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-October 2013
Well, we are here today this afternoon with Mr. Benjamin Nance in Indianola, Mississippi. Thank you so much, Mr. Nance.

Thank you for asking me.

All right. Mr. Nance, I wonder if you could start by telling me where you were born and something about what life was like when you were growing up?

I was born in Indianola, Mississippi. Of course, you know that’s Sunflower County, in the late [19]50s. Stacy and I are the same age. We grew up playing with each other, grew up in the same church, attended the same schools in the area. It was quite different, and then again, not so different. I remember the integration of schools; there was, of course, we grew up with an all-black school, we had all-black instructors. I remember when the schools became integrated, it was different, and I thought, positive. I have watched several changes. I moved away after becoming an adult. I lived in Illinois for about thirteen years, and then Los Angeles for twenty-seven years, and I’ve come back to Indianola to . . . I’ve come back to help rear my grandchildren, and that was my focus. I have seen some differences; for instance, where we are sitting today, it was unheard of, having a black building or home, or having a home sitting in this arena. When I come up these streets, the only time you would see a black, you would be on your way to someone’s house to do some cleaning up or ironing or cooking. But now, you see, with living all over the city—

So this is a white-only area.
N: A white-only area. The only thing, the library did not have that addition, even. It was just this part, and we didn’t frequent the library; that just wasn’t a thing that happened. The only time you pass Hannah Street to come over in this element, you were going to the Hall Brothers clinic, which was the only doctor. Of course, we had a Dr. White on Church Street. He was a black M.D. Prior to him, there was Dr. Fuchsia on Church Street, but most of our lives, we had to go to the Hull Brothers clinic, where all the medical facility—about four blocks from where we are right now. It still stands as Indianola Medical Center now, but at the time, it was the Hull Brothers clinic. That was the only reason we would be over on this end. Then, again, as I said, after integration, Indianola Junior High—now it’s called Penneton—it was one of the schools that was migrated. Of course, they moved out, and to show you how severe it was, they built Indianola Academy and then, after building the academy, they sold the school’s football team into the ground.

O: Now, who’s they?

N: The city as a whole.

O: The city, okay.

N: As a whole. The football field was, as I understand, was so far down. Even today, it’s Indianola Academy’s football field.

O: That’s a private school?

N: A private school.

O: Who goes there?
Only—well, we had maybe two or three in the last, maybe ten, fifteen years. They had maybe one or two minorities there, but basically it’s a pure white school, private-owned. But the football field that went with the school is owned by them, and that still is present. The school is there in Indianola, which is Pennington Junior High now, named after one of our—our second black superintendent. Or was he the first? No, he was the second black superintendent. They named the Indianola Junior High School after him. The football field next to it, along with the school, is owned by the Indianola Academy. Pennington has to play, if they play, at Gentry High School.

Oh, so—

Back across the track. So, some things remain the same, in one sense, but then, there has been some growth. More minorities wanted to get out of the city, either date or marry, but basically, then folk would come in. It doesn’t just normally happen here in this little town yet. They say that we are won and prejudiced, and realistically, we know that’s not true. The best of us have a little bit in us, I don’t care who we are, but I mean to the point that it’s not belligerent. I don’t mean that. But I’m saying, all of us have a little. I have seen a lot of growth in the last couple years. We’ve been able to worship with First Baptist church, and that was unheard of.

That was a traditionally white church?

It still is a traditionally white church. I think they might have one black family in it now. That’s the church right downtown, next to the post office.

Oh, the large church?
The large church there. They've had a Back-to-School Blast and involving more of our children than it has been theirs. So that's positive. That's making history, and they have reached out to the less fortunate children, trying to make a difference, and I think that's remarkable.

Mr. Nance, could you tell me about your parents or grandparents? Have they always lived here?

Sure. They have. My great-grandparents migrated to the Delta in 1923, from Woodfield, Mississippi. Of course, that's in the hills. They moved to Woodburn community and lived there until they moved to the town in the early [19]30s, but they lived in the rural area from 1923 until, I think, about [19]34, [19]35.

And your grandparents.

My great-grandparents.

Right.

What were their names?

