

INTERVIEWEE: Oliver Gross

INTERVIEWER: Amber Williams

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Williams: Good morning, I'm Amber Williams here at William H. Turner Technical Arts School here with Mr. Gross. Can you please say your name and spell it?

Gross: My name is Oliver Gross. O-L-I-V-E-R G-R-O-S-S. Gross.

W: Thank you for coming out here to share your story with us. I want to ask you when were you born and where?

G: I was born in Wrens, Georgia August 31, 1930

W: When did you come down to Miami?

G: Well, my first-- well, I guess my first visit Miami to live here was 1943, but my mother and father, we had visited Perrine in 1938. We lived there for about a couple months. My daddy was employed someplace else- (Roy Richards?) Construction Company that went over the country. When I say country: Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia putting up power lines and there was not always electrical-- people didn't always have electricity. People had lamps so when they come about putting up these power lines well, people began to put power into their homes where they had bulbs and stuff. There was no such thing during my time in the early years. You had lamps- kerosene lamps- with wicks. You didn't have no refrigeration. Stoves was wooden stoves-

burn wood in it. And you put ice in the ice box- had a container that was sealed that you put ice in it and it would make that little-- [chuckles] make that little box cold to hold whatever you had, that leftover food or--and during that time, people would cook food and put it in jars and save it, they'd cook it and put it jars and put rubber bands on it and tighten it and they-- you could keep it for six months, sometimes for a whole year, you know, and they had-- my father-- and we lived on a farm, we had a smokehouse and the smokehouse had all the meats there, all the beef and all the pork, and packed in salt [taps microphone], packed in all this salt, you know? But the smokehouse-- and they had chickens and we'd gather eggs, and had cows- we'd milk cows and got the milk. You see we didn't get no milk this-- delivered to us and we had to go from the farm to [chuckles] the city on Saturday and it's a wonderful thing about that. I remember quite often we'd go to the gin mill where we'd pick the cotton- I picked cotton a lot, pick a lot of cotton and go to gin and cultivate it, take the seeds out of it and you get paid for it. And we lived in a little town called Stapleton and we would go to Wrens. Now, in Wrens, there was two sections there: one for white and one for blacks. You couldn't walk on the sidewalk and go in the front door, you had to come in through the back door to go into the store, but you could go out the front door, but you couldn't come in the front door. The law was you could not go in the front door, you could come out the front door, but you were per--not permitted to go in the front door. You had to-- and they had in the back, they had a little-- little restaurant, and a little pool hall and the little stuff back there, and going into those grocery stores and buy the dresses or buy some shoes or, you know, whatever you had to buy and get some groceries because practically everything you needed was on the farm. That's a situation where your life was controlled to a point. You see, there was control to

a point where you-- do's and do not's, do and do not do or could/could not do it, you couldn't do those kinds of things. It was just one of the situations during that times, you had the police and they- to some degree- I guess they was tough and tough but they didn't have a whole lot of arrests because you didn't put yourself in a position where you got arrested. And like a told a young man that when my daddy had talked back to this white lady, we was sharecroppers, and the unspoken law was that you couldn't do those kinds of things, my daddy did it and doing so, we got chased out of Georgia. The Ku Klux Klan came to my daddy's house at night, maybe two o'clock in the morning. They was gonna call him out, they was out there with shotguns and everything else, and my mother and I went out the house through the thicket and pine trees and-- to a little town called Wrens, where my grandmother lived and I didn't see my daddy for about three or four years, I didn't have no idea-- know where he were. He would send a letter- let me explain this to you- he would send a letter and they would say it was something like a (deciphering?). He would write as much as he could and skip two or three lines and start something else and what you had to remember was what it is that he's trying to tell me, (deciphering?), you-- in between-- read between lines- that's where that expression come: 'Read between lines'. I say, "My name is Oliver Gross and I lives in this town Fayetteville", let's say, "Got a job working, got a place to stay."

W: What high school did you attend in Miami?

