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-October 2013
C: Okay, I think we’re working. It is September 24. This is Nicole Cox here with Joe Mathis, and we are interviewing Ms. Jennifer Buckner. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

B: Thank you.

C: Well, I guess maybe just to start off, you could tell us maybe a little bit about your background; where you were born, where you’re from, that sort of thing.

B: Okay. I was born in Greenwood, Mississippi. I moved to Cleveland when I was four with my aunt and uncle, who was an AME minister. I went to H.M. Nailor Elementary School, and graduated from Eastside High School. Afterwards, I attended Coahoma Junior College—at that time, that’s Coahoma Community College. Then, graduated from Delta State—well, Delta State College, at that time in 1972. After that, I moved to Chicago and was there for fourteen years. I worked in central accounting at Montgomery Ward until that department moved to Kansas. After about a year, I worked with a daycare, an after-school program at my church. In 1987, I went to Hawaii and was there until 1992. I had to decide whether I wanted to go to back to the Chicago winters or come home to a little more moderate climate, since I’d been in that ideal climate for five years. [Laughter] So, I decided to come home. After I came home, I taught at Coahoma County High School for eleven years, and Hunter Middle School in Drew for a semester and at Eastside High School for a semester. Now,
I’m on disability so I’m not teaching anymore; you know, substitute teaching for a little while. Now, I’m working with the NCBA, which is the National Caucus on Black Aged for twenty hours a week. They make it on-call. It’s really not work; it’s a training or whatever. But, that’s what I’m doing now.

C: Well, could you tell us a little bit more, maybe, about what it was like growing up in Greenwood?

B: No, I grew up here.

C: Grew up here, okay.

B: Uh-huh. I was born in Greenwood.

C: Okay. What was it like growing up here in Mississippi?

B: Well . . . I guess I didn’t know anything else at that time. I liked—well, I liked it. I liked going to school. Basically, I was a shy child. People have a problem believing that, but I am. [Laughter] At that time, I was. Then, I had a friend, a girl named Annie Pearl Clark, who kind of befriended me—because I used to stand on the wall outside at recess by myself. She befriended me, and that’s how I started intermingling with other kids. During the summer, I never knew what they did, because I was always gone. But, when school would always start in the middle of September—or almost the end of September, because the farmers had to get their crops done. So, black folk picked cotton, you know, during that time. After we started school, the first six weeks was only a half a day, like we got out at 12:30. The kids would go home, change clothes, go to the field; pick
cotton, because they’ll help their families, too. I didn’t have to. That’s something that I never had to do, I guess because, at that time—I don’t see how we’re considered middle class, but a minister, I guess, I don’t know. Because the other kids is going, I want to go, too, because everybody’s going to the field. So, she called a friend of hers, another minister that had some cotton. I would go down there—which, I couldn’t pick very much. I had friends that could pick, in a half a day, two hundred pounds of cotton. I would barely get forty. So, I was just there because the other kids was there. So, basically, it was quiet. You know, we didn’t do a whole lot until we got in . . . I guess, in elementary school, we did like operettas and things like that. I was always a part of those. Then, when I got in high school, I was a cheerleader. I was heavy, but I wasn’t as heavy as I am now—but I didn’t let the heaviness get me down. [Laughter] So, I was a cheerleader all through high school. As a matter of fact, I think I was in eighth grade when the cheerleading coach got me. I went all the way through high school. I was in the choir, dramatics club, enrichment club. I was real active. I’m trying to think of something else in high school . . . I went to Coahoma, I didn’t do a lot, because we are commuted on the bus. It’s in Clarksdale.

C: So, how long of a trip was that?

B: It’s about forty miles to Clarksdale, and then Coahoma’s maybe about three or four miles out. So, we would have to catch the bus early in the morning, and they would bring us back. During that time, kids didn’t have
cars like they do now. The bus still run, but I don’t know whether it’s as big a bus as it was back in the [19]60s, because a lot of those kids have cars at Delta State—which I didn’t want to go to, but I wanted to go to Alcorn. At that time, the HBCUs didn’t have the money like the other state institutions did. So, Delta State—at that time, that was the time during integration—in order for them to keep their federal funds, they had to get some more of us over there. Because they were only, I guess, about . . . wasn’t that many, I don’t know whether there was ten. So, out of just needing to, that’s where I went. I got a free ride, didn’t have to pay anything. Nothing. Even got work study. And we really didn’t have any place to work, because other kids already got the jobs, so they set up what they call a pool. When it was time for us to work, we would go in and sign in. Excuse me. In a room. And if they needed us someplace, they would send us someplace. I think I got sent someplace about twice, so that was an easy job. We organized a black student organization, BSO, and basically, that’s where our catalyst was, because we were just, I mean . . . I went over there with the idea, they don’t know me; I don’t know them, so we’ll get to know each other. But that’s being idealistic, you know. In the real world, and because I stayed in Cleveland, my aunt wanted me to get the experience of staying on campus. So, for a year and a summer, I stayed on campus. Very interesting. My room was in Cleveland Hall, right on the front of the first floor. Like I say, if we didn’t have—it was four of us in a suite, because there’s a room on each side and a bathroom in the
middle. Of course, we were black; four blacks. There wasn’t any integrated rooms.

