

LOVETT ERNEST GAITHER
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Lovett Ernest Gaither

Interviewers: Erik C. Branting and Frank D. Pelli, Jr.

Interview Date: October 26, 2012

Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Center, Newport News, Virginia

THE INTERVIEWEE: Lovett Ernest Gaither was born July 21, 1945 in Salisbury, North Carolina. He spent much of his early career with the United States Air Force, which allowed him and his family to travel extensively around the world. After twenty-two years, Gaither retired from active service. He subsequently became a letter carrier, then floor supervisor, for the Norfolk postal service until his retirement in 2002. Gaither has been married to Mrs. Norma Greenard Gaither for 45 years. They have a daughter (Kendra), a son (Lovett Ernest Gaither, Jr.), and a grandson (Lovett Ernest Gaither, III), who Gaither says “is his life now.” He is a man of deep faith and is highly active in his church and community. He was also an active campaigner for the 2008 and 2012 Democratic tickets. Additionally, he has worked with Habitat for Humanity building houses after Hurricane Katrina.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Erik C. Branting was born July 28, 1993 in Herndon, Virginia. Branting attended Herndon High School and is currently attending Christopher Newport University as a sophomore. Branting holds a passion for reading and history as well as astrology and philosophy. He is also a member of Greek life, being an Epsilon member of the Phi-Nu chapter of Psi Upsilon.

Frank D. Pelli, Jr. is a native of Vienna, Virginia but has lived in Williamsburg, Virginia for nearly eighteen years. Pelli attended Our Lady of Walsingham Academy and currently attends Christopher Newport University as a senior in History and Political Science. He enjoys his time sailing and reading any book relating to history.

Pelli and Branting are currently enrolled in Dr. Laura Puaca’s course on “The Long Civil Rights Movement” and are conducting this interview as part of that course and in conjunction with the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview ultimately took the form of a complete life story. Gaither provided a full description of his life from early childhood to present-day. Though his life was filled with a lot of laughs and excitement, discrimination in both of his occupations was discussed, and the topic of discrimination in his and his parents’ everyday life was also explored. There was also much discussion on the changing politics of the times and how the civil rights struggle is still continuing to this day. Efforts were made to explore his opinions and experiences with the civil rights movement and the ongoing struggle for equal rights. The topic of the future of African Americans and the economic and social disparity that still exists was discussed at length, as well as the importance of education in life.

TRANSCRIPT – LOVETT ERNEST GAITHER

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Length: 1 of 2 audio files, MP3 format; 13 minutes approximately

Length: 2 of 2 audio files, MPS format; 1 hour 30 minutes approximately

START OF AUDIO FILE ONE

FDP: First of all Mr. Gaither, we'd like to thank you very much for contributing and allowing us to interview you about this time in history. Certainly, it will be a great contribution to, at least, our education and research, as well as the history and research in the civil rights movement and the individuals involved or affected by it and with it.

ECB: To warm up, can you say your full name, when and where you were born.

LEG: My full name is Lovett Ernest Gaither. I was born in Salisbury, North Carolina, July 21, 1945.

ECB: Your wife's name? How many children you have?

LEG: My wife is Norma Greenard Gaither. I have a daughter, Kendra LeAnn Gaither. A son, Lovett Ernest Gaither, Jr. and a grandson, Lovett Ernest Gaither the third!

FDP: How do you keep yourself busy since you've retired? Like hobbies—

LEG: I do a lot of volunteer work at the church. I work with the homeless ministry. I'm a trustee at my church. I visit the mature adults' center, four or five days a week. I was involved with the juvenile detention ministry, down at the detention center there on 25th Street. I fish about three or four days a week. That's how I keep myself even-keeled.

FDP: Can you talk about where you were born?

LEG: I was born, as I said, in Salisbury, North Carolina, which was the city. But I actually lived at 1140 Verbal Street, East Spencer, North Carolina, right inside the country line. I was born to a single parent. My mother met a guy, married him, and he adopted me. I have two brothers. There's Alton, who was the middle child. He's sixty-one. My baby brother is Leon III, who is now fifty-three. There's a big gap between our ages. I actually helped raised my younger brothers because my parents worked. My dad worked at the Southern Railroad, until times got hard. Then he switched to the Department of Transportation. He got a job with the North Carolina Department of Corrections. He was one of the first black corrections officers there in North Carolina. My mom was a domestic at first. Then she worked at the high school that I attended. She was in charge of the kitchen staff. And, later on, she became supervisor of the kitchen at Rowan Memorial Hospital. I had a full childhood. I tell people that I don't think I had a childhood because I was so busy taking care of either my younger brothers or my younger cousins. It was unique because we were all living on one block. The one block had three houses. It was our house, my grandmother's house, a big field, and my aunt's house. We were very close growing up, and we're close now, no matter where we are. We always find time for one another, whether it be by telephone or stopping by to visit, emails, whatever.

FDP: What about the community? Not to put a dark side on it, but in the idea of race relations [interruption] and things of that nature. Was there anything that was really apparent to you then or just more—

LEG: My grandmother lived in East Spencer, and that was across town. At five years old back then, I would ride the bus, and the bus driver would put me off. Of course, we had to ride in the back of the bus at the time, but the bus driver knew me, and he knew my stop. If I was talking or not paying attention, he would make sure I got off at the stop. It's not like today. I would shudder at the thought of a five or six year old getting on the bus, because times are a lot different now. We had our differences back there, but children on the whole were safe. My mom was a domestic. And the family she worked for treated me like I was one of their children. I honestly didn't know—I didn't understand prejudice, because I would go wherever they would go, and I never had any problems. We had two Afro-American policemen there in the city, with twenty-one thousand people in the city. They could arrest Afro-Americans, but they couldn't arrest Caucasians. I remember the first time, I think I was about twelve years old, and somebody called me a "nigger." I didn't know what it was. I had to ask my mom, "What is a nigger?" She explained it to me.

FDP: Do you remember how she described it?

LEG: No, I don't remember, but I remember I didn't understand. This guy's calling me a name, I hadn't done anything, I was just walking down the street. Back then, we lived on a dirt road, but it was the main drag. The pavement ended two blocks up, and that's where the bus stopped at. So eventually, pavement came down. We had running water, but it only ran to the back porch. It was different. My neighborhood was, I'd say, predominately black. The only Caucasians we came in contact with were at school, the people who did the parks and recreations. They were really nice to us. I had no problem. I really had a good childhood growing up. I remember a lot of things that weren't so nice

coming up. The KKK burned crosses. Not right there where I lived, but right down the street. There was a lot of fear because of that, and that's what it was, fear. They accomplished what they wanted because you were scared.

FDP: Well that's all it was, intimidation. Were your parents --not to interrupt-- but your parents, did that intimidation ever get to them? Or did they not have any reason to be intimidated?

