Congressman Bobby Scott
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Congressman Bobby Scott
Interviewers: Laura Puaca and Matthew Johnson
Interview Date: April 8, 2024
Location: Newport News TV (NNTV) station, Newport News, Virginia
Length: Audio (MP3) and video (MP4) files, 54:58 minutes

THE INTERVIEWEE: Congressman Bobby Scott was born on April 30, 1947, in Washington, D.C. to Dr. C. Waldo Scott and Mae Hamlin Scott. At the age of two, he moved with his family to Newport News, where Dr. Scott had spent much of his childhood. Congressman Scott grew up in a family that was heavily involved in local politics and community life. His father, for example, would serve as the chief surgeon at Whittaker Hospital, the first African American on the Newport News School Board in the 20th century, and as a member of the Political Action Committee, which sought to expand Black political power. His mother also played an important role in the community, both as a teacher in the Newport News public school system and various civic activities such as the Little League, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, and Links, Incorporated.

As a child, Congressman Scott attended the city's segregated schools, such as Booker T. Washington and Thomas Jefferson. After the *Brown* ruling and anticipating "massive resistance" that could shut down schools in Newport News to avoid integration, Scott's family sent him to the predominantly-White Groton School in Massachusetts, where he graduated in 1965. He then attended Harvard University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts in 1969. Subsequently, he attended law school at Boston College, where he earned his Juris Doctor degree in 1973. During this time, he also served in the Massachusetts National Guard and, later, in the U.S. Army Reserve.

Following law school, Scott returned to Newport News where he began practicing law. He also served as president of the local chapter of the NAACP, from 1975 to 1980. In that period, in 1977, he was first elected to the Virginia General Assembly. He served initially in the House of Delegates, from 1978 to 1983 and later, in the Senate of Virginia, from 1983 to 1993.

In 1992, Scott was elected to the House of Representatives, making him the first Black Congressman from Virginia since the 1890s. He also became the first American with Filipino ancestry to serve as a voting member of Congress. In the past three decades, he has served on a wide range of caucuses and committees, and is currently the Ranking Member of the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

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

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted at the Newport News Television (NNTV) station, where Congressman Scott was accompanied by several members of his staff. From the beginning of the interview, Scott made it clear that his family has a long and rich history with the city of Newport News. He detailed the various contributions of his parents to the city, and shared his own experiences growing up there as well. Scott described the racial landscape as "total segregation," something that was both widespread and largely accepted, and referred to the largely inadequate resources provided to Black schools. It is evident, however, that Scott had high regard for his teachers, who routinely had to face the material and psychological challenges of segregation; after being elected to Congress, he even held an award ceremony to honor them.

Scott also reflected on the process of school desegregation in Newport News, as well as the challenges that his father faced as the only African American on the school board at that time. With regard to his own education, Scott began attending an out-of-state boarding school in the seventh grade, due to fears that Newport News would close its schools to avoid integration.

Much of the interview focused on Scott's numerous community and political contributions. Both in the NAACP and later in the General Assembly, he concerned himself with such subjects as health care, housing, education, criminal justice reform, and poverty. He expanded on those efforts in Congress, and described in detail his work pertaining to criminal justice, early childhood education, student loan relief, and job training, and healthcare.

Toward the end of the interview, Scott reflected on the "Shoe Lane controversy," referring to efforts to displace Black homeowners to make room for what was then Christopher Newport College. At the interview's end, he offered advice to younger generations, stressing the importance of being active in the political realm.

After the interview, everyone stepped outside to view the historic solar eclipse, or Great North American Eclipse, that had begun taking place. Congressman Scott and his staff even shared their glasses so that everyone could view the event.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Laura Puaca: This is Laura Puaca.

Matt Johnson: And this is Matt Johnson.

LP: Today is Monday, April the 8th, 2024. We are interviewing Congressman Bobby Scott. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good afternoon, Congressman Scott.

Congressman Bobby Scott: Good afternoon, Laura.

LP: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today. We are taking what's called a life history approach, and we would like to start with just a few questions about your childhood. Where and when were you born?

BS: I was born in Washington, D.C. April 30th, 1947.

MJ: And when did your family move to Newport News? What brought them to the area?

BS: My father [Dr. C. Waldo Scott] was originally from Newport News. He was away. He went to Howard University for undergraduate, University of Michigan for medical, and was back in D.C. to be further trained in surgery and had the honor of training under Charles Drew. Came back to Newport News in 1949. I was two years old.

LP: And we understand that he worked at Whittaker Hospital. Can you say a few words about that institution, and particularly the role that it sort of played in the community?