Mr. and Mrs. Joe Nance. My great-great-grandfather was Joe Nance, and my grandmother, most people remember her as Charlotte Nance. They moved to Gray Street, where I grew up. At that time, Gray Street was the place to be. It was the only place that had a place for Afro Americans, a little small pool. We lived in tin-top houses, shotgun houses. It had this playground, and that was just a group of tin-top, shotgun houses, but that was the stop, because it was the only recreational place for us to go and play. So, of course, we thought we had totally arrived at that juncture. You had something that no one in the community had but
you, and you were blessed to be living there. My grandmother was very active with civil rights. She was active with NAACP.

O: That was Charlotte Nance?

N: Charlotte Nance, right.

O: Did they come here for work-related, or was it . . .?

N: I'm certain of that. My great-grandmother, which was Chaney Tucker, married, and that brought them to the Delta. At that time, people were moving from the hills, as they would say, to the Delta for a better way of life. So, we have been here. My great-grandmother Chaney Tucker had fifteen children when she moved here. My grandmother, Charlotte, that's my great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother, Chaney. Charlotte was my grandmother's mother, so that's great-grandmother; she was the oldest girl out of the fifteen. She married in 1924 to Joe Nance, and they reared four girls. Of course, that's how I came along in the bunch. Her baby daughter and her grandson, and she reared me. Of course, I said reared me, in church, big morning-style Baptist church, was is seven and a half mile south of Indianola in the Woodburn community. From there, I migrated to Mount Beulah Missionary Baptist Church. That's how Stacy and I collectively met, there at church. They were living on the corner of Roosevelt and Gray Street, so those streets were right there together. So, all of our lives, we have been a part of. Again, I have seen a lot of work. You see, now, most of our faculty and schools is mixed, seem to be getting along. I look even at the university now. We have Mississippi Valley State, in particular, which is a predominantly black school that opened in 1950. Look there, now you have
Caucasians, you have some everything on campus, so I am seeing drastic—and have seen—a drastic change for communicating and getting along with each other. We have a long way to go, because there are some things still different. I look at some of our streets and how things are taken care of, business-wise. On one side of the track is a little different from the other; that has yet to change. But I think it will take time. Some things we are taught and we lived on. You can't teach that you don't know and you can't go where you haven't been, without directions. So, if you had been fed and you'd been taught that way, it's just a way of life. It's just life, and you learn to adjust and live and adapt to your surroundings.

O: Right. Mr. Nance, were you apprehensive about moving back after being away so long, or were you . . . ?

N: No, because, being born and reared here, you pretty much know what to expect. I imagine it's a sense of—and I love coming home. All of the time that I've been away, I come back to Indianola two or three times a year, for all of the years, so I've never totally gotten away from what I pretty much kept up with: the news, any major events, I would come home for and always stay a part of the community. So, yes, I was excited to come home. I have known a lot of people asking, well, how do you re-adapt from Los Angeles back here? I say to them, I knew where I was coming. I am a product of Indianola. You don't forget where you've been, and if you can incorporate that with what you've been exposed to, it can work for you. I've been able to bring some pieces to the town, where you started a Good Friday service here. It's economical worship service every Good Friday. This is
our seventh year, and we have ministers from across the state that come in and speak on the seven last words. All revenue that's raised for that goes back into our community, be it for tutelage program or be it for some needy family; buy literature for schools and daycares. That's giving back to the community and being able to enlighten them, because exposure is the key. The only way we can expose them, sometimes, is by giving them some information. You know, you can read and go around the world. You know, you can read and go around the world. You might not ever leave the city that you're in, but if you are visual and able to read, you can go from here to London and experience some of the great things that happen in London, even if you physically never get there. I'm a firm believer in exposure.

O: Wow, that's really cool. You had mentioned earlier your grandparents. What kind of values did they try to instill in you?