LEG: My dad's mood never changed. He was always the same, even-keeled, up until the day he died. He never got excited. As I said, by working in the Department of Corrections back then, [he believed that whether someone was a] black or white inmate, a con is a con. He treated everybody with respect. He instilled being respectful to everybody that I came in contact with, like if I was on the bus. I would be riding on the bus with my mom and, if a lady got on the bus, black or white, it didn't make any difference. I got up and, if I didn't, I got popped upside the head. That was instilled in me. And today, I still get up and give my seat to women, or elderly, or even an elderly male. I ran across that in Japan. I gave my seat to an elderly lady, and this little Japanese man just shot around and took the seat, because the culture is different.

LEG: I remember when they—

FDP: Space is rare in Japan. [laughter]

LEG: I remember when they had the sit-in in Greensboro at the A&T. It was Feb. 1, 1960, I was fourteen years old. There was so much uncertainty when they went in with the sit-down and refused to leave. We didn't know what kind of ripple effect it was going to have. One of my friends, who was ten or twelve years old, was going to A&T at the time. I talked to him, and he really didn't share a lot then, but later on in life we talked about it.

There are so many things running through my head. It was such a long period. I worked in restaurants.

FDP: About what age was that?

LEG: Sixteen or seventeen. I could work in it and eat in the back, but I couldn't eat in the front. In the department stores, they had fountains for whites only. You didn't drink out of the white fountain. Every now and then somebody would do something, but we knew what was expected, and we knew there would be consequences. So, we didn't.

FDP: Was that something that ever bothered you at that age? Is that just what was done?

LEG: I didn't understand. I don't know how my mama explained it to me, but she just told me not to worry about it, and that it would be alright. We would go to the movies, which back then meant you went up a little narrow alley, and you got your ticket on the side. Blacks had to go up in the balcony. Caucasians were on the bottom. Now, the balcony's the best spot! We didn't know that then. We thought we were being penalized. It was always an issue or something when we'd go to the movies. We'd go to Woolworth, and we'd get a little popcorn and stuff, and go to the movies. I need to take a break for one quick second.

END OF AUDIO FILE ONE

START OF AUDIO FILE TWO

LEG: What was the last thing we were talking about? [laughter]

FDP: We were talking about you working in restaurants, and then it was going to the movies.

LEG.: Going to the movies, yes. We would go to a train station. You could eat, but you got your food from a little cut out in the window. You couldn't go in and sit down. Hotels

—the Yankin Hotel was probably the biggest thing around. Blacks could work there, but they couldn't stay there. If you don't know any better, it's alright. But then when you get out into the world and you see things and you say, "That's not right." Because my dad worked for the railroad, we used to get passes and we'd go north in the summer. We'd go to Washington, DC. We'd go to New London, Connecticut. We'd go to New York. We traveled. We were one of the first families to have a car on the block. We were one of the first families to have a television. And my wife used to say, "When I was growing up, the area of town that you grew up in, we envied you because we really thought you all had it made." I never went hungry. If somebody in the neighborhood had something, everybody had something. We had a garden. I worked the garden. It was a good time, but it was also bad times. I remember one time I was driving down the street. Now, I'm not a child, I'm about twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old. I'm in the military. I was home on vacation and this dude rolled up on me and called me a "nigger"—like you know, "Get off the road, nigger. What do you think you are doing?" Blah blah, blah, blah.

FDP: Was this in North Carolina?

LEG: Yeah, this was right here in my home town. This was in the late 60s, early 70s. My school was all-black. We didn't have the same curriculum that the white kids had, other than core courses. You had home economics, you had wood shop, and if you were really really lucky you did a little brick masonry. But there was no such thing as auto mechanics or stuff that they do now. It wasn't there. We used to get hand-me-down books, the books were hand-me-downs. Someone else had used them and they'd come from a white school to the black school.

FDP: Did you enjoy school?

LEG: I did. I did. I played in the band. I played football.

FDP: What did you play in the band?

LEG: I played trumpet.

ECB: OK.

LEG: My parents afforded me every opportunity that was available to succeed, and I guess I took it for granted. I thought everybody had the same opportunities—you know, naïve. Now, my wife talks about how hard she had it growing up. There were seven or eight of them and there were just two, three of us. We've always owned a home, whether it be my grandmother's or my dad's. Me and my wife, we've always owned a home, unless we were in the military overseas, and then we lived in base quarters. I think living overseas helped round me off, and also made my children a lot better, because they came in contact with all kinds of cultures. Their friends, you name it, they're friends with them. The phone rings and it's liable to be anybody. They took after me in a sense. My daughter graduated from A&T, along with my son. She went to George Washington and got a master's, then an MBA. She worked for the State Department in the Foreign Service Office for about ten years. Now she works for Carnegie-Mellon University. She's the executive director for the international affairs portion of it. My wife was the Director of Guidance for Menchville High School and Smithfield High School, but she put her career on hold to follow me for twenty years in the military.

FDP: What branch of the military?

LEG: I was in the Air Force.

FDP: OK.

LEG: So like I said, she got her master's from the University of Southern California and she got her advanced studies degree from ODU. Then, she did something at William and Mary. She's not that far from a doctoral so I said, "Why don't you go on and get it?" and she said she doesn't want anything to do with it now. She's retired also. I said, "But you started it." But at one time, all four of my family members were in school, in college.

[laughter] I made a vow to my kids and to my wife that, "There will always be prejudice and they may treat us different. They may not let us do something." And I said, "If we can't do it, it won't be because of economics. That's why I go to work every day. So that you can do things that I couldn't do." And I've lived a full life. I did twenty-two years in the military. I did fourteen years at the post office. I retired in 2001, it's 2012. I haven't worked since March of 2001. My wife retired in 2009. It's been three years.

We had a little house, about sixteen-hundred square feet. It's two stories.

FDP: That's cozy.

LEG: Then, when the kids left school, and we retired, we bought a bigger house!

[laughter] It's a rancher. It's about almost 2900 square feet.

FDP: So you appreciate the space more.

LEG: Yes, well she had problems with her knees. She had knee replacements. I had to get her off that second floor.

FDP: When did you join the Air Force?

LEG: 1964. I went to Texas. It was not a good experience for a young black man in Texas. Texas was not kind to blacks at the time [laughter]. We went through San Antonio at Lackland Air Force base. Then, we left there and went to Amarillo. They had a policy

that in order for people to get the contract to serve the military, they had to serve everybody.

ECB: OK.

LEG: Well, they served everybody but the service was not the same. Standing up on the balcony on the weekend, we maybe only got maybe one weekend out or off a month. We would go downtown and rent a room for about four or five of us just to hang out. We'd get arrested for doing nothing! [pause] They would let us go, but it would mess up the whole weekend. I still sort of resent Texas now because of that.

ECB: I think anybody would.

FDP: With the discrimination, how long did that go on for you? You were in for twenty-six years?

LEG: Twenty-two years.

FDP: Twenty-two years. Excuse me.

LEG: Well, it came up a little subtle. I know you had to go to get your skill level. Nine level is the highest you can get. You start out with one and you go to tech school. Then, you became a three level. Then you have to make five level to make E-5, and if you can make E-7 (). You got nine levels and that's how your assignments were controlled. I had one [officer]—I can't remember his rank—say, "Only way a black man make E-6 here is if he comes in here an E-7." So in other words, he's gonna bust him. That's the only way he's going to get promoted. Blacks didn't get promoted. I was up for promotion and they cancelled the performance evaluation. They suspended it.