BS: Well, by the 1940s, it had been long standing and it was a fairly large hospital. It was the Black hospital in Newport News. Blacks couldn't use the facilities at Riverside or–. The old Dixie Hospital, which was on what is now Hampton University's campus, allowed Blacks to be treated and for Black physicians to be on staff. But it was a very small hospital at the time. It became Hampton General on Victoria Boulevard after that, I guess the late '50s, early '60s. Whittaker Hospital was built by four physicians in the early 1900s and grew to a fairly significant hospital, a hundred and twenty bed hospital, and treated African Americans where they could get treatment. My father was the chief surgeon. There was a surgeon there before him, Dr. E.C. Downing. And Daddy became the chief surgeon and was for a long time one of the only surgeons–Black surgeons–on the Virginia Peninsula. He happened to be the first board-certified surgeon of any race on the Peninsula. So, he was very well qualified.

MJ: And what kind of, kinds of challenges did your father, C. Waldo Scott, face as a Black surgeon in a segregated city?

BS: Well, obviously he had privileges at Whittaker Hospital. At Dixie Hospital, he had privileges and then at Hampton General. Not at Riverside. A lawsuit was filed, and my father was part of that lawsuit that integrated the staff at Riverside. That was in the 1960s. Phil Walker, who was the lawyer on that case, was later in life my senior partner. I joined his law firm when I started practicing law. But the challenge was really having the access to all of the other opportunities that other physicians had. Medicaid and Medicare did not come in until 1965. And so many of the patients, quite frankly, couldn't pay. And so, although the American Medical Association opposed Medicaid and Medicare, African American physicians saw it as a way for

many of those patients to be able to pay their bills. And that became a great boon to physicians. It also meant that the facilities had to be integrated. You couldn't, you couldn't–. Hospitals couldn't receive Medicare and maintain segregated facilities. And that was the basis of the lawsuit at Riverside.

MJ: We understand that he was also involved in efforts to expand Black political participation. Could you say a few words about some of those, such as the Political Action Committee?

BS: The Political Action Committee was the political organization in the East End of Newport News for African Americans. They were very much involved in coordinating voter registration efforts and trying to get people to run. The first African American to win a political office in Newport News, since Reconstruction, was Jessie Rattley in 1970, City Council. Others had run unsuccessfully, but she was able to win in 1970. The Political Action Committee was the major force behind her organization: making sure that people were organizing the polls, running voter registration activities, and making sure that people got information on voting, dropping literature and things like that. The kind of political operation that you would take for granted today but just wasn't available. Other cities had similar operations. There was a Goldenrod Ballot in Norfolk, Crusade for Voters in Richmond and the Political Action Committee in Newport News.

LP: Before we circle back to your own experiences and learn a little bit more about those, we'd also like to hear just a little bit about your mother, too, Mae Hamlin Scott. What did she do for a living?

BS: She was, early on, a housewife, making sure that we could get to our Little League Baseball and other activities. When we got into school, she became a schoolteacher. She had a background in science, master's degree in public health. And so, she became a schoolteacher,

taught science in elementary school. Taught at Dunbar, Walter Reed, Huntington Intermediate. And was a schoolteacher for many years. Active in the Newport News Education Association.

LP: And what kinds of community activities was she also involved with?

BS: She was involved in a lot of activities, the Girl Scouts, one, Boy Scouts. Depending on whether my brothers and I were in the Boy Scouts, she was active in the Boy Scouts. My sister was a Girl Scout. She was very active then and the Girl Scouts on a regional basis. I remember her getting an award in Washington, D.C. for her activities in the Girl Scouts. So, she was very active in the community.

LP: And were those–

BS: Also, she was also active in sororities and other organizations like Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and the Links Incorporated. She was a founding member of the Newport News Links.

LP: And groups like the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, were they segregated at the time?

BS: Yeah, the troops were segregated during that time.

MJ: So, we will circle back to them in the context of school desegregation battles that later took place. But we'd like to hear about some of your own experiences now. You touched on this slightly when talking about your past, but could you tell us more about what it was like to grow up during segregation?

BS: Well, it's kind of hard to say how it was because that's how you grew up. There was fairly total segregation. I have frequently thought back to my childhood, and I can't remember a single conversation I had with a White peer. [I can recall] Whites, store clerks or others. But a peer, you know, a teammate on Little League Baseball? No, that was all Black. Classmate in school? No, they were segregated. I can't remember [interactions with a White peer] in Newport News until, really, I came back from law school, even a conversation. It was just total segregation. Now, you

know, when I–. You obviously talk to people in other situations, clerks and bus drivers or things like that. But it's what you would call a social peer, I can't remember a single person that I even had a conversation with during those times.

