

James Lovett Interview Summary

Interviewee: James Lovett
Interviewers: Nicole Flautt and Dane Christensen
Interview date: October 14, 2023
Location: Virtual
Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, 93:04

THE INTERVIEWEE: James Lovett was born on July 21, 1950, in Jacksonville, Florida. When he was three years old, he moved with his family to Newport News, Virginia. There, he attended a number of the city's all-Black schools, such as Huntington High School. As part of "freedom of choice," he also attended the newly-integrated Newport News High School for one year but ultimately returned to Huntington, from which he graduated in 1968. After graduation, he attended Hampton University, South University, University of Maryland, Savannah State University, Central Texas College, and the former Thomas Nelson Community College (TNCC). There, he was particularly active in efforts to promote and make people aware of Black history. He has also been involved with numerous community organizations, such as the NAACP, and is particularly passionate about voting rights.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Nicole Flautt and Dane Christensen are both students at Christopher Newport University. They conducted this interview for part of their HIST 341: Long Civil Rights Movement with Dr. Laura Puaca.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: This interview took a life history approach and began with some questions about Lovett's childhood. He recalled the difficulties of segregation, which he described as something that prevented different groups of people from learning about one another. While integration provided new opportunities, it was not without its drawbacks, according to Lovett. He described his experiences integrating Newport News High School, which contrasted sharply to his fond memories of Huntington High School. He also discussed his interest in Black history and his efforts to share that interest with others, such as his classmates at the former Thomas Nelson Community College. Other topics discussed included voting rights for felons and the larger impact of the civil rights movement.

James Lovett–Edited Transcript

Interviewee: James Lovett

Interviewer: Dane Christensen, Nicole Flautt

Interview Date: October 14, 2023

Location: Virtual

Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, 93:04

START OF INTERVIEW

Dane Christensen: Right, this is Dane Christensen and this is my partner Nicole Flautt. Today's October 14th, 2023. We are interviewing Mr. James Lovett. This interview is being carried out as a part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. So, for our first question, Mr. Lovett, where and when were you born?

James Lovett: July 21st 1950. Jacksonville, Florida.

DC: You said?

JL: Where? Jacksonville, Florida.

DC: Jacksonville, Florida.

JL: Yes.

DC: When did you move to the Hampton Roads area?

JL: I think I was like, maybe, three years old.

DC: Did you have any siblings?

JL: Yes, uh-huh. Okay, question: I thought the questions were related to desegregation. I don't know, you know, about this kind of background. I don't want to give all that out.

Nicole Flautt: Yeah, so what we do is we take a life history approach, so we like to begin our interview with questions about your childhood. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions you can just abstain from them.

JL: Okay.

DC: For what reason did your family move to the area?

JL: I'm not sure. I was, like I said, I was three years old. I'm not sure.

DC: All right, all right, that's understandable. Was your family, or more specifically your parents, part of any community organizations? If it was a church or if it was even a political organization like the NAACP or something of that nature?

JL: No, no.

DC: Okay. So given it doesn't seem your family was very politically involved then, just kind of in your casual life, how do you think—this is kind of a broad question—how do you think segregation influenced your childhood growing up around here?

JL: Well, it's sort of deep, you know. Like, segregation was—. It hurt Blacks and it also hurt Whites too because we have the shipyard, Newport News Shipyard, and when you went to work at the shipyard, you didn't know anything about other people, you know. You didn't know about their culture, you didn't know about their habits, you know, and things of that nature so, you know. It really hurt, you know, both sides, you know, Black and White, because there's a lot of stereotypes that came about. You know, like Blacks are not as smart as Whites or, you know, or vice versa, you know. But when you— Like I attended Newport News High School, which is on Huntington Avenue, for one year and then I left and went back to Huntington High School. But it helped me out to understand, you know, like some things that people say are stereotypes, you know, and that's about it.

DC: Do you still talk to a lot of people from your high school?

JL: Well, the high school that I graduated from, Huntington High School, I talk to them. The students that attended Newport News High School, I've only seen one person, Gail Lucado, and I saw her at her brother's funeral. And I had spoken to him once or twice, you know, but that's all, you know, basically as far as the schools I attended and the people that I knew, you know.

DC: What was the experience of segregation in school for you?

JL: Well, it was-. So [at Newport News High School,] I had a teacher by the name of Miss Williams that taught history. And she used to, you know, instead of saying "negro" or the other "N-word" she used to call us "negras," you know. And it was sort of offensive to me but, you know, like, I didn't allow it to bother me, you know, because I was, like I said, one year at Newport News High School which was, you know, "freedom of choice" back then in those days. And, you know, I could see some White students snickering, you know, at different events we had. You know, like I went to the junior dance at Newport News High School and my sister and I were dancing on the floor and all the White students were surrounding us, you know, and calling us the N-word. But because I was having so good a time, I just ignored it. But my sister told me about it later on, you know. I didn't have too harsh a time at Newport News High, integrated school. But that was basically it to me as far as at Newport News High School.

DC: What would you say your experience was at Huntington, overall, and how might that compare to Newport News?

JL: Well, I learned a whole lot from Huntington High School. We had some great outstanding teachers that taught us about discipline, about showing respect to others, being kind, and it was a historical Black school. And it gave me some-. You know, it helped motivate me in learning

about different things about different people. In fact, I know it was better than Newport News High School.

DC: What were your favorite subjects at Huntington?

JL: My best subject was history. History and math, those were my two best subjects. And once I got into history, you know, I learned a whole lot about, you know, the history of the Black man. You know, like where we came from. It involved slavery, you know, on both sides. And math—you know, I mean multiplication tables—I was good at that, you know. Adding in my head, you know, was good at that. You know, things of that nature.

DC: Did that specific topic in history get covered at both Huntington and Newport News, or did they shy away from it at Newport News?

JL: Black history? No. Like I said, it was sort of inspirational to me. You know, the history itself was great. But talking about the Black History program, I was a student at Thomas Nelson Community College, and I helped organize the Black History program at Thomas Nelson back in 1969. There was an instructor by the name of Raymond J. Jirran, he was a Jewish guy that taught Western Civilization. And we, you know, we got along pretty good. I told him that he could teach us Black History from the book, but not from experience, you know. But he was, you know, thankful for teaching us Black History. I mean, of course, you learn on your own, you know. And that's it.

