Dr. McKinley Price
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Dr. McKinley Price
Interviewers: Laura Puaca and Matthew Johnson
Interview Date: April 2, 2024
Location: Newport News TV (NNTV) studio, Newport News, Virginia
Length: Audio (MP3) and video (MP4) files, 62 minutes

THE INTERVIEWEE: Dr. McKinley Price was born in Newport News on March 10, 1949. He attended several schools in the city, including Huntington High School, where he graduated in 1967. He later attended Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology. While at Hampton, he participated in ROTC and later served as First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, where he was honorably discharged. In the 1971-1972 academic year, he was employed briefly as a substitute teacher at the Wilson School in Newport News, amidst school desegregation. He then enrolled at Howard University, where he began studying in 1972, and graduated with his Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) four years later, in 1976. Additionally, he completed a certificate in anesthesia at Provident Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Following dental school and his residency, Dr. Price and his wife, Valerie Scott Price, returned to their hometown where Dr. Price was first hired by Dr. C. Benson Clark and later opened his own dental practice.

Dr. Price is a leader both in the field of dentistry and the community more generally. He served on the Newport News School Board from 1984 to 1992, with two years as chair. During that time, he was also elected by his peers as President of the Peninsula Dental Society, where he became the first Black president of this organization. Among his numerous contributions and accomplishments, he was a founding member of People to People, which aims to improve race relations in Newport News, as well as the Virginia Peninsula Chapter of 100 Black Men.

In 2010, Dr. Price became the first African American man and first directly-elected African American to serve as mayor of Newport News, a position that he held for three terms that spanned twelve and a half years. During this time, between May 2020 and May 2021, Dr. Price also served as the President of the African American Mayors Association.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Laura Puaca is Professor of History at Christopher Newport University and founding director of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project. Matthew Johnson is a senior at Christopher Newport University majoring in English and History. He plans to attend graduate school for his Ph.D. in African American Literature.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted at the Newport News Television (NNTV) station. The interview took a life history approach, and Dr. Price spoke about his experiences growing up in Newport News and his memories of some key institutions there, such as Huntington High School, Dorie Miller Recreation Center, and Whittaker Hospital, where he was born and where his father-in-law, Dr. C. Waldo Scott, was Chief Surgeon. He also spoke about his mother, Rosa Belle Price, and his father, Arthur Lenard Price, who worked at the

Newport News Shipyard. Additionally, he shared memories of First Church of Newport News (Baptist), which was founded by his great-great-grandfather.

Much of the interview centered on Dr. Price's numerous contributions to his profession and his community. As a dentist, he worked with lower income families and children, providing work that they could neither afford nor get at other dentists. He also played a key role in building organizations devoted to improving race relations in the city, such as People to People. As a member of the Newport News School Board, he worked to improve education and increase reading rates. His tenure as mayor was also what he described as "youth-involved," and focused on improving opportunities for the children of the city. Another theme was environmental justice and addressing asthma rates and other problems related to the city's coal yards.

Dr. Price especially aspires to encourage young people and to provide them a sense of possibility. He is also grateful for his family, friends, career, and the various opportunities that the city has afforded him. It is clear from his retelling that Newport News has come to mean a lot to him.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Laura Puaca: This is Laura Puaca.

Matt Johnson: And this is Matt Johnson.

LP: Today is Tuesday, April the 2nd, 2024. We are interviewing Dr. McKinley Price. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good morning, Dr. Price. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today. We are taking what's called a life history approach and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. Where and when were you born?

McKinley Price: I was born in Newport News, Virginia in 1949, March 10th.

LP: And where were you born?

MP: Newport News, Virginia, at Whittaker Hospital.

MJ: Whittaker Hospital. Can you say a few words about that institution?

MP: Sure. Whittaker Hospital was the first hospital built specifically for minorities in my neighborhood. Before that hospital was built, people had to be either treated in the basement of the jail, or at the shipyard. I remember once I got injured and my dad took me over to the clinic, because he worked in the shipyard. But in 1949, actually, the year I was born, Dr. [C. Waldo] Scott came here as a surgeon and one of the first–if not the first–board-certified surgeon in

Newport News. So that place was an institution that people were very proud of because it was built specifically for the minority community. The Old Fields House, which is on 25th Street, the third floor, also acted as a hospital for a while. He rented that out to some physicians to treat people before the hospital was built. So, I spent a lot of time there as a child because I was very small. And I remember one day my dad said, "Something's wrong with this boy. I'm gonna take him to the hospital and see what's going on." So, I would spend a week at the hospital. And I also had a thing called mesenteric adenitis, which is just a viral infection of the gut. And I had to have an operation and–. What is ironic is my father-in-law is the one who did the surgery, Dr. Scott. But to show you how small I was, when I was entered into the hospital, the nurse put me in a crib, and I was eight. [laughter] So that gives you an idea of the size I was. So, I grew late. I was just a–. I grew about three inches in college, actually.

MJ: Thank you. Wow. And what were your parents' names, and what did they do for a living?

MP: My father's name was Arthur Lenard Price. And my middle name, I take after him. My brother took his first name, Arthur. My mother was Rosa Belle Price, and my father was from Littleton, North Carolina, and my mother was from Surry, Virginia. We're kin to the Pooles' family over there. My mother's great-grandfather–my great-great-grandfather–actually founded the first form of organized religion in Newport News. And our church is called the First Church of Newport News (Baptist) because of that. So, we were actually the first church in Newport News–the original church where the railroad tracks were. So, when they moved from 28th Street, when the railroad expanded to 23rd and Jefferson–. And there was a building there with a large steeple. First thing you saw when you came over the bridge or whatnot, it was very large, wonderful church, three stories tall. And now it's located on 24th Street and Wickham Avenue.

