

Rivers Taylor Interview Summary

Interviewee: Rivers Taylor

Interviewer: Jaden Getz and Brandon Graham

Interview Date: November 2, 2021

Location: Blackboard Collaborate

Length: 68:16

THE INTERVIEWEE: Rivers Taylor is an educator, minister, and active community member. The son of a Black minister and Black business owners, Taylor had grown up in Hampton Roads amidst the civil rights movement. He was born in Newport News in 1951 and attended local schools in Hampton. He attended Hampton's Phenix High School for two years before the school's name was changed to Pembroke High School. He graduated from Pembroke High School in 1969. After graduation, he attended Norfolk State College (now University), worked at Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, served in Vietnam, taught at local public schools, and served as pastor at Bethlehem Judah Ministries, Newport News. He is presently a mentor in the RISE program in Hampton and Newport News and works to spread awareness of Black history with Project 1619.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Jaden Getz and Brandon Graham are students at Christopher Newport University, working with Dr. Laura Puaca to contribute to the Hampton Roads Oral History Project

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview took place online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Taylor was very comfortable and forthcoming sharing his experiences growing up in the Newport News area. The interview went very comfortably and Taylor was an enthusiastic participant. Aside from minor technological interruptions, the interview went without any major issues.

Rivers Taylor--Edited Transcript

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Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 68:16

START OF INTERVIEW

Brandon Graham: This is Brandon Graham and my partner is Jaden Getz. Today is November 2nd, 2021. We're interviewing Mr. Rivers Taylor. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good morning, Mr. Taylor. We are taking what is called a life history. And I'd like to begin the interview with a few questions about your childhood. Where were you born?

Rivers Taylor: I was born right here on the peninsula. I was born in Newport News, on March 12th of 1951.

BG: What did your parents do for a living?

RT: Well, that's very interesting. My mom and dad were entrepreneurs. My dad worked in the shipyard. He was a minister. He was a barber. And they also owned their own grocery store back in the sixties. And my mom was a beautician. And, see, when I was little, they built a beauty parlor onto the house, full service beauty parlor, with just one person doing the hair. They had the chair, the shampoo bowl, the dryer and all that. So when I came home from school, I came straight home and my mom was there.

BG: Can you please state their names?

RT: My mom's name is—was—Lily May Taylor. It was Lily May Wilkins before she got married. My dad's name is the same as mine, and he was Senior. His is Rivers S. Taylor, Senior.

BG: You say that your father was a minister and your parents are small business owners, as you said. We'd love to learn more about them. So beginning with your father, when did he go into ministry?

RT: Well, let's go back a little further than that. Dad grew up on a farm in a place called South Hill La Crosse, Virginia. That's in the Western part of Virginia. Him and mom both grew up on a farm. Dad worked the farm. He'd never got no further than a third grade education when he was younger. He ended up going back to school as an adult, getting his GED, and then taking college courses and got an associate's from Norfolk State. But prior to that, he was in the Navy. Then after the Navy, he came home and he married my mom. I have a sister that's five years older. I am 70, my sister's 75. We just celebrated her 75th birthday. We had my sister in 1946. Then they came here and I was born. Now it's very interesting in our family: my dad is one child of 16. He was close to the youngest one, on the youngest end, and my mom was one of nine. And I used to tease them because three brothers married three sisters of that nine and sixteen. So my teasing was, they was in the country, there won't nobody out there to get married to but each other. And like I told you, mom's last name was Wilkin and his dad's last name was Taylor. So that's about, right now, that's about it. The one thing that I learned so much from watching them is that they had an awesome—they may not have had the education—but they had an awesome work ethic. I mean, if dad needed more money, he got another job, or he worked longer hours. As I told you, my dad worked in the shipyard. At the same time, he owned a barber shop and he had people working in a barber shop for him. And at the same time, they owned our little convenience store, like [what] we call convenience stores now, where we sold meats and bread. I mean, full service,

like a little grocery store; beer and wine, meat, bread, cigarettes, you know, little, little things. Band-aids, alcohol, little things you will get at a little convenience store. So that's how I grew up. Now, mom had a high school education. In fact, they were thinking that my mom was going to be the first one from her family to go to college. Mom played basketball back in the thirties—female that played basketball. And played tennis back there in the day. So, you know, she was a little ahead of her time and we just gleaned—my sisters and I—gleaned so much from them. You know? My sister, presently, is still working for herself again as an entrepreneur. Her and her husband have a business where he's a motivational speaker and my sister is the back office boss, that's what she calls herself. She has a degree in public—. Like social studies and some history and her master's was in—. Oh, man, what was her master's in? Something public service or something like that. Anyway, she taught for a while. Then she worked on Capitol Hill and, after that, she came home to be with her husband to run a business. So that entrepreneurship runs through our family for generations. Now my grandfather, my dad's dad, was born in 1869. That was just four years after slavery. So I am the fourth generation from slavery. And so, but you know, we never let it—. He owned land in La Crosse South Hill, Virginia and, I mean, they would just, they were just go-getters. You know? Like my dad's dad was a minister. He was the itinerant minister. You know what that is? They traveled from different churches preaching and running revivals. So it's in the family.

BG: So when your father was in the ministry, what was the name of his congregation? If he had one.

RT: The name of the church was a Trinity Church of Deliverance. Yeah. We started off in the Zionist—. African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. We started there. We were joining one of those in the sixties and we belong to that. And when dad was called into the ministry, that's what

he was doing. He was part of the AME Zion, but then he decided that he would branch off on his own. And that's when he came up with Bethlehem Judah ministries.