DC: Do you remember what year it was when you took that Western Civilization class?

JL: 1970. Black Studies program and the book was entitled *From Slavery to Freedom* by John Hope Franklin, which was a historian. [interruption]

JL: Go ahead.

DC: Are we all right to go forward?

JL: Yes, sir.

DC: Okay, sorry. When you were at Huntington were you a member of any student organizations?

JL: Well, I was a member of the Future Teachers of America Club and the Hobby Club. I also ran track for a little while. Didn't work out too good 'cause I was working in the morning and in the afternoon. You know, so I wasn't able to practice with the other fellas.

DC: We saw in our background research with the things that Dr. Puaca provided us, you graduated, high school specifically, in 1968. Is that correct?

JL: Correct, June 16th 1968.

DC: Around that time there was [phone rings] a pretty important court case, [phone rings] *Green vs. County School Board of New Kent*.

JL: Yes.

DC: Did you hear about that case going on at the time?

JL: No, I'm not familiar with that case.

DC: All right. Did you remember noticing any progress made on school integration around that time?

JL: I think it was some progress. I mean, back in elementary school, we had hand-me-down books, hand-me-down desks, you know, just hand-me-down stuff from, White schools, you know. That really didn't help us a whole lot, but it helped us to a certain point because, you know, our parents paid \$2.50 for Poll Taxes back in those days. And so they contributed to the taxes, but we were not able to get the quality textbooks that we should have gotten like any other school, you know. When I look at integration, I look at Dr. King, who says, "Black and White children should hold hands and join with the Negroes (12:55) free at last, free at last." I see that he

was basically looking for justice and equality. You know, to have the right to have the same things that students in White schools had, you know. I see there's two sides sometimes to every story and where, in integration, there's a positive side and a negative side. Negative side is that there was more discipline in the schools when the schools were all-Black and—well, I'm not sure about all-White—but all-Black. When a child acted out in class and, if it was really, really serious, you know, they got a tap on the hand. You know, not a whipping, but just a tap on the hand. And it corrected a lot of students in certain ways. But when integration started, it sort of faded out, you know, like—. And I'm gonna tell you just like it is, I think some White parents did not want Black teachers to, you know, smack their kids in the hand. You know, because it was, you know, it was a no-no type of thing. And today, you know, it's different, you know. Like kids, you know, in some cases where they say certain things to teachers and they get away with it, you know. Back then, you know, you had—. You know, teachers that taught you about discipline: you know, caring about each other and showing respect to your elders. But today, you know, some kids now—not all of them, 'cause some of them still, you know, know about discipline and respecting their elders—but back then, you know, because of the integration, you know, in the Black schools, you know, if you acted out in class, teachers, you know, spank you on the hand or whatever. I remember when I was in sixth grade, I was eating some candy 8-Balls in the classroom and the teacher told me, she said, “Well, Lovett, you can't eat, you know, candy in the classroom because it was a no-no,” and she put me in the coat room. The coat room was dark. There was nothing but books and cameras in there. You know, sound systems in there. And, you know, I mean, that was part of discipline, you know. But you can't do that now because, you know, they say, well, you know, like, “You're hurting the child, you know, putting them in there.” But, I mean, it made me think about, well, “I shouldn't have done that, you know. That

was a no-no,” you know. But the positive side, like I said, with the integration is that, like I said, it helped, in some cases where Black kids and White kids were learning the same thing, you know, in a certain case. Like I said, that was—. The positive side was, you know, everybody learned the same way, you know, and learned about each other: you know, each other’s culture, background, you know. But when, like I said—. [phone rings] And then on the negative side, again, is that you had what you call “White flight.” I know, in Newport News right now, [phone rings] you have the school system—. Schools are normally, I mean, predominantly Black. And a lot of Whites that were living in Newport News, they left and went to Yorktown and Poquoson, and those—if you look at those counties, those cities—they’re predominantly White, you know. So I think integration was good as far as education was concerned, but as far as people living where—. And some people live where they want to live, and that’s a good thing. But when you see people moving in, Blacks moving into areas that were predominantly White and people moving out, you know, like, it sort of puzzles me. Like, do people really care about each other, you know? Do they, you know, care about, you know, living next to somebody? You know? And so—. And that’s it.

DC: When you were going to Newport News High, did teachers or faculty ever, I suppose, try to give you a hard time?

JL: Not really, except the only teacher I mentioned, Miss Williams, you know. She would say, you know, when she would talk about history, she would say “negras.” You know, “negras.” And to me, it really meant the other word, okay. It really meant the other word. But I think I was treated fairly by the teachers at Newport New High School, you know. [cough] Excuse me.

DC: And you mentioned earlier Black teachers teaching White students. Did you see a lot of Black teachers coming into schools after integration?

JL: Okay, could you repeat that question again.

DC: Sorry. Did you see a lot of Black teachers coming in after integration started?

JL: Into White schools?

DC: Mm-hmm.

JL: Well, not really because—. I don't recall—. At Newport News High, like I said, I went there one year, and I don't recall any Black teachers at Newport News High School. Now, at Huntington High School, there were about four, I think—four White teachers that taught at Huntington High School. But there were no White students, you know. So, like I said, it was “freedom of choice,” you know. It wasn't mandatory [that] 'cause you lived in a certain district that you go to that particular school, you know. So, like I said, I didn't see any White students at Huntington High School, you know. Now, later on after '68 there may have been some, but I wasn't there since I graduated. So, you know, it may have been something that someone that attended Huntington High School, but I do know that— After a couple years—past couple years—I learned that, I can't think of his name, but he said he attended Huntington Middle School. A White guy, he was a city councilman, but he said he attended Huntington Middle School. Now as far as high schools, you know, I'm not really sure. But there was a few, you know, Whites I think that went to Huntington High [*sic*, middle] School. But that was like, you know, in the '80's, you know, whatever, you know.

DC: Do you remember when the whole court-ordered busing effort was happening, do you remember anything about, like, the debate over that?