LP: We read that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke there in 1958.

MP: Yes.

LP: Did you attend that event?

MP: You know, one of the few regrets I have in my life was not going to that. It was–. I was nine, it was in the evening and my parents were dressed and say, "You want to come? We're going to go listen to a preacher." I said, "No, I think I'm gonna stay and watch Zorro." [laughter] So, you know, later, as you grow up, you look back on things that, yeah, [you] probably shouldn't have, wouldn't have, done that because I never had another opportunity to see him live. But the church was packed, and we have photographs of him being in the pulpit and speaking. And my daddy was actually a deacon at that church–became a deacon–and it was a wonderful evening. I wish I had gone, I do.

MJ: Okay, so we read that your father helped to make the propeller that's on the corner of J. Clyde and Jefferson. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

MP: Yeah, my father was what's called a machinist chipper. And this was [in] the days before lasers and all the, you know, computers and whatnot. So, he was a very skilled handcraftsman. He would actually do the final cutting and honing on propellers and brass. And I can remember distinctly he would come home, and he would smell like brass because all of his clothes, you know, they didn't have locker rooms or things like that to change. And Mama, you know, would wash his clothes separately from ours or whatnot. But yeah, he would even travel for the shipyard because they also did hydraulic dams, like in Denver and Boise, Colorado. So, he would go and do the final honing on some of the hydraulic things for dams as well. So, he was a very skilled person. And once he stopped doing that, he was a planner in the shipyard, where he retired.

MJ: Okay. And you spoke a little bit about this with regard to the church, but were your parents active in any other community groups?

MP: Yeah, my mother was a deaconess, and my father was deacon. He was chairman of the deacon board there at church for years. And when we built that church, he actually oversaw the construction because of his draftsmanship capabilities as well. He was the person that was assigned to monitor the construction of the church there on Wickham Avenue. As far as he was– he was a Mason, which he never spoke much about other than, you know, "We strive to help mankind." That's all I got out of him. [laughter] And my mother never was that social. They weren't a very social, active people. Just mostly in the church and family.

MJ: So we're eager to learn now more about growing up in, during, segregation. What were race relations like in Newport News when you were growing up?

MP: Well, it's interesting, I often say that actually, as a child, to me, Newport News was more integrated than it is now because I can distinctly remember–even though the schools were segregated–we had sections of the city where Blacks and Whites lived right next to each other. So we moved–. I was born on 26th Street, 700 block. In 1955, we moved to 31st and Marshall. Well, 31st and Marshall, two blocks down, on 33rd street was Marshall Courts. Marshall Courts was all-White. But there would be on Marshall Avenue, there would be–. I distinctly remember two houses where I don't know if the families were related or not, but there were White people living there as well. So, the neighborhoods were integrated somewhat, but the schools were segregated. So, I started out at schools with John Marshall, the old John Marshall, which was torn down two months after I went there and then went to Thomas Jefferson through fifth grade. And then I went to Booker T. Washington for sixth grade and Walter Reed for seventh grade.

And then started Huntington High School ‘cause we didn’t have junior high then or middle school. I went eighth through 12th to Huntington High School.

MJ: Did you notice or experience any discrimination in public facilities or public places? And if so, could you just talk more about that?

MP: Well, it was kind of a way of life. You know, the conversations you would have from your parents were, “When you go in a store, keep your hands in your pockets. If somebody White walks in front of you, you let them go first.” It was just kind of the way life was in those days. The theaters were not–. They were segregated in the sense that Blacks were upstairs and Whites were downstairs in the old theaters over town. We had our own theaters, like I had Jefferson Theatre, Moton Theatre, and Dixie Theatre in my neighborhood. But if you wanted to go what we called “overtown” to a theater, you would have to go upstairs. And I was still very small then, I only went usually with my older brother, which was crazy to do because, you know, people are going to be throwing stuff down. [laughter] It didn’t make sense to do it that way. But that’s the way it was. And also in my neighborhood, I lived one block from Huntington High School, also one block from Dorie [nickname for Doris] Miller Recreation Center. Now, my understanding is that the nephew of Collis P. Huntington–. The city approached them for contributions for the recreation centers. And he said, “If we’re going to build one–. We’re not going to build one, we’re going to build two.” So, they were actually one block apart, two identical recreation centers. They each had their own pool. They each had–. I remember they had their own tennis courts, baseball field. This is where Huntington expanded because Dorie Miller became part of Huntington High School at one point. And then, when segregation ended, that became World War II: there was Doris Miller and World War II Memorial. Those were the names. But then it became Dorie Miller again once that one was vacated. So, it was interesting to see a lot of heated

arguments between two factions of kids, even though they lived right next to each other because, like I said, on 33rd Street, I distinctly remember a basketball court that we could look through the fence and watch the kids play basketball but we couldn't use that court. We had to go this way because that was the cutoff. You couldn't go past 33rd Street and use those facilities.

MJ: So, that brings me then to the question of whether or not you were aware of the civil rights movement as it was unfolding. You speak to, kind of, a perception of race relations. Do you remember any protests or demonstrations in Newport News? And if so, were you or your family involved?