BG: What was it like being a son of a minister? And were you very involved in the church personally?

RT: Very much so. Very much so: singing in the choir, junior usher boy, junior deacon boy. You name it, I was part of it. I mean, that was just part of our life. But the one beautiful thing about my mom and dad is that they allowed us to be kids. You know what I mean? In other words, that I wasn't a mini adult. I wasn't expected to walk around with a 20 pound Bible under my arm and, you know, like I'm all that and a bag of chips. He allowed us to be kids, you know? We went to games, we played in the neighborhood, we went to dances and parties and stuff like that. So—. And I think that's important. Sometimes, you know, we get people in church and they think that that's all. But it's a lot more to life than just church. You know what I mean? You know, and they want to raise a holistic child. And blessing is that I pass that same thing on to my children. And I guess you'll ask me about my kids later.

BG: So about the barber shop, do you have like any specific memories about that from when you were a child?

RT: Yeah, I used to go there and get my haircut, but that was it. I—. You know, he used to take me to get my hair cut. And of course, when I was there, I had to clean up. I had to sweep the floor and mop and do all that. They taught you, you know, the value of work. You know, the value of getting it for yourself, the value of not just holding your hand out, but just give me a hand and let me get it for myself. Y'all not familiar with James Brown, but James Brown had a thing. He said, "I'm not looking for a handout. Just open up the door and let me get it myself." So that's what they taught us. You know, how to, you know, move forward and do for yourself. Don't wait for

somebody to do it for you. You get out there and get it yourself. Like I told you, that's what—. And when we needed something and he didn't have it, he worked more hours or got another job. So, you know, that's what he taught us. So that was with the barber shop. Now, the grocery store, I worked—. I started working at that grocery store when I was 12 years old. And I worked until I was 62 years old. Then I retired. I'm presently 70. So work ethics is something that I know about. In fact, I'm stopped—retired from the school system, but I'm still working now, you know. But at least I'm working for myself and not working for somebody else. That's the fun about it. But you know, a friend of mine—. I was an educator, I guess I didn't tell you that. I taught school and I was a guidance counselor for 30 years. I got my first degree in 1980, no—. Yeah, 1981. I got my first degree and I got my master's in '95. Now I wasn't no goody two shoes, if that's what you think. You know, preacher kid. I was the preacher's kid. So I tested all the waters there was, okay? I was not, you know, just “oh, just a nice lil boy.” Nah. (0:10:19.8) I was just a regular kid, you know. I did my thing, went out there. I was in the Marine Corps during Vietnam. And I traveled the world. Did a few things, some good, some bad. I made some mistakes, not one or two, but more. But you know, it's just that when you grow up in a certain environment, you know, when you fall down, you know how to get up. You know what I'm saying? Yeah. You know how to push forward. Okay, so I made—. So failures to us were not failures. They were lessons that we learned. And so not to do it again.

BG: Can you tell us a little bit more about your mom when you were growing up?

RT: Oh man. Phenomenal woman, phenomenal woman. She spoke life to me. And when I say that, this is what I'm saying, is that a lot of—. As I was saying with you, I was a little rambunctious. I was a little different for most kids. [laughter] Sometimes, they didn't think I was going to make it. You know, you got that (word? 0:11:29.4) brother and sisters that said, “Nah

don't worry about him, 'cause he ain't going to make it out of here. He ain't going to." But mom always spoke life to me. You know, I mean, I worked. I did what I was supposed to do. But I was, you know, I liked to get out there, (little strings? 0:11:45.9), and do whatever everybody—what other young people—was doing. But mom spoke life. Mom would always tell me, say, "Junior, you going to be alright. You going to be—. You're smart, you're going to be—." [interruption in recording] Y'all there? Okay. They used to share—mom used share that with me all the time. And it got to a point that I believed it! You understand what I'm saying? Even when I was going through all the things I went through out there in the world, you know, the little mistakes I made and all that, I still believed that I was going to be successful. And that's because mom put that in me. And I believe that we do that for every child that we run into. And that's one of the reasons I went into education because we give that same thing to others, they will start believing it too. So mom was powerful in our lives. Very powerful.

BG: So from everything you've told us, it sounds like your family was very involved in the community. And as you're telling us, you also owned the grocery store, Taylor's Market.

RT: Right.

BG: So can you tell us when that was? When did you—. Like when did that open up and like how long was it operated?

RT: I started working there in 1963. And I was there off and on from that time—. Now you gotta remember, I was only 12 years old when I started working there. But they believed that, you know—. My mom and dad used this analogy. I didn't have to work because I was a kid. But then he told me this, he said, "If you work for us, we going to pay you. Now, we ain't gonna pay you a lot, but we going to pay you. You'll have your own money. And if you have your own money—." I used to like to dress when I was in school. You know, buy the most popular stuff.

But, if we buy you clothes, we going buy you what you want to have. Now this was (the initial spot? 0:13:46.4). They used to say, “If we buy you clothes, we going to buy you what we want you to have. But if you make your own money, you can buy what you want.” Now for a 12 year old kid, that made sense to me, right? Because I have my own money, go shopping, doing what I want to do. So in the evening, when all my little friends was playing basketball, baseball, in the field, I went to work and never regretted it a bit. Never regretted it. Met a lot of good friends, met a lot of good people, some relationships that I have right now. So I enjoyed it. But again, that's the work ethic, you know, you work—. Oh Lord. I lost y'all. Wait a minute for it to work. Y'all there?