MJ: With that in mind, do you have a sense of what race relations were like, for example?

BS: Well, they were–. There was acceptance of segregation. The civil rights era was just beginning during that period of time, Civil Rights Act passed in [1964]. But it was just accepted in society that it was socially segregated. There were efforts made in terms of civil rights, that there were rights that you had, rights to vote, rights to jobs, and things like that. But the social segregation was fairly total.

MJ: So, you mentioned the civil rights movement and its unfolding as you were growing up. Do you remember any protests or demonstrations in Newport News?

BS: Not many. I do remember Martin Luther King did come to Newport News when I was probably about twelve years old. I remember meeting him. My father and other community leaders had dinner at the Cosmos Inn in the 600 block of 25th Street. It's no longer there, of course. But I met him there. He was speaking at one of the local churches. And so, he came. But basically the efforts were in voter registration to see if we can break the political barriers.

LP: Great. Thank you. So, we'd love to hear a little bit more about your experience, about your experience attending some of the city's segregated schools. And so, for starters, what schools in Newport News did you attend?

BS: I went to Booker T. Washington when it was an elementary school, first through seventh grade. I went through the sixth grade, except for the third and fourth grade, when I went to Thomas Jefferson, which was at 30th and Jefferson Avenue.

LP: Did you remember any teachers who were particularly influential who stood out at you?

BS: I had the opportunity, after I was elected to Congress, I was asked to host a fundraiser for the local Boys and Girls Club, and I said, "Well, I have an idea. I'll be happy to do it. But let's have an award ceremony and I get to pick the awardees." And so, I picked all of my elementary school teachers. And my teachers–kindergarten, first, second, fourth, fifth and sixth grade–teachers were all there to be honored. I couldn't find my third-grade teacher. I lost contact with her early on, but everybody else was still local. And so that gave–. That was quite an opportunity for me to say, "Thank you."

LP: That's such an amazing story, to be able to sort of reconnect with them in that way. When you were in school–. And so, it sounds like you had a really, you know, great relationship with your teachers. But did you notice any differences between the schools for Black students in the city and the schools for White students?

BS: Well, it's hard if you didn't see the inside of the other schools. It's kind of hard to compare, except that frequently you would have schoolbooks–. And the city provided your schoolbooks. In the Black schools, the stamp of your school was right under a stamp of a White school that's crossed out. So, the book was obviously a hand-me-down from the White schools that got the textbook when it was new. The teachers–. There was a lawsuit filed in the early '60s, I believe it was, to equalize teacher pay. White teachers were paid at one level. Black teachers were paid at a different level for the same job. A lawsuit was filed, and federal courts required Black teachers to be paid like everybody else. But those were the two things that I can remember.

MJ: So, you were in school at a time that battles about desegregation waged on, particularly after the famous 1954 *Brown* ruling and Virginia's turn to massive resistance. So, zooming out for just a minute, we understand that your father was a member of the Newport News school board at the time as well, having just been elected a few years before the *Brown* decision in 1962.

LP: ‘52.

MJ: ‘52. Sorry. Could you talk first about his role in the battles over segregation that took place in this period?

BS: Well, I remember he would frequently remind people that one of the positions he took after the *Brown* decision came out was that Newport News ought to take that decision as a blessing rather than a curse, because it relieved the city from having to duplicate separate but equal facilities. I know there’s a recreation center that was recently demolished and they’re building it. The Scott Center for Hope, at the corner of 32nd and Wickham Avenue, used to be the Dorie Miller Recreation Center. Two blocks down the street [from] the Dorie Miller Recreation Center used to be World War II Recreation Center. They were separate but equal. Identical facilities about two or three blocks apart. You could see the exact same floor plan, exact same basketball court in the same place. Swimming pool, exact same dimensions. Great swimming pool, nine-foot depth in the middle, a huge swimming pool. Ball field on the side. Ball field inside. Separate but equal facilities. They paid twice as much as they should have. They could have had one, maybe even slightly better, facility. And he made the point that you ought to be able to view this as an opportunity to no longer be burdened with having to build two of everything. You can build one. He also joked about the “subcommittee” that was formed on the five-member school board to go to Richmond to discuss with the governor’s office how they should respond to the *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. A five-member board established a four-member “subcommittee.” [laughter] Doesn’t take a lot of imagination to know which one was left behind, but he frequently jokes about that. So he didn’t know what the discussion was. But we dealt with the trials and tribulations of cities across the state dealing with the *Brown* decision. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, which became part of the *Brown* decision, it was four cases consolidated into one. They