FDP: About what time period was that in?

LEG: This was in 1965. I was coming up for my five level, and you can't get promoted without your five level. And what they did, the training NCO—who was a white guy—he brought this guy in and had him change his AFSC from a 6-4-5 to a 6-4-7, from military management to a warehouseman. They waived the test and let him test and promoted him. But we had a guy named Joe Pavarice. He was an NCO in the audit room. He saw what had happened and raced in—we had an Italian dude named Pavarice who was the 1st Sargent and he was livid. So I had to meet the board. They asked me I don't know how many questions. But they offered me my five level. Still didn't get promoted! But I would be the next cycle around. Without it I could not have gotten promoted. [pause] It [discrimination] was there, but it was underlying. Then they start testing for promotion. Once they starting testing for promotion, the minorities started getting promoted. Blacks, Hispanics, and women were climbing up the ladder. You can make E-7 up till there and after that you had to go before a board. Now, I make seventy on a board score. On the test, they gave me a twenty on the board score, and I don't get it. But, this guy here, he makes thirty on the score and they give him seventy on the board score, and he gets promoted. And this kind of stuff went on. And the only reason I got out of the Air Force is because I couldn't make E-8. I had six years in grades for E-8. But, I had good assignments.

FDP: Did you enjoy your time in the Air Force?

LEG: I loved it and never had a bad assignment.

FDP: Where did you travel to?

LEG: I was stationed in the Philippines three times. I was stationed in Tehran, Iran. My son was born there on June 1, 1976, right before the hostages. We left in June of 1978. I

was stationed in Yokota, Japan. I was in Vietnam, Okinawa, Korea. I was also in Mindanao, which is in the Philippines also. I've just been all over, Thailand, Taiwan. You're gonna have to pause again. [break in recording]

LEG: I was thinking about one of the times I was riding the bus by myself going to my grandmother's house. I saw this policeman beat this guy. I went home and I said, "Ma! This policeman, he sure beat this guy up! He was sure beating him. He beat him real bad." She said, "What color was he?" "Hell, I didn't know." I said, "I don't know, but let me go get a shoe." This is what mom and dad told me. They said that I went and got a black shoe and said, "This is the guy." Black and white back then, it didn't register.

We went to the beach. Beaches were segregated. It had that big line. You couldn't cross that line. [laughter] There was black on one side and white on the other. The same water though, same Atlantic Ocean here in Hampton or down in South Carolina or North Carolina. This is not something that I read. This is something that I lived, I saw it. You've brought a lot of stuff out that you just glaze over because you know it's not right and that it's going to get better. You ask yourself, "What did I do to be treated like this?"

FDP: Do you find that attitude or that reflection back on that period has come out more as you've gotten older, to look back at that and more or less question what happened more?

LEG: Well no, because my outlook on life has changed. As you grow older you should mature and you should grow. Going back to what happened fifty years ago has no bearing on what's happening today, and I can't correct it. So why dwell in the past? I just try to live in the present and I try to treat people of all races the same way. We had race relation classes when I was in the military. It was mandatory, but when you force somebody to do something, you don't get anything done.

FDP: Were the mandated race relation courses as a result of the civil rights bill that passed in 1964?

LEG: That was because of the riots at the Travis Air Force Base in California, where they took over the dining hall, the blacks, and General Daniel “Chappie” James had to go in. He was a colonel at the time, and he diffused the situation.

FDP: And that was 1964?

LEG: 1965 or 1965. It might have been even 1966 because I might’ve been on my way overseas or something [1971]. Back then you could go to lunch or dinner and after that, they had a thing called a “dap” back then, and you would “dap.” It would take you fifteen minutes, “Dap, doop, doop, doop, doop.” And I think they made it up as they went [laughter]. It was an art! It was something I couldn’t do because I couldn’t remember that long. And I think it threatened some of the white airmen. They had the riots there in Watts, this was all a part of it.

FDP: How did your family and you react to the civil rights movement? Your parents, yourself or—When did you get married?

LEG: I got married November 4, 1967. It’ll be forty-five years next Sunday.

ECB-FDP: Oh wow, congratulations.

LEG: Yes, thank you. How did we react to the civil rights?

FDP: Was it something you felt that you needed to get involved in, or it didn’t really apply to you more or less, at least in your area?

LEG: By the time I left home, and I was in the military, there wasn’t a whole lot you could do because you were in a uniform. I knew that changes had to be made. I didn’t have an answer, but I didn’t want to be a part of the problem if I didn’t have a solution. I

graduated from high school in 1963. My wife graduated in 1965. My middle brother graduated in 1969. We all went to Dunbar High School. His class was the last class to graduate. Then they integrated the school system. All of the black schools were turned into something other than a school at the time. We had a football field, a baseball field that was six years old, but they came in and bulldozed it and cut the lights down off the switch. We were one of the few schools that had a lighted field [laughter]. It's like they tried to erase our existence. It created a lot of animosity within the black community. They still struggle. They don't have a class reunion, they have a school reunion. My baby brother went to an integrated school. He went to Salisbury High School. He went to the Y. We couldn't go to the Y. When I was growing up, I played baseball. We would pass all these nice, little, quaint Little League fields. But we played in a cow pasture with lines on it. But we played. We were content. I guess I look back now and ask, "Why, why?" but I don't have an answer. Because when God created us, He created us equal. The original Bill of Rights gave everybody the same rights. I don't know why we are passing more laws, more bills, and more amendments. Our forefathers had enough vision with those original bills of rights that would handle anything we come across. But then we got so smart, and we just used it. We found loopholes. *Roe v. Wade*, that's scary what they're talking about. Affirmative Action—for every black who made it, he stood on someone else's shoulders to get there. A lot of them get there, and they forget from whence they came. The first thing you hear is, "Oh! I did it all by myself!" You haven't done anything by yourself. No one has done anything by themselves. Someone has to give you a break. If someone doesn't give you a break, then you're just like any other "Joe Blow." So, I have issues with that. I'm not envious of anybody. I live a good life. I do what I want to

do, and I do it when I want to do it. My life revolves right now around my grandson. So, if I decide I want to go see my grandson, either we get in the car and drive to Florida or we book a flight. My whole life is my grandson now. I'm not living vicariously through him. I am a—

FDP: You're a grandparent.

LEG: I told my kids that if I knew grandkids were such a blessing, I would've skipped the kids and went straight to grandkids [laughter].

FDP: I'm sure there are a lot of parents who wish the same thing.

LEG: And I know you've got some other stuff you probably want to ask--

FDP: No, that's fine. You talked about your youngest brother was in an integrated school at one point—

LEG: Yes, he went to an integrated school.

FDP: To be able to go to school with white kids, was that something you ever wanted, or was it something that you would have wanted to have changed when you were growing up?

LEG: I really don't know because I thought that I was given the same quality of education that everybody else was. The teachers, black or white—you have good and you have bad. You have some that are dedicated and some who are in it for the paycheck. We had some good teachers at the school and we had some who only wanted a pay check. There again, you don't know that you're not getting the same education, because you're not exposed to it. You see the by-product or the end results of it.