G: Carver High School. During that time they had three high schools: Carver High Schools, Booker T. Washington, and Dorsey for blacks, or for coloreds, let's say for coloreds. That's what it was, for coloreds- blacks. There were three white high schools: Miami Edison, Miami Jackson, and Miami High for whites. They had their schools, we

had ours. Overtown they had Dunbar Elementary and Phillis Wheatley. At my school, it was one through twelve- you started in first grade and you were there for twelve years before you finished. Twelve years, I say, twelve years. I ain't talking about thirteen, fourteen years. Twelve years you finished, you see, because you knew you had to be in school, you knew you had to get your lesson. They had playgrounds, parks-- we had the park there and we didn't have no gym, we had no showers, you couldn't shower up and like now the kids shower and change clothes, they didn't have that, they didn't have that. Then no air conditioning-- there was no air conditioning in the room, you had to heist your windows up and whatever wind that blew in the windows that keep you a little cool, that kept you cool and you'll pull the windows down in the winter when it got cold. Sometime it got cold here and during that time-- now it doesn't get as cold. But I went to school at Carver High School and I finished in June 1951.

W: Do you remember any of the restaurant sit-ins in Miami or anything?

G: Well, they had a place-- we used to go (uptown?) they give names for it, it was a nasty name but it had a beautiful restaurant where they had the meat and stuff hanging in the window. Had the sauces and the baked chickens and all that and the pork chops and-- and now they had the stew beef and the rice and the chitlins and the boar, fish and grits, I mean you know you stand there and just marvel at all this food that was there and your mother, "C'mon there, boy." You go in there and you-- and you get your meal, sit down and eat and stuff and then you would-- you know and-- (?) hotels and they had the Mary Elizabeth. Mary Elizabeth was a magnificent place, beautiful hotel. I mean it had doormens and it had shoe-shine shops and all this kind of thing, (it was all nice?) people were paying (to race to go in?) to go in and stay, people come from all over the country to

stay at and all the big entertainers: Dinah Washington, Cab Calloway, you know, Lester Young, and Parker, and Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Sam Jones, and-- that's where they stayed see, because they couldn't live on Miami Beach, couldn't live on Miami beach, they could entertain on Miami Beach but they couldn't--couldn't live in the hotels on Miami Beach during that time. They had to come Overtown, downtown and live in the Mary Elizabeth or Carver Hotel, that's where they had to live. Now, where the police department is now and the post-office area, that was our Lord Calvert Hotel there, that nice hotel and the building, the open lot in back of Greater Bethel Overtown there on Ninth Street was the Carver Hotel and it had the (nip bottler?) place that would have sodas and all that kind of thing you know we-- and they had everything in Miami, it had the restaurants it had the churches, had the nightclubs, they had centers, and places where young people could entertain themselves, the halls, and they would have-- the schools are different now than they were then. On a Saturday morning, they would have a sock hops you know the kids would go back to school and they would dance. On Friday afternoon, they had amateur hour for the boys and glee club was singing, the girls were singing, they had dancing (country?) because see, a lot of boys couldn't dance, they didn't know how to dance, still don't know how to dance, you know, but I'm saying some of the girls don't know how to dance, too, but they had---energetic, it kept you going. They had a lot of things for teens that-- but see, like, now they don't have a lot things for kids now to do. You get out of school, where you gonna go? You get out of school at three o'clock, you go home, you watch TV or you get your lesson, there's nothing else. See, they had four theaters Overtown. Four. They had one in Coconut Grove, they had one in Liberty City-- the Liberty Theater on Fifteenth Avenue. The Cotton Club was also on Fifteenth Avenue,

a big nightclub where they entertainment. They had the pool there on Seventy-First Street and they had a swimming pool, they had entertainment and--over there by Liberty City Elementary there they had all these nice things, all the nice places you could go in to have fun and enjoy yourself. Four theaters. There's no theaters now for kids. The one on Biscayne Boulevard is gone. They done closed one down over there in the Aventura Mall. They had one on Sixtieth Street in Liberty City. See, you-- and they entertained, they danced and had brought the entertainers there, they performed and they would have big dances and-- it was nice. But see, all that's gone now, all the theaters Overtown are gone, they don't have them, they had four theaters Overtown. So we always had someplace to go, always had something to do, had the libraries and everything. Sure, they had the football teams. We played--black teams played black teams, we didn't play white teams.

W: Did you ever visit the Dixie Stadium at Dorsey Park?

G: Dorsey Park?

W: Yeah, did you ever attend, like, a football game there?