C: Although the university was integrating, huh?

B: It was integrating, it wasn’t integrated. [Laughter] There’s a difference. There weren’t any, of course, black fraternities or sororities on campus at that time, so the young men organized them a fraternity called Iota Kappa Chi, I think it was. And they got a charter. If they had kept it up, it probably—by now, it probably could have been national, uh-huh. If the ones who came behind them and the ones who started it—

M: Stayed involved.

B: Uh-huh, probably could have. But the girls, we never did get anything started in that realm, but finally, before I left, they were trying to get a chapter of Delta Sigma Theta on campus. I’m trying to think . . . I’m trying to think before I get into 1969. Maybe something will come up in. We decided that, in 1969, there were some things that needed to be changed and it wasn’t going to be changed if we didn’t say anything. So, we planned a week of demonstrations and, like they were talking about last night, there’s always somebody in there who’s infiltrating, you know, the group. We knew right away who that person was. So, we planned our demonstrations each day, what we were going to do. After we finished that, then we’ll disperse for the day. But finally, on that Thursday—I think it was a Thursday; had to be Thursday, because we had another day to do—after we had had a picnic on the president’s lawn, we were supposed
to disperse. So, some kids went the dorm, went home, because we had commuting students. At that time, the student union was called the mill, and it was in that big building there. So, I’m going to class, because everybody was through—there was a certain nucleus of us that were just standing around the mill, talking. Somebody said, just all of a sudden said, let’s go see the president. We see people running; what’s going on, you know? So, a friend of mine and I, we were standing up there. We were standing up there and stuff, so he just grabbed both—he got in the middle and grabbed both of us by the hand and we started running, because we knew when we went into the building that we would be arrested, so that’s why we saved that to the last day—we thought we were saving it to the last day of demonstrations. So, sure enough, soon as we got in there and sat down . . . and I guess they must have—I’m assuming they must have been watching us all the time. I don’t know they still have this club on campus called the M Club, it’s supposed to be an athlete’s Christian organization. So they would have them, because the fellas are watching us every day, you know. But, anyway, here come the other troopers. The fella that was the infiltrator was trying to go up the steps, trying to sneak up the steps, trying to crawl up the steps. So my friend, Ms. Davis, pulled him down by the coattails so he couldn’t go anyplace. There was this white fella, and I cannot think of his name . . . his father was a minister, and he was trying to get all of our parents’ numbers so he could call and tell what was happening to us. All of a sudden, he said, I’m going, too. So,
when they put us on the bus—when they brought us out and put us on the bus—they said, I said it, but I don’t remember; I probably did. They should have known what color bus to bring; they brought a black bus, you know. [Laughter] You know, because, when you’re young . . .

M: Yeah.

B: And Delta State’s changing a whole lot. Some of the kids there had gone to class; they said they just felt something was wrong, so they left class and came out. When they came out, they saw them putting us on the bus, so they were arrested, too. They took us—first, they took us to the county jail. Well, the county jail used to be in the courthouse, so there really wasn’t any room there for us. So, I’m naïve, wondering, where in the world they’re going to take us, you know? So, by that time, some kids who had heard about arresting us, they got one of the girls’ cars that had stayed on campus, and they followed. Somebody said, if we go down old rural road, I know where they’re taking us. I said, well, where are they taking us? I’m not going to say—oh, no. They took us to Parchman Penitentiary. They said that’s the only place they had some room. Excuse me. The only place they had some room at Parchman Penitentiary was in maximum security, and that’s where, you know, they got the people on death row. But they were on one side, and they had us on the other side of the wall. There was—I can’t think of his name, but there was a young warden there, a white warden. He said that, I didn’t want them to bring you all here, but
since you are here, we’re going to make your stay as comfortable as possible. Well, how comfortable can you be?

M: On death row.

B: Yeah, you know. But, on the girls’ side, they didn’t close the cells; they let us be free, somewhat. But they said the boys, said, they closed their cells. Now, how are they going to get out? A bunch of college students. I mean, where they going to go? They couldn’t . . . so, he did. Those that smoked, they brought cigarettes and cards and stuff for us to play and stuff. But the things that was chilling, they searched us like they searched a regular inmate.