FDP: Did you feel that after you graduated school that you were behind in anyway, with regards to the military or anything of that nature?

LEG: I don't know. Back then they used to come in and give a battery of tests to all the high school seniors and it was like sixty-eight or seventy-three of us. Then only five of us would pass the battery of tests. That battery of tests is hard. I actually passed the test, but I didn't go in right away. I started in college instead. I had a football scholarship, and I decided to leave school and go into the Air Force. It was the height of Vietnam. My mom, my dad and my grandmamma did everything they could to keep me in school, and I said, "I just need to go." I knew that even though things were good, if they had one less mouth to take care of, it would be better. My dad offered me a car and all kinds of stuff to stay in school, but I said, "Dad, take that money and use it for something useful." My middle brother, he graduated one day and joined the Air Force the next day. He did twenty-two years in. He's in Oklahoma City now, and we're close, within one thousand miles of one another! We're going to get that thousand miles to see each other. I just went up and celebrated his birthday up there with him because he was up in D.C. on the sixth of October. I took all my equipment up there, and he had some friends up there for a Masonic affair, and I fried fish and made barbeque for about fifty people. It was just me and my daughter and my family. But the family unit is there. Family is everything to me. We have a family reunion every year. We've had thirty-five consecutive family reunions on my side. I'm proud of my family. Don't always like all of them but I'm proud of them [laughter]. We grant every graduating high school senior that goes on—whether it be a trade school, two year college, four year college, driving school, or whatever—we give them a five-hundred dollar book scholarship and all they have to do is apply. There's only a little requirement that they submit a two hundred and fifty word essay. Some of them put two hundred, maybe one hundred and seventy-five, and some put one thousand. But

it's there for them. All they have to do is ask for it. I try and take care of all our seniors. It's one of the things I stress at the family reunions: seniors first, seniors first, seniors first. This year I was able to give them their registration money back from the reunion. I sent a nice long letter and they were so happy.

FDP: Did your youngest brother ever share any of his experiences being in an integrated school, whether positive or negative? Did he enjoy it? Or was it something—

LEG: He enjoyed it! He has lifelong friends that he made in high school and in college. He went to a predominantly black college, Winston-Salem State University. But they have a pretty large white contingency there. And he played football. He won a championship. He also won a championship in high school. My dad won a championship in high school, and my brother's son won a state championship. My son won a state championship here at Bethel. I'm the only one that didn't win one. [laughter]

FDP: Because church is extremely important in your life, I would imagine that the church itself, your faith and everything like that— In raising a family, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, what role did your church play in your life? Broadly and in respect to what was going on in the country?

LEG: We got married in 1967. Our first child wasn't born till 1974, in California. I was raised in the Methodist church. My wife was a Baptist. It was a little old small church, and they had church every other Sunday because they had a roving minister. I went to church every Sunday. We couldn't always find an A.M.E. Zion church. So we would go, but we weren't involved. Then we went overseas and we would, again, go but not get involved. Not until we came here in 1985—we got here in 1985, I retired in 1986—that I actually got involved. I was born again Christian on December 21, 1966. My kids and my

wife joined the church I go to now—Ebenezer Baptist Church—there on Summer Farm Road. I came on Christian experience and I watched my kids get baptized. I went to church, but I was not in church. Then God started working in my life. He changed me. There was a transformation of the old me to the new me. It was nothing I did, it was all God. I started out doing one little thing that lead to one other little thing, to one other little thing, to one other little thing. By the time I retired—the worst you can do is retire and the church knew it—then it’s “Oh, Brother Gaither, he’s not doing anything, we’ll call on him.” So, you got to learn to say no, but with a smile. I brought my kids up in the church, but I didn’t set the example that I should have at first. We did give them the basics, the background. My son travels a lot and when he graduated from high school, the minister gave him a bible, and he traveled with that bible in his car. He was in a bad wreck up on Interstate 64, and he had his bible. My daughter has a bible that the minister gave her. She eventually changed churches and joined a church up in Alexandria, because she lives up in Alexandria, Alfred Street Baptist church. She is well-rounded and I can’t take credit for it. I did apologize to her, I don’t know when, but I said, “I am so sorry that I did not do a better job of exposing you to the Word.” And I said, “when you walking in the dark, you don’t know any better. But then once you walk into the light and you see the light, then you see the errors of your ways.” I get a little annoyed at people sometimes. Especially when people are trying to use you, and I let God tell me, “Do or don’t,” as far as helping somebody. We have black and white go to the bible church, but its predominately black. We have Hispanics and a German lady and Asians. It’s an old church, a friendly church, and our minster has been there for forty years. He just celebrated his fortieth anniversary.

FDP: And still coming up with sermons too, after forty years. [laughter]

LEG: We just had out annual revival. We have some good people at my church. I tell them sometimes, “You know, I can only take so much of you all at one time. Too much getting all around, it overshadows me!” But they know they can always count on me.

[break in recording]

LEG: I don't think I'm better than anybody else, I don't think my values are better than anybody else. I owe a lot of what I do and what I've become to my wife and my daughter. Hurricane Katrina hurt me, the way I saw the people being treated. I don't care how I look at it, I still see racism in the way it was carried out. As soon as it happened, my wife and I went to the Red Cross and wrote a check, but we wanted to do more. My daughter had just come back from somewhere, she always somewhere, and I had contacted Habitat for Humanity. So we got on the schedule. We drove from here to New Orleans, put ourselves up for a week, and built a house in a week, just me, my daughter, and my wife. We didn't do it all by ourselves, but we were there from the start to the finish.

FDP: About how soon did you do that after Katrina hit?

LEG: It was probably about a year and a half or two years.

FDP: Things down there still aren't as they should be.

LEG: When we got there, and we went to the house—and this is how people perceive you because ninety-five percent of the people doing the work were white volunteers.

They'd asked, “Is this your house?” and we'd say, “No, we're volunteers.” The people in New Orleans, when they spoke to us, they'd say, “We are so glad you came, we don't see too many blacks volunteering, to come down and help.” There was a sprinkling, but not any large numbers, you know. My church wanted to go down there in a bus, and my

pastor wanted me to figure it, and I said, “Pastor, I can’t make that drive again. I’ll do the legwork for you but I can’t do it.” But I ran across a little church there that was devastated and they had two people trying to put it together. I ran the pastor down, and I talked to him, and I said, “I can’t guarantee you anything, but we want to help. I’ll talk to my pastor and see what we can do. What do you need as far as help?” I got down his contact information and that Sunday, since we didn’t have church, I wrote my check out to them as opposed to back here. I came back, I took pictures, and I did a briefing at noon bible study. We also did one at the night bible study my daughter came down for. We had pictures of all the devastation, the church, surrounding neighborhoods, and you have this house, crumbling and falling apart. But you have them building this brand new house right here. All these trailers—I’m talking about four, five, six, seven people living in a trailer. You’re looking at houses that don’t have a mark on them, but it was underwater so long it was nothing but mold. I asked the pastor if there was the possibility that we could do something and he said, “We’re going to do something, we’re going to do something.” I waited a week, and I said, “Pastor, when are we going to do it?” We did a collection on Sunday and we collected about five thousand dollars with what they gave and with what the church put in. And we sent it to them. But God wouldn’t let me go past that little church without stopping in to see.