call it *Brown*, but *Davis* vs. *Prince Edward County, Virginia*, is one of the cases decided. The language in the *Brown* case, the operative language, was that it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state provides it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. If you listen to that powerful language–. Apparently, all Virginia heard of it was "where the state provides it." And they figured, "Well, if you're not providing it, it doesn't have to be equal. Everybody gets equal education, or they get none at all." So instead of integrating the schools, they just, under massive resistance, closed the schools. In Prince Edward County, the schools were closed for four years. They also closed schools, I believe, in Charlottesville, Arlington, some in Norfolk. I say some in Norfolk, because the White schools were closed. The Black school, open to everybody, didn't have to close. So, Booker T. Washington High School never closed. The other schools had to close because they were subject to the integration order. But it was a reprehensible way to deal with the decision. But that's what Virginia did. They finally, on a very close vote in the legislature, ended massive resistance. And the rest is history.

MJ: So how did these particular issues affect you?

BS: Well, first, my father being on the school board and looking to the left and the right knew what the vote would be. As soon as the order to integrate took place, they were going to close the schools. So, the decision was made that I would continue education in Massachusetts at a boarding school, Groton School. I started in the seventh grade. It turned out that we ended massive resistance without closing the schools in Newport News, but I was already there. So, I stayed and graduated from high school in Massachusetts.

LP: Thank you. So, after graduating from Groton in ‘65, you attended Harvard, where you graduated in ‘69, and then you attended Boston College Law School, where you graduated in ‘73. What drew you to the law? What did you hope to accomplish as a lawyer?

BS: Well, basically, I viewed law as a kind of wide-open doors of possibilities. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I looked around for jobs and then I couldn’t find anything interesting. So, I decided I’d apply to law school, actually on a lark. I didn’t really intend to go to law school, but when I couldn’t find a job, I decided to go to law school [and] graduated. And one thing about the law is that it qualifies you for anything that doesn’t require a medical degree. You don’t have to practice law. You don’t have to be a trial lawyer. But anything you go into, a law degree will enhance your qualifications. And so, with that background, I decided to go to law school, graduated, and came back and joined Phil Walker’s law firm. The lawyer that handled the case my father was involved in with Riverside and practiced there a few years before I got elected to the House of Delegates.

MJ: So, you later returned to Newport News, as you mentioned, where you practiced law. But you also served as the president of the local chapter of the NAACP from ‘75 to ‘80. How did you become involved in that organization?

BS: Well, when I came back from law school, I got involved in a number of different organizations and efforts. There was a health care situation where the federal government set up a health care matrix where the community had to be involved in certain decisions that had been made. We got a group together to make sure our effort was that our voice was heard. I still remember the doctor that was chair of that effort. He said, “You have a right to have your say, but not a right to have your way.” And so, [laughter] so we had our say. And next, there was a housing crisis. So, we got a group together and fought that. And then it occurred to us as we were

doing this, we ought to have an organization so we shouldn't have to spend our time getting organized. We ought to have an organization that's ready to go and we won't have to worry about organizing. Somebody mentioned the NAACP. You looked at their bylaws and you noticed that they have committees on education, health care, voter registration, housing. Every issue that could possibly come up, there's a committee for that. And so, I got involved in that and very active. And people asked me to run for president and I did and I got elected in '75 and was president for five years, some of which I was in the General Assembly. So that was real busy.

MJ: So, what do you see as the most important accomplishments of your presidency?

BS: Well, effective voter registration drives would probably lead the list. But we had two lawsuits against the city of Newport News on discrimination: failing to hire and failing to promote. And those were, those were successful. You know, when the city has sued successfully for discrimination, it tends to help the next process. And so, I think we improve the hiring processes in the city by letting it be known that we were ready to file suits and that we could win.

LP: Thank you. So, during this period, as you mentioned, you were elected to the Virginia General Assembly, where you served first in the House of Delegates, later in the Virginia Senate. And just to sort of zoom out for a minute, can you just say a few words about the political scene in Virginia at the time, especially with regard to what we might consider sort of the racial landscape? You know, how much had changed, for example, since, you know, say, the '50s or '60s, between then and when you entered politics yourself?

BS: Well, when I entered, for African Americans, there wasn't much political activity at all. The voter registration, so we're trying to encourage people to vote. There was only one Black elected official in Newport News. That's Jessie Rattley. Only one in Hampton, John Mallory Phillips, member of City Council. And that was it. Others had run unsuccessfully. The year before I ran,

we'd had candidates for City Council unsuccessful. No one in Newport News or Hampton had ever run credible races at all for the General Assembly. There's one African American at the time in the House of delegates, Dr. William P. Robinson from Norfolk. One other had served in modern history, Fergie Reid, Dr. Fergie Reid from Richmond. He was defeated in '75. So, in '77 when I ran, Dr. Robinson was the only African American. And I was elected in Newport News, and two African Americans were elected in Richmond. So, the three of us quadrupled the Black Caucus in the House [laughter] and won election. Doug Wilder was serving in the state Senate at the time, so we had a very small Black caucus. But I think very effective.

