klan did have a strong hold in South Mississippi. I used to work for—Tougaloo College acquired Medgar Evers's home for the historical reasons, so we can continue to tell the story. And a lot of people there were part of that, they get just upset when our kids don't go to school and don't want to learn, but part of our education system fold is, we took out the hands-on skills. We took out shop, we took out home ec, we took out auto mechanics, and a lot of our kids—even in my generation—were not college-bound because they didn't have the academic strength to go there. But we took their opportunities to become something. A lot of blacks have always been entrepreneurs, we've always started our own business and used our own skills to make a living and it had become a lost art. Now, we're trying to bring it back, but we let it die, trying to push everyone into

college or military, and everybody's not that. I know a young man that can take an old Chevy and re-build it. All he got to do is read the book on what model he has in front of him, buy the parts, and he'll sit there and put the whole thing together. [Laughter] Where it actually passes inspection and the whole nine yards. You wouldn't think it was a junk car and I'm going, he is mechanical, he has to have it in his hands. He is not analytical, where he can do it on paper. And we've got to go back and teach teachers to recognize kids' skills and we have an intelligence system, we have seven different intelligences that always work at the same time. But we have teachers now that, I think, in education because it's the only job in America that you work strictly days unless you a coach—then you got the afternoons and weekends—but it's the only profession where you don't have to work at night, our public education system. And I think we need to re-vamp that, we need to be in education to teach our children. It's not about, I don't have to work at night, but how well are our kids going to stand and think on their own. I challenged one of my mentors to ask his mentee, tell me how you would tell a five-year-old how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I asked a tenth grader that the other day and he said, I tell them to get two pieces of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and jelly. I said, but you still ain't told them how to make a sandwich. He told me ingredients to the sandwich, you still have not told them how to make a sandwich, and his pastor looked at me and said, you right. We were taught to think when someone asked a question. We were able to speak clearly and, in a few minutes, articulate an answer and that's all he could answer. He could not sit and think about it, well, how would you tell a five-year-old? So,

we've got a lot of history, but we've got a lot of growing to do and we've got to reach for the sky and stop letting, that'll do, do. [Laughter] I get very upset when people do, that'll do, that's just enough to get by. So, here, I'm pushing that our kids make honor roll. We will reward our kids that make honor roll. I don't like C's, I didn't like them with my four young adults and I don't like them now. Those standards have not changed. So, we've got a lot to do and a lot of growing to do, but part of our growth is, go back and learn what was in our history that's not in books. And you know, yourself as a doctoral student, they just started putting our history in books. I just talked to a retired teacher that said—she said, up until, what did she tell me? She said, I was in my fifteenth year in teaching before I was a brand new Teacher's Edition of a textbook. And I'm looking at her going . . . She said, I never had a Teacher's Edition, we took a student edition and we made a Teacher's Edition from that. It was only when we integrated that I actually got to see a Teacher's Edition of a textbook. And I'm looking at this lady going . . . Our teachers were smart enough to able to do that. Our teachers now couldn't do that, because that means they got to work. [Laughter]

W: Or if they had to do it, it's not in the curriculum, why are you teaching outside of the curriculum? There's so many boxes.

E: Right, right.

W: You can get in trouble for teaching something that makes somebody know how to think better, but it's not—you know, with these tests, they teach to the test now.

E: Benchmarks, yeah.

W: So, if you don't meet that, you're not supposedly a good teacher.

E: Well, see, the thing is, that's not teaching. Teaching means stepping outside the box, these tiles, and reaching a kid that you would normally not reach. I'm a tutor, so I used to teach algebra and history, but now when I tutor people—especially those going back to school in college algebra—I always relate it to something that they know. Had a young man in my home church that failed trig, and I said, how you fail trig and you play pool every Friday? He said, what does trig and pool got to do with it? I said, meet me at the pool hall and I'll show you. [Laughter] On second thought, give me a piece of paper. I drew a pool table. I said, trig is about lines, sides, and angles. When you play pool, you're taking that cue ball, knocking it off a solid wood stripe and banking it. It always forms a triangle; I don't care how you put it. A straight line is a 180 degree triangle. And he looked at me, and after I drew what he see: she right, it is a triangle. I said, you apply trig every time you play pool on Friday, so why you flunking the class? [Laughter] He said, it ain't that easy. I said, it is that easy. Turn around and he had to re-take the class, but he passed, because he remembered what I said and all of his papers, he had a pool table drawn on the side of it. But, that's the journey. You've got to step outside the benchmark and say, what do I need to do to reach this kid? The other thing we have to do in education is, we've got to set some standards: not the schools, not the district standard, not the state, but your standards for your classroom. Because I have taught kids who they thought weren't going to make it through second grade, seventh grade, because they