G: Yeah, I played there- I played there when I was in high school. That's where all the football games were played- in Dorsey Park. Carver High School played their games there, Booker T. Washington played there games there, and Dorsey High played their games there. They-- whoever they came to play them played there. We had a couple games at Coconut Grove on the Coconut Grove Park but basically that was this stadium or the place- the park- where football games was played. Big high wall. Police was always in presence there, you know, keeping kids from jumping on the wall because some kids wanted to jump on the wall, you know but (Mr. McGruder?) and all this boy

was that you didn't get on no wall because you knew you was in trouble if you climbed that wall, you know what I mean? So you paid your little bit of money, if it was twenty cents or fifteen cents or whatever, see now then money wasn't like what it was. Gas prices-- gas was cheap, food was cheap, and you lived in an area where you didn't-- you couldn't live in any other place you wanted to live. Like that young lady asked me earlier about Miami Beach- I (know of a time?) people worked on Miami Beach, you had to have a pass- identifying pass with your picture on in, picture I.D. to go and work on Miami Beach, and you had to leave a certain time, you couldn't stay over there all night long. There was nothing for you to do, there was no place for you really to go for entertainment but see, now they go to these hotels, they got people working at hotels and there was a lot of jobs at one time that a lot blacks didn't take advantage of. Ms. Athalie Range had worked out a deal with the union where they were gonna have the black working the hotels, be chambermaids and change the linens, buff the floors, and all the kinds of things where they do in a hotel, they didn't want to do it, so you know what happened? They got some Cubans. That's why it's one of the biggest labor unions over there on Miami Beach now. One time here, in the bus system- the transit system- which was on Eighth Street down near Seventh Avenue, then it came out here to Fifty-Fourth Street (where the?) Caleb Center and they had black bus drivers, the president of the union was black, but, like, a lot of times when [chuckles] there's a (difference?) of agreement where you want-- you are the president and now you don't want him to be the president and another person who desires to be it, he'll get more votes than the two of you will get and he becomes the president. See, that's why we as people we gonna have to learn to work together. We're never gonna get anyplace if we don't work together for one

another. Because nobody gonna help us like we can help ourselves. What I do for you, or what you do for some other young person is good, you understand what I'm saying? You gotta stay in school. It's important that you stay in school not only-- for you, it's important for you. Doesn't have anything to do with anybody else, it's for you. You get an education for you, you don't get one for me, you don't get one for your parents, you don't get one for your grandparents, your great grandparents. High intelligent that you are, that's what matters. How much education you got, that's-- it's gonna serve you. And in turn you can take it and help someone else. See, because you don't have a education, you can't help nobody else, can't help yourself. You can't read and write for yourself, you can't teach somebody else to read and write. See, you gotta want to come to school, you gotta wanna be a part of the school system. It's important that you do this. I worked twenty-five years for Pan American in New-- here in Miami and-- [school loudspeaker comes on] and New York City. I retired and I came here and I worked ten years over there at Technology Center there Mr. (? and Mr. Park?) and Mr. Miller and those on the other side and I retired here in 1998 and every year, like I said, I go back down to Youth Fair and I bid and I get a couple pigs, always get a couple pigs for the kids that's over there. So they all know me when Mr. Gross shows up you know, like here a lot of the teachers-- I know all the teachers here. And I was here when it was (Miami?) Agricultural School, not here, on the other side. When they built this school, this plan here and named it the William Turner Tech, Dr. John McKinney was the principle. And when they first built this school, it was gonna be for boys only. But Dr. McKinney and Bill Turner and those they said, "Make it a coed where they be boys and girls", and in doing so, it's a wonderful school. I think they're doing real good, maybe not as good as they could do, but they're doing well,



you have a good principle here, I've known him for a long time. I know a lot of the teachers and the school itself is never gonna get any better than the students. The students make a good school because you get good grades and you are able to-- and there's a lot of money here, a lot of scholarship money here. OK?

W: Thank you for coming out here and sharing your experiences with us, we appreciate it.

G: Thank you, it's a pleasure, it's a pleasure. Always nice to meet some nice young ladies and young men, especially someone who lives in Bunche Park. [laughs] Well, I guess that's it--

**END OF INTERVIEW**