MP: No, I was a little bit too young for that. It was just you accepted things as they were, because that's the way things were. You didn't question why. You know, "Why do I have to do that? Why did–" You know? No, you do as I said. This is the way it is. And you know, you–. There were separate water fountains in public facilities, separate restrooms, and those types of things. It's just your accepted behavior for those times.

MJ: Okay.

LP: We'd love to hear a little bit more about your experience attending some of the city's segregated schools, which you already mentioned. But did you notice–either at the time or, you know, looking back–any differences between those schools and the schools that were for White students?

MP: Yeah, the law was supposed to be separate but equal. But you notice that things weren't quite as equal because most of the books that I had, you know, there was a pink slip on the left-hand side and stamped how many people had had the book before you got it. Well, there were always five names. [laughter] And so we very seldom had a new book. So, all of the books were generally handed down to us. So, you kind of noticed that. You noticed that the equipment, if

you ever got to visit another school, the gym equipment, the facilities were quite different than the older schools that we had. It's just interesting how we grew up and what was called a "court-approved plan," where most of the busing, once integration started, came from our neighborhood. We were allowed to go to the first–I think, first and second–grade in our neighborhoods, but were bused out of our neighborhoods in elementary and White students were bused from middle school down, to try and get some type of balance.

LP: So, you mentioned attending Huntington for high school?

MP: Yes.

LP: Did you have any teachers who were especially influential?

MP: Oh, Huntington was great for me. And, you'll know, anybody that talks about Huntington talks about it with pride and joy. It was unique in the sense because of the time–. Because minorities couldn't teach at other facilities, I had teachers who had Ph.D.s. So, the education was phenomenal. And also, the love of that school [by] people. Education was your key out of poverty, your key to success. And it was drilled into you: "You will do the best you can. You will learn this. You will be exemplary in any actions. You will act like ladies and gentlemen." That was driven into you from eighth through twelfth grade. There was no option. You could get sent home for having your shirttail out. It was strict, it was rigid, but you felt loved. And I think that's the thing when people talk about Huntington and want to go back to those days–although it could never be replicated in today's time–that feeling of passion and love is so critical and so evident in people who experienced it and want to maintain it and want to have that model carried on. Children being loved is, I think, the key to success in their education requirements because it gives them hope. It gives them a plan for the future. It lets them see what they can be. Because, in those days too, all the professionals live within your community. So, your principals, your

teachers, your physicians, your dentists all were in your community. You could see them. You don't see that now. After integration, everybody went out to the suburbs with the bigger houses and whatnot. And you very seldom see a professional in a kid['s] neighborhood.

LP: Were some of your favorite subjects to study when you were at Huntington?

MP: Well, I was math and science all the way. We actually were in an experimental group in math from after seventh grade. There were about twelve of us that were going to take math during the year and summer every year until high school [ended]. So, it was it was actually before the Advanced Placement program actually started. So, by the time I was in 12th grade, I was taking college calculus. So, I actually had all my math requirements for college by the time I finished high school. And I distinctly remember one year going back to the difference between segregated and integrated schools. So, integration started in '71. In 1968, I took a course at Ferguson High School, in the summer, six weeks, 8[AM] to 12[PM]: catch the bus every morning [laughter] from there to Ferguson. And the class was–. I was the only one in the class that wasn't repeating the class because I was taking it for enrichment to continue further on. And also, being the only minority in the class, I was teased quite a bit. And there was one student, his name was Billy Martin, who became a lawyer, who was also taking a class, but it was separate in the class. She was teaching two classes at one time; he was in a more advanced class. He was a little bit older than I was, and he was the only guy that would speak to me or say hello to me. And, you know, I didn't realize the impact it was having on me at the time. But flash forward 30 years and I'm in a board meeting, and this now attorney, this was his last day of being the attorney for this board I was on. And this guy said, "Chip, I'll see you later." And something hit me: he said, "Chip." And he walked out the door. So, I followed him, and I went to the elevator. I said, "Excuse me, did you ever attend Ferguson High School in the summer?" And he said,

"Yeah, I was in a math class." I start crying. I broke out in tears. This guy, he had no idea the impact he had on my life for just that small act of kindness: just speaking to me every day and trying to look out for me. You know, the paper actually did an article about it: just what small acts of kindness, how they can influence you, and how they can stay with you for life. But that really helped me with race relations, knowing that everybody wasn't going to call you a name, or everybody wasn't going to tease you. There were some good people out there.

MJ: That's amazing that you were able to reconnect.

MP: Yeah.

MJ: So long after too. So, while at Huntington, were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

MP: [laughter] Yeah, my grades probably suffered a lot because I was in everything. I mean, I was a tennis player. So, I started playing tennis at age of eight, which is another interesting thing. My first tennis racket was given to me by my future mother-in-law. She was actually a 1937 Junior National Champion, Mae Scott. Of course, the tennis was still segregated in those days as well, but she was a women's Junior National champ. And she played tennis. And a lot of the faculty at Huntington played tennis–Ms. Sales and Ross Hines–people like that–who was my first coach–played tennis. You know, the courts were one block from my house and, being small, that was probably the only sport that I could participate in a high school level. So, I played that. I was in the Hobby Club. I enjoyed doing things with my hands. I was in the Math Club. You know, a lot of extracurricular activities. But tennis was the main thing. And I actually got a scholarship to go to college with the tennis.

MJ: Wow. So you graduated from Hampton in 1967.

LP: Huntington.

MJ: Sorry.