BG: Yes, we hear you sir.

RT: Okay. I'm back. Something came up [on the computer screen] and I tried to get rid of that. I got rid of y'all. [laughter] I'm sorry. Yeah, but you know, it's just, I believe that a lot of who you are has a—. The people that raise you have a big influence on you. I really do believe in that.

That's not in all the cases, you know. There's always cases where you see kids, like, you know, they grew up in foster homes and stuff like that, had been very successful. But I believe part of my success is that I grew up in a two family household and we—they—believed in working. I mean, they believe in putting the pedal to the—. Not just talking, but make you—but backing up your talk with action. So, I mean, I appreciate that. I'm 70 years old and I still work. I have my own business. I pastor my own church. So, you know, I learned a lot from that. And I knew that it was in the civil rights [movement] 'cause I was born in '51 and that was a time that, you know, they had the “colored” fountains and the “white” fountains and the “white” bathroom and the “colored” bathroom. When you travel, you couldn't go to the hotels and stuff. But we never felt like we were short changed, you know? And I think that's the way the mom and dad raised us

that, you know, we never felt like, “Man, oh, I'm missing out on this. I'm missing out on that.” I grew up in a neighborhood that had middle-class and upper-class people of color, Black people. I mean, we had the preacher on one street. We had the doctor right next door. Are you familiar with *Hidden Figures*? The movie they talked about. One of those people lived right behind me. One of the ladies lived right behind me. Her husband was a mailman. I mean, we had a principal, teachers in our neighborhood, you know. I mean, we just felt like we, you know, like, “Hey, you know, we got it made.” That was the classic, middle-class working families. And, among the group, we had entrepreneurs like my dad—and mom and dad—who owned their own businesses, you know. Up the street, there was a guy that owned the cleaners, ‘cross the street—when we went to work—‘cross the street, (the guy? 0:17:03.4) owned a bar and a grill, you know, candy store. So, I mean—. So we never felt like, “Okay,” you know, “we being shortchanged.” No, we didn't. BG: So, you were talking about, you know, like what it was like growing up during segregation. So do you think—. How do you think that impacted your parents owning a Black business during that time?

RT: Well, they worked (bruh? 0:17:31.7). Remember, they grew up working on a farm. So, owning a business, and air conditioning, the bathrooms, and a heater that was major, you know. That was major. They was like, you know, the Rockefellers of the neighborhood, especially of their family, you know? So like I said, we never even missed it. But, at the same time, we know that certain things, they couldn't do. Certain loans, they couldn't get. You know, they had to—. Where somebody with what they had, you know, they probably would have got big, big money, big loans, you know, because we were the only grocery store in like a large immediate area in Newport News, down on Ivy Avenue. So they couldn't get the loans like other people could get. But they worked and made the money and then they showed that they could pay for it, you

know? So always, you know, you had to work a little harder than others, but it's always worthwhile.

Jaden Getz: We'd also like to learn more about what it was like to live and grow up in a segregated society more generally. What were race relations like in the town you grew up in?

RT: Well, honestly, it was not-. Well, some people would probably say it was bad. I can tell you from my own experience: for me, it wasn't. And the reason I'm saying, "for me, it wasn't," is that we didn't feel like we were missing anything, you know. We went where we wanted to go. We ate what we wanted to eat. We traveled when we wanted to travel, you know. So they said that you had to use the "colored" bathroom. We didn't feel like, you know, it was like a major thing. We just enjoyed-. We were a family, man, and I think that's why family means so much to us today is that we just-. We enjoy being around and with one another.

JG: Were there ever any conflicts between white and Black residents?

RT: Yes, but not where we were. But it was, it was, Jaden, because, you know, and especially in the sixties, during civil rights-. Now, let me explain something to you guys: I went to segregated schools. I went to-we went to-the Black elementary school. We went to the Black junior high school, at that time. And we went to the Black high school. My senior year, in 1969, they integrated. That was forced integration where, you know, you know, the civil rights bill had passed and all that and stuff. But, you know, they were very slow in integrating schools. So then, in 1969, they integrated it. Now, the only thing that they got to me and made me upset is that that was my senior year. And I was looking forward to graduating from the high school I had been in for two years prior. And they changed the name of the high school from Phenix High School to Pembroke High School. So that was that. But never did I feel like, you know, we were just like pushed out. What I felt mainly is that we were doing so well-. Not so much we were billionaire

but we had enough to go ahead and pay the bills and have money left over and enjoy life and all that. So it was like, you know, it was like a blessing.

JG: Were your parents involved in the civil rights movement at all? Do you remember any protests in the area?

RT: Mainly through the churches, mainly through the church. Not so much were they doing it themselves or riding around giving speeches, but we would support activities in the area. Not anything nationally or internationally. At that time, you know, that was a new concept, you know, back there in the sixties. I know it's normal now, but it's a new concept in the sixties because we thought we—. We never felt like we were less than, you know. We didn't even understand it till later on. And a lot of these things that are on, that we talked about no, I didn't even have a clue. As y'all know, the first Africans that landed in America—the first enslaved African that landed America—landed right here at Fort Monroe in Hampton. And that just came out in the last 20 years. So it was a lot of information that we did not have. Now, one thing—Imma be honest with you—this is that because of the information that comes out now, you know, we were not aware of some of the issues with slavery and you know, Jim Crow, and you know, not giving us the right, you know, to vote or anything. A lot of that information is coming forth now. This is a great time to be alive. I know my mom and dad would have never believed that we would have had a Black president in Barack Obama. You know, I mean, those things were not like even heard of. But like my main thing is, is that I believe in economic wealth. I believe in economic power. I believe that you can pull yourself up by the bootstraps and make it. I don't believe in a lot of complaining and whining about what somebody has done because we sit back there in the past, we never going forward. Now don't get me wrong: we need the past to know what happened, but I don't want to live in the past. I want to live in the present and look forward to the future, you

know. So, a lot of things that have happened to us, I want to be knowledgeable enough to know. But I don't want to live back there. I'm ready to move on because there's a lot to do. I presently have four grandbabies. I'm trying to set aside a legacy and a generation of wealth for my grandbabies and I cannot do that whining and complaining about what happened. I need to go move forward with that.