M: So, a tactic to take your pride?

B: Yeah, you know.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: That’s the way they searched us, even though they knew we weren’t dangerous or anything. But that’s the way they searched us. The next—they fed us pretty good; prison food, whatever. But, the next day, how we knew what was going on, on the outside, was those death row inmates had a radio. They would talk through the wall and tell us what was going on. So, we knew what time we were potentially going to get out, and when they changed the time. We knew what the bail was going to be after we got out, or when they changed the bail, so wherever—they would tell us through the walls. Finally, they let us go. When we got to the courthouse, the kids from Eastside had filled the room. There were some white kids
had come and brought us food and fruit, and it was—I mean, the experience was, it lets you know there are some good people in the world, and there are some bad people. What happened, how all of us got out—I mean, bonded—the parents in Cleveland, because they wouldn’t let the parents from other places put up their property, their property bonds. Some of the parents didn’t even know some of these kids, but they put up their property for them to get out. I think it was six hundred dollars, I’m not sure. Afterwards, of course, by that time I was just . . . I didn’t care. We had to go—my memory’s getting foggy. I can’t remember . . . we couldn’t go back to class until we had the hearings? I can’t remember. But, anyway, we had hearings; we had individual hearings, and we had a young civil rights lawyer—I can’t think of, I’m bad with names—give me a nickname, I’m bad with nicknames, but a real name . . .

M: A real name.

B: [Laughter] But, anyway, he was real good. And he was comical. By this being a school hearing, he couldn’t say anything. So, when it was time—if he bothered with something that should be objected, he would touch us and tell us what to do, or he would write and say in some instances, because he couldn’t say anything because of the school hearing. So, they called us in their one by one. What was that, fifty-some of us? Fifty-two or something that of us. When they called me in, they were always talking about outside agitators. When I got in there, Lord knows, they thought I was an outside agitator. I asked them, why do you think I’m an outside
agitator? You know, I think to myself, they don’t think we’ve got sense enough to do anything? You know. I see that your address is Chicago, Illinois, on my cumulative record. I said, if you would have looked on it, you would have saw that was my mother’s address. You would have seen that I graduated from H.M. Nailor Elementary School and Eastside High School, here in Cleveland, Mississippi. They couldn’t say anything. They thought I had come down from Chicago and—

M: Got everybody in uproar.

B: Got everybody in an uproar and so forth and so on. So, they always wanted to know who our leader was, so we never did tell. See, they always thought it was—I’ve forgotten who they thought it was. But, it was Beverly Perkins, which is Margaret Block’s cousin. He was actually the president or whatever, you know. But, afterwards, my aunt did not know that I was in jail until late that evening. She was walking, she was wondering why people was looking at her as she was going downtown. What was going on? Till finally, one of the girls who didn’t participate in the demonstrations—who wanted to, but she was scared of her father—called her and asked her, did she know that I was in jail? That’s when she got on the phone. She called the president’s office—and she’s about your height, little thing. Never raised her voice. I had never heard her curse. But she said she told us that, when she called the president’s office, said to the secretary, she wanted to speak to the president, President Ewing. Said the secretary said, no, he’s not available. Would you like to speak to—she
said one of those bad words. After I got home and she told me, I said, I know you didn’t say that. But she was upset because she didn’t know, you know—

M: What was going on.

B: What was going on. She called the sheriff’s office and they tried to give her the run-around, too. So, then she called—by that time, Owen Brooks, I guess he was the director of Delta Ministries, that was another civil rights organization. Owen Brooks and, I can't remember what Luther's first name was, he used to be warden at Parchman, too, years later. They all together and . . . they were the ones organizing and making sure that everyone was bonded out and everything. Then, of course, we had meetings afterwards. I left Delta State after that because I was going to have to get the probation. Like I say, I just . . . at that time, I was fed up. So, what I decided to do was go back to Coahoma and finish that one year at Coahoma, because I only went one year at Coahoma and then I came to Delta State. Well, I said, I'm going to back to Coahoma, get that AA, and they are not through with me yet. Then I'm going to go back to Delta State. So, that's what I did. When I came back to Delta State, I changed my major from social studies to speech and drama. In that department, that made me feel more at home, because we were closely knit in that department than I had felt the first year I was there. So, I was still shy—now, why I majored in speech and drama, and I don’t know. But, I guess I liked when I was doing—you know, we had to do the Speech 101 and all
that. I enjoyed that, so I majored in speech and drama. So, the first time
that I was really . . . that was on stage at Delta State, was interpretive
reading. That was a part of your grade. We had to do a play—not a play,
but an interpretive reading—that night. We did *A Raisin in the Sun*. She
wanted me to get up on the ladder. I said, now, you’re going to have to
find another person, because I’m not going to get up on the ladder.