N: Growing up in a very religious home, I was taught that you do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Love yourself, and then, if you're able to love yourself, you're able to love others. In spite of whatever is issued to you or done to you, never hold grudges. The scripture tells you, never go to bed with it out against your brother. In other words, don't go to bed mad with someone. Try to make peace. I have lived that; that has been my motto my entire life, to treat people the way I wanted to be treated. It hasn't always been, but I've always been a people person. I have done the right thing, whereas if it comes to it, I have stood sometimes alone—not always appreciated, not always accepted for my ideas, but if I felt it was the correct idea, I stood on it; that sense of principle.
You must have principles, and that's, more than anything—get all of the advice and the knowledge that you can get. Get all that you can get and put here and then, the scripture says, so a man thinketh, says he, if you have a good foundation, and you have good morals and good principles, those things will carry you. The scripture always says your gifts will make room for you. In other words, if you have the foundation, you're able to do whatever it is that's needed. That's why I'm able to hug Jim. They've known me all of my life. I've been a stand-up person and believe in justice and believe in things being done right, and people being an equal opportunity for everyone. You know, I'm not one that's envious of anything that anyone else has, because what's for you is for you. That's been the gist of what I've learned. My great-grandparent, Charlotte, was born May 10, 1903, so you can imagine that mindset was different from, a long way, from where I am. But people, some of the seniors that's living now who knew her, say, I see her in you, mannerism, they say I see her in the way that you deliver and how you speak. She was a very articulate woman that spoke her mind; never was one of those loud persons. Didn't have a lot to say, but when it was said, she meant what she said and she did what she said. So, that's been my philosophy. Again, do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Love with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding, because if you put it in your mind and you set it most times, you'll mess it up. [Laughter] But, if you keep Christ in it, and keep the love of your brothers and your sisters, be it whatever color; we're all brothers, we all bleed the same way—so, if you love them as a
whole. Somewhere along, someone would see the light. I don't know if that makes logical sense.

O: It makes perfect sense, yeah. Very logical.

N: That's, then, keep it simple, because love hides in a multitude of forms. If you're able to do that as you watch the academic arena, sometimes you lose whatever power, but you know some of us are not where we should be, academically. Some of it is about choice; some of it is design. But, for whatever reason, you take whatever little you have and make good of what you have. The sky is the limit. Paul, you wouldn't be where you are if you didn't make some sacrifices, would you?

O: Mm-hm.

N: Then that's what it's all about. Now, I don't know if this is a great interview or not.

O: This is awesome, this is great, yeah. You know, I was going to ask you, when you were in high school, what were you hoping to do? What were your ambitions back then?

N: I really felt that I would become a principal or teacher. I've always loved children, and the Lord has blessed me. Los Angeles, in a private school setting, I was assistant principal. I taught English for twenty-seven years that I was there; did the same thing in Illinois. I've come back and I work for Boys and Girls as an area director, where there were twenty-seven clubs throughout the Mississippi Delta.

O: That's Boys and Girls Club?

N: Yeah, Boys and Girls of Mississippi Delta. My office was at Mississippi Valley State University, and so I traveled from Sunflower County through, what, seven
counties, from Tunica all the way back to Yazoo City; Lexington, Greenwood, Moorhead, Belzoni, Drew, Indianola, Greenwood and Valley, so I had a wide range of area to work with children. Of course, you know, Boys and Girls, our motive is to make a difference, to make our children feel at home, safe in that, and make them aware of the opportunities that are presented. We want them to be positive citizens, and that's what I'm doing as of today. I retired from the area director, but I'm still working with Boys and Girls in Leflore County. If I can make it to a facility where children are—I'm a diabetic, and some days, now, I really have some bad days, but my worst day, if I can make it to a facility, and those babies come in running, hey, Mr. Nance, hey, Mr. Nance, I promise, it's just like insulin to me. I just pop right back. I'm ready to work. I give more time than I get paid for. [Laughter] But I love being where children are, and wanting to love. Naturally, I'm a nurturer. I believe in children and seniors, to be able to reach out and be a helping hand to some young person, and always some seniors. That is what I live for: my church, and I'm involved in the community a lot, but those are the keys in my life. My wife says, well, when it comes to him working with a child, I know my place; I can wait until he finish. [Laughter] Or, if it's something he needs to do for a senior citizen, I knew what I was marrying, I have no problem. I brought my wife here from Virginia, Portsmouth, Virginia, not knowing anything about the Mississippi Delta, but loved and trusted me enough to follow me here, and seem to be adjusting quite well.

O: Oh, good.
N: I have one daughter and four grands, and so we nurturing the hell out of them, and everybody else's child that I can.

O: Mr. Nance, I wonder if I could ask you a few questions about your teaching career; you say you taught English many years. What types of, what was your teaching philosophy, and what types of texts or books would you employ?