JL: Not really, not really. You know, we only had the morning news and 6:00 news and 11:00 news, and if you didn't get it, you know, the news at that time—. And, they had articles in the paper and things of that nature, you know. But I don't recall any, you know, anything about it.

DC: People in the community didn't really argue either about it?

JL: Well, they did. The NAACP argued about, you know, about the changing of Huntington High School into an intermediate school. But the courts, you know, decided that, you know, it would be—I think, and I'm not really sure—but they decided to make it an intermediate school instead of a high school because, like I said, with the high school was across from the projects, and, I think— and I'm not really sure—but, like I said, some White folks did not want their kids going to a school that was in a Black neighborhood. Especially in high school, you have afternoon activities: football, cheerleading, you know, basketball, you know, clubs and things of this nature, so—. And that's my opinion, you know. I mean, I don't have facts about it, but I just have a gut feeling about, you know, that they did not want [White children to attend school in a Black neighborhood]—. And the same thing with Carver High School. Carver High School was a Black high school too. It's now Crittenden Middle School. And it was in a Black neighborhood. Of course, it was off of Jefferson Avenue, and they had a few projects in that area, you know, but—. And it just seemed like, you know, the Black high schools have diminished since, you know, the integration because, you know, some Whites parents didn't want to have their kids going to Black schools, you know. When I look at Newport News High School, because of the White flight, you know, Whites went to Yorktown and Poquoson. Newport News High became a middle school because the only students that were at the school were Black kids, you know, so—. [interruption] And now Newport News High School is housing. It houses the navy, the US Navy, you know. So, like I said, just White Flight, you know. Some Whites don't want their children going into schools with that were Black. Well, also look at a lot of these Christian academies that's been forming up for so many years. That's where some Whites still, you know, like, they don't want their kids going to schools that's predominantly Black. I mean, just some, you know,

because we have, you know, in both races, we have people that don't like each other because of the color of their skin. They don't want to judge people by the content of their character. But, you know, like I said, in Hampton, I think it's off of La Salle Avenue or King Street, they have the Christian academies, you know, where they're predominantly White, you know. You have elementary school, you have high school, middle school, you know, and some Christian academies in Newport News, you know, where, when you look at—. When you look at Newport News: Warwick High School, predominantly Black; Menchville, predominantly Black—it's a mixture of Hispanics there. When you look at Woodside, there's a lot more Whites at Woodside, and the reason for that, I think, is because you have a lot of military families there. But Heritage High School, you have—it's predominantly Black. You have some Hispanics there, you know. So I think, you know, the positive side about integration, you know, is that everybody learns, you know, to a certain degree the same thing. But on the negative side, you know, some people just don't want to live next to other people.

DC: How did it make you feel personally when they made the decision to turn it into an intermediate school?

JL: I was very sad, very sad, because the history and, you know, the culture that I was taught at the school—. I mean, it made me feel like, okay, well, you know, you're turning the high school into an intermediate school and eventually it's not gonna be a school. That's what I thought then. And now, because of the city council turning the school into—. They're tearing down the school—part of the school—and putting in a YWCA. Pearl Bailey Library, which is on 25th and Wickham, is going to move down there. Some other entities they're putting into the building itself. And they're going to move Huntington Middle School down where Doris Miller was located, because they've already torn down Doris Miller. And they're going to build, you know, the middle school

there. You know, it's not always the building. It's the teachers and administrators in the school that teach the students. But it's also the students that are hungry for education, you know. And if you have teachers that are willing to go beyond, you know, the call of their duty, you know, to help students—. And that's what Huntington High School did for me, you know. I had teachers that went beyond, you know, to help me out. But the building itself is, you know, is a historical site. And so when I look at Newport News High School, the students that attended Newport News High School, mainly the White students and maybe a few Blacks that attended there and graduated, they can tell their grandkids and great grandkids, "That's the school I attended." When I look at Huntington, you know, they can say, "Well, you know, that's the school I attended," because, of course, it's going to be like a recreation center and a library and different other entities they're gonna put in there. But Huntington High School, the building itself means a whole lot to me because there's a lot of historical events and things that occurred in that school. Huntington High School started on 17th in the 700 block, I think. And it's been moved, you know, several times. I mean, when I look at Booker T. High School, Booker T. High School remains but it remains in another location, you know. So when I look at the historical sites of a lot of Black schools, they're being destroyed, the history is being destroyed, you know. I mean, like I said, it's the teachers and the administrators that teach the students, but it's also, you know, it gives you that strength, you know, to see that building there and say, "Well, you know, I went there, that was a great school," you know. So I was very displeased about, you know, the city council deciding to tear down part of Huntington High School. I mean, it's all about the kids, you know, making sure the kids learn. But they keep talking about [the] 21st century, and those are just a couple of words. You know, numbers: 2, 1. You know, a century is a word. But when I look at Booker T. Elementary School, which is on Chestnut and 38th Street, I see the building

there and students that went there, you know, learned a whole lot. But then they gutted the school out and now it's Washington Middle School. But with Huntington, they said that "Huntington wasn't in good shape," you know. Like, you know, "they have roaches and it's deteriorating." But they are going to keep part of the old school, gut it out, and keep part of the old school. And the new part they're gonna tear down. So it wasn't good enough to go in there and gut it out and have it remain a middle school. But it's good enough to gut it out—go in there and gut it out—and make it a YMCA and put Pearl Bailey Library in there. So I'm saying, like, there's two—

There's mixed emotions there. Something is funny in that water, you know. Like, we—myself and others—signed petitions to make sure that Huntington Middle School remain—you know, be gutted out—and remain a middle school. But the city council, some members of the city council, I think, held the school board hostage as far as you know, gutting it out and rebuilding the school because they said they gonna give us x-amount, they're gonna give city school board x-amount of dollars to rebuild the school But they just play games, you know. They just played games. I mean, they just, like, you know, didn't want to gut it out and make it a middle school. I talked to a guy that used to be a custodian at Huntington—well at that time, Huntington High School. He was a custodian. And he mentioned that when he was in school, he punched some guy and punched a hole in the wall. He said when he became a custodian there, that hole was still in the wall. So, like, you know, it seems like the school board—and it could have been the faults of the city council too because, you know, the people who hold the purse string is the city council, you know, the city manager. And, evidently, they didn't give them the money to upgrade the school, you know. So the school just went down, you know. It's just like if you have a little tiny hole in your sock, and if your mother don't patch it up and you don't patch it up, it's gonna to get larger. And that's what happened, I think, with Huntington High School, you know. The school board

and the city council failed to do their job, you know, to uplift the school, to make repairs and things of this nature, you know. So, to me, it was like a conspiracy to close as many Black schools in Virginia as possible. And that's just my gut feeling.