[Laughter]

M: How were you received back on campus after you transferred back in?

B: Well . . . some of the kids never left, you know. Another fella, Thomas
Edwards, went to Valley and came back. So, there was always somebody
there. I can’t remember whether anybody else left and came back or not,
but there was always somebody left, because see, like I said, some of the
kids who were in the demonstrations—

M: Didn’t get arrested.

B: They didn’t get arrested. It’s not because that they were not
demonstrating, because, see, if we all had gotten arrested, I don’t know
where they would have put us. It would have been about a hundred or so,
you see. So, that’s the reason why, every year, they talk about the ones
that went to jail. I think that we did, but there was some more that was a
part of it, too, and I think they should be recognized, too, you know what
I’m saying?

M: Yes, ma’am.
B: But there were some there on campus that didn’t . . . do anything, you know.

M: During your time absence, when you went back to Valley—

B: I didn’t go to Valley. Coahoma.

M: To Coahoma, the students that were left on campus, do you think that they, so to speak, held the fort down, while y’all was gone?

B: Mm-hm. But now, like I said, even some of those who went to jail—

M: Stayed.

B: Stayed. Stayed, you know. Their determination was to go on. But, like I said, I just studying and I guess I was disillusioned. Then, I should have known, because we were going through . . . ever since I was a little kid, I knew how the white-black situation was. So, but like I said, I just gave up. I had to go rejuvenate. So, like I say, being at Delta State made me speak up.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: More. It made me sit back and watch, too, a lot. I do that now, because I’ve learned that you don’t react verbally to everything. You sit back and—

M: Observe.

B: Observe, and see what the situation is; then, you know whether to speak or not to speak. I learned that, too. There was something else I was . . . oh. When I was—see, I’m going back; I had forgotten when I was in high school, my senior year, because that was the year they integrated
schools, public schools. In order to try to keep us from integrating schools, well, I wasn’t going over there anyway. I was a senior, I wasn’t going to leave my classmates. Now, maybe if I had been in eighth or ninth grade, yeah, but I was a senior. We had come all that way together; I wasn’t going anywhere. But, we had two classmates that did. What they tried to do to block that, because they knew that a lot of children—black children—were being raised by their grandparents and guardians and things. So, what they tried to do was, if your guardian didn’t adopt you, you weren’t going to be able to go to school or you would have to pay two hundred dollars. So, the lawyers was getting rich, because some people went and adopted their—

M: Nieces and nephews.

B: Uh-huh. The lawyers were getting rich, because they were doing it at a discount. But my aunt said, no. I’m not going to do that. She told my mom, said, you can send her down here if you want to, but I’m not going to adopt her. She called Owen Brooks with Delta Ministries; he told her what to do, to call Washington and who to talk to. They came down there to our house. She told them what was going on. They told her, don’t worry about it. They went to their superintendent, and we didn’t hear no more about two hundred dollars or paying tuition. We didn’t hear any more about adopting no children, and people today don’t know why.

M: This was a tactic just to keep you all from graduating high school?

B: No, keep us from integrating.
M: From integrating the colleges.

B: Huh-uh, elementary school, high schools, and all. This was elementary; public schools at that time. They were worried about the colleges then, but it was just the regular public schools. So, they don’t know why that happened, but that’s—because of her. She knew what to do.

M: Put an end to it.

B: Uh-huh, she knew what to do and who to contact. Like I said, she was a quiet person. Never raised her voice, but she knew what to do.

M: How to get things done.

B: Yeah. That’s how that was squashed. I’m trying to think of something else that happened during . . .

M: During your time in college, when you all were doing the protesting, did it actually resonate in your minds how much danger you all were putting your lives in?

B: I don’t think so.

M: No.

B: I know it didn’t me.

M: Do you think it would have made a change in your actions if you knew the danger you were putting yourself in, or do you think you have kept going—

B: Probably would have kept on, because when you’re young, you know . . . hey. You don’t think about your—you’re thinking about the cause. That’s the way it is now. There’s just so much going on. I just . . . then, like you say, if you don’t have numbers, it’s hard to go out there by yourself. You
know? Then, if you have all, everyone’s so excited. They’re meeting, then, boom.

M: Drops off.

B: Uh-huh. So, it keeps you in limbo. You know? What do you do. So, like there are some—excuse me. Like now, this elementary school, H.M. Nailor Elementary School is the only black school that’s left that was built in—I think it was 1934, something like that if I’m not mistaken. But, at that time, it was called Cleveland Colored Consolidated School. Cleveland Colored Consolidated School.

M: CCC.