FDP: You had said you did see an element of racism, and God knows there’s a lot of evidence to support that, and I imagine it angered you, or troubled you at least--

LEG: It troubled me. People had nothing, and we weren’t even letting them come across the bridge, that was the killing part. I could deal with just about anything but that.

FDP: Is that really the first time you've ever been truly disturbed by an incidence of racism or discrimination that level?

LEG: That, and when they had the disaster in Haiti. We, as the American government, the American people, we would open our arms out to the Cubans, to the Jamaicans. They would get here and get their feet on dry land and we welcome them. In Haiti, they get their feet on dry land and we turn them around and send them right back. Their country has nothing, and yet we treat them as less than nothing. This is not a new policy, it's been right there. Pat Robertson made a statement that I didn't particularly care for [laughter].

LEG: I know it was bad times during the 1960s and the 1950s, but the good times overshadowed. I had so many good experiences. My dad was the block captain for the civil air patrol. We would go down and spot planes at night and call them in and so on. I would go with him. I didn't feel like we were different, but I know we did things that other people didn't do. Because of that involvement, because of my dad and my mom, and things that I took for granted, I felt everybody should own a home. I thought everybody had a home. I thought everybody had all they could eat. It's naïve on my part.

FDP: Do you regret not being exposed to the harshness, the blatant harshness?

LEG: I don't regret it, but I probably could have appreciated it more because life's been easy for me. There aren't a whole lot of blacks who can probably say that growing up in that era. People look up at the Cosbys and say, "Oh, that's not real." My mom and dad weren't doctors and lawyers, but we did good. We had running water to the porch. We had a brick home. We had a washer, dryer, an icebox that converted to a refrigerator. We would go run down to the ice house, get the ice, wrap it up in burlap bags. Then we'd go down to the railroad tracks, and pick up coal off the side of it and bring it home. That

involved you then. They'd want to go put you in jail if you picked up coal off the railroad tracks now. We would go to town and people in the stores, like the grocery stores, Food Lion and Winn-Dixie, they treated us alright because we were spending money. I'm sure some of their employees didn't like it, but they never voiced it.

FDP: You said that you knew you were different, but towards the later 1970s and early 1980s, because you've never said you felt different from anybody else. In your values and such—

LEG: My values are different. Then again, by the time I retired in 1986, there was a lot you couldn't do because you were in the military. You had a code of conduct, whether on duty or off duty. So we knew that we couldn't protest. We knew we couldn't march. We knew we couldn't do that stuff. Guys would do it if they took off their uniform, but they're still in violation of the code of conduct. Some might have been afraid of security. They didn't want to lose what we had. Then when they had the boycott in Alabama, we didn't participate, per se, but we had a car. So we were right on the fringes. But I saw some of our friends who were in the dead middle of it. They lived in public housing. I never lived in public housing. I don't know what public housing was all about. I don't know if I could live in public housing. Not that I'm a snob, but it's another experience. These kids today, there's a cycle, and every time you can help one get out and break that cycle, you've won. Even if you get one out of a thousand, that's one you've saved. If you can save one out of a thousand, you've accomplished something. I drive down though the East End [of Newport News] all the time, and I can see the hopelessness in their faces. And I tell people that. What do you mean hopelessness? They have nothing, can't get nothing, no prospects, no nothing. They don't want to do anything because they can't do

anything. If you're a felon, you can't get a job. Nobody wants to hire you. A lot of little petty, petty crimes, but they have to pay the rest of their lives. I'm about to get worked up. I see the stars. They get all these breaks where they do stuff that, if I did it, they'd put me under the jail.

FDP: A slap on the wrist makes them more famous.

LEG: I see injustice. You don't know the whole truth. You just know what you hear on the media, and how the media is saying it now. Our hobbies are to report the news. The newscasters now make the news.

FDP: Like Walter Cronkite, or something like that. He just read the news, and that was about it.

LEG: We don't need your slant on it. We have our own opinions. You don't have to tell us how to think, but that's what they do now. I think we have too much news.

FDP: I can agree.

LEG: Too much news. Same things happening now that were happening forty years ago. It's just that nobody had a cell phone or camera to put it right there on the internet. It happened, then and there, like the Rodney King beating. That started it all, because it went viral. Now the police, with the dash cameras, they do dumb things, and they catch them with their own camera. Hampton [police], have done some pretty shady things in the past, and they get swept under the rug. I'm not privy to all that information. I can only go by what I've heard. And, then, by the time you hear it about the fourth or fifth or sixth time, you don't know what's true and what's fiction. So you can't spread that. Well, this is what I heard. I can't say it happened for sure.

FDP: Everything becomes hearsay.

LEG: And everybody's story changes at the end of the day. It's who you're telling it to and what they need.

FDP: I'd like to ask you about working in the postal service. You left military in 1985, you said?

LEG: 1986, June 1, 1986. I started the post office January 2, 1987. So I wasn't out of work very long.

FDP: What drove you to the post office? What was the appeal to it at that time? That was in Virginia Beach or—

LEG: I started in Norfolk, but I ended up carrying mail here in Hampton. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I know I was in school. I was at Thomas Nelson [Community College].

FDP: What were you studying there?

LEG: Public Affairs. I was carrying a 3.5 GPA at the time, and guess what? I wasn't even applying myself! It just came naturally to me. I could read it and I could retain it. I can't do that now. But I had a friend and he said, "Yeah, and I went down to take the tests, and you got ten point preference for veterans. They're hiring, and they get like twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen up to twenty dollars an hour." In 1987, that was lot of money. And I said, "I don't know what I have to do but I know I have to go out and work because I have a family, I have kids going to school." I took the tests, passed it, and went through my training. There were about twenty of us. I think sixteen of them came back to Hampton. The other three went to Norfolk or Virginia Beach. I was one of the ones who stayed at Norfolk. But the money was good.

FDP: What were you, a mail carrier?

LEG: I was a letter carrier, yes. And I delivered mail in the ghetto. I had every public housing system there was. There was a guy—and I saw this first-hand—who gave up on his first day on the job. Done with his training and all. They put him down on Church Street. He came down and parked his little Pinto, got out of it, and went back in the back to get his mail to put it in his bag. He looked around, and he got scared, so he put the mail back in the car, got back in the Pinto, and went back and told them he quit. He was scared. This was in Norfolk.

FDP: Was it a white mail carrier?

LEG: White mail carrier, yeah. They were terrible, always talking up to him. I didn't back down, and I told them, "Well, your check comes next week. You do want your check, right? You got to be worrying me about your check? You'll be getting it, but it will be at the end of the day, because I won't be able to find it until I come back through."