DC: Do you feel like—trying to think of the best way to phrase it. Do you think there was any difference in how much White students appreciated their education as opposed to Black students?

JL: I'm not really sure about that one. Not really sure about that one. I mean, I think all young folk, you know, appreciate education to a certain level. Like I said, education really starts at home. Your surroundings, your parents, you know, reading to you or you read to them. And, like I said, your background, you know what I mean. If you have parents that do a lot of reading or you have parents that, you know, that's adding, subtracting, multiplying, you know, doing their budget and the things of this nature, and you see this, you know, you pick up those habits. And to me it didn't really matter was it Black or White, yeah.

DC: We also found in our background research that you were a member of the NAACP, was it?

JL: Well, I'm not really a member as of right now. I was a member, you know. I saw issues that needed to be worked on, you know, like as far as making sure that the districts were evenly divided, you know. I mean, evenly together, you know. I am now—. I do voter registration under the Concerned Citizens Voter Registration Drive. I was under the NAACP and I'm still doing that now, trying to get people registered to vote. Also, you know, if I run across someone that has a felony, you know, I try to encourage them and give them advice and how to make sure that they are able to register to vote, you know. If they're not, you know, how to go about registering to vote. I've also written letters in reference to, you know, felonies. You know, when people have felonies, they can't vote. I look at—I think it's Maine and Pennsylvania. Those are two states

that allow you to vote even if you are incarcerated, and those states are predominantly White. I look at Florida where, you know, your rights are just basically gone. You have to chew bubblegum, slide down the sliding board, all kinds of stuff, you know, in order to register to vote. But, I mean, I see the United States as United, but it don't look like we're United, you know. I mean, 'cause you have—. And I know, you know, about the states' rights. You know, states have a right to do this and do that. But United means United. You know, everybody should be the same. But I think that people that have felonies, you know, should have a right to vote after they have served their time, you know. But, in cases where, you know, somebody held a gun, you know, and committed a crime—. You know, a felony, a crime with a weapon, you know, they should be denied, you know, a weapon. But I think they still should be able to vote because they're still citizens. They have to work. You know, in order to work—in order to eat you, you have to work. And then when you work and you eat, you have to pay taxes. That's the 16th Amendment to the Constitution. You have to pay taxes. So why should a person work and pay taxes [but] cannot vote? That's wrong, you know. It's like you are still punishing that person for the crime they committed. And there's a lot of people out here that's been committing crimes, but nobody locks them up, you know. Like the jury says, "Okay, this guy, you know, didn't commit—. Well, he committed a crime but, you know, he was mentally ill." You know, he was sick or he looked at the jury and the jury said, you know, like, "Okay, well, this guy's good, you know." Whatever, you know. But, I mean, white collar crime is a little bit different from blue collar crime, you know. Wherein, you know, white collar crime is like, you know, embezzlement and things of this nature and lying to the government, lying to different people. But when it comes down to blue collar crime, you know, like, they throw away the key. You know, I mean—. A person [who] commits a crime should be, you know, punished. But the fact is that they should

still have the right to vote. 16th Amendment says you got a job, you pay taxes, you know, but you can't vote. Now, like I said, if you had committed a crime, a felony, with a gun, you know, no—. I mean, if it was self-defense, you know, one story. But, you know, you still should be able to vote, you know, and hold office if you want to. But then in cases where some people have felonies, they should not be able to run for chief of police, or fire department, or anything, you know, with a felony, you know, because they're not telling the truth, and—. But, like I said, people with felonies should be able to vote. Like, Maine is one of the states where it's predominantly White and people are allowed to vote while incarcerated. Is that United? Or is it just, like, states' rights, you know? And that's it.

DC: Would you say then that the civil rights movement is still ongoing or would you say this is a different struggle?

JL: I think it's still a struggle, still ongoing, you know, because, you still have people that's fighting for justice and equality in different areas. Some insurance companies whereby—. I was told by a company that—not the company but a person that worked for the company—that because my car was red and because of the ZIP code I was in, my insurance would be higher than someone that lived in another neighborhood, another ZIP code. People are able to go online and Google and find out what kind of neighborhood that is, and that's where it starts. Okay, well it's predominantly Black, you know, and the insurance is higher. Same thing with a friend of mine: many years ago, she worked at Old Dominion University as a research personnel. And she worked with some people that had four bedrooms, a living room, kitchen. You know, fine things. You know, fine homes. And, at that time we stayed in some apartments and I was in the military. And when she compared, when she asked them about their utility bills, their utility bills were lower—way lower than mine—and I had a two-bedroom apartment. These were White folk that

had nice homes and that worked at Old Dominion University. When you look at ZIP code, sometimes you look at, you know, like, what the rent [and] what the utilities are. You look at apartments and projects or things of this nature where, you know, things are much higher. [cough] Excuse me. Like I said, civil rights is still an ongoing thing, you know, where Blacks are still discriminated [against] in a certain way. Like I said, with the insurance company, the location, they look at ZIP code, you know. It's a ball of confusion sometimes, you know. It makes you think that-. And then with the police brutality, in some cases, where I could say there's some good policemen and there are some bad policemen, you know. And bad policemen make it worse for the good policemen, you know, because they're out there to defend and protect. But when you have some of those bad policemen that-. I also think about what happened with Jim Crow. They went from slavery to Jim Crow, and [from] Jim Crow, they went to the Ku Klux Klan. And the Klana took off the uniforms and became policemen, firemen, politicians, you know. I guarantee you have a quite number of politicians that's sitting up there in DC that's members of the Ku Klux Klan. But they took off the robes and they put on suits. Like I said, there's some good people and some bad people in both races, you know. You got some Blacks that, you know, need some awakening. You have some Whites that need awakening, but-. And then, you know, like, just like the crime thing-. But when you see videos of some Black men being tortured and beat up by four or five different policemen, you start thinking now, are they there to protect and defend and help? Are they there just to [cough] go with their gut feelings, you know? Their gut feeling, may be, "Well, I don't like Blacks," you know. "I don't like Hispanics," you know. I mean, it's just terrible, you know. We need to make a change. We need to make a change in America. I mean, I was in the army for 20 years and 17 days, you know, and I fought for this country. And, you know, a lot of other Blacks fought for