B: [Laughter] That was the high school and, I guess, the elementary school until they built the one building over there that became the elementary school. The big building was the high school. Okay. Last year, they want to tear it down because they say that the building is . . . is dilapidated. They have built a new addition to that part, too. Okay? But, all through the years, you know this is a historic building. Why haven’t you been putting money into that building so it wouldn’t be that bad? Because, when they built that building—even though they had Cleveland High School over there; Cleveland High School’s over a hundred years old, now—they didn’t even have an auditorium when they built it. When they built this one—no auditorium, I’m sorry, gym; they built a gym. So, that’s where the black artists at that time, they tell me, came. Black gospel artists and people like
that. I remember—no, I don’t, but they were telling me the Harlem
Globetrotters came there and all. You know?

M: It has history.

B: It has history in it. Why would you want to tear it down? That’s the building
you should be trying to clean up. With Cleveland High School, like I’m
saying, it’s historical, too. But you still should be putting money in that, too.
So now, this year, it’s boarded up; the historic part. So, they tell me,
because we had—we were talking about we didn’t want it torn down, this,
that, and the other. They tried to get it historical status, but I don’t know. I
said that I was going to look into and see, really, are they trying to do it?
So, now, Nailor is just kindergarten, first, and second grade. Then they
have, over at Cypress Park, with third, fourth, and fifth grade. Okay. Even
if you want to that route, you got crowds. It’s crowded, because twenty—I
mean, when I was going to school, even twenty years ago, twenty-five
kids in a class, teachers could handle that. We were different. These
children, now—

M: Twenty-five in a class is a lot now.

B: That’s a whole lot, because you got little kids; they’re wiggly. Even though
you got an assistant in there, their attention spans are not as long. You
know? I went down there for grandparents’ day the other week. Me and
my counselor, who was a veteran teacher, I looked, I said, oh, my God.
And I worked—I worked down there last semester, at Nailor when it was a
full pre-K through sixth grade. So, the classes weren’t that large. You
know, you could deal with fifteen kids in the class; fifteen third graders, even though they were a handful.

M: Yes, m’am.

B: So, it’s a load on the teachers. Okay? In Cypress Park, they used—and Dean Smith, they tried this open concept. So, when they built those two schools—well, now Dean Smith is called a middle school, because it’s sixth, seven, and eighth grade. But they had that open concept thing. Well, they found out that was a disaster. So, now they try to—they got partitioned and things, but you still go the noise level. Now imagine in the room, had the way it’s built, imagine twenty-five kids in a partitioned room. It’s not good.

M: There’s no way to watch them all, all of them are doing different things.

B: Yeah. Then, only kindergarten and first graders have aides, have teacher aides. The rest of the classes don’t. Third through fifth grade, you are it. So, I’m concerned about that. I’m concerned they’re talking about test scores. You’re talking about test scores, you need to be able to reach these children, you see? So, now, through this agent instead of going back to school, what I’m doing is working in the after-school situation at our church. You know? To try to help them with their homework or whatever, you know. It’s two of us there. So, it’s a lot of concerns that I have. I get so frustrated. I just don’t know. I’m not sure whether this is going to work or not, unless . . . I just believe, if we can get that other part of the building done, that’s going to take some of the load off. They can
make those classes smaller. You don’t have enough computers and
nothing because, you know, this is the computer age. These little kids can
do those computers.

M: Mm-hm. It’s important that they know how to do it.

B: Oh, and they know, even though they have—during their activity period,
one of their activities is the computer day. But they don’t have twenty-five
computers in there, I don’t think.

M: To service all the little kids.

B: Huh-uh, because I didn’t go to the lab this time. But it’s a lot. So . . . I don’t
know. I stand on my soapbox. [Laughter]

M: I have a question. Ms. Block told us, there’s a school now that students in
high school, they’re not allowed to have an integrated prom. She told us
that, for the white kids, they would basically have a prom at a country club
to serve as a country club, and the black kids are really not allowed to go
to this particular party or—

B: Well, see, that’s Cleveland High. It’s got to be Cleveland High.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: I served over there a few times, but I remember the kids showing me
some pictures, but I didn’t know that . . . that the blacks didn’t even go to
the—

M: My question is, basically, do you think the teenagers are as avid about
social change as you all were in your teens? Do they care as much about
the struggle or see the importance of eliminating these things in the community?

B: I don’t think they do, because the reason why is because they can go so many places that we weren’t able to go, and do so many things that we weren’t able to do, so they don’t—

M: It’s important.