JG: You mentioned your education, you were at Phenix which had had the name changed. What was it like at these schools? How did the conditions there compare to local white schools?

RT: It was weird. [laughter] I'm glad you asked that, Jaden. We didn't feel like we missed anything until they told us we'd been stuffed it. We didn't realize that, you know, the books were old and all that. We just know we had the books, you know. We didn't-. The one thing y'all have to realize is that, back then those days, we did not realize that we were going through until somebody told us we were going through. That there was something better than what we had. You understand what I'm trying to say? Is that we were not aware and we were making do with what we had. But compared to most, we were doing well, very well. You see what I'm saying? But you know, we know now, you know, that we could have been better. But like I told you, we don't-. I grew up in a family where we don't worry about what somebody else has. We just say, "Hey, this is what I want to get." My dad's work ethic: I get another job. Work ethic: I work longer hours. Work ethic: I'll start another business. So we were always, no matter what, even though we might've had some challenges, you know-. At that time, guess what? We just moved forward. We didn't look at it as you know, we just moved forward.

JG: Do you remember any teachers that were specifically influential on you?

RT: Wow. Now, Jaden, you picking on an old man now. [laughter] You got to remember, I mean, some of my students are 50 years old and older, okay?

JG: [laughter] Understandable.

RT: But you know, some—. They talked about some teachers, but I can't remember. But there was one teacher, I cannot remember his name, but this guy was—. No, it's two teachers and they were not in the high school. They were when I was at Norfolk State. One was my math teacher and one was my advisor. My undergrad was in business and one was my advisor. My advisor was from Germany. So, you know, he had a German name and he was white. But he was very influential in my life. I mean, very, very. You know, I could stop by and see him anytime. We sit back and we talk about life. 'Cause when I went to school was after I was in the service. So I was not an 18 year old going to college. I was like 22, 23 years old, you know, going to—. No older than that. I think I was 31 when I graduated from high—. Thirty when I graduated from college. Yeah. So I was not one of those, you know, 18 year olds going to school. So I had some life experiences and he would help me out a lot. Now the math teacher—when I first got to college out of—I was right out of the Marine Corps. I first got to college, you know, I was looking at the ladies still, you know. I'm (low? 0:27:54.1) today. I'm looking at women and joking and jiving. And my math teacher pulled me aside and he said, "Mr. Taylor, you smart." He said, "'Cause sometimes you can pick up stuff just like that." He said, "But you're not—. You say you're getting these C's and B's, but you're an A student." He said, "You're not living up to your full potential and I want to see you do that." That's all he had to say, Jaden. That's all he had to say, is telling me that I had potential and that I was not living up to the full potential. I graduated with a 3.9 undergrad. No, 3.6. 7,6 [3.76]. Anyway, I was in honors. Not only graduated with (0:28:40.2) And then when I went to grad school, I came out with a 3.97. So just those—. And I think that's why I went into education because how just speaking something positive into somebody's life will make them change.

JG: So you mentioned that you were in high school in '69, after the civil rights bill had passed. During the process of integration you mentioned it was slow. So could you talk more about that? What was living through that like?

RT: Well, honestly, didn't hit us over here that bad. Norfolk it did. You know, in Norfolk they closed down schools in Norfolk—and in Northern Virginia—not for one year, but for several years, because they did not want to follow with the integration. Here in Hampton and Newport News, I guess it went as smooth as it possibly could go. But we didn't have, we didn't have the problems. You know, people just went to—. When they told us what school we were going to attend, we just did it, you know. I mean, there was no—. I think we did have one protest in Newport News in the sixties, but nothing really major. So it was like, for us, almost like a smooth transition. Resistant 'cause we did not want, especially—we didn't mind integrating—but we didn't like the idea of our school having a name change. And the thing about it is the white schools didn't change the name. But they changed the name of the Black school before we got there. So I had a problem with that. (0:30:23.0)

JG: So talking more about the name change, how did the students respond? How did this affect the identity of the school?

RT: Well, it did a lot because Phenix High School was founded in 1932 and the first school was on Hampton University's campus. And Phenix was the—. George P. Phenix was a white guy and he wanted to start a school for the Black people. Of course, at that time we were called "colored." But they wanted to start a school for us. And that was in 1932. So in 1968, when the last graduation class graduated and we came behind 'em, it was sorta difficult for some of us. But they were so—. They didn't protest, they didn't say, "We don't want it." They didn't do any of that. They just went along with the status quo. But for some of us, especially those of us who were in

that graduation class, that 1969 graduation class of Pembroke High School, some of us were very upset. But what can we do as kids, right? At that time, you know, it was unheard of, of a kid, you know, talking back or protesting or something like that. If the parents didn't do it, we weren't going to do it.