LP: What motivated you to get into politics? What motivated you to run for elected office in the first place?

BS: Well, as president of the NAACP, you're always offering suggestions for legislation, and at some time you just get to the point where rather than asking somebody else to do something, why don't I just do it myself? Selection of judges was one, where there were, I guess at the time, only a handful of judges, a couple of Black judges in the state. None on the Peninsula. And it doesn't take long to figure out how to become a judge. It's the members of the General Assembly, local members of the General Assembly, essentially offer the judges, hold General Assembly votes. But the local delegation has an outsized influence on who they are. And that just wasn't happening in Newport News and Hampton. So, I thought that that was a voice that needed to be heard. And a lot of other issues: Equal Rights Amendment was pending. Other issues that I just thought we weren't properly represented, as president of the NAACP. I thought another voice would be helpful. I didn't know at the time that I wasn't supposed to win. [laughter] And I wasn't burdened by that wisdom and put together a campaign. And we did extremely well. It was a top three-win, multi-member district, and I came in first place.

MJ: So, you mentioned the campaign. Could you just say a few words about how you generated support? For instance, the Hampton Roads Oral History Project–. We spoke with Susann Davis, who talked about your connection to her aunt, Annie Daniels.

BS: Madam Daniels was a cosmetologist who ran a beauty school, was very helpful. She was also active in the NAACP and, as NAACP branch president, you're involved in fundraising, organizing, voter registration. And a lot of the same people involved in that helped in the campaign. A lot of people who worked in campaigns, unsuccessful campaigns–. Reverend Henry Maxwell, who subsequently became a member of the House and State Senate, ran unsuccessfully for City Council the year before I ran. A lot of the people that helped in his campaign were very helpful. And just friends and family were able to put together a very active and enthusiastic campaign. Had a huge turnout on primary day, substantially more than anyone expected in a primary. And that was how I came in first place.

MJ: And what were some of your main agenda items?

BS: The agenda items were the same things I'd been working on in the NAACP: housing, education, criminal justice reform, helping the needy. The Neighborhood Assistance Act was one of my earliest successes, and people are still taking advantage of that. It's a tax credit to businesses to make donations to selected organizations involved in crime prevention, education, giving young people activities, social services. You have to be selected by the Department of Social Services to be on the list. But once there, you get tax credits for businesses, which encourages businesses to donate to those. And part of the strategy is if they're making major donations to get the tax credits, they're not going to let an organization they've contributed to just fail. They're going to come back with volunteers and other kinds of [assistance.] You know, if they need a computer, if they got an old computer, volunteer old furniture. I mean, that can

really help if you have the corporate support. Fundraising and other activities, you need board members. People making major contributions, they'll be available as board members to the organization. So that was a major success.

And criminal justice reform is trying to get people focused on prevention and early intervention, which became a kind of strategy in a lot of different things. Rather than waiting for young people to mess up and then argue about how much time they're going to get, if you give them activities like I had–Little League Baseball and Boys and Girls Clubs and recreation center–where you've got things to do that aren't getting you in trouble, you don't get in trouble to begin with. And so, focusing on that became a priority. And prevention also got me into maternal and child health because we have a regrettably infant mortality rate, particularly in the minority community, which is a national embarrassment. I mean, [the rate] borders at that time, third world nations. And we found that if you focus on prevention and early intervention, it's all preventable. One of the problems with prevention is if you do a good job, nobody notices. You talk about the director of public health. If nobody gets poisoned at a restaurant because you are overseeing the public health risks at all the restaurants nobody notices. So, you never get credit for your good work. Politically, if you are–. You have no support. If you are talking about preventing a particular disease and you put an organization together to address that disease, everybody that joins already has it. And so, they're looking for services, insurance coverage, and all other kinds of things. Trying to get them to focus on prevention isn't part of their agenda. And so, it's hard to get organized. You're not going to get any credit. And so–. But it's the right thing to do. And if you focus on it, you can, in the long run, save more money than you spend a lot of times. I was able to get–I mean, there are very few people focused on prevention as a legislative strategy–but I was able to get a commission established by the last year that I was in the General

Assembly of all of the major agencies, social service agencies, in the state: Department of Education, Department of Corrections, Department of Social Services, everybody, so they can sit around the table as they make policy. And so, when a school system says, "We want zero tolerance or we're going to kick people out of school." The Department of Corrections is going to say, "Whoa, all you're doing is sending them to us. Deal with it in the schools." So, you know, prevention, early intervention becomes a strategy that the Council on Prevention can deal with. You haven't heard about it because after I left the State Senate, they dissolved the commission, you know.