B: They don’t think that what happened years ago, exists now. You know? Until they get out here in the real world, and then they’ll see what’s happening. But they don’t see it. They don’t see it. They don’t understand. That’s just like, yes, we do have two high schools, but I don’t know whether it’s the parents—well, I know it’s some parents. Even though they might stay way on the other side of Eastside High School, they will have their children go all the way over here. You see? Because they think it’s better because it’s over there. That’s the kind of mentality. Whereas, it can be the same in both places. You see what I’m saying? Now, another thing that upset me is because Nailor, D.M. Smith and Eastside had this IBO grant. I had never heard of IBO until . . . until, you know, it happened. I think Eastside and D.M. Smith had it first, and then the issue was that Nailor wrote a grant so Nailor could be in. So, it was like they had the primary year program, the middle year program and the diploma program, which was loud enough. Okay? Nailor had—that would have been, I think, Nailor’s second year, which was going to be good because, by the time those kids got to high school, they’d have been ready. They told them, in
the first couple years, test scores [inaudible 44:53], but then, after a while, they would rise. So, I was excited. I said, oh, all this came together—when I really understood what IBO was, you know, because like I say, I didn’t know. This year was the first year that, I think, they told me there was fifteen students at Eastside who actually had gone into the program, into the diploma program. But I didn’t know how many made it. I know one child, Emma Brown, I think she’s going to make it. Right now, she’s got all kind of scholarships to different places.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: But you have to pass that IBO test. You know? In order to go, skip your freshman year and go on to sophomore year. But I think she’s going to make it. Two of them, I think, that she said. But, anyway, I thought this was good. In the Delta, Mississippi, and there’s only one other school in Mississippi who would have had this kind of honor, you see what I’m saying? They wouldn’t—the reason why IBO wouldn’t pass Nailor, because of the building. Why wouldn’t you get the building where you could have this kind of—

M: To receive the grant.

B: Receive the grant so you could have that kind of distinction, not only in Bolivar County, in the Delta, Mississippi, but in the state of Mississippi and in the country, in the world, because this is an international organization. You see what I’m saying? So, now, I don’t know . . . how it’s going to work. But, now, they tell me, D.M. Smith and Eastside, this is the last year for
that grant for those two schools. So, I don’t know what’s going to happen now. That concerns me, because I knew that this would be a plus. So . . .

M: When looking at everything that’s going on in the country, considering the election of Barack Obama and the change that he’s trying to enforce in our country, and reflecting back on some of your experiences with the civil rights movement and trying to initiate social change in your time, if you could give a message to the teens and the college students in the nation, what would you tell them would be the most important thing to focus on right now?

B: First, God. Then, education, because if you don’t know what’s going on in the U.S. first, and then in the world, you’re going to have a hard time, a hard time. Right now, it’s rough because people are impatient. The economy didn’t get like this overnight. It took years and years—it took years. Then, you can’t expect anybody to come in here—they started when, he wasn’t even in office a year before they started, you know, talking about he’s not doing . . . What can you do in less than a year? What can you do in two—it was going to take him four years to figure out what to do.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: You know? Because he just doesn’t have to deal with what’s going on here, he has to deal with what’s going on all over the world. So, our problem in the United States is, we are so impatient. And some folk might not like what I say, but we are hypocritical. We are really hypocritical. We
get mad when somebody say something; they got mad when Michelle, when she made that statement, you know? But it’s the truth. We are just hypocritical. The Native American befriended the European when they came over here. What did they do to him? You see what I’m saying?

M: Mm-hm.

B: Queen Liliuokalani in Hawaii befriended the United States. What did they do to her? Locked her in her own palace. So, this is what I’m saying. We’re so hypocritical. We don’t like to admit our wrongs, but we see everybody else as wrong, and that’s not right. We should fess up to what we do, too. You see what I’m saying?

M: Mm-hm.

B: This upsets me, too. You know, we want to put out that we’re so this and so that. Look what the Ku Klux Klan did. You know?

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: We’re talking about the federal—well, was it at the head? That was a farce. You see? So, we have to own up to what we have done wrong, and then go from there. You know? That’s the way I feel about that situation.

M: Yes, ma’am.

C: Building off of that, I had a question. I was wondering why you think students and younger people throughout the country know so little about the movement here in Mississippi?

B: Because it’s not in the history books. It’s not in the history books. There’s very little black history in the history books, period, in the U.S. history
books. Well, I didn’t teach U.S. history; I taught U.S. government. It’s not in the book. You might see a little bit about Brown versus Board of Education. You might see a little bit about the Mississippi studies book. We had something, a little bit, about Nat Turner and about—but it’s not in the book.

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: Now, in Mississippi, you have to try to teach to the tests. So a lot of extra stuff, you can’t get in there.

M: It’s robbing you of teaching it to them.