were, they thought their skills were down here, but they never looked beyond.

That's why I appreciate the movie *Freedom Writers*, because she never accepted what folks said about her students. She always challenged them to come up, to come up, and that's what our teachers need to do. Yes, we got the benchmark, but challenge. A lot of our kids have not been challenged to think outside of their community, think outside of what they see. In a staff meeting [laughter] a few years ago, they said, look at the educational areas at your table and one of you will relate all of those subject areas to the real world. At my table was a biology teacher, a chemistry teacher, a business education teacher, an algebra teacher, and English. Being I'm the one with the strong voice, they said, okay, you relate [laughter] this to the real world. I said, well, if we going to relate this to the real world, I'm going to relate to what my kids know about and those were dealers on corners. What you see on the corner are the hired employees of the manager or the store owner. Now, the store owner has to have some chemistry background because he knows what his product look like, he knows what it tastes like. He knows when you done broke it down too far. So, he has to have a background in chemistry and he has to have some mathematical skills; but, above all, he has to have some personal skills, so he needs to be able to talk, convince people to come and join him. And the principal said, okay, that's enough. You said the real world. Okay, I know who I work with. I know what my kids talk about in class every day. She said, you didn't have to go there. I said, well, I listen to what my children say in class, and I challenge them all the time to go beyond what they see. I tell my athletes, get an academic scholarship as well as an academic

scholarship. Why, Ms. Evans? Because if you get injured, your academic scholarship still covers you while you work on your degree, because if you get red shirted, you can't play. And now the NCAA requirement they take these academic test to make sure they able to read, write, and understand. We got kids going into college can't pass that test, but they were star athletes because somebody kept passing them along. I thought that behavior had stopped, but it's still here, and that's the reason why our system is falling apart. We have been passing people. Teachers have lost their ethics about teaching. If you don't know the basics, you're not passing my class.

W: May I ask you some biographical information, because we kind of bypassed that? Would you please state your full name?

E: Reverend Tanya Edwards-Evans

W: And when and where were you born?

E: Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. Graduate of Callaway High School, graduate of University of Southern Mississippi, and a graduate of Memphis Theological Seminary.

W: Okay.

E: And the mother of two males and two females. My two men are Marines. My oldest child is working on a degree in mortuary science. My younger child is working on a double major in accounting and hotel management.

W: Who were your parents?

E: My parents are Darus and Sherman Edwards

W: Where are they from?

E: My father is from Greenwood area; Greenwood, Mississippi, where he was raised by his aunt. My mother is from Charleston, South Carolina.

W: And your dad, who were his parents?

E: Hattie and Charles McGhee.

W: And where are they from?

E: Tylertown area.

W: I'm sorry, you'll have to be more—

E: Tylertown, Mississippi. That is Walthall County. [Laughter]

W: And your mother's mother and father?

E: My mother's father is Jeanine and Thomas Robinson from Charleston, South Carolina.

W: Okay, and how about their parents? Do you have knowledge on your mother's side, your father's mother and father?

E: No, I do not, of their names.

W: How about of your great-grandparents, do you have knowledge of any of them on either side?

E: I do know that my great-grandfather was a French—on my mother's side—was a French officer. My great-great-grandmother was a Carolina Indian. She was from the tribe there. She had fifteen children. My great-grandmother on my mother's side was a mother, the only woman that we knew that was six feet tall. She bore six boys; all of them were either in musician or in education.

W: Now you're saying that's your dad's side—

E: This is on my mother's side.