N: I used black literature, and one of the main focuses that I did was question basic English information and literature; materials in use. But I loved the black literature. Again, that was in a private setting, but, quote, in the unified—L.A. Unified School, I worked as an assistant college advisor in the college counseling; they help kids prepare for school. One of the special ed persons in the L.A. Unified said, Ben Nance, you need to come out because you just have a way with children. We could use you. At that time, I didn't have—I thought the required things to go into teaching, because I had not been in a class—but I got the, what do you call them? I'm having a senior moment . . . the credentials, emergency credentials, that's what it is. I got those from the state of California, got them from Illinois as well, and worked on them for basically—now, usually they say that they're good for a year; they're good for two years. But, for some reason, I must have had God's favor. I used them until I left the area, working with children in special schools, again, which black literature—

O: Who were your favorite authors?

N: Paul Lawrence Dunbar was one of mine that I adored. I did a lot of William Shakespeare. It was necessarily just all black, but that was one. God, if I had
known, then I would have brought a book with me. [Laughter] I've been out of that for a number of years, now. You would have me.

O: You started teaching, though, in the [19]60s?

N: No, no, no. That was in the latter—I'm going to say, [19]80s, through . . . I've only been back here for five, six years; seven years. So, from that time, I've always worked with children, always, in some form or fashion. That was the latter part of the . . .

O: What year did you graduate high school?


O: [19]77, okay.

N: I left immediately right after high school, and have been gone until now.

O: But so, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Shakespeare—

N: Shakespeare, and if you didn't ask me, I would have been able to recite several, but—

O: Langston Hughes?

N: Langston Hughes, that is a good one, that is a good one, that is a good one. He was one. God, why can't I tell you some? But that's a good one, Langston Hughes was wonderful.

O: James Weldon Johnson, maybe?

N: Yes, and that's a good one. You know them; I don't have to tell you.

O: [Laughter] Okay, right.

N: That's one thing diabetes will do to you. It messes with your memory. If you have it and I'm looking at it, I can recite it to you very quickly.
O: Well, the reason I ask you, Mr. Nance, is I was trying to just get a sense of your educational style and philosophy, and maybe also what you saw in those authors, because of course, today, working with young folks, teaching at the University of Florida, sadly, a lot of them—if I mention those names to them—

N: They don't know who it is.

O: They just shrug. And yet, I was in Trinidad with my wife; we were there in August, we went to a special evening event, and there was a youth course in Trinidad. The first song they sang was, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. So it was . . .

N: An Afro-American hymn. We say it's an anthem, but it's really not an anthem; it's still a hymn. It has not been adopted yet as an anthem in the United States, but we say it, as a whole.

O: Right.

N: I just believe, as I say, coming from the South, when I got exposed, I first saw the book and I started reading Garvey, telling about even the—I taught history, you know, as well, and I looked at one of the books that we had. It told a lot about our south. It talked about Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Once upon a time, that was an all-black city; black mayor, black—everything in it, black, up in Bolivar County. When I got to California and I saw that in a book and it talked about Fannie Lou Hamer. You know, I knew these folks, and I knew four or five mayors from Mound Bayou; being from Sunflower County, I know who they're talking about. It was just exciting to me to be able to, and I could tell them about how I chopped cotton and how I picked cotton, how I grew up in a house that didn't have a real tub in it. I bathed in a number two tub. When I got to a number ten, I thought I
had totally arrived. [Laughter] Everybody was saying, what is a number ten?
What's a number two tub? I said, you know when you go to a picnic, you see the round, tin tub that you have your sodas and watermelon in. That's what I used to have to bathe in. I said, and then, thank God when we made it to the long ten tub, I said, you couldn't tell me anything. I was in a house without a television at the time. I remember when my family got their first black and white TV. Again, living with a person that was born in 1903, you can kind of see how this trickled down. It was a different story, although you didn't have some of the luxuries. Again, I say to you, living on Gray Street at that time—oh, that was catching me on. You got the playgrounds, but at the same token, there were so many things we didn't have, but there were so excited with the things we did have, you didn't know the difference. Going away from here, going to Champaign-Urbana, and from Champaign-Urbana, moving to Los Angeles, California, and then being able to travel from there to somewhere, anywhere that you wanted to go? Anything that I saw that I could relate to, and I could relate to a lot of the poetry that had been printed. As you presented it to the children, it was with such fire and excitement. It became a live experience, too. Kids, just some of them had no idea, anything, about Southern living or anything that happened in the South. I've had friends to come and buy acres of land, because they're never come to Mississippi, and all they heard was it was slavery time. I say to them the same thing: as bad as things might have been, I wouldn't change it for anything, because there were a lot of things that—because our standards were so high, we never catered or bowed to any of what you call negativity. When I would bring my
friends from LA, they would say, God, it is so beautiful here, and it's blah, blah, blah. They would come and buy stuff. I got friends who moved down to Jackson; Indianola was a little too slow, but at least they end up leaving Los Angeles, coming to the South, because of the exposure. I would bring friends home for the B.B. King festival every year. Some of my students came, and they were just in awe at the good catfish, and to be able to walk in the high school that I attended. It was just unreal. I don't know how to put it in words; I'm not the best talker, I don't know if I'm doing this—