MP: Huntington. Yeah.

MJ: Thank you. And from there, you went to Hampton.

MP: Right.

MJ: I was getting ahead of myself. So why did you select Hampton?

MP: Well, at first, I wanted to go to Howard. You know, I wanted to go away. I wanted to be, you know, I didn't want to stay close to home. But then Hampton gave me money. [laughter] So I said, "Yeah, that's sounds good." So, I got a tennis scholarship, and that was the main reason. And the campus, it was great. I'm glad I did. We actually went to visit Howard. My mother wasn't that excited about it because Howard didn't have a very distinct campus at that time. It was right in the city. And she was worried about housing because you were only guaranteed housing for one year, then you'd have to find your own housing. And neither of my parents had gone to college. So, you know, they wanted to make sure that I had a good experience.

MJ: And you spoke to your love for math and science. What made you decide to study biology?

MP: Well, I always wanted to be a physician. The guy that I talked about, that did my operation, my father-in-law [C. Waldo Scott]. I love that guy. I mean, I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to grow up like him. Actually, his son Jon and I were classmates from first grade on. We were best friends since first grade. So I spent more time probably at his house [laughter] than I did at mine. So, we were like this together. We played, you know, Little League Baseball, football. Even though I never made the weight limit, I was third-string quarterback. They would bring me in for extra points, you know, and push me in behind the runner. [laughter] But we grew up together and just had a great time. We lived maybe two blocks from each other. Played table

tennis, Boys Club, Boy Scouts, you know. My father believed in, you know, being well-rounded. Do as much as you can. He taught me how to swim at age four. So, we did everything together.

LP: Now after you graduated from Hampton, we understand that you taught as a substitute teacher in a Newport News School briefly, briefly. Where did you teach?

MP: I taught at a school that no longer exists. It was a three-story school off of 25th Street. I think it was called Wilson School. I had just gotten out of the Army. I did ROTC through Hampton and did advanced ROTC and was a second lieutenant. And [I] got out of the Army early because it was at the end of the Vietnam War–so, they created a thing called ADT Active Duty for Training only. So, after I went to Officer Battalion School at Fort Sam Houston and had done my four months of active duty there, I got out early and I came back home. So, you know, [I had] finished college, finished Army, no job. I was, you know, doing odd jobs and this long-term substitute position became available from a lady who was having cervical surgery, and she was an English teacher. [laughter] So, I wound up teaching sixth grade English: the only male teacher in the building! Henry Godfrey was my principal. So that was the first year of integration. And it was interesting to come back to that situation because the kids would come in and everybody would be divided. The White kids over here, Black kids over here. And it was interesting to see once they got over what they were told at home and then began to interact, how things changed in that classroom. It was interesting to see that, if you don't listen to what you're being told, but experience it for yourself, that life would be different for them. And I think people began to see that this was going to work. Integration would work if people would allow it to work.

LP: So, this is '71.

MP: '71.

MJ: What was the racial composition like of the faculty?

MP: At that school?

MJ: Yes, sir.

MP: It was integrated. The faculty was integrated. It's just there weren't any male teachers. [laughter] I was the only male teacher, that I do remember. I was one that broke up all the fights. [laughter] And these kids were as big as I was. [laughter]

MJ: What were–. You spoke a little bit to that. What were the relationships like between Black and White students?

MP: I think it became, you know–. Once the stereotypes were melted away, it's just like any other school now. It was no different. Everything was the same.

MJ: So, do you recall any moments of tension or conflict?

MP: No, just a couple of fights. I remember one kid, actually, who was my size. And like I say, I just got out of the Army, so I was [in the] best shape of my life, you know. And I also had studied karate. And this kid jumped in my face and, and I said, "Okay, I'd like to talk to you after school." So, I had him and two of his boys to stay back. And I went out to my car, because we had we had some boards that we break. So, I brought some boards in, and I had his partners hold the boards and I punched through the boards. Boom. I said, "Son, if I hit you, I'm gonna break your chest. Don't ever get my face again." I had no more problems with him. [laughter] Of course, you can't do those things these days, you know? [laughter]

LP: We also understand–to sort of talk a little bit more about the desegregation process–we understand that the city's adoption of court-ordered busing also involved effectively closing Huntington High School by turning it into an intermediate school. As an alumnus, what was your reaction to this decision? Do you remember when you first heard the news?

MP: Yeah, I was away at that time because from ‘72 to ‘76 I was in dental school. But it was–. It’s not actually a court [-ordered plan]. It’s a court-approved plan. So, the aim was to keep the racial balance–as much as you could–equivalent. So, you know, that’s why the busing was so prevalent. It was sad to me that we would lose that, just like, you know, Newport News [High School was] lost. It was sad that these institutions that had been part of the city for so long and so renowned and so well-known would no longer be there. But, you know, it’s something that you know had to occur.

MJ: And so, at what point did you decide to pursue a career as a dentist?