JG: Were there any debates over busing in your area? If so, what were those like?

RT: Honestly, not. Honestly, in this area, there was not a lot of, you know, going back and forth about the busing, and, can I be true for you, Jaden? I very seldom rode the bus. Very seldom. Not if it a school bus. But I very seldom rode a bus. Yeah.

JG: Well, were you involved in any protests around here during that time?

RT: Not at that time. Uh uh. I didn't start going to, you know, going to those things until after being an adult and then going ahead and, and seeing that others were not treated the way they should be treated. My thing, Jaden, is this, is that I have had a good life. God has been good to me and he's been good to my family, my children, my wife, you know, my sister and (0:32:57.3). So a lot of things we do is not for us personally, but it has been for others because everybody has not had the blessings that we've had to have the type of parents that we had to instill that work ethic to, you know, move forward, to not go on ahead and think of things negative but positive all the time. A lot of people are not blessed. So most everything I do now, I do volunteer work with the city of Newport News and Hampton with children. I do a mentor program. We do a mentor program at our church. We do volunteer work outside. But a lot of those things I've started doing as an adult. But not as a child, not as a youngster.

BG: We're going to go ahead and talk a little bit about your time at college and the shipyard. Was there anything specific that made you want to attend Norfolk State?

RT: Yes. First of all, Brandon, I got a scholarship for school. I got an academic scholarship, and that was in 1969. Now, whatever that—. Do the math: I graduated [from high school in] 1969. I graduated from college in 1981. So there's a little time—. [laughter] There's some space and time. So, I went to school, got a young lady pregnant. That's my oldest daughter, who is 51 years old. Her name is Tammy. Back then, those days, in our family, you didn't produce a kid and then walk away and say nothing. If you had a kid, you had responsibility. You'd take care of that child. That was fun. Whether you married that woman or not, or you married that man or not, you had a responsibility to take care of that child. Well, me, I got married. Okay? Now, I'm not with her now, but I got married at a young age, too young. That's another story. Yeah. That's, that's rated R or X. You guys—. [laughter] I don't know if y'all ready for that yet. [laughter] But anyway, when I went to school on a scholarship, I didn't stay because, you know, because of my daughter. I had to take care of her. So I went and started working in Newport News Shipyard. I hated it. And one of the things in the shipyard is that, you know, at that time, people that look like me, a lot of them couldn't read or write, and a lot of them went—. And so they were shocked when I was talking about college, when I was talking about my aspirations. You know? So those people, you know, when you're around, I don't know if y'all have to be around people that don't have the same aspirations as you though. So they act like they—you talking about them and they try to shoot everything down. So that's the reason that I didn't stay at the shipyard long. I was in the shipyard maybe about two years, maybe two and a half years. And I left. And the reason I left was because I had aspirations. I told you I grew up around people who had dreams, entrepreneurship. That is, that was in me. So I knew that when I went into that shipyard, I was not going to stay. So I have about two years, maybe two and a half years. I said, "I need to do something." I wanted to go—. I started going to school and working the shipyard. It won't a good

mix. I was asleep in the yard and asleep in school. Just sleep. Too tired to go to school and too tired to go to work. So I had to come up with a plan. And you got to realize that [at] this time, Vietnam [the Vietnam War] was wide open. This was in 1972. And I missed the draft because of the fact that I was young and I had a child. So I had an exemption. But I had to do something. And I said, "I need to go to school." So I do—. 'Cause I could see it. Again, my momma talking in my ear telling me, you know, "Junior, what you can do if you put your mind to it because you're smart." So I went into the Marine Corps. I stayed in the Marine Corps four years. And, when I got out, I used the GI bill and went straight to school. And I went to school, I enrolled in school [on] January 9th of 1977 and graduated May of 1981. And I knew I needed to go to school because of some of the things, my aspirations, what I wanted to do in life. And I know it wasn't in the shipyard.

BG: So what did you go to school for, and what was your time like there? During both instances.

RT: Oh man, I had a ball in college. I mean, I had a ball. I shouldn't have had so much fun.

Anyway, [laughter] it was nice. I majored in business and minored in mathematics. And a minor in mathematics was by default. It wasn't because I was just a math wiz and loved it. I was just very good at it. So, if any of y'll ever major in business or you have friends, you usually have a track, you have a secondary track. Either you can do business management—I was a marketing major, so I got to do management—accounting or mathematics. And I was just good at math so I took the math. And when I finished, when I graduated, I had just as many hours in math than I'd had in marketing, in my marketing courses. So, when I got out my first job—real job when I got out—was I started teaching in 1982. Yeah.

BG: How different were the campuses from when you started versus when you ended?

RT: Now when you say start, you talking about back in 1969, or the second time I started?

BG: First time you started.

RT: Oh, big difference, no mistaking.. They didn't have dormitories when I first got there in '69. But when I came back in '77, they started having dormitories and some of the little small things they had cause—they used to call it off state, a little state because they were a branch of Virginia State out of Petersburg. So when I went there, it was—. The campus was totally different, you know? 'Cause I first went there, you had to stay off campus in like a house, you know, and you using people's personal houses. And they had rules, regulations that you had to follow. You know, curfews and all that kind of stuff. Big difference.

BG: So when you worked at the shipyard, what did you do there?

RT: Believe it or not, I was a mail clerk. You know, the shipyard gets mail and I was a mail clerk. That's how I started. And you had two things: you had a mail carrier and you had a mail clerk. I was a mail clerk. I was one of the first mail clerks they ever had in the shipyard. First male, Black—. I'm sorry, first Black clerk in the shipyard because most of the Blacks were carriers.