this country and Whites too. But when some Blacks come back to this country after war, in Vietnam—I didn't go to Vietnam [cough]—but they're being discriminated against, you know. It's not fair, it's not fair. And some people say, "Well, life is not fair." No, well, you know—. To a certain point, it should be fair, you know, to a certain point. But then you got these people, people with these negative attitudes, you know, that some Blacks are not as smart as Whites. You know, just like the quarterback situation with the NFL. So many years, Blacks had been denied that position because people thought, well, you know, like, "Is he smart enough?" But they had proved it. It's the same thing with coaches, you know. Like, NFL is predom—. Well I'm gonna say, from my standpoint, it's a lot more Blacks in the NFL now playing than there were back, you know, some years ago. But why aren't they—and like I said, owners have the right to pick their coaches as they please. Why aren't there more Black coaches in the NFL? I mean head coaches, not, you know, line coaches, or safety. I mean, line coaches or defensive back coaches, or whatever, passing coaches, you know [cough]. So there's a lot of things that need to be changed and bills and laws are great on paper. But you have to change a person's mind, and some people don't wanna change their mind. Some people want to stay, you know, want to say, you know, like, you know, Make America Great Again, you know. Well, America ain't never—. It's always been great, you know. But you have these people with these polluted minds that think that this country is owned or should be held by Whites. God created this, the heavens, and the Earth. And that's my feeling. And it's for everybody, you know. I mean wherever you want to live, you know, you should be able to live. But I know, you know, there's immigration. Like, you know, well, you know, you can only let certain people in, and I understand that to a certain point. [cough] But this is God's Earth and every country on this Earth belongs to God, not man. He's just letting us borrow it until the day we close our eyes.

DC: What would you say is the most important achievement of the civil rights movement so far?

JL: I think the most important thing about civil rights was, like, [being] able to attend any college or school you want to. I think that was the biggest thing that was achieved, even though we still have a long way to go, you know. That's it right now. I mean, I probably can think a lot of things, you know, but that's it right now. You know, allowing [Black students] to attend the school of their choice, you know, even though in some cases—and I'm not sure where it's at—but there are some cases where some people are not able to attend because they, you know—. But then the voting thing, I think, is another thing that we still need to work on even though, you know, that helped a lot when they took out the poll tax, you know, because some Blacks, and maybe some poor Whites, were not able to vote because they couldn't pay the poll tax. But with Blacks, you know, it was difficult. Like I said, voting, you know, is one of the things that—a positive thing that came out with the civil rights. And school, you know, integrating schools and allowing students to attend schools of their choice. Those are two things I think that came out pretty good.

DC: When did you getting involved in activism start?

JL: I got involved in '69-'71 time frame when the [phone rings] group—. Well, along with the SCLC, Dr. King and Reverend Jesse Jackson, Operation Breadbasket, the CORE, Congress of [Racial Equality], H. Rap Brown, which is, Hubert Brown, Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers, you know, really—. And the group here in Newport News was called the Black [Unity] Congress. They awakened me to the history of the Black man and to get involved, you know, in civil rights. John F. Kennedy, president of the United States, his famous words were, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," and that awakened me too, you know. I wrote a letter to his wife, you know, when he was assassinated. And, like I said,

the Black Panthers awakened me to, you know, the history of the Black man. Like some of the events, I mean. Excuse me. [cough] Some of the inventions that Blacks were involved in: Matthew Henson, you know, Dr. Charles Drew, blood plasma, Dr. Hale [Dr. Daniel Hale Williams], the heart surgeon. Blacks were inventors and Blacks that built the White House, you know, they were slaves, but they built the White House. And all sorts of things, you know: Maggie L. Walker, the Black lady that became a millionaire. You know, there were Black millionaires back in, you know, early, you know, '40s and '50s. During Reconstruction time, there were Black US Congressmen back in those days, you know, in South Carolina and different other places. And the first book I read entirely was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver. It awakened me too, you know, about Black history. In elementary school—. In high school I did not do a lot of reading, because in the first grade and the second grade—. Well, in first grade we had this book called *Dick and Jane*. Dick and Jane did not look like me. Dick and Jane had hair like you, had color blue eyes, you know, brown eyes and the dog called Spot. Dick and Jane, Spot, all those characters—. In fifth grade we had *On Cherry Street*, and Cherry Street—pictures didn't look like where I lived at, you know. The people, the characters, didn't look like me. So I really didn't get into it. But then when I read like, you know, books that related to Black folks, you know, I got deep into it. And I think, when you know about your history—well, people that were, you know, your ancestors—it helped me out a whole lot. Now I know some people say, “Well, you know, like, a word is a word, you know.” But when you see pictures, sometimes pictures tell stories, you know. It's just like when doll babies were all White back in '56 and '57. Black girls, you know, had White doll babies. They really couldn't identify with a White doll because they were not White. And then when they started making Black doll babies, you know, Black kids' parents started buying Black doll babies, you know. And also, when I was, Like I