MP: I had a couple of unique experiences. As I said, as a kid. I always wanted to be just like my father-in-law. I wanted to be a medical doctor, and I had an opportunity after my junior year in college to go to Georgetown for a program. IBM sponsored a program to try to get more minorities interested in health professions. So, I was assigned a Ph.D. candidate who was doing experimental work on rats. She was studying redistribution of blood flow on hypertensive rats. And believe it or not, there is a breed of rats you can breed that are hypertensive, have high blood pressure. You have to be very quiet around them. You have to keep them in low light. I mean, you shock them, they’ll stroke out. It was funny. So, these rats–. And these are big rats. So, she had to cannulate the aorta and inject a radioactive material, then cut out the kidneys and whatnot to see if the blood flow redistributed differently in the rats once terminated. And she was able to do one surgery a day. So, at this rate, she was going to take four years to finish her Ph.D. [laughter] So, I got involved with her, helping her, and I could do eight rats a day. So, it really helped her with her research as far as getting ready for her doctorate. Actually, I extended my stay there and got to meet another dentist who was also working at the time on getting a master’s in physiology, Dr. Fleming, who I stayed at his house for those extra three weeks while I was

continuing to help her. And I kind of saw the lifestyle he had [laughter] and how he was doing, and he was talking about, you know, Howard and that it was, you know, an 8 to 5. And then by that time, too, my father-in-law, Dr. Scott said, you know, he had always regretted the fact that he didn't spend as much time with his family as he could because, in those days, you did morning rounds, you did office hours, you came home for dinner, you went back to the hospital, you know, and he just was never home. And he said, you know, he looked at the economics of dentistry and the 9 to 5 and, you know, "You about to marry my daughter," [laughter] you know, "why don't you think about dentistry?" Well, at the same time, going back to Georgetown, the department chair, Dr. Peter Kott, I remember his name. He was the chairman of the Department of Physiology. He said, "Price, you know, you're good with your hands, obviously. You know, you have a good personality. You love technology. Why don't you think about dentistry?" And so, I did. So, I applied to Howard. Especially after that stint with the teaching, [laughter] I knew I was not going to be a teacher. And so, in '72, I went to dental school, and I'm happy I chose dentistry.

MJ: And why do you think you came back to this area after that?

MP: Well, I've always wanted to come back home. I've always wanted–. I love Newport News. I love the people here. I love the potential this city has so it was no other place I wanted to come back to. I got married between my sophomore and junior year in dental school. So, the people that I was close to, the Scott family and my family–. My history was here, so. This was definitely the place to come back to.

LP: So not that long after you came back, you established your own dental practice, and you became a leader among other dentists in the area based on your involvement in different

organizations. What do you see as some of the most important attributes that you bring to your profession?

MP: Well, I think dentistry–. Because of the experiences I had as a kid, again, because of my I guess, slow development, I had to have twelve teeth removed as a child. And the dentist at the time wanted to remove two a day. Now, in retrospect, I probably didn't have to. I was just slowly developing. My baby teeth stayed with me longer than the average kid did. So, I decided, "No, let's go to hospital and take them all out at one time." Mistake. In those days, the anesthesia was a mesh–wire mesh–with gauze. You pour ether over it, and they hold you down till you pass out. And that's probably as close to suffocation as you ever want to experience. So, I had that done to me twice, once again for that abdominal surgery and then for the extraction. So, when I woke up with a mouth full of blood and they gave me melba toast, I remember. [laughter] You know how hard that is? Anyway, I said, "There's got to be a better way to do this. So, I'm glad that when I went to dental school, I did a year–. After dental school, I did a year of anesthesia as well. So, when I first came back, I did general dentistry with sedation for kids. And in my neighborhood, again, there were no specialists: so there were no pediatric dentists, there were no endodontists, there were no oral surgeons. So, I became that for the dental community. So, I got everybody's bad kids. I got everybody who was afraid of the dentist because I was doing sedation at the time. So, for the first seventeen years of my practice, I did a lot of Medicaid, and I did a lot of sedation. So, I think that's why, you know, people–a lot of the dentists–knew me and would recommend stuff to me.

MJ: You are also someone who has been very involved in the Newport News community. We're interested in learning more about your time on the [Newport News] school board, where you

served from 1984 to 1992. And for two of those years, you served as chair. So, what led you to get involved in the school board?

MP: Well, actually, my partner and I–Dr. Clark [and I] were partners for twenty-nine years on a handshake, no legal paper signed. And that's the way we did things in those days, too. I think they actually called him first because he was seven years older than I was. He was more known. And he said, "No, I know the guy you need to talk to." [laughter] And me, I guess I have–. My wife says I have a gene that prevents me from saying, "No." I said, "Sure. Yeah, I'll [do it]–." In those days, too, you were appointed so, you didn't have an election or anything like that. City Council appointed you. And so I was appointed to the school board. And, as you said, the last two years I became chair. That was an interesting assignment to do. So, a lot of responsibility. It's a large budget. That's the largest [part of the] budget for the city. That's the biggest chunk out of the budget. So, it's a lot of responsibility, but I enjoyed it.

MJ: And what were some of the biggest issues that the district faced during your time on the board?

MP: A lot was trying to get–. There were questions about whether or not–at one time I remember whether or not seatbelts were going to be used on buses. Most of the studies in those days, as they do now, show that you have more problems with seat belts: kids using them as weapons or [laughter] or, you know, getting entangled. So most places don't use seatbelts on buses to my knowledge. So, we didn't in those days. Student violence, trying to keep things safe. I remember cell phones were just coming on, and whether or not we were going to allow kids [to carry them], you know. And I was one that wanted children to have access to phones. You know, if my daughter's going out to a football game or somewhere and, you know, she gets stranded, I'd like for her to be able to communicate. So those were topics that were [discussed]–what schools were

going to be built, remodeled, renewed. We have old schools in Newport News. And it's going to take a ton of money to replace them. A high school now is almost $100 million to replace the school. It's just since, I think '85, the state stopped funding construction. They're just beginning to put small amounts back into school construction. Cities just can't afford to build these new schools. It's just too expensive.