BG: So what were race relations like at the shipyard? And do you remember if there were any conflicts?

RT: Not really, not really because, you know, for me, I'm not talking for others. I'm only talking for others. I'm talking from my perspective and my perspective was I was not going to be there long. You follow what I'm saying? In my mind. And I think sometimes when you think that, when you think about that, you thinking at a higher level. So any conflicts, [you ask yourself,] "Is this going to get me off my path for things Imma do?" Do you understand what I'm saying? And a lot of people get caught up in the, "he say, she say" conflicts stuff, and losing their perspective and losing their vision and losing their dreams. Dealing with something they have no control over. So not for me. And mostly everybody, the clerks, were white except for me. And I

got along with them well, I didn't have any problems because they knew—. The one thing that I say, Brandon and Jaden, is this: people will respect your intellect. They will respect you, you know, when you open your mouth and it's not dadadadada. But they will respect your intellect. And that goes past what you have on the color of your skin. You follow what I'm saying? When you open your mouth and you start to talking and people know what you're talking about, they start to respect that. And that's the kind of respect—. I wasn't trying to be everybody's friend or buddy and all that. I just got out of the Marine Corps. I had dealt with, you know, you dealt with issues in the corps. But I also knew that people will respect you if they know that you know what you're doing. And that's the main thing. I didn't care about anybody loving me for who I am. I had family and friends and all that. You know, just respect me. And they did. That was good enough for me.

JG: So you mentioned that you served in the Marines during Vietnam.

RT: Correct.

JG: Can you tell us more about that?

RT: Yes, Jaden. I went in the corps in '72. I scored very high on the ASVAB, if you are familiar with that. That's the scored test you take. So I was sent to a place called Twentynine Palms, California, and I went to electronics school. While in electronics school, you know, I did pretty good, you know, we traveled and did stuff. But you know, I was a Marine and all Marines are basically grunts, if you know what I mean. So first thing, you know, you can have all the knowledge, electronic knowledge you want—the first thing they'll do is put a gun in your hand, you know, and you train and stuff. But it was pretty good. I had some challenges while I was in the Marine Corps, but everything went well. You know, I was able to come out with an honorable discharge, traveled, left California, went to Okinawa, was in Okinawa. When I hit the ground in

Okinawa, I was in—. They put me on guard duty. Every first Marine, you first get there, you get put on guard duty. You have guard duty six months. Then you go with your unit for six months. I did so good on guard duty that when my six months rotation was up, they requested me to stay another six months. So I stayed twelve months on guard duty on Okinawa. Now this is what got me. There's a thing that happened, at the end of the Vietnam era, in 1975, around about May. It's called the Mayaguez incident. In the Mayaguez incident, the Vietcong had captured some ships. And, you know, Okinawa's the closest because that's where you go. So they sent my unit over there to bring the ships home. Of my unit, twenty something guys got killed because they didn't think that it was going to be a firefight. And I was supposed to be with them. But again, I was on Okinawa on guard duty. That's God, because if it was not, I may not be sitting here talking to you guys right now. So when I left Okinawa and I ended up being stationed in Norfolk, I tried to get back in California 'cause I love California so much. Whoopee! But I ended up back in—. I end up back here in Norfolk and stationed in Norfolk. So I said that was divine intervention. So I ended up coming back here and I ended up getting out while I was here in Norfolk and I got out December something of 1976. And the next year, January, that January, I was in school in Norfolk State.

JG: So could you tell us more about what race relations were like in the Marines at the time? Did you notice or face any discrimination?

RT: I'm gonna be honest with you Jaden, probably did. Probably didn't—. It was not blatant, if you understand what I'm saying. At that time we were—. That was a time that, you know, race relationships were not good, at that time in the seventies, in the early seventies. But, still, at the same time, we didn't have a lot of problems. You know, I was in the corps. We weren't having battles, race battles, anything like that. Not like it was for my dad and them in the forties and the

fifties. This is the seventies now. So—. And you knew that sometimes you could feel that sometimes that you may not get a promotion because of who you were. ‘Cause I ended up being a E-5. I got to be a E-5 in less than four years. That was usually unheard of. But, because of my stellar record, they were promoting others that were not my persuasion and they had to promote me also because, if you looked at my record and looked at their record, my record looked better. So they had to throw me in the promotion too.

JG: So after that, you mentioned going into teaching. What made you want to teach math at high school?

RT: Well, honestly, I didn't know what I was going to teach in high school. [laughter] In fact, I wasn't going to the school to teach. I was going there so I could get a job working in central administration. You know, I had this business degree. I'm thinking, “I know I can use it,” you know, “I can do that.” Then they looked at my transcript and they saw these math courses. That's what I was alluding to earlier, Brandon. They saw all of these math courses. They said, “Wait a minute. Hold it. Why you got all of these?” I said, “Oh, I just took them because, you know, I needed to have something as a little minor.” They said, “We are desperate for math teachers.” And I tried to talk my way out of it. Right? I told them, I said, “I never had no educational courses or none of that. I don't know about teaching kids.” I was fresh out of the Marine Corps now. “Y'all don't want me to hurt your children.” [laughter] Right? They told me, they said, “You the type of person we need.” [laughter] So I was getting recruited all over again, right. So I went and started teaching. And, believe it or not, my former assistant principal when I was in junior high school is the first person to open his doors and gave me a job.