LP: We're eager to learn, too, a little bit about your bids for Congress. So, in 1992, you ran to represent Virginia's newly configured or reconfigured Third District. Can you just talk a little bit about some of the changes in Virginia politics that had taken place between your first run for Congress in '86 and your later one?

BS: Well, I think the difference was that Virginia decided to comply with the Voting Rights Act. The 86th district was a district that, by all measures, you would not expect an African American–within the polarized voting and other things–you would not expect an African American to win. In '92, they drew a district that was about sixty, over sixty, percent African American. So, you would expect an African American. The technical legal language is "the minority voters would have an opportunity to elect a candidate of their choice." That may or may not be an African American. Sometimes you get candidates, African American, run against the Whites. Sometimes the African American community may prefer the White candidate. So, voting, to voters, [it's] the Voting Rights Act, not the Candidates Rights Act. And frankly, I thought the district had been drawn at a level of African American population way over the level necessary to give the minority community an opportunity to elect a candidate of its choice. I was not successful in

bringing the number down. But I guess about twenty-five years later they did. They cut the Richmond part of the district out. And, minority community was able to elect Donald McEachin, a second African American, to work in Virginia at the time. And that's the challenge you have. Actually, the situation that Alabama [faces] today, the courts ruled that they had had one district, when in fact, if they had shaved the number down a little bit, they should have had two. And the courts have ruled that the second district had to be drawn. In '92, we just had one district that was what we call, "overpacked." The African American population was, frankly, in my judgment, higher than it needed to be. But it made it much easier for minority community to elect a candidate of their choice. That was not the case in '86. And in '86, the problem there was I was running against an incumbent. And if you run against an incumbent, the first thing you have to do is really disqualify the incumbent. Herb Bateman was a good, conscientious legislator. I made a case why I should be elected. But I didn't make a case why he ought to go. And so, I got forty-four percent.

MJ: Well, thank you. So, what were the main issues on which you campaigned?

BS: The same kinds of things I was dealing with in the General Assembly: dealing with issues of poverty, criminal justice reform, education, particularly. And it was that kind of campaign that I ended up on the Judiciary Committee and the Education and Labor Committee, because criminal justice reform and education were two of my high priorities. It was interesting. When I got elected, I was assigned to the crime subcommittee and on the Judiciary Committee, and the major issue of the day was the '94 crime bill. Actually, it was the '93 crime bill. But some of us looked at it and saw that rather than an evidence and research-based approach, it was a rhetorical slogan and soundbite approach: "Lock them up. Throw away the key." Every slogan and sound bite they had, they just pulled off the shelf, stapled together, called it a crime bill. I think it was

so silly that Bill Clinton doesn't even try to defend it today. But at the time it was the policy of the incoming president. And you know how people treat Joe Manchin for not going along with the program. Well, that's how they were treating some of us [laughter] for not going along with the program. Now, we've had the benefit of time. People look back and say we all were right, but at the time it wasn't that comfortable. I attended all the hearings and tried to point out the evidence and research, that some of the things made no sense. Some of the things were counterproductive. One of them, the "three strikes and you're out," that if you're convicted of a third offense, you get life without parole, suggesting that whatever you're getting today wasn't enough to protect the public. I asked the question back then, "Well, how many people get out after being sentenced on a third strike and commit another crime? Because that's really what we're protecting ourselves from." And I was told, "I'll get back to you." That was over thirty years ago. They still haven't gotten back to me yet. Haven't found one. Because, I mean, if you've got a judge looking at somebody, a three-time loser, they're not getting out. So, the judges are already doing enough. Or, if they get out, one of the factors in terms of recidivism is age of release. The older you are, the less likely you are to commit another crime. By the time you've got out after serving a third strike, you're too old to get out there and commit crimes. And so, there was no evidence to support it. But you got eighty-year-olds sitting up, can't get up and down the cellblock without their walker, spending all that money, thinking you're doing something about crime in the street. And we were saying it, and they didn't like hearing it. But I think that was one of the reasons I ran for Congress, to try to focus on research and evidence, rather than slogans and soundbites of criminal justice policy.

MJ: Thank you, thank you. What does it mean to you to become the first Black congressman from Virginia in more than a century? And also, the first person with Filipino ancestry to be elected to the House of Representatives?