MJ: What were some of the biggest challenges facing the schools specifically during your time?

MP: I guess the biggest thing was the academics: reading rates, trying to make sure as the programs change–I know we started a new reading program during that period. We were trying to make sure that the racial gap was closed between [their] performance. It's difficult when kids come to school that are hungry and trying to teach them to learn. We were just beginning to provide food for students to be able to make sure that, you know, they came to school on an equal setting. Also, preschool: we started doing preschool in those days because a parent who has a library in their home, who reads to their kid every night versus a kid who hasn't seen a book until he gets to the first grade and no one reads to him, doesn't know his colors or alphabets, there's no way they're going to be on the same footing by the time they get to third grade. So that critical period of making sure you learn to read by third grade: because after third grade, you read to learn. And if you haven't learned to read by third grade, you're forever going to be behind. And you can just look at the path of success, you know, to either prison or college based on reading scores. And it's amazing that you can do that. So, it's critical that you put your resources in the early years for kids. And this is why right now we're challenged with a school that Mike Petters and I are trying to raise funds for, for a school on 16th Street. It's part of the Peake Early Childhood Center. We're going to have one in Newport News for 200 students from

six weeks to four years of age on a sliding scale, because childcare is so critical for people trying to be employed, and also for the success of kids in the future.

LP: Thank you for that. You've also been involved in a number of different organizations dedicated to improving race relations in Newport News, such as People to People. Can you tell us a little bit about that organization? How it came about, for example?

MP: Yeah. Herb Kelly, [who]was a prominent attorney in this area, and I became friends. And we started talking–. After things happened in Newport News, I was called into what was now called the NOW Group. NOW group was a bunch of businessmen who said in the back room with a lot of money who, when they saw something that needed to be done in the city, they would do it. So, he called me in, and something had happened that they were concerned about. Oh, I remember what it was: after I left the school board, it was kind of an unwritten rule that if a minority leaves the school board, that one [minority] would be replaced. That didn't happen when I left. There was a bridge that connected Peterson Yacht Basin that was deemed unsafe, and they closed it. Well, in the minority community, it seemed like that was a prominent community being walled off from a poor community. And there was one other–. Oh, there were two basketball courts that were closed down in a White neighborhood because of "too much noise." All of this happened in a two-week period during the Rodney King era. So, these businessmen said, "This place is going to erupt." They called me in, and I brought with me the guy that was president of the NAACP at that time, who was a minister, and also, he was a trained lawyer. And he said, "Price, we need your help. What are we going to do? We're concerned that, you know, these things that this all-White–at that time–male city council has done, may not be the wisest thing to have done." So, we started talking and there were eight of us. So, the NOW group assigned a committee, eight of us together, and we would rotate meeting at each other's

home. So, when it got to my house, Herb said, “Huck, let’s order a pizza.” I said, “They don’t deliver pizza to my house.” He said, “What do you mean?,” he said. [I said,] “No, they don’t. They won’t come to my house.” He said, “You got one of the prettiest streets in the city. You got a congressman living in your house– a state senator–and all these professionals.” [I said,] “Yep. Can’t get a pizza, though.” [laughter] So, he said, “That’s not right.” I said, “No, it’s not right.” So then, he–. Yeah, some kind of way the paper came up and I asked him, I said, “Herb, what time do you get your Sunday paper?” [He said,] “Oh, about 5:30.” I said,” I get mine at 10:30.” I said, “I am reading history when I come from church, I’m not reading the news.” [laughter] So, he began to see that we were actually having two cities. And how things were being perceived. We also had a very serious drug problem at that time. Drugs were being handed on the corner. I said, “I’ve got to go through three drug deals to get to my house. You’re not having that, Hilton. Why is that? Why is it being allowed in my neighborhood?” So, we started meeting more seriously. We started developing. We started talking about People to People and relationships and trying to see what we could do to improve race relations as well as community. And that’s how People to People started. And we did that. Herb and I was supposed to be co-chair for three months and rotate. We were co-chairs for twenty years, [laughter] I think. We brought in some great people to talk. We were very progressive in our interaction. I think we had very little violence, when other cities were having interracial violence during that period, because we got people to come outside of their comfort zone and talk about issues one on one. We would break up in small groups at high schools. We would feed people. We would get two or three hundred people at these meetings and have had great speakers to come in to talk about how we were, as a community, very progressive in what we were doing.

LP: What would you say were the–your–priorities or sort of goals for the group?

MP: The group was to improve race relations and also target the discrepancy in the Southeast community, starting there with things that were going on, things that were being allowed in that part of the city that weren't happening in others. And to try and make things equitable for both communities.

LP: What do you see as the group's greatest accomplishments or achievements?

MP: I think the fact that people talked: people were able to get the perspective from other views, to get outside of their comfort zone, to be honest with one another. We provided a safe environment to do that. We had excellent counselors and interviewers to be able to do that. So, I think just the fact that we communicated and different communities got to learn other people. There's no way I was going to know a Herb Kelly in the environment that I was in, you know, or those type of leaders. So being able to be able to communicate, to call him, and let him know what was going on was, I think, tremendous for the city as a whole. Because it's a long city, you know, 25-mile-long city. It's really hard to see that in different areas, different things are going on.

MJ: More generally, what, what do you think initially influenced you to become such a staunch advocate for your community?