FDP: Could you find, still, areas or even latent discrimination within the postal service at all? It's still a government entity but it wasn't like a—

LEG: It wasn't subsidized by the government. It became a post office and not a postal service. It was a good place to work. Once upon a time, the post office was predominately black. Then they realized how much money they were making and then there was influx. All of the managerial jobs, in the higher echelons, were predominately white. Now, whether race has anything to do with it, I don't know. Maybe they just applied themselves more. Maybe they had the education, the background. But when I look at a picture of twenty people and I see not one black or Hispanic, some bell just doesn't ring. There's got to be somebody qualified somewhere.

FDP: Was that something that bothered you then? In the back of your mind, a why is this the way it is kind of thing?

LEG: Yes, and no, but I was a shop steward. I became a shop steward, so I was on the EEO team. There were a lot of potential grievances that we would try and defuse before they became an explosive situation. We had a couple of white supervisors that were just outright nasty to everybody, but it seemed like to blacks even more so. They would talk down to you. I would tell them, "Hey, you want somebody else to carry this mail today? You got somebody else to carry it? I don't need this job, I draw a retirement check each month! Things may get tough, but I have a retirement check. My wife works every day and I draw a disability check. I don't have to put up with this." The ones that they could run roughshod over, they would. When you stood up for yourself, they didn't bother you.

FDP: Had you ever felt, up to that time, of being an equal in the workplace? Or that there was equality in the workplace or was it always sort of this--

LEG: There was a lot of favoritism. You got it wherever there was favoritism. Some carriers could do whatever they want to, no mind, and nobody would notice. And then some of the carriers couldn't do anything right. Normally the ones that were always dogged were black. Now, some of them needed to be dogged. And I tell everybody in the workforce, "You have ten percent who are not going to do anything. If you're doing your job as a letter carrier, it shows on the floor." Because if the mail is on the floor, you're not doing your job. If the floor's clean, you're doing your job. But they would follow you, harass you, the supervisors, all kinds of stuff.

FDP: So, even in the 1980s it was still going on?

LEG: Yeah, and we had some good supervisors, and we had some pretty rotten supervisors. I know they couldn't change it, but at least the ones would listen to you and let you blow a little steam off and make you feel a bit better. You know you can't do anything, but you'll listen to me. That was all we'd ever ask, treat everybody the same. That's the only thing we ever asked. If I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing, put your foot in my butt and make me do it or fire me. Don't dog me out because Joe Moe over there isn't doing what he supposed to do. My floor's clean.

FDP: Did you ever get that, that sort of equal treatment? Or was that something that was always—

LEG: I had a few run-ins. And when something didn't go the way I think it should have gone, I would get the shop steward or I'd get the post master and then we'd talk.

Everybody couldn't do that. After I was the shop steward, I could. Most of the shop stewards, whatever they did was for personal gain. Whatever I did, it was for the good of the whole.

FDP: Did you always get a good result from it?

LEG: Sometimes, not always. Sometimes they don't get what you said or did. Your mind's already made up, so you stopped listening to me all attentively. But when you're listening to me and your eyes are wandering, spaced out like you're someplace else, you're not hearing me. You've already made up your mind. I saw that in the military. You go a present a case and you spend thirty minutes of your time and his time and you've already made up your mind. Then you say, "You were right, but." Here comes that but.

FDP: To go to your kids during this time, did they ever talk to you at all about if there was any sort of discrimination to them or—

LEG: They never mentioned it. There again, my kids were raised with black, whites, Asians and so on. My daughter—I said I wanted her to go to a predominately black college. All her friends were non-black! You need to get in touch with your roots. My son, he needed to go to a predominately white school [laughter]. This is one of the facts that I told my kids, “It’s not if you go to college, it’s where you’re going to go. And if you’re not going to college, you’re going to have to leave here.” I told my son, at an early age that, “I know you like these girls, you like to look sharp, and you buy these hundred dollar sneakers.” That I’m buying. But I said, “If you go and get a girl pregnant, you’re going to support that baby, you’re going to support my grandchild. You can’t buy hundred dollar sneakers working at McDonald’s.” You know, they have that commercial, “Do not attempt this at home, I am a professional,” and this guy had a spatula and he was flipping burgers. I said, “I don’t see you in that commercial.” So, it was not a choice. The recruiters just called my house and I said to them, “Don’t call here.” “Well, we can pay for his college.” “Hey, that’s great, but, I’ve given twenty-two years of my life. I don’t think my son needs to give any of his to the country.” I said, “I can afford to pay for his school.”

FDP: You find that a lot of, at least, fathers and mothers. My father was in the Marine Corps, and I said, Dad, I’d like to do the Marine Corps. And he said, “No, you don’t want to do that son. I was enough and that was about it.”

LEG: I really think that the caliber of airmen, soldiers, sailors that we have today is not the same caliber as they had in the 1960s and the 1970s. I knew it was time for me to retire when I came back because I had to explain to a little one striper that I had seven stripes—he was E-1, I’m E-7—and why he had to do something.

FDP: I can imagine, my dad had the same thing. He was in Okinawa for one year and he said when he came back, it was some major and my dad was a colonel at the time. He asked my dad, "Why?", and my dad's going, "Well, if I need to explain that to you maybe you should join another branch."

LEG: I don't think my kids had any problems at all going to school. They still had friends. My daughter just had her twentieth class reunion and just as many white kids come back now as black kids. She was on her debate squad. Once she started A&T, she took the tests. She started up with thirteen credits. Then she won the Jackie Robinson Foundation Scholarship. She is a Jackie Robinson alumni. They gave her \$20,000 dollars, \$5000 dollars a year. At the end of the second year, she gave \$10,000 dollars back to them because she had got a scholarship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation to cover her last two years and a year of grad school. Then the White Masonic Lodge gave her another year to do her MBA. So, she came out of school and didn't owe anybody anything. I bought them both cars. In their second year in college, they were riding around in brand new cars. I tell them, "Hey, your job is to go to school, get grades and graduate." It took my son an extra year, because he did two internships up in Cincinnati. He's a project manager for a company down in Florida. He lost his job. He's off work for about two and half weeks, and he's right back working again.

FDP: Were your parents able to see you obviously get married and have children?

LEG: Oh yes.

FDP: Were they, I wouldn't say amazed, but impressed by what you were able to accomplish? Or proud of the fact of what you were able to accomplish?

LEG: Not only proud of me but proud of my kids. My mom died in 1999, just before my brother got a commission as a Foreign Service officer. My dad died in 1991, not quite ten years, and he was proud of them. My son went to school in Livingston the first year on a basketball scholarship. He said, "Dad, I can't stay down here." He said, "I have to leave." He was going to A&T and he'd only been there two years. He said the only good thing about it was that I got time to spend with my grandparents—because in my hometown there were all my aunts, my uncles, my nieces and nephews, his uncles and stuff. So, that was a year that he would not have gotten in his life. My daughter said that I was the only Gaither that didn't live in Salisbury.

FDP: Did your parents ever talk about their experiences with your children. As a matter of maybe education, or did they have the same sort of attitude of that was in the past?