B: That’s right. But, by me not having a subject area test, you know, I can sneak some little stuff in there, you know. But those people that have to teach to the test, they have to—sure is not a lot of room to teach extra stuff. That’s probably all of the country, you see, because we’re testing our children crazy. Some children, all they can do is try to struggle through the regular courses. They struggle and struggle and struggle. Everybody’s not a rocket scientist, now. So, what are we going to do with those children? We’re going to throw them by the wayside? You don’t want to throw them in Special Ed because they’re not Special Education’s children. Then, those children in Special Education going to try to not get a certificate; if they don’t get a certificate, it’s not like nothing. They need a diploma. So, what are you going to do with those kids who have struggle and they’re so happy, I passed everything, I passed all my units—then what are you going to do? Then, if they don’t pass these tests, they’re just let down.
M: They don’t graduate.

B: They don’t graduate and they’re just let down. You know? That’s just like telling them, well, hey. You ain’t going to make it. So then, they tried some of them—now, not all of them—because they’re crushed, some of them are going to try to get a GED so they can go on, you know? But there’s some of them, they’re just, I can’t pass it, so what I’m going do? What I’m going do? So, what do we do with those kids, you see what I’m saying?

M: Yes, ma’am.

B: What do we do with those kids? One of my godchildren, it took him . . . from the tenth grade to the last time he took that subject area English test, the last time he took it just before graduation, he was able to pass. But, if he hadn’t have passed it—

M: He wouldn’t have graduated.

B: He wouldn’t have graduated. Now, he’s in Mississippi Delta Community College and doing great. You see what I’m saying? So, he’s in show choir and keeping up his grades and everything; they’re going to Mexico in show choir and everything, keeping up his grades. So, I don’t know. A teacher, if they don’t pass this practice test, they can’t teach. But, everybody that passed the practice test can’t teach either.

M: Yes.

B: So, what do you do? That’s why I think teachers should be like, on a probationary period with a mentor. You see what I’m saying? Just because you pass the test doesn’t mean you can teach.
M: Yeah, I definitely know that.

B: You know? So, this is . . . all of this concerns me, all of this concerns me. Because if I had to sit up and take a boring test, you know, I probably wouldn’t have passed it either, because I’m an oral person. You know what I mean?

M: Those individuals that grew up with you during your middle school, grade school, and college career, do you think they’re still as active in movement today, or have they kind of—not turned their back, but—grown out of that stage in life?

B: Oh, that’s a good question. Oh . . . that’s a good question, because a lot of us . . . that’s a good question, because a lot of us . . . I guess a few, a few . . . but a lot of us are just, I think, complacent. We know that we have made some strides, but we’re not really there yet. How should I say this? But things are not happening like they used to, so we just stay right here. We’re in the middle, you know. We’re not speaking out. So, I think this is where we are in my generation now.

C: What kind of lessons do you think we can learn from that earlier activism and that earlier generation?

B: Stay on course. Always know that there’s still much more to be done. We have to try to talk to the younger generation that’s under us, because like at my house, those boys come by my house and their pants are low, you see them doing this because they know I’m going to say, what’s wrong with your pants? Oh, I forgot my belt. And you ought to see them trying to
hold it up till they get it at least past me. So, you know, and it’s a way to do it, you know. First, some of the times—a lot of time—I didn’t know. They walked by there, first, walk down a few days out. Then, I was certain, I stopped and asked them, what’s their name. They’ll tell me. They’ll talk and talk and talk. I ask them about—because a lot of young folk, I don’t know them personally, but I may know their mothers or grandmothers or something like that. So, we’re talking, then I say . . . well, what’s wrong with your pants? Why are your pants down like that? Oh, oh, oh, they come up with—I say, well, you’ll look so much better like a young man if your pants were—

M: Pulled up.

B: Uh-huh. And, when you see them again, you see them pulling pants up. That’s how, you know, I get to know them. That’s the way you have to be. Then, some people, all those—but I say, you know, I think that’s my calling. Young people, and to try to help them. You’re not going to be able to help everybody. I used to be naïve and think I could, but I know better now, you know? But, if you can help one, you’ve done what you need to do.

M: Yes, ma’am. Today’s society has branded our generation as the Why generation, and they call us the lost generation. Do you think one reason why our generation is so-called lost is because the elders have bought into this and backed off of teaching us?

B: Mm-hm. They have.
M: Yes, ma’am.

B: I tell them all the time. I say, no. I say, you have to talk to young people. You have to talk to them. You hear a lot of negativity; a lot of it. A lot of it, they don’t think nothing can be done. But you see it every day. What’s the gentleman’s name in New York? Duncan, in the Bronx? Who started the school?

M: I’m not sure.

B: I think that’s his name.

M: It’s a charter school for young black men?