MP: I think because the way I grew up you know. It has become a trite saying but, you know, it does take a village, I think, to raise a kid. And I was one. I mean, between the Boys Club, Boy Scouts, recreation center, family, you know, that helped develop me. And I wanted to do that, to come back and be able to help do that. So, youth has always been critical on my list with involvement, letting people know I consider myself an icon for average. I was a very slow reader. That's why math and science was great for me, because I could read it slowly. History and English were my worst subjects because it required faster reading. I went to pre-college one

summer before starting Hampton and I tripled my reading rate. They had a Craig machine. It was a thing that would help you to speed your rate. I tripled my reading rate to get to average, [laughter] so I would call every word. That's just the way I learned how to read. It got better, you know, as I had to push myself to do it, to get be successful in college and whatnot. But I could see that reading was going to be critical to doing better. So, I forced myself to do it. But I forgot what you–. I'm sorry, what was it you said?

MJ: Just what, what initially influenced you to become such a staunch advocate for your community?

MP: Oh, just the fact that I wanted to give back because the community had done so much for me. I mean, you know, being able to develop as a child, to feel free and relaxed here, to feel comfortable in this city, to see that from someone [with] average capability and talent could be successful. I wanted to show kids, you know, that a guy like me, born on 26th Street, 700 block could become mayor. First Black-elected–. Elected: not the first Black mayor, but the first elected [Black] mayor. If I can do that, definitely you can.

MJ: And are there any moments in your time as a community advocate that stand out as particularly meaningful?

MP: There are times of success when you have, you know, you get a $30 million grant like we did with the CNI grant. The staff worked diligently to make that happen [and] the city manager. When you're traveling–. And I was honored to be president of the African American Mayors Association. And that's an organization with 500 Black mayors. And it was doing Covid. And so, most of my interaction was through the screen. And actually, Kamala Harris [held]–the first inter-governmental agency she talked to was us, the African American Mayors Association. And to lead that group through challenging times was very interesting. And one of the things I really

enjoyed was, you know, I would talk to people, and they said, “Well, where are you from?” I said, “I’m from Newport News.” [They’d say,] “Newport News, where is that?” And I would say, “We build nuclear aircraft carriers and submarines. What does your city build?” [laughter] So, they quickly knew not to ask me that question anymore. You know, Newport News, a lot of people, I guess, internationally don’t know about it, but we do great things here. And, you know, it’s the fifth largest city by population in the state. It’s growing and I think it’s going to continue to be successful. So, I’m very proud of this city.

LP: Let’s hear a little bit more about your experiences as mayor. So, you served as mayor of Newport News for twelve years. What got you interested in elected office?

MP: Again, that wasn’t because I love politics. I don’t consider myself a politician. A servant leader, maybe. I was actually on the committee to search for a mayor. Joe Frank said he was retiring, and I was on this committee. Again, it was during that period where council was kind of at each other, and I think people started coming back to me because of, historically, how I had helped lead with People to People. And they looked at my demeanor and looked at how I could get people talking, could build bridges, and they thought that I would be a good mayor. I’m not a great orator. I’m not one of those people that, you know, rousing gets you. But, you know, I try and do what’s right. I try and show people how things can be done. I try and get people to see each other’s side. I try and mediate. I try and be goal-setting. And I think they thought that I was going to be successful. And hopefully it was. Actually, it was twelve and a half years. They moved the election, thanks to my daughter [Marcia “Cia” Price], who was in the House of Delegates and voted for that which I will never forgive her for. [laughter] But so, when they moved the election from May to November, they just extended our period for six months. So I actually, served twelve and a half years.

LP: Did you–? What were your agenda items as mayor?

MP: I was very much youth-involved, wanted to see what could be done because especially, you know, you see a kid [who says,] "There's nothing to do down here." So, trying to make sure that we had facilities, we had curriculum, we had parks, we had activities. We had paths for kids to be successful. You know, these magnet schools that we try to develop: it was also to help the racial balance, but also to give kids a different way of pathway of success. You know, if you're a musical student, you're talented in the arts, why not concentrate that talent in one area so that those kids can propel? So, you know, those are the types of things that we try to influence on. Trying to decide, looking at the future of this city–. One of the things I tried to do was with the EPA to show them this coal yard. Okay? Everybody knows that coal is not going to be in the future. We have two coal yards right next to deep water. So, when coal stops and those people sneak out in the middle of the night and leave that dump there, what's going to happen? It's going to cost $100 million to clean that up. We don't have that kind of money. So, I asked the EPA director–his name was Reagan at the time when I was [president of the African American Mayors Association, or AAMA]–. He was the director, and I was head of the AAMA. [I asked,] "Why don't you start putting funds aside now for cities like mine who are going to be abandoned and don't have the facilities or the capabilities of cleaning these sites up like you did with the brownfields? So, I think one of the results that has come out of that, they're at least now–they're doing a three-year study on coal dust and the other things that are in the air. It's been a hundred years. We know the effects of coal dust. There's thirty percent more asthma in my community than anywhere else. So, we know what the effects are. Clean it up. Get ready for what's coming. But government moves very slowly.

MJ: What did it mean to you to be the first African American man and the first directly-elected African American to hold this position?

MP: It was very moving. It was a truly–. I had a very eclectic and inclusive kitchen cabinet, as we call it: people from all parts of the city, all races, all genders, to come together and say, "Okay, this is how you need to run this race. This is how you need to be successful." And it all came together and we–. You know, I feel good about that race. We ran it by the rules. We gave a good story. We gave a good projection of what we wanted to do for the city. And we were successful. Second term, I didn't have any opposition. And I had three young men come after me after my third term. But we were successful in defeating them as well.