LEG: No, they were believers in education. Both my brothers got degrees. My middle brother went back and got his from Langston, out in Oklahoma. I didn't get mine and they said, "Hey, everybody got a degree but you." I said, "That's great, that's alright." But my wife's got seven of them. Every last one of them got a degree. One lawyer, nurse, engineer, you name it. So, we believe in education. Like I said, it's not a matter of if, it's where you're going. One of the counselors called because my son hadn't done something for college or something. He said he just wanted to know if I knew he hadn't done this. I said, "No, but he will!" [laughter] He played basketball and football and he thought he was a jock. But we let him know if you got bad grades then you don't play. Simple as that. Simple as that. Today's kids, that's their only way out. Their parents push sports and not the books, but the books are what's going to be there. You're one play from a career-ending injury. I used to ask my son, "What are you going to do when the ball

doesn't bounce? You can't go a flat basketball." Everybody has expectations to become an NBA or NFL player. One in about a million? That may be high. You have a better chance of hitting the lottery than being a NBA player.

FDP: Can you say that the civil rights movement had an effect on your life and the life of your family?

LEG: Yes, I can.

FDP: The result of which and during it?

LEG: Yes. Because of the civil rights, I was able to accomplish some of the things that I would not have been able to do. And I know this. I don't take credit for accomplishing anything by myself. Somebody went before me and paved the way. That's why I think it's so important that we don't forget that. And every chance we get, we should help.

Sometimes it may not be but a word of encouragement. If we can financially help, we should do that also. In the case of my neighborhood, I live in a pretty good neighborhood, and I tell my kids who graduate, black or white, "If you need anything, you know how to get hold of me." I go to high school graduations, I go to college graduations, I go to marriages.

FDP: It's support. It's just being there.

LEG: We have black, white, and Asian in our neighborhood. And I have a cookout, every year, and I invite all my neighbors. Last year I made a cake for all my neighbors in my little cul-de-sac. I give out something for every Christmas.

FDP: It's that whole idea of giving back.

LEG: And I always say that—you see people always with the handout, and it comes to the point where you have to turn the hand down and put something in it instead of receiving something.

FDP: The article that we were given that had cited your name in it showed that you had contributed your time to the Barack Obama campaign in '08. You were quoted as saying, "Obama's struggle is our struggle," is how you said it. What was the struggle that you were referring to and how was that struggle—how did you feel connected to that struggle?

LEG: First and foremost, he was a man that wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was a working stiff. It was evident that he's black but that had no bearing on it. When you run for the office of the President of the United States, you're not running to be president of black America or white America. You're running for all of America. You've got to do what's right for everybody. He convinced me that he was going to make a change, and I know change is slow to come, and he had a lot to overcome. He convinced me that things would, and could, and should get better. I bought into that. I did canvassing. I did door to door putting knockers on. I delivered flowers. I did voter registration. I did phone banks. I went to all the rallies and stuff. I contributed money. I didn't go to the inauguration. I had tickets, but I gave them to my daughter because my wife just had a knee replacement. So she couldn't go out in the cold, but we sat up watching TV, and I gave my tickets to my daughter and my daughter in law. I believed, and I still believe, that he's going to make a change. I think he's more in touch with the American people than who is running against him. McCain last election, and I also think the same things about Mitt Romney. Mitt Romney has not said anything to me. He just

keeps saying it louder about what he has not accomplished. No president has ever come into office with this many problems. They never talk about the war that he inherited. We spent a billion dollars a week on the war like Iraq and Afghanistan. They had money, but we were funding the war. Why are the American people paying for it? We've lost so many lives over there in these so many years, something like over 2000 lives! I don't even keep up with in anymore because I get mad when I think about it. [pause] War is profitable. People that are rich make money on war. People in the trenches are the ones that are suffering. People like you and me, we have a stake in this country, we have a stake in how its run. We're the ones that the fallout falls on. That's what made me. I told you that because I had never been politically active. But a lot of it is because of the military. When he [Obama] came along, he just energized me. I'm energized now, I just can't do things that I did in the past. My health won't let me do it. But I still work the phone banks and I still contribute money. I still talk. I still pass out flyers. I didn't come here for four and done. I came here for the long ride, not only did I get involved, but my wife also did. I volunteer, but every time I volunteer my wife goes with me as an add-on. So instead of getting two hours, they get four hours from us every time. But I forgot about that article, because I never did see it anywhere.

FDP: I could give you the copy.

LEG: Well, I did see it in the newspaper, but there was another article that I was looking for.

FDP: Have you ever thought the same way about another president, previously? Even in your youth, a president like Kennedy?

LEG: Yes, President Kennedy comes to mind. He was special. I don't care how good he was or all the good things he did. People still remember the negative things. He did a lot for the country. He put us in the right direction. And then we got on the mark and we kept going. Then Johnson came in behind him and kept going. Then we got a little sidetracked. And then we came and got back on track again. Then we got side tracked and now we're back on track again. Politics makes strange bed partners. My philosophy is-- and I have nothing going for it—you go up there for two years, you prove your worth, and we let you stay for two more years. But you have to keep proving it. Our forefathers did not plan for you to be a professional politician and to live at the taxpayers' expense. Why should we pay you for four years of service, and support you for the rest of your life. Where else can you get a job like that? I did for twenty years and my benefits are nowhere near their benefits. That's one of the things—if they had to live on Social Security, they would have fixed it a long time ago. Social Security is not something that they're giving you, it's something you earned and that you paid for. I paid into Social Security all my life. I draw Social Security, I draw Air Force retirement, I draw military disability and I draw post office retirement. My wife draws a city, a state, and Social Security. We're making just as much money now not working as when we were working every day. I'm not bragging or boasting, just telling the facts. We've got money in the bank. We haven't got as much as we could or should have because I had to support my kids for a while.

FDP: Well and now you have a grandson, so—

LEG: I support him, too. I put money in his account every month, automatically. I'm making sure his education is paid for too before he starts.

FDP: Looking back, and there's three areas which I'd like for you to think about. Are there specific things that you take particular pride in? In regards to say, the period of civil rights, in your career, and just in your life in general? We can go through those individually, if you like.

LEG: Give me the first one you want me to tackle.

FDP: The civil rights struggle and just in that era of what maybe something that you did or something that you said or something that you thought or instilled in others or supported? Is there anything that you can really take some pride in?

LEG: I take pride in the fact that I would talk to a lot of individuals about voting. They would say, "I don't vote." I'd say, "What do you mean you don't vote? People died so you could have that right to vote." I said, "You know, if you don't vote, then you don't have a right to complain about anything that they give you. You need to exercise your right to vote." I say, "Voting is a God-given right, but man is trying to take away that from you, and why don't you exercise that right?" I'm a firm believer of that. I've voted in every election there's been since I've been old enough to vote. A lot of times that was absentee because I was in the military, but we voted.

FDP: Did you ever have to take the literacy tests?

LEG: No.

FDP: Did your parents ever have to do that, that you can remember?

LEG: I don't know. Well, both my parents graduated from high school. My dad went to college and played football. He was sort of a math whiz, so they had good foundational skills. He was in the Navy, also.