said, at Thomas Nelson, I helped orchestrate this committee, which is called the Black Awareness Committee. [cough] Excuse me. And it was under the umbrella of what you call a Spirit Club. And I started a lot of things at Nelson like, you know, like I said the Black History Program. I went to the Dean and asked him to come up with a Black History class and we—myself and two other fellows—we went to Hampton University to find a Black historian, or somebody that could teach Black History, or had accreditation to teach Black History. And so, you know, the school decided we were gonna use Dr. Raymond J. Jirran, which was a Western Civilization teacher. You know, he taught history. So he taught the course for three semesters, I mean, three terms. And I think he went on to teach the other classes, you know, after I left there. I had a bulletin board and I used to put up, you know, events. I mean, things about Blacks. You know, like, discoveries. Who, you know, who invented this, who invented that, you know. You know, pictures of Malcolm X, pictures of (Mahatma? 58:21) Gandhi, you know. Different people, different things, about Black history. And it started out pretty good. But then, because it was a day school and night school and I think the night school students—some of them that didn't like the board, you know, didn't like the information on the board—were tearing it down. And so the next day, when I come to school, I would go to school and I would see that the board was torn down—I mean, the information was torn down—I would put up more information. And so each time they tore it down I put it back up. And so eventually they understood, “Hey, this Black young man is not gonna tolerate the crap, you know.” I'm gonna keep putting it up there until, you know, until you stop. And so eventually it stopped, you know. We had, like I said, we had several programs there. We had a Reverend Boddie from First Baptist Church in Newport News. He came and spoke on a Memorial Day for Dr. King. We had this guy named Myron Cook that came and spoke on—. There was a member of the Action Committee to Stop Drugs, you know, to

keep drugs out of the community, and he spoke there. And so I went to the school librarian and asked her to put in the—. Have you ever heard of the *Ebony* magazine and *Jet* magazine?

DW: Mm-hmm.

JL: But *Jet* magazine and *Ebony* magazine was the number one—and the *New Journal [and] Guide*—were the number one magazines and newspapers in this area. And so *Jet* magazine was put into Thomas Nelson Library. The *Ebony* magazine, you know, other materials that were related to Blacks [were too]. They started picking up books with reference to Sojourner Truth, reference to Maggie Walker, you know, different literature about Blacks. You know, Black studies areas. Like I said, you know, the Panthers and Dr. King awakened me to, you know, to do something. And actually with John Kennedy, his inauguration speech, you know, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” What can I do for the history of the Black man?

DC: Was there any specific figures in Black History that you saw as a personal inspiration?

JL: Like I said, Dr. King, Frederick Douglas, Malcolm X, Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, Clifford L. Alexander—was a military personnel—Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali. I mean, I can name until doomsday, you know. SCLC. Like I said, Reverend Jesse Jackson, you know, inspired me. Many other—. My teachers, you know, inspired me. (Miss Mildred Harold? 1:01). One of my other teachers, Miss Karen Wilson—she’s still living—she was my ninth grade English teacher. Like I said, I can go on and on and on. Alex Haley, you know, with *Roots*, because that’s where it started. The *Roots* movie, you know, started from slavery and the triangle trade route—how that started, how slavery was not only in Africa and the United States, but it was in Europe too. I mean, when you see the pictures like *Hercules* and *Samson*, all the pictures, those are fiction pictures, movies. But they were real, you know. They had White slaves, you

know, but it was different because when you were Black and the person that was in charge of you was White, you know, there was a difference. You could say, "Well, I know this person is Black, so he's a slave." But now with *Ferguson versus Plessy*—Ferguson was a Black man, but he could pass as White. That's "separate but equal." When they found out that Ferguson—. No, I'm sorry, when they found Plessy was Black, they changed. He was in the front row, he was in the number one seat. But when they found out he was Black, you know, "Hey, you got to go to the back," you know. Rosa Parks, you know, influenced me a whole lot. Carter G. Woodson. Like I said, Frederick Douglas. When it comes down to Frederick Douglas—. I wrote a letter to 100 US senators about three years ago, to make DC a state, and it started with Frederick Douglas. He wanted to make DC a state, but it didn't happen 'cause people didn't want to vote for it. This is the capital, you know, and we're gonna make, you know, these other (land? 1:04:39) areas, you know, states. And he also wanted to make—I think it was one of the countries over in the West Indies areas—he wanted to make Puerto Rico, I think it was [a state]. I'm not really sure, but anyhow, he wanted to make that country a state within the United States. But the leader at that time did not want it to be part of the United States. But, like I said, it started with Frederick Douglass, you know, wanting to make DC a state, statehood. [computer sound] And then it went to Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson petitioned that DC become a state, but it didn't happen. So when I saw this information, I read up on this information, you know. I wrote letters to 100 senators and I received three letters back. One from a senator, a US senator from Pennsylvania, and the information he stated that, you know, that people could petition by having signs going up to the Capitol, you know, stating what they wanted. But here it is, you know, you got a body of land where people are paying taxes, but they don't have representation. They got a shadow of a person that has no voice, you know. It's just like the Insurrection—and I call it an Insurrection, I

don't know what you call it or somebody else call it, but it was an Insurrection—and the (man had? 1:06:37) hands are tied. And it could have been—. It could have been stopped. But by not making that a state, they had no authority to go to [the] Capitol. Around the Capitol, they had authority but not, you know, in the Capitol. And the other two letters I received was from my two US senators from Virginia here, you know. [They] stated that, “Yes, DC should be a state,” you know, and they voted for it, but—. Like I said, you know, people paying taxes: 16th Amendment, you paying taxes. DC residents pay taxes, but they don't have a voice. Is that United, or is that fair? Yeah, some things are not fair, but that should be fair, you know, people that work—. Some people from—and I don't know the percentage—but some people that work in DC live in Maryland. So they pay state tax in Maryland, and they pay the federal tax. But the poor people that have to pay federal taxes in DC have no voice. Like the “no taxation without representation,” the Revolutionary War, that's how that started. The people were not getting representation, but they had to pay taxes. Them jokers threw that tea overboard, you know [laughter] yeah. That's it, you know, that part is—. You know, that's it.

DC: I think we've gone through a lot of the topics we wanted to cover and we've come up on a little over an hour, I think. Is there anything you'd like—

NF: I'm just gonna cut in with a question if you don't mind.

DC: Okay.

NF: What do you think is the most pressing issue facing African Americans today?