B: Is it—seems like it’s integrated. I’m not sure. But I think it’s supposed to be open today. I think it’s today. He and the education secretary, I think it’s today. But he’s been on CNN, this man. I think that’s his last name. I won’t be able to see it for today, because it’s on coming. [Laughter] The parade is at 4:00. But I think that’s his name. But people like him have started school in the Bronx and, I saw when CNN had this educational special on, and I can’t remember what this place was, but it was a charter school, this other man, and it’s working. But, see, those schools have, what, maybe ten kids in the classroom? The college rate is high. You don’t have all those kids to try to teach. They can deal with one-on-one. You see what I’m saying? But you got twenty-five kids in a classroom . . . especially little children. Excuse me.

C: We’ll pause it for just a second.

[Break in recording]
C: Okay. The other question that I had, I was wondering—because you mentioned you lived in Chicago, and was it Hawaii, too?

B: Mm-hm.

C: I was wondering you could talk a little bit about the differences. You've lived in several different places. What were those transitions like?

B: Oh, well, Chicago wasn't new to me, because like I say, every summer I would go. But my senior year, when I finished high school, I told Mom I wanted to see what it's going to be like being at home during the summer, so I stayed at home during the summer and I volunteered for Head Start. But Chicago . . . I like Chicago. There's always something to do if you want to do it; always someplace to go. But now, it has its negatives, too. Whereas, you know, anyplace. I have seen a young man shot in a neighborhood, gangs, you know. But, basically, I enjoyed myself in Chicago. I didn't like the winter. [Laughter] I did not like the winters. But, at Christmastime, it would be so pretty. Downtown, all the stores had a connecting theme in their windows so they could just go. But, from what I can understand, those particular stores are gone, because I think Macy's bought Marshall Fields. But I met some good friends at my job. I enjoyed my church, which was only a couple of blocks; I didn't have to go far. I'm trying to see . . . well, then, I went to Hawaii because my aunt got sick. Her daughter came and got her from here. When she got sick, it made more sense for me to go over there to help take care of her because her daughter was close to retirement; I was young. I was only supposed to be
over there a year. This time, I had gone to Hawaii when I was eighteen because they were stationed there then. But, after he retired from the army, they just stayed. We were only supposed to be there another year, but every year, she decided she was going to work another year. So, after another year, I got me a part-time job after she came home from work so she could be there with—I call my aunt Mommy, so she could be at home with Mommy, and I found a job in downtown Honolulu. It was in market research. Well, let me tell you now, you know I'm shy. Trying to call somebody on the phone was hard for me, but I did, and I did well. They liked my personality, so they wanted to put me out in the field. Well, that was really hard. They sent me to the airport. I sat there a long time before I would talk to my first person. I was scared to approach them, you know, the ones—you talk to tourists. I finally broke the ice and I enjoyed it, because you talk to people from all over the world. I used to try to play a game, I used to try to distinguish the New Zealand, the Australian and the British accents. Sometimes I’d get it right and sometimes I wouldn’t; they would just laugh, you know. So, I had a good time. I really liked it because I didn’t have to be inside. I knew what project I had to do, I knew how much time I had to do the project, and so I could just set my days, my times and whenever I wanted to go. I didn’t have to go every day or stay all day, you know, and I knew how many people I had to talk to. So, I really enjoyed that. It was so laid back in Hawaii, you don’t have to worry about no shirt and tie when you go to your high-power job. They wore the
Hawaiian shirts. It was just, the ladies would wear their mumus, you know.
Now, if you want to wear some, you know, fine, but like I say, everything
was laid back. The weather only got—the highest it got was, like, eighty-
eight.

M: That's lovely.

B: Yeah. [Laughter] Really, we didn't have no winter. I remember one year, I
can remember one time—what year it was—but it got, like, down in the
fifties. They had on jackets and stuff. But that didn't last very long. Then,
the first year I was there, it rained nine straight days. Every day. I thought
that's the way it was going to be every year, but it wasn't. But, like I said,
everything was laid back. I had a good time. But, you know, I realize,
when you live in a place, you don't do as many things as the tourists who
come in do. There are some places I never did go and I always said I was
going to go. But, when it was time to—we were coming home.

M: That's definitely true, definitely true.

B: Mm-hm. But I really want to go back to stay, but they say, you don’t have
any family—but I said, well, I met people over there. But they were having
a fit, so I just stayed when I got over here. That's how I got stuck back at
home.

C: Did you have any other questions?

M: No, I'm good.

C: Did you have anything else you wanted to talk about?
B: I can’t think. See, I could have written stuff down. But, like I say, I’m an oral person—

M: Just go with it.

C: You did a great job. This was great. Thank you again, so much, for doing this. I really enjoyed it.

B: You’re welcome, you’re welcome. I hope I helped in some way.

C: You did.

M: You definitely have.

[End of interview]

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