FDP: Another area is, anything you take any particular pride in your career?

LEG: In my career?

FDP: Or careers, I should say.

LEG: [pause] I take pride in serving my country. When “The Star-Spangled Banner” goes off, the hair on the back of my neck still stands up. When we go to the base and we go to a movie, they play it before each movie. When I see people disrespect the flag and “The Star-Spangled Banner” by standing up with their hat on, it annoys me. But I don’t say anything because then I’d be making a bigger scene than the scene they are creating. I would try to nudge them and say, “Hey, maybe next time you may not want to do that.” And you never know how they’re going to receive you. But the people that run the theatre see the same thing, and they should address that because that’s a military installation and even though they are civilians, they should enforce that decision. It shouldn’t be up to me to do it.

FDP: In your life, what can you say you’ve taken particular pride in, maybe not just one thing?

LEG: My wife and my kids. I am so proud of them and I tell them all the time that they have done things that we could only think of doing. We exposed them to travel, but they’ve taken travel to a new level. My daughter’s been to Africa. She worked the South African desk. She was stationed in Lima, Peru and I visited her there. She was stationed in Mexico City. She was in Caracas, Venezuela. She’s been all over and I need to take one more pause. [break in recording]

LEG: I take pride in my family and my country.

FDP: Is sharing your story something that you find constructive to you and the future generations who might listen to this and hear about your life? Or is it something that might be difficult for you to relive and retell?

LEG: No, I don't have a problem with it because I share it with my kids. I share it with my baby brother. I share it with my nieces and nephews. We reflect a lot at our family reunion about accomplishments—things that we've done, things that we could've done, things that we should have done. Things we could have done a little bit better. The family, again, is very important. In my immediate family, I am the third oldest, now, at sixty-seven. I've got an aunt is eighty-two—she just turned eighty-two—and a cousin that just turned seventy. I've been married longer than anybody at the reunion now, over forty-five years, because of deaths and stuff. Some of them had been married for sixty, fifty years, and when I got the award this last time, I was shocked.

FDP: In looking back, is there anything you can say probably that you regret doing or not doing? That you now wish you had done? That is in respects to the civil rights or in your career or even just in your life in general.

LEG: I don't regret it because I didn't do it. But I think I could've been a better spokesman. I could've been a better representative of what was going on by being in the military and being one of the senior NCOs. I was often called in when there was an issue between the young airmen, whether they be black or white. I treated them all the same. They knew that I had their back. I didn't let the officers back me in a corner because if you're wrong, saying it loud doesn't make it any righter. I believe that you have to speak out and sometimes there will be some consequences. They may not be good. [phone rings]

LEG: That's me again, I didn't call my wife. [break in recording]

ECB: Is there anything that you regret doing or not doing, I think you just finished off that question.

FDP: Another question I'd like to ask is, at least now currently, before in the interview you said that when someone called you the n-word, you didn't understand what it was and how that disgusting term has been used. Now, with our current culture, it's being used so much and so prevalently—

LEG: Yes.

FDP: Is that something that troubles and bothers you or irritates you?

LEG: It annoys me. But it's something that I just live with. These young kids today, you say something to them and they may pull out a gun and shoot you. They don't really know how offensive that word was.

FDP: Were you called that repeatedly in your life by whites?

LEG: Not repeatedly, but it would come up every now and then, and it was people that I didn't know. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. And if they knew me, I didn't know they knew me. We were driving down by the hospital, in the rich area, by the country club. We pulled up at a stop light and this guy in a convertible got to calling us all kinds of "nigger" this and that and "blah, de, blah, blah." All that we did was stop at the red light. This guy's from New York, [laughter] the son of a preacher. He put it in park, jumped out the car and went up and put a forty-five up in this guy's face. That scared me to death. I said, "Lord! I'm just getting a ride and I'm about to go to jail." I try not to put myself in situations. I'm not doing myself any good, or the people I'm with any good.

FDP: Do you think the use of that word, even in popular culture, do you think it's doing a detriment—

LEG: Yes, it is. But they can't see it. It sells and if you get a dollar and a cent for it, hey. Not only blacks, but whites use it too in their lyrics, so—

FDP: Do you think it's any more offensive when white individuals use the word or is it equally as troubling? No matter who—

LEG: It has got to the point where the word is said so many and so much that you just look at the source and just let it go. It still hurts, just like I can't stand these swaggy pants, with their pants down below their butt, showing the crack of their butt. But there again, they take something that they don't know why they're doing it. They saw it on TV and it was popular. Convicts started that! But it's cool.

FDP: Supposedly.

ECB: It was in prison, you wear your pants low if you know—

FDP: You didn't have a belt. In closing—but first of all, we'd both like to thank you very much for doing this. It's been enjoyable. It's nice to be able to—

LEG: I really enjoyed it. I had no idea what to expect. I wasn't scared or anything, but I love to talk. I usually didn't talk, but I do, and there's probably so many things going through my head that it's fragmented. But the gist of it was that I knew that we were being discriminated against. Bill Harris stores had the blacks and the whites and the fountains and the JC Penney's and the white bathrooms. It was everywhere.

FDP: We'd like to thank you for your military service as well, it's a great service to our country and we're very proud of that fact as well as we are of you. Last thing I'd like to

ask, is there anything else that you can think of to say or offer that you feel is important to the story?

LEG: The story has not ended. The struggle has not ended. I like to tell people this, when children are born, their minds are blank sheets of paper, there is no prejudice. You see little black kids, little white kids, and little green kids all out there playing together. It doesn't mean anything. It's a taught behavior. I wore a Santa Claus suit one time for a children's party and they didn't see a black face up underneath there. All they saw was that red suit, Santa Claus. But as they get older, whether it be their parents, their grandparents, or somebody instilled this into them. My grandson is three years old. He sees everything, and he's like a sponge, absorbing everything, just waiting for the chance to try it. The other night his mom had a foot soaker, and he was so intrigued with that thing. She said, "Hell, no you can't do this." They got home and she said, "Hell, no you can't use it, you have to put water in it." So she went to do something and she came back, and he had put water in it. When he comes home from school—he goes to nursery school—and they had water out for him so he put it in there. She said, "Oh, okay." So then he was in there soaking his feet then, he asks for a snack, like, "Hey momma, I need my snack" [laughter]. She said, "Ok" and she gave him his snack. So she went to change the clothes. When she came back, he had taken off all the clothes! He's a big fella too, forty-one inches tall and weighs forty-four pounds. And he's all up in there with his knees up against his chin, in that little foot soaker! [laughter] But as I said, when he sees it, he'll file it away and he's going to do it sooner or later.

FDP: Is there anybody else that you can probably think of, within your family or within your church that might like to be interviewed in this sort of manner and would be willing to contribute an oral history?

LEG: Man, that's a tough question. I know everybody has a story they want to tell. I had a friend that just passed who would have loved to have told you stories from Alabama. Enterprise, Alabama. His wife may want to do it.

ECB: You said you had email? If we could just get in touch with you, I'll give you mine—

LEG: I'll give you mine, and you can just email me.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Erik Branting and Frank Pelli

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