JL: Voting rights. I've heard cases where people, names, have been taken off the roll, you know. They go to vote, and, you know, then—. Because I have worked at the main precinct, and I've had people come to me and say, “Well, I went inside and they said my name wasn't on the list,” you know. And they have to go over to the registrar's office and find out what happened. Or they

may tell them, well, okay—. Some of the questions the people at the polls ask, you know, “Have you moved or change your name?” “No, I haven’t moved. I haven’t changed my name.” At one time—and I forgot what year it was—but like if you had not voted in an election, your name was taken off. And why? I guess that’s just the way the system was. But in cases where, today, you know, your name should stay on the list to vote because, you know, you—. But, like I said, if you have moved to change your name that, you know, that still shouldn’t matter because your name should still be on the list. But, you know, when I tell people, I say, well, you know, “Have you moved or changed your name?” They say, “No, I’ve been living in the same place for the last 30 years.” So voting thing is a factor, you know. Voting rights is still up in the air—. I mean as far as districts and the zoning and things of this nature, you know, I know that downtown Newport News, which is 16th Street, there’s been a lot of apartments torn down where people have moved from one part of downtown Newport News—Southeast district—to the Northern district or central area. The polling places have closed because there’s less people, you know, to vote at that place. And I understand that, you know. But when you—. And in some cases the information may not be announced to people that have found out that their poll place has moved, has closed down. Yeah, I mean, I know the board, the election personnel over there, I guess they try to get out the information to let people know, “Hey, you know, your poll has closed down and you have to go other places,” you know. But in some cases, they don’t get the information. Yeah, that’s basically it. Well, police brutality and “Black-on-Black” crime too. Those are issues that, you know, I look at—. And then, when I look at the recreational centers in the Southeast district, [they] are all basically gone, you know. They tore down Doris Miller, Magruder Recreation Center—used to be Magruder Elementary—which is now the STEM Academy. Like in the afternoon we used to go to Magruder Recreation Center, which was part of the school, and play

basketball and, you know, play football, and they had a tennis court in the back. But now there's no tennis court. The gym is just closed to the students, and so the kids in that neighborhood, they don't have anything to do but either play on their cell phones or some of them get in trouble, you know. Talking about doing stuff, the students in that area—kids in that area, you know—they don't have a place to go. I think Booker T. Middle School allows them to [go] in the gym in the afternoon, but I'm not really sure. I mean, I've seen the signs that say, you know, "gym open in the afternoon." And then you're talking about the swimming pool. There's a midtown area where there's a recreation center there. But a lot of kids that live on 6th and Ivy and 12th Street, they don't have any place to go but set down to the park, down there to play on the swings, you know. They have a basketball court out there, but a lot of things that we had when I was coming up, you know—. We had the opportunity to go to those places, like I said. Now, of course, we had a Hampton Roads Boys Club—well, Hampton Roads Boys and Girls Club—which is, you know, down on Hampton Avenue in the 600 block, where kids can go. But a lot of places that were open, you know, at Booker T. Middle School, they had a basketball court out there so the guys go out there and play basketball. But they don't have that anymore. The baseball diamond, you know, there's a field out there, but it's not designed to play baseball. They got grass out there. Now, some of the things where people in the community could start up, you know—. But as far as the courts is concerned and as far as the—. I mean, someone could get involved and say, "Okay, we're gonna have a baseball team at Washington Middle School." But when you talk about, you know, other places like Magruder, STEM Academy, where they had a baseball field out there—we played baseball—there's no baseball field out there. There's no basketball court out there. So the kids don't have nothing to do, you know, but play on their phones. And some of them now are, you know, in their home studying and doing their work. And others, you know, that's not

studying. You know, they're committing crimes. And there's "Black-on-Black" crime, there's police brutality. Both sides, I mean—. It's like what do you do, you know? Like back in the day a lot of churches used to get involved, but some churches are getting involved and some don't. Like I said, I can talk from now to Doomsday. But I still try to, you know, encourage, young folk. You know, 'cause I was a substitute teacher in the school system for many years, and I would try to encourage students to think about, you know, positive things and associate with people that are positive. I mean, you don't have to dislike a person because they're not positive but, you know, you still have to love them and, if you can, help them. But don't associate with them because you got a basket full of apples and three of those apples going to be bad. So you have to disassociate yourself with those apples. But, you know, if you can help some of those apples to become, you know, ripe, you know, you can. But, you know, you have to stay your distance. Children at a certain point gonna be children, to a certain point. But I think a lot of times, because of the Covid, you know, Covid-19, a lot of students didn't learn as much as they should because you had online classes for a while and then when you get into the schools they're on the Chromebooks. And, you know, it's just a terrible situation, you know. And that's it, I think as far as the information that—. Excuse me.

DC: Nicole, is there another question you'd like to ask because I have a good final question that I wanna.

NF: No, you go.

DC: All right, I just wanted to ask, as a final question, do you think a lot of the prominent civil rights leaders, if they could see us today, do you think they would be proud of what's come about?

JL: I'm not really sure. I'm not really sure because I think they would see that some young folks are trying to carry on what they implemented back in the day. The Black Lives Matter organization I think is one, you know. But there's not a whole lot of outspoken organizations. I mean, there's individuals that's out there, you know, but there's no Jesse Jackson out there. There's no Dr. King out there as far as what I see. Now, I mean, I could be totally wrong cause I'm in Virginia. There's no Reverend Abernathy. Now there's few: Senator Brooks. There was a senator from New York.

There's Corey Booker, that's, you know, that's a senator. There's former president Barack Obama. There's John Lewis that was out there, you know, 'cause he was a member with Dr. King, you know. I think they would probably say we have a lot to go, you know, a lot of ways to go. But I don't think they would be dissatisfied, because, you know, there's some ropes and there's some obstacles that's still being put in the way of Black folks, you know, like, you know. That's it. Nicole, did you have another question?

NF: No. Do you have anything else that you wanted to contribute or feel that we might have missed?