W: Oh, your mother's side. Okay.

E: My father's grandparents, I am not sure.

W: Okay.

E: Because he didn't talk much about his. I think they were already gone, so . . .

W: And you mentioned your four children. What are their names?

E: Timothy Evans, Cassinthia Evans, James Evans, and Darus Evans.

W: What is your earliest memory of your personal education?

E: Personal education, Mary C. Jones Elementary on what used to be Whitfield Mills Road in Jackson, Mississippi, which is now Martin Luther King Boulevard in Jackson, Mississippi. [Laughter]

W: Did you have a favorite teacher or favorite subject there?

E: My favorite subject was, has always been math. When I got to high school, it became history. There's one teacher that I always admired, but I didn't like her at the same time, and she was my biology teacher in high school. She was able to quote that biology book and never looked down at the page. [Laughter] And I said, Lord, if I ever teach, let me be like her. But she was stern. She expected the best out of us, and Ms. Affineck Cotton was the same way, she taught English. She didn't—

W: What was the name of the biology teacher? I'm sorry to interrupt to you but—

E: Ms. Young. Ms. Dorothy Young.

W: Now, Ms. Affineck Cotton—

E: Was English. Twelfth grade English. And she demanded a lot from us. I enjoyed her because I had an opportunity at my high school, Calloway, the year that I became a senior, we were able to do a college step. We got a chance to pick our instructors for one course. And I chose her for Black Literature and Literary Writing and I was introduced to black writers and it was an interesting thing to see that we actually had more than Richard Wright and Nikki Giovanni and all of these people that I likes to use, but there were other writers. And now my daughter, my oldest child, is collecting different writers. I have a library at home with Jerome Dickey and E. Lynn Harris and Kimberla Lawson Roby, and now my grandbaby loves books. Saying, she fuss at me, Grandma, when are you coming back to take me to the library? She wants to go to the library. Not the park, the library. [Laughter] So. We encourage reading because that's how you learn the

language. And I'm one of ten. I have, present living, four brothers living and two sisters.

W: What are the names of your brothers and sisters?

E: Beverly, Thomas, Jerome, Kelvin, Isetta, and Douglas. My deceased brother, one that we do know the name of is Alonzo, Vietnam vet, and my twin sister Tanya, and then one unknown. So.

W: Outside of religiously-inspired literature—because I'm sure if I asked you what your favorite book would be, you'd tell me the Bible—but in terms of otherwise than that, and maybe I'm just guessing, what would be your, who are your favorite authors or your favorite books?

E: My favorite author would be Kimberla Lawson Roby, who talks, who writes in Christian fiction. She talks about the drama that occurs around churches. And my other favorite writer would more than likely be Jerome Dickey. But again, I like reading magazines, books. Since I spend a lot of time, as I say, by myself, I do a lot of reading, but I spend a lot of time learning stuff in education, so as I work with adults going back to school or children struggling, I know what's coming, what's current. But technology has made us lazy in learning. We can go online and kick out anything.

W: Actually, that's how I found this location, the Sanctuary. I just typed in Civil Rights Laurel and Mississippi and it came up with this address. So, I guess sometimes it can be helpful, but you're right, it does make us a little lazy.

E: The reason why, what I mean by lazy in technology, is kids will go to the library and kick out a report about somebody and then they'll turn it in as their work.

W: Cut and paste.

E: That's plagiarism. And I happened to tell one of my former students that. Don't go home and turn this in as yours, go home and write it like a seventh grader would write it. And I told her mom, don't let her cut and paste and turn this in. That's plagiarism, that's an automatic F. She said, nobody's ever told us that. I said, you know, ma'am, I'm going to be straight with you, she needs to stop that habit now because we have a program. Technology has its benefit. We have programs now that can tell a teacher if you have plagiarized. That's why some people have lost their degrees, because of that program. But I want us to—if we don't do anything in the next ten years, let's go back and teach the skills so our people can survive. Not teach to a test, but teach the skill. Teach them how to think where they can answer on the top of their head as we used to do in extemporaneous speech class. You had to go. [Laughter]

W: Were you in forensics in high school? Did speech and debate? You mentioned extemporaneous speaking.