O: No, this is wonderful. In some ways, Mr. Nance, it's almost a full circle, because as you’d mentioned earlier, your ancestors, great-grandparents, moved to the Delta for opportunity and a better way of life. In some ways, now, you have been able to educate other individuals that there are wonderful things here.

N: Right, right. I wouldn't take anything—my friends and things in California and Illinois, are you going to stay there? I said, until the undertaker takes me to the cemetery, I'm back in Indianola to stay until my last breath. I am at peace. I hope and I pray for even more changes, and I'm certain it will, because you can see—who would ever think that we'd have Mr. Obama as president? So, if that's possible, anything else is possible. So, I'm just looking to see one day when everything, this little town look like a city in California. It can look with experience. It won't get LA, but Gardena, one of the small areas that I look forward to seeing fruition into something like that.

O: Okay. What were your thoughts when Barack Obama was elected president, when you first realized that, wow, this is really going to—
To be honest with you, when I found out he was actually going to run, my opinion and my thoughts: that this would never happen, not in my lifetime. Margaret Wright from Los Angeles was the first female that ran for president back in, I think it was [19]61, [19]62, but I worked at the school that she worked at. She was a really civil rights activist, Margaret Wright from Los Angeles. Then, of course, Jesse Jackson had ran, and I said, well, this will pretty much be the same scenario; they're going to run, and . . .

Get some votes—

Yeah, and that's it. But—as it began to materialize, as most Afro-Americans I'm certain will attest to the same thing, never in my life would I have believed. Now, maybe my grandchildren or their grandchildren, it might would have happened. But, you know, God can do anything with faith, and it's a living example. It took going through some of the Republican shenanigans that's got us where we are now, and experiencing the hardships, some of the things—waging in a war that was not necessary, that is promoted. See, He has a way. It's designed from our birth, things that happen. It's designed before our time. It's not our will. Our path is already set for us. We just happen to follow it through. So, when Obama was born—it's already ordained that this day would happen, and it did. There is no words to express the gratitude for American folk opening their eyes, to know that until it goes done, necessarily, have a color. Greatness don't necessarily have a color, it just takes a person with the will to do the right thing. Yes, it's not going to happen overnight. Obama didn't create all of this, and he ain't going to clean it up anymore, but it didn't happen anymore. But just to say that we have an Afro-
American president that says, the sky is the limit, and there is nothing impossible. All of us can do this hand in hand. I love the idea that, even when he went in cabinet, he didn’t go try to put all Afro-Americans together. He kept it open and brought it in, your first Mexican judge coming in. They tried to buck that. But it takes all of us. It takes a whole village to raise a child. It’s going to take a whole village to change what’s going on. We’re going to have learn to care and respect, and learn the different cultures so we can learn to appreciate each other. A lot of our things that happen and go on, simply because of ignorance. We don’t know. We have not been exposed. Sometimes, we don’t care to be exposed, but I dare you to step out in faith. You’d be surprised to what you can learn about each other, because there’s so many things we have in common; so many things. So, it’s a beautiful picture. It’s a beautiful culture, once it’s all put together.

O: Mm-hm. Well, Mr. Nance, I know you have a busy schedule today, but were there things that you didn’t have a chance to say that you’d like to say as kind of a—

N: No, I think you’ve asked me enough questions. [Laughter] I just hope I was able to give you what you needed.

O: Oh, yes, sir. This has been really educational.

N: Okay, well, I am appreciative, because I wanted to make sure that whatever you needed, I would be able to answer.

O: Okay. I’m going to go ahead and—

[End of interview]