JG: Wow!

RT: Yeah, he knew that name, Rivers Taylor. He knew that name. And when he saw me, he said—his name was Cornelius Sherman—when he saw me, he said, “Rivers, blah blah blah blah.” I ain't had to go through a lot, just had it right there. And I had to go back, of course. I had to go back to school and take the educational classes that I needed. But it was never a problem after that. It was just a really smooth transition and I enjoyed every moment of it. I'm telling y'all, that was the best thing I'd ever done. I stayed—. I taught school for about nine years. Then I got the bug 'cause you know, teachers don't make good money. You in teaching because you want to be, not because you're expecting to become wealthy or well off. So, I did it for nine years. Left it and went and started—. Worked for a company called (Life of Virginia? 0:49:50.1) and Ford Financial, selling insurances, annuities, and all that. I did that for about a year and a half, almost two years. Hated it! Missed those kids and love—. I love working with the kids. Stayed there for about two years, went back to the classroom and did it for the rest of the rest of my days. Taught three more years, got my master's from Norfolk State again. And getting the master's was interesting. I wasn't going to school to get a master's. I was just going because I needed to take some courses to get my recertification. And I took a counseling course and I loved it. It just like—. It spoke to me, you know. I loved it. So this one counseling course, and I took another counseling, then all of a sudden (0:50:44.3), working on my master's. And it's interesting that I started in ninety—. January of '94, and I was finished August of '95. Going to school and working too. Like my daddy, all those jobs he had had.

JG: Did you feel that when you taught at public schools, that they were truly integrated? Do you remember any instances of racial discrimination there?

RT: I'm going to be honest with Jaden. No, I mean, it was. Oh, let me pull back the layers like you do an onion.

JG: Just one second.

RT: No, that was my wife, that was my wife trying to call me.

JG: Oh, no problem.

RT: What I did see, and Imma be honest with you, I saw that sometimes, when I was teaching—not when I was teaching teaching ed, but especially as a guidance counselor—I noticed that there was some teachers who would favor other students over others. You would notice that. But I was able to make a difference at that time. That was in the eighties. I was able to make a difference. If you see a teacher, always writing up the Black kids, you know, for doing the same thing that the white kids do, and they're not getting written up, that tells you something's wrong. And it's always the same teachers that have the problems with the same students. You knew something was wrong. So what I would do—. I had an awesome, awesome principal, white female. Awesome. But, she loved the kids and she would not let anybody mistreat 'em. So we did well by our students. Really did well, but it would take an effort (0:52:45.5) So I want to say, Jaden, that as far as blatant discrimination, I saw that more as as an educator than I see or saw it as when it was just me. Because it's just me. I mean, I don't pay it no attention. Either you for me or you against me. But either way, you're not going to do—. You're not going to decide my destiny, you know. But my problem is when I see people that are weaker or smaller or, you know, not able, not having that background and I see people take advantage of them, that's when I have to step up.

JG: Well, were there any specific instances of you stepping up and saying something in the school that you remember?

RT: Yeah, but I can not go call names and stuff, Jaden. I'm sorry. I can't call names. But I can give situations where I saw that same kid getting written up for something and then, as I told you

earlier, that I saw another kid not being, not of the same persuasion, if you know what I'm saying. But same persuasion is the same color, you know, of their skin.

JG: Yeah.

RT: And then they just get a smack on the wrist and the other little boy gets sent home. And I would step in and make changes because 12 of those years of the 18 years I was in Norfolk, I was department chair of counseling. So I could make a difference, and I did everything I could to make a difference.

JG: So we saw that you mentioned that you had worked with Project 1619. So what sort of work did you do with them and are you still involved with them?

RT: Still involved with them. I'm on the board of directors. Now you got—. Now one thing, I want you to understand—. This too, Project 1619—. [connection cuts out; 54:45]

JG: Hello? I'm going to give it a minute. [pause] I assume he's just busy with something. [pause] Oh, it's saying that he's having connection problems. [pause] There we go. [pause] Hello?

RT: [connection resumes; 57:24] Oh, can you see me?

JG: I can hear you, but I can't see you right now.

RT: Okay. I don't see y'all at all.

JG: It might be connecting. You might have to give it just a minute.

RT: Okay.

RT: Who am I talking to?

JG: Jaden, right now.

RT: Hey, Jaden.

JG: Hello!

RT: Okay. I apologize. I'm on my phone. I was in the middle of doing something and I decided, I said, "I'm gonna call these guys cause I've been, I've been late and tardy and I know they might think something wrong with this old man, say, 'I've been trying to get with him.'" So I was just in the church, in the church office. I said, "Well, let me go ahead and get online then, not realizing that people going-. I use my phone, not realizing that people are going to be trying to call me while I'm on my phone."

JG: Oh, that's not a problem. Don't worry it was only a couple of minutes, so not a big deal.

RT: Okay.

JG: So Project 1619, type of work you did.

RT: Oh, yeah. Project 1619 was founded by Calvin Pearson 20 years ago. Man, 1990, 2001, somewhere in 1998, something like that. And Calvin is a friend of mine and also a classmate that graduated with me from Phenix High School, Pembroke High School. And Calvin worked-. He was the-. He did a lot of work with the city of Hampton. He was the coordinator for Parks and Rec in Hampton before he retired. But he started finding information out about the landing and the first enslaved landing in Virginia was Fort Monroe. Of course, at that time they, everybody, thought the first slaves came in, at Jamestown. But it didn't. It was Hampton. So we took that narrative and worked it and worked it and worked it until, you know, he brought me in. I mean, he had been going (59:33) for about, I guess, about eight to ten years before he brought me onboard as a board member. And I think he did that because, you know, sometimes I can't hold my peace in certain areas. Sometimes when I find injustices in places I can't, you know, I'm going to speak up. When nobody else speak up, I will speak up. And they usually, like I told you, they usually not for myself. I usually am just speaking up for somebody else.