BS: Well, those are really two separate questions. And basically, I'd like to–. The idea that to be the first Black to be elected, that is something accomplished before you get sworn in because you're elected, then you get sworn in. I would hate for, after all this time I've been in Congress, for people to know me as the first Black since Reconstruction to be elected. Which meant what did I do for thirty years? I'd like to rather be known for thirty years. And you know, as an extra, "Okay, first Black, that's nice." But the focus ought to be on what you've actually done. And I think that focus, I think I've got a lot done in terms of education and criminal justice policy, setting the tone where you can actually fight for prevention in criminal justice. I mean, that used to be dangerous, where you get labeled soft on crime. And that's the end of your career, that you can actually duke it out and accuse your opponent of wasting the taxpayer's money to enhance his political career. And he ought to be ashamed of himself. You know, you can kind of equalize on that issue and get to the point where you're doing intelligent policy. So that's one of the major things. And promoting prevention as a strategy. But a lot of the stuff in education: making college more affordable, focusing on getting money to education where it needs to be. We put more money into the K through 12 education legislation in history and the American Rescue Plan, and we distributed it according to the Title I formula, where poverty is the biggest factor. So, money went–most of the money went–where it was most needed. And so, I think I've done a lot in terms of that, and that's what I'd like to be known for.

The first voting member with Filipino ancestry is interesting because growing up–. You talked about segregation. Growing up, the fact that my grandfather was a Filipino was not

anything anybody paid any attention to. The government had to know whether I was Black or White. The rest didn't matter. They had to know whether I was Black or White to know what school to send me to. So once that was decided, that was pretty much the end of the analysis. I didn't get the sense that anybody in Newport News was concerned about the fact that my grandfather was Filipino until I was a state senator. A Filipino couple came to me about a problem they were having with the state Department of Transportation, and I just as an offhand, "Oh, yeah, you know, my grandfather was Filipino." The Filipino-American Society, on the Peninsula, had formed a year before. So, all of a sudden, it's a big deal. When I got to Congress, the CAPAC, Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus formed the year I got there. So, they found out I had Filipino ancestry. So, all of a sudden, I'm part of that. The Library of Congress publishes *Blacks in Congress*, *Women in Congress*, *Asians in Congress*, and they list me as one of having Filipino ancestry, not Filipino heritage. Because heritage would suggest growing up in Filipino culture, which in Newport News, you know, there wasn't any. Maybe now with the associations, both here and on South Side, it'd be different. But there wouldn't much to say. So, it's interesting. And the first voting member that–. In the 1940s there were delegates to Congress: like we have a delegate from Washington, D.C., non-voting delegate; delegate from Guam, non-voting delegate; delegate from the Philippines. But when they got independence, they lost that status, and they were sending an ambassador to the United States. So, I'm not the first Filipino to serve in Congress. First Filipino to vote in Congress.

MJ: Thank you.

LP: So, during your career in Congress, you've served on a really impressive, wide–you know, wide range–of committees. You're currently the ranking member of the Committee on Education and the Workforce. I know that you sort of touched on, you know, a number of your sort of

interests and contributions already. But we were just curious, you know, what do you see as your most important contributions, especially if we haven't touched on, you know that already? If there's anything else you want to add about your work in Congress.

BS: Well, one of the things is a focus on early childhood education. We found that third grade is a marker for education. If you can't read by the third grade, you're in trouble. Teachers say that, "Up to the third grade, you learn to read. After the third grade, you read to learn. If you can't read by the third grade, you're not learning after the third grade." So, a lot of focus has to be put on that. And so, we've been trying to make sure that early childhood is covered. We haven't done as much as we want, but I mean, making sure that people know that that's an important aspect.

Access to college we've been pushing. And I think we're beginning to make progress on access to college. This very morning, the president [Joe Biden] is announcing a student loan relief, all of the significant student loan relief, which means that the fact that people have to take out massive student loans, they can actually pay them off. They're taking out student loans through no fault of the student. The Pell Grant hadn't kept up with inflation thirty years ago. It covered eighty percent of the cost of going to college, tuition, room and board. Now it's about thirty percent. The rest is on the student, and that's what a loan comes from. So, they're not doing anything different than anybody else except that they're having to pay the bill rather than the federal government paying the bill. And we're trying to get that back where people can actually go to college and come out without overwhelming debt. We're also focusing on job training a lot of people, and we have legislation to enhance job training opportunities. Most of the jobs of the future require education past the high school level, but most of those are not four-year colleges. Our job training programs, many of the short-term programs can significantly

enhance your earning capacities, but you've got to get that skill. If, of course, the community college costs $1,000, studies have shown most families can't come up with $400. So, if it costs $1000, they can't go. We've got to figure out a way to make sure they can go so that they can become, instead of fast food, they can become a welder or shipfitter or other things at the shipyards where they can make–with a little overtime–six figures. That's available if they get the skills. And focusing on that has been another priority in education.