MJ: What do you see as your most important contribution as mayor?

MP: I think probably my most important contribution is to the younger kid in the community who is looking to the future and wanting to see his capabilities and possibilities. And as I said, I just see myself as an average student, an average citizen who has worked hard and has been successful and showing that, you know, a kid today can be anything they want to be. All I got to do is have the fire in the belly to do it and the drive to continue to educate themselves and go forward with it. There are people out there now, there are so many more resources for help, that if people will take advantage of them. And they need to understand that there are communities and sororities and all types of agencies that will be helpful. If you have a desire and a goal and you put forth that, that effort, you can be successful.

LP: We're also interested in learning a little bit more, particularly about your memories of the displacement of Black homeowners to make room for CNU or what was then Christopher Newport College. Can you tell us first a little bit about the Shoe Lane community in the years before the school was built?

MP: Yeah, I don't really know that much about that as it happened. I do know that I had a lot of friends on that community. Dr. Downing and Dr. Shavers, they both married sisters and they lived, I think, right next to each other. And Paula lived on that street. And for me, coming from the Southeast, driving all the way up to Paula's house was, you know, a unique experience in those days. So, I just know that they had beautiful homes. It was a lovely, tight community. But I don't know much about the history of how that happened and how that went down.

MJ: And how did the community respond to the news that CNC wanted to acquire that property?

MP: Well, I think it was obvious that the minority community was upset about it. They, I think, fought it every way they could. I think that's probably now being relooked at as to how it happened and why. And what's going to happen retrospectively from that? I don't know. But it was not something that the minority community appreciated.

MJ: Later, in the late 1980s, the community learned about a master plan to expand CNC's boundaries. Do you know what actions the community members took in response?

MP: I do not, I do not.

LP: And I don't know if you're able to speak to this or not, but we read that part of that expansion ended up including the acquisition of Ferguson High School.

MP: Now, I do know about Ferguson. I was actually chair of the school board when that occurred. I actually signed the paper to sell Ferguson. I think we sold it to the state, and then the state donated it back to Ferguson [Christopher Newport], as I remember, $7.5 million, something like that. But yeah, I was, I think, chair of the board when that happened.

LP: How did that decision come about?

MP: I think there was just a surplus of capacity at the time. And there was, you know, what are we going to do with the school? And CNU was growing, and it was just a, you know, it seemed like a good plan to do at that time, to do that.

LP: Do you recall how community members, either in the immediate area or in the city, more generally responded to that?

MP: Far as I can remember, it was a win-win situation. People saw that, you know–. The high schools have never been where the population needs to be. There's, you know, Warwick and Ferguson right together. So, it was kind of like, not in the way, but just it wasn't that critical where it was at this point. So, you know, we wanted one in the Southeast. So, if that school was going to be built, we didn't need this one. So that seemed like a perfect opportunity for CNU to take advantage of that.

MJ: All right. So now as we're wrapping up, we just have a few questions with regard to the broader civil rights movement. So, do you see yourself as part of that movement or the broader Black freedom struggle?

MP: I think there's a continuation of [it] still. Unfortunately, we appear to be regressing a bit in our race relations in this country. We're more divisive politically and racially, I think, than we were a few years back. And I think it's more about power struggle and opportunities. People who are not maybe economically where they want to be are trying to find reasons or excuses why they're not and blaming other ethnic groups or other political organizations for that. So, until we get back to a country where people on opposite sides of an issue can sit down and talk, and until we get back to the point where we put our country first, as opposed to our own political gains or our own political parties, this country is going to be in trouble. And, you know, people talk about the good old days, but something has to give because this is not going to work. This is not going

to propel us forward. And until we have some give and take on both sides issues are not going to be resolved.

MJ: That leads me to ask, then what do you see is sort of the unfinished work of the movement, or what do you see as, you spoke to that, the pressing issues?

MP: To me, the pressing issue is the fact that all boats will rise if things are done correctly. We are at our best when we are united. The United States of America. And until we reunite with one mission, one vision, and see that all of us need to rise–the rich need to continue to be rich, the poor need to continue to improve, and the middle class needs to continue to erupt and grow. And so, if all of those continue to do that, one can't dominate the other. You know, one can't continue to push down the other. The poor, the middle class can always hate the rich. The rich sometimes do provide jobs for us. But how much money do you need? People need food. We all need to work together to grow this country as we have had in the past. And until that occurs again, I think it's going to be detrimental for us to continue on the path that we're currently on. And that's just conflict. Continuous conflict. No, no communication. You know, when you're putting self and party before country. There's a problem. No matter what side you're on.

LP: Thank you for that. Just finally, the very last question: is there anything that we might have missed or that you would like to add?

MP: No. Just that. I am honored to have been able to grow up in this city. I've been honored to be able to have the positions that I've had. The experiences that I've had have been, I think, a meaningful and a fruitful life for me and my family. I've been honored to marry a hometown girl, the sister of my best friend since first grade. I've been honored to learn and know the people in this city from all aspects. And I've been honored to have people put faith in me as a leader. And it's just been a wonderful experience to have had.

LP: Well, thank you, Dr. Price for participating in this project. And we can wrap up there unless you have any other questions. Matt?

MJ: No, just thank you so much.

MP: Oh, thank you. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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