JL: Not really that I can think of right now. [I'll] probably think of 1,999 things. Now, I could think of 1,750 things. Votes, you know, are things that I think of. But, not right now, not right now. I think the system, the judicial system, has worked halfway decent. I think that some of the members of the House of Representatives should realize that their constituents vote for them to make decisions for everyone and not just for a political party. But, you know, it's like saying that, "Okay, well, you know, we need this and we need that," but then other people, you know, need certain things, just like we have disasters. Now those people that are in Hawaii and different places that have, you know, tornadoes and things of this nature, they need food, they need

clothing, and they need shelter, you know. And if we deny them--even though they're talking about the budget, you know, and talking about overspending and all these things of this nature--but there are people that's hungry out there that are both Black and White, that's hungry and need a place to stay. And if you have people that only think about themselves, being selfish--there's some selfish people, US representatives, in the House today. They're selfish. They're only thinking about their people and not everybody else. United means together. It does not mean, you know--. This separate issues with states, I understand in some cases where there may be issues, where, you know, your laws in Virginia may be different from Idaho or others. But when you talk about like the farming area, you know, like the taxes may be a little bit different because there's a farm area--. But when you're talking about, you know, abortion and you're talking about "This state says, you know, 15 weeks, this state says 10 weeks," you know, that's not United. I think there should be one specific law on abortion. And I know that incest and rape should be the two key elements for an abortion. And then they say, "Well, if a doctor says that if you have this child you're going to die or the child is going to die and I recommend an abortion"--. Well, an abortion, and if you believe in God--now if you don't believe in God that's a different story--but if you believe in the almighty and one wants to have an abortion it's gonna to be between them and God, not man and man, you know. It's not gonna be, you know, the Senators and the congressmans, because--. And some people don't believe in God. Some people don't believe, you know. Once you die, you know, that's it. But I think it's better to believe than not to believe 'cause what happens if you die and people saying, "Well, you know, if you don't do this and don't do that and you go to hell and you burn and continue to burn until eternity." What happens if there's (stick pane? 1:24:41) of gold and you say, "Well, I believed in that." But if you say, "I don't believe in that" and you burn up in your soul--not your body, but your soul--

you know, no telling what'll happen. No telling what a person might, you know—. I mean, their soul. But we need to, as a country, we need to get together and think about not only our constituents, but other people that have been in floods, storms, hurricanes, bridges falling, you know, caving in where Congress could have, you know, issued money to the states, and pay for these bridges that's falling down. Some things may happen, you know, that's unknown. But when you have people saying, "Well, we're overspending," you know, there's people out there that's hungry. When you talk about taxes and the wealthy paying less tax than the poor and the middle-class people, that's wrong because I made you a millionaire. Other poor folk made you a millionaire. No, I don't have to buy your products, but I made you rich, a millionaire, a billionaire. And you can't afford to pay more taxes than me? That's totally unfair. Now, I'm not saying you give all your money to taxes, but you need to pay your fair share, and not all these loopholes they have out here. I mean, it's totally unfair, you know. We're talking about the Constitution; we're talking about folk on reservations. This is, you know, this is wrong, this is totally wrong, you know. We are people and we should treat people like people and like human beings, you know. Justice, the Civil Justice I think cries sometimes. I think she cries because she sees little justice in America. Like I said, I could talk all day, but I know you guys don't have time for me to talk all day, but okay. But I believe one day, maybe not in my lifetime, you know, that things will change for the better. But until we realize as people, and not only just people in America, but people all over the world—. All these wars—. And I know the Bible speaks of wars and rumors of wars. But those rumors are just rumors and we have people that have a tendency for a long time want to take over somebody else's property, you know, take over their country. Then in the Midwest there is a lot of desert over there and there was not, I don't think there were many people in the desert, you know, living in the desert because it's, you know, there's no

vegetation in those areas. But when those Europeans came over here and, say they came for religious reasons or treatment, you know, bad treatment reasons—some came, some were crooks, some came for religious reasons, some came because, you know, they were not treated right, you know. But they, you know—. When I look at Christopher Columbus, if something is not lost, it's not found. You understand what I'm saying? If it's not lost, it's not found. And that's just my thought and somebody may say, "Well, you're totally wrong." But that's just my thought. But, I'm gonna end, like I said, on this last statement here. Like I said, when I went to—. What's this place? Mariner's Museum and I saw a picture of someone putting an American flag on the North Pole. And I asked the tourist guy, I said, "That's Matthew Henson?" He said, "No," he says, "that's Admiral Perry." And I go back to my history and it told me that Admiral Perry had a Black man by the name of Matthew Henson, which is—. I think Matthew Henson had some Indian blood in him, along with some other Indians. And Admiral Perry had a cold, had the flu or something, and he could not continue on the journey. So Matthew Henson was the one that put the American flag on the North Pole and not Admiral Perry. So there's a lot of information about, you know, who discovered this and who discovered that that's totally wrong, you know. And I think that the governor of Florida is doing a disservice to his kids and all the kids in Florida and different other places because it may hurt that slavery occurred, but—. I'm not putting you to sleep, am I? But I mean slavery occurred. And it may hurt some people, you know, to say, "Okay my great-great-grandfather had slaves" or "My great-great-grandfather was a slave," you know. It makes you have a feeling. But you should realize that people made mistakes and it's the truth. You can't hide the truth. The truth should be told even though it may hurt. I mean, it hurts me sometimes when I figure that okay, there was slavery in Africa 'cause when an African tribe captured another tribe, and they were all the same color, there was still bondage, you know, as a

slave or indentured servants, that could work their way out. But when it came to the triangle trade route, there were chains put on Black folks and, when you see a Black man, you automatically thought he was a slave. Now there was some free Blacks in America at that time, especially in the North. But when you put chains on people and you look at their color, “this guy’s automatically a slave.” So slavery in Europe was different from the slavery in Africa and the United States. Slavery in the United States was a little bit–. It was much harsher. It was hurting, I mean, it hurts me, but Black folks need to know the truth. White folks need to know the truth. Don't hide the truth. Don't hide the truth, you see what I'm saying?

DC: Mm-hmm.

JL: I guess that’s it. Are there any other questions?

DC: I don't believe so.

NF: No, All right, I think we’re about out of time, so I’m going to stop the recording.

JL: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Nicole Flautt and Dane Christensen, December 7, 2023

Edited by Matthew Johnson, February 4, 2024

Edited by Laura Puaca, February 12, 2024