The Education Workforce Committee also has jurisdiction over health care, and the Affordable Care Act was one of the major achievements there: making sure everybody can have health care. Medicaid expansion, for those under the poverty level can get health insurance, a huge step forward. And we're improving it. It used to be if the cost of the health care on the Affordable Care Act was about eight and half percent of your income; we're bringing it down to seven and a half. Hopefully we can get it down to six and a half and gradually get it down to where everybody has insurance. We've expanded the number of people that have the insurance. We've got essential benefits. And when you compare it to where we were before then: costs going up ten to fifteen percent every year; people were losing their insurance right and left; people with pre-existing conditions couldn't get insurance. The cost thing, since you're paying a percentage of your income–. If you're making the same this year as you made last year, your health insurance premiums can be the same this year as it was last year. Now, the federal government may be paying more for it, but you're not. And so, people can continue to afford health insurance. That is a huge difference, particularly when you compare it to where we were.

LP: That's great.

MJ: You've done amazing work. Thank you.

LP: Yeah, absolutely.

MJ: So now we'd actually like to circle back for a minute to the Newport News community, and we're really eager to have–to see if you have–any memories of the displacement of Black homeowners to make room for what was then Christopher Newport College. In the recent *ProPublica* article, for example, your father was cited as one of the outspoken critic–critics–of the movement, saying, I quote, "Does it seem more than coincidental that with the hundreds of undeveloped acres in the city, the sites recently chosen by the city for condemnation are sites owned by Negroes?" End quote. Local civil rights leader C. Waldo Scott–. Yeah. Sorry. That was the rest of the quote. Could you tell us about the Shoe Lane community in the years before CNC acquired that land?

BS: I don't think there's any question. I mean, that's how things were. You had a thriving community, a middle-class community. A lot of professionals. And there were essentially–north of Mercury Boulevard–two major areas where African Americans had homeowners. And that was one of them–maybe two or three–and that was one of them. So, I mean, the–. It wasn't a coincidence. Everybody knows what happened. They had a right to do it. They got eminent domain. I remember standing in Dr. Downing's backyard one day when he used colorful language to say, pointing to his backyard, "They're going to take my backyard to build a college." I was about twelve years old, maybe ten or twelve years old. He was my dentist. I grew up with his son. So, I mean, that's exactly what they did. Now, I don't know whether or not the families at that time were properly compensated under eminent domain. But subsequently, later–. And they're going to do a study to see what the compensation was, to see if the compensation later on was adequate. But once they put the college right there in the middle of the block, the idea that the community could continue to thrive was–is–absurd. Some will try to hold out but, gradually, some will want to sell. The next generation won't want to keep the family home, and

the college will obviously be a willing buyer, probably the only buyer. Who wants to buy a home right up under a dormitory with students doing student things? So, I mean, it was–. The difficulty for the neighborhood was kind of set when the college moved there. So, I mean, it's no question. I mean, the only–. Having seen it, I'm just surprised that people are looking up and saying, "Oh, this is a revelation." [laughter] I mean, you go back 50 years, you can reveal a whole lot of stuff.

MJ: Mmm-hmm.

LP: [to MJ:] We should wrap up.

MJ: Yeah. Just as we're wrapping up, what lessons would you share with the younger generations looking to follow in your footsteps?

BS: Well, if you're getting–. First of all, you have to be active in the political realm. A lot of decisions are made. A lot of young people said that they weren't going to participate in the 2016 election. And then all of a sudden, a few years later, the one they didn't expect to win wins, appoints three people to the Supreme Court. And if they're wondering what happened to their student loan relief, that's what happened. They let–. People didn't vote in 2016 and that's what happened. Abortion rights, affirmative action. A lot of things will happen. And the problem with a lot of it is it doesn't happen immediately. 2016, it was several years later before the Supreme Court took that action. We have an election this year. The winner will appoint people to the Supreme Court. Several years from now, they'll make decisions. I don't know what those decisions are. I don't even know what the cases are going to be about. But the outcome of those decisions will be different depending on how people vote. And so, people don't think it has anything to do with them. It may not today but, as time takes place a few years from now, they will wish that people had voted in 2024.

LP: So just finally, is there anything that we might have missed or that you would like to add to this, to this story.

BS: Nah, I think you got me in enough trouble already. [laughter]

LP: Well, we do want to thank you once again for participating in this project and for, you know, sharing your experiences and your stories. We really appreciate it.

BS: Thank you.

MJ: Yeah, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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