JG: Absolutely.

RT: So anyway, we ended up with 1619 and the narrative is that the first enslaved Africans came in Fort Monroe, which at that time was Point Comfort. So, we just had—. And in 2019 was the—I think that was—the 400th anniversary. And, you know, we had a big, big, big things—. State, national, came in and we had a big thing with them. But that's major. And I think some of the things that are being brought forward today, major. The critical race theory, I think, is major. And the reason I'm saying that is because we need to know the truth, the true narrative of history. We don't need just history, just from one point of view, you know, because some of those things I had no—. Okay. It's just something that came up. I think it's so, so important because we need to know the history. But I know why some people don't want it, because it will make the United States not look good, you know. But it makes a difference whether we look good or not. The main thing is, is that the history needs to be told. And, you know, because some of the things that the United States did, you know, to enslaved Africans in the early, early centuries were, beyond humane, you know. They were not humane at all. They treated us like cattle, chattel, cattle. You know, at one time we were just—. If you had three fourths, three-fifths of Black blood, you was Black. You know, because it's called—. It was like it was tainted. And if you go back in our history, man, you know, what they did to Blacks in America was worse than the Holocaust. It was a lot longer 'cause it was centuries and, even after the end of slavery, you had the Jim Crow era. But like I told you, when I was growing up as a kid, I'm learning more about it [now] as studying than I did, than I was affected by it growing up, you know. And now, you know—. And now things can be so subtle that they don't want to share. But you don't understand—. Most people don't understand that when you share true history it's not because—. It's not so you can just hate somebody for what they did. It's because you want to know the truth. You want to know where you came from. Black people in the United States didn't just start as slaves. You know, we

came here from Africa and we were doing—. We were inventors, mathematicians, and engineers and doctors, you know, and—. But you know, in the United States, it looked like our life began as slaves. You see what I'm saying?

JG: Yeah.

RT: So that's so important. And for some people, it's—. Now, for me, it didn't make no difference because the way I was raised, I was raised to know that, you know, I was just as good as anybody else. But some of these generations we have today and before, you know, they need to know that so they can have pride in who they are. The one thing I didn't tell you guys—I mean, I described it, but I didn't tell y'all—is that the neighborhood I grew up in, you know, with the doctors, the lawyers, the Indian chiefs and all that kind of stuff, back in those days, that was an affluent neighborhood. So like, we were like, somebody. You understand what I'm saying? Mostly blue collar, mostly workers, you know. Store owners, you know. And worked as engineers, doctors, lawyers, preachers, teachers, and stuff like that. But it was influenced. There was an influence there and we felt good about it. So I think that got a lot to do with with the way I view life now, you know? Okay.

BG: So just some concluding questions, Mr. Taylor, what do you view as the most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement?

RT: Say it again, now?

BG: What do you view as the most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement?

RT: Well, the civil rights movement was a social movement. And so we can go in the same restaurants or we can go in the same stores. So we can both go to the same clubs and all that. Where we missed in the civil rights movement was to develop economic power. We got the social power. We did not get economic power because it's the economy, it's the money, it's the

capital that brings along true equality. So we can go in the same restaurant, but what does that got to do? No, no, I think that's where we missed our point. The plus again is social. The negative was we lost our businesses. We lost our stores. We lost our banks, you know, because of the coming together. You know, because they—. (1:05:39.0) They can sell the clothing cheaper. They can sell the groceries cheaper, you know. They could, because we didn't have the economic power. So I think we were so busy, worried about social equality, we forgot about economic equality. We didn't get our 40 acres and a mule. You follow what I'm saying? Because that would have made us stronger. So we didn't do that. So I think that's one of the main problems that I have. You know, we got social equality, you know. We can go any place, we can eat anywhere, blah, blah, blah. And that's nice, but we needed economic power, the money. So again, we can't depend on people to give it to us. We got to go out there and get it ourselves.

BG: What do you think are the most pressing problems facing African-Americans today?

RT: Economy, the money, the wealth, generational wealth. If you look at it, we make about a tenth—Black folks make about a tenth—of what the other races bring in. Our average family income, on an average, is 17,000. And on an average for a very strong middle-class white family, it's 170,000. That's a lot. That's a big difference, you know. That's a 90% difference. So I think that's one of the major problems we have. As far as, you know, socialization, I don't think that's a problem. But I think also with our police department—. I don't agree with defunding the police. I believe we need to be training the police and weeding out the bad ones. You know, the ones that don't respect or [are] not there to protect and serve. Or they look at me—every time they see a Black man or Black woman—thinking they're a criminal. It's like every time I see a white man or white woman, I shouldn't look at them and think they're prejudiced because they're not. It's very

few of us that are criminals and very few white folks that are truly prejudiced, but we tend to lump them into a category, as if all is all, and it's not.

BG: Well, Mr. Taylor, thank you so much for letting me speak to you today. We appreciate the opportunity to gain your perspective on the civil rights era and the Hampton roads area. This concludes the interview for the oral history project.

END OF INTERVIEW

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