E: Yeah, I was officer of Future Farmers of America, and that was one of their requirements that Presidents always had to be in that speech competition. I've always had the ability to get elected into a position without a lot of effort. [Laughter] Used to aggravate my little sister that she be trying and I don't be trying and I get elected and she doesn't. We always had classes together

because we are a year apart. And we had chemistry together in high school, we had biology together in high school, and it was a competition. She would study, I wouldn't. I have an A, she has a B, and it was a fight. [Laughter]

W: How did you get involved in FFA, again? How has that expanded your leadership?

E: I got involved in FFA when I became part of a horticulture class at the Career Development Center in Jackson. And because my fascination with plants and animals—and then, in their structure about policy rules and all of this. And I was always interested in law and structure, so it became second nature to me in doing policy, procedure, and rules. And because I was also, most of the time, scared of speaking in front of folk, I would do a speech if I knew what I had to talk about, because I had time to put it on paper, but I got challenged by Mr. Overby to do one where you don't know what's going to come. And I served as the president of that chapter my junior and senior year. So, it's been a journey. But getting in school organizations gives you an outlet to introduce you to different things. The extra-curriculars of the schools has its benefit because it introduce even the quietest kid to something new or open the door to different skill they didn't know they had; FBLA, all of these things that we have in the high schools. We have the Girls' Academy here, sponsored by the Deltas, where they bring teenage girls and then we house them here and teach them etiquette and proper dress and—

W: Delta Sigma Theta Sorority incorporated?

E: Mm-hm. And we work with them on etiquette and behavior and how you should be acting; you know, presenting yourself, and how important it is to stay on top of your grades. So, groups like that have helped some of our young ladies see a focus that's not lets them becoming a baby-making machine as society has pretty much put out that that's all teenage women do and it's not. We have a large number of them finishing school. Some of them, even with children, have finished and went on to do bigger and better things. But that's our journey.

W: Are you in a sorority?

E: No, I'm not.

W: Okay. And I just want to back up for a second, you mentioned Mr. Obery—

E: Overby.

W: Who was Mr. Overby?

E: Overby. He was the horticulture instructor that always challenged me to go outside my comfort zone. [Laughter] And especially when we had to have competitions. I would always assign somebody else; being president, I get to tell someone else they doing it. He said, oh no, you can't do that, you got to lead by example, you need to show them that you can do it as well. So, that's where the journey started.

W: How did you end up being the minister here as opposed to working in horticulture and agricultural science?

E: That is pretty much what we call the call story. I have been active in the church since I was about nine or ten years old. It is something I have always been able to do. According to my big sister, I can take any text and explain it to a young person and an old person and never lose either one of them in the conversation. My first profession—actually I wanted to be, was a lawyer. [Laughter] I even went to school for it, paralegal studies, and was getting ready to be go to Howard University. Got married and God turned me toward education at the request of a retired teacher.

W: What was that teacher's name?

E: Ms. Emma Moore. She said, I need you to go take the E.N.T. We need some more black instructors, teachers in classrooms who really care about kids. I said, okay, Ms. Mora, I'll take this test and guarantee I'm going to pass it. Because that's when the state of Mississippi had the E.N.T. and I took it and passed it on the first shot and amazed a lot of folk in education. [Laughter] How'd you do that? You weren't an education major. I said, because my teachers taught me how to think. And I just memorized facts for the test, but they taught me how to think. So, I went into teaching and I have done that with Jackson's schools for seventeen years. I was also a G.E.D. instructor for Hinds Community College and I enjoyed doing that for the simple reason, we need to get our attitudes off the bottom and bring them closer to the sky. But the ministry came in the midst of the illness of my husband and everything I had to do, juggling the whole family. I decided to take my calling, accept my calling into the ministry. And everyone in my family said, well, it's about time, you've been doing this already, you just wasn't getting

paid for it. [Laughter] Because I had been doing trainings, teaching the Methodist structure all over the state of Mississippi, all the way through high school and college. So, I had already been doing it as a lay person and so I accepted it. My children didn't have a problem with it except when I've got to go someplace by myself, then my sons get a little concerned. With today's society, Mama you sure you going to be all right? Mama's gonna be fine. So, my journey is not over. We still have a lot of people who don't know who He is. And I tell my churches, the reason that we are not growing is, we shut people out once they enter the door. We have open door for them to come in, but we shut them out once they get in. We don't allow them to grow and stretch their imagination and their skills that they can be used by God, and then they walk right back out those doors and you don't see them anymore. So, hopefully my job and responsibility is to help people see where they are in God. Not where people want you to be; where God wants you to be. And God can take the simplest creature and make them important. He says, fool, watch an ant, you might learn something. And that's in Proverbs. And an ant is one of the smallest—outside of the gnat, it's the smallest insect that God created. But he teaches you that you work, you should have a work ethic on anything that you do, and rest when the season says that you can't work. So, that's what I'm working on, is hoping to educate our folk so when the time comes, they'll be of good use. And lean on and trust God, not just let it be a phrase on a dollar bill or a coin, but truly trust him. Especially with the lay-offs of Mason and Sanderson and [inaudible 34:05], for major employers here in Laurel, in the hospitals. I think I talked to—

[Break in interview]

E: What?

W: You've done a great job, I appreciate it. I just have a couple of final questions. Could you tell me a little bit about the history of the marker outside?

E: We have a marker outside recognizing the date that Martin Luther King spoke here at St. Paul.

W: It was March 19, 1968?

E: March 19. It was a . . . that marker came up about five years ago. Through the history department at J.C.J.C. and my—

W: J.C.J.C.?

E: Jones Junior College. Jones County Junior College. [Laughter] It came up with our church historian, realizing that we had not recognized that, and she got with the state of Mississippi Historical Society and they got all the information in articles from the newspaper that day and the days after, and we put the marker down—I think it was two years ago.

W: And what is the historian's name?

E: Estelle Christian, she was serving as the church historian then. She presently still lives here. She's eighty-four years old.

W: She'd be a wonderful person to talk with.

E: I believe she's at home. I'll have to show you where she lives. She can give you all kinds of historical stuff on the city of Laurel and the black community, businessmen, because she was part of all of that.

W: Okay, I wish I had time to spend all day with perhaps one more person. She'd be an appropriate person to speak with.

E: Next time you come through Laurel, we'll work on doing that.

W: Well, I hope that we're able to establish a more longer-lasting relationship. The Sam Proctor Oral History Program, we're looking for partners to continue to work with. We work with the Sunflower County Freedom Project up in the Delta and Indianola. That's part of the reason we continue to come and we come back to Mississippi every year. We'll back in September, up in the Delta. Perhaps this is an opportunity to establish this relationship.

E: Being that I'm a Methodist preacher, I meet a lot of retired teachers and people in history. There is a female by the name of Ms. Lois Flag, retired educator of fifty years. If you want to know anything about the history of Hinds County, she knows it. She can even tell you family lineages and who married who, and I'm going, Ms. Flag, you eighty years old, how you remember all of that? She said, because I love history. She sits there and goes through. They just recently took down the only wood bridge at Edwards to put a concrete bridge over the train track, and she had to go take pictures of it taking that bridge down, because that's the only thing she's remember that eighty years, was that wood bridge going across the

railroad tracks. So, there's a lot of history and a lot of our people are still here.
You can call St. Paul at any point or you can call me.

W: I appreciate that.

E: And I can let you Ms. Estelle know that you're going to call her one day.
[Laughter]

W: Definitely.

E: Because I think she would love it, along with—I've got a couple other people who have born and raised here, so they know all the changes that have come through here in Laurel.

W: Well, in closing the interview, I want to thank you for allowing me to take this time to speak with you and give you the opportunity to make any comments that you would like to make and at the conclusion of those comments, that will conclude the interview.

E: Enjoyed it. Again, I'm pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church, the historical church of Ms. Leontyne Price. Her home family house is right across the street. We are a church that is trying to re-establish our connection of our past to our future that we may be better equipped to serve God's world in Laurel, Mississippi.

[End of interview]

Final edited by: Diana Dombrowski, July 19, 2013