

INTERVIEWEE: James Moss

INTERVIEWER: Diandgy J. Georges

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(Georges?): Can you say your name and spell it please?

Moss: My name is James Moss. It's spelled J-A-M-E-S period-- no I'm sorry, J-A-M-E-S M period M-O-S-S.

G: Alright. Can you tell me where you were born and when?

M: I was born in Nassau, Bahamas.

G: So what was it like growing up there?

M: Pardon me?

G: What was it like growing up there?

M: Okay, well I-- in my early age, I did not grow up in Nassau itself [coughs] excuse me. My mother sent at a very early age to my grandmother about 365 miles away from Nassau and I grew up there until I was about twelve. But during that time, I experienced a whole lot of beautiful things. But one of the amazing things to me at that time was the first white man I ever saw. I was in Crooked Island and it was amazing, so different to me; I had never seen a white man before. In those days, as you know, young people have the privilege to see white people or any kind of colored people, any different kind of things nowadays because you could look at TV and you could get on the internet and you

can see things or hear things that you never dreamed that you would see, you know? In those days, there was no television, nothing to show you what a white person might look like no more than maybe if you read a book you see a white picture in there. But this was a white man in person and he was- to me- was different, was quite different and it's really brought my-- kind of brought my attention to (aware?) that he was there and I really got to really look at him on that night. He had-- he was a missionary and he had the service that night and I got to talk-- see him, I got to meet him and all that and I was kind of satisfied after, you know, that he was not something more or less to [chuckles] to frighten people or something.

G: Okay, so when did you m-- when did you move to Miami?

M: I moved to Miami in 1944.

G: How old were you then?

M: I was sev--about seventeen years old when I moved to Miami. [coughs] My father-- I moved with my father, my father was here, my mother in Nassau, so I moved with my father, moved to a place called Redland which he was living and I came to Miami, I came to Thirty-Sixth Street International Airport down there and I was excited, naturally, you know at that time-- most young people like a whole lot of light, you know, a whole lot lighting, things happening and I saw this lighting and whatsnot and looks like I'm gonna have a wonderful time here in this place, right? And so, driving with my father and we talking and suddenly I notice the diminishing of lights. One here, and one way down the road. I began to th--kind of think to myself. So when I got to Redland, my father pointed out the light way back and said, "There where you gonna live, son." I said, "Oh no, here I am coming from Crooked Island and I'm not even-- not even Nassau." My mind then

reflect to Crooked Island and because of-- in Crooked Island there was no lights at all, no kind of lights. The only lights you saw was [coughs] lamp lighters at night. Very primitive, good people, and as I mentioned to someone youngster just awhile ago, the name of the island is Crooked Island and has nothing to do with character of the people, it just was the physical shape of the island, that's why they call is 'Crooked Island'.

G: So what were your earliest memories in that town?

M: Here?

G: Yes.

M: My-- one of my earliest memories pertaining to segregation you talking about, right? Was--living in Redland, I wanted to go to Miami because my-- my whole attention is on Miami now because this is where everything happening and as a youngster, you want to be where things are happening. In Redland, it was too quiet for me [coughs] I wanted to be in the [core?] of Miami and in doing so you had to take a bus. I didn't have a car, and I didn't-- even if I had one I couldn't drive at the time. So, in getting a ticket to ride the bus, you had to go to the bus stop-- station. [coughs] At the bus stop station, black people couldn't go inside to get a ticket, you have to stand on the porch and waited until the lady gets-- until the lady gets you-- her attention see you and when she comes out there, she would come out there and ask you what you want and you say to him-- to her, rather, you know, "I'd like to have a ticket" and then she get you money and goes in the back and get the ticket and bring it back to you, okay? The next encounter I had was after getting the tickets, then you have to go to the bus driver, you get in line, the bus driver is standing and accepting tickets at the door to get in the bus, you understand? And he would-- he would just reach over you and get all the white tickets, so to speak, I call them 'white

tickets'. The tickets of the white people, get all the white tickets and after getting all the white tickets, then he would take your ticket, and mind you your flashing in his eyes all the time. So, that was the second encounter of segregation, real segregation that I have had.

G: Is that your most disturbing memory?

M: Pardon me?

G: Is that your most disturbing memory?

M: Well, yes, I have segregation-- I worked for Bell Telephone Company, I mentioned to young folks, and mind you-- let's be in mind, segregation was a thing all around you.

Everyday, there was no letter, no maybe some-- it go away tomorrow and everything will be alright. It was there and it was around you all the time, everywhere you go, you got to bear in mind that that segregation was there. If you go downtown, as soon as you-- if you want to drink of water, very, very first moment you say, "Well, let me go get a drink of water" it's right there. If you--some stores, you go to the store and you want to buy something and maybe you want to try it on, the very moment you think about trying on, boom, it's right there. Some stores wouldn't even let you try on what you want to buy, although you buying it. Okay, so segregation was all around me. At night you go to work, when you come back home, some police may stop you before you get home and ask you, "Boy, where you been?" and all this kind of stuff, "Where are you going?" and all that kind of thing, you know, very irritating and I am so glad that we have more or less gotten rid of that kind of segregation because I don't think this generation would have taken it so easily, I think it would have been a mass massacre or mass something if it was the day where some young people the was they are today, you know? So, I'm glad that we were

kind of able to diminish that, it still exists, I know that, some places, but somehow we were able to kind of cover it up, put a blanket on it, so to speak, try to smother it. But I experienced segregation with the-- even the job that I was working, you know working on the job at Bell Telephone Company, one of the biggest company, business company. And Bell had a cafeteria for its employees, a big cafeteria, big like all this in here, I mean, hundreds of peoples could go in there at one time in (our?) building and I was not able to go to the-- go through the line to get something to eat, okay? What you had to do, you had to go around to the back door and ask somebody, not even the people who serve it, ask some girl or some woman, or some man who was working there to get you something so you can-- if you wanted to buy something. And you buying now, this is not something for free, you were buying but you still couldn't buy freely, so to speak, or with-- you know, just go and touch things the way you want to touch things. At Bell Telephone Company, I decided- a friend of mine decided- that what we would do, we're going into-- we'll go in the line and let's see what happens. So we went in the line one morning to get breakfast. [coughs] We'd set it up with the girls who were serving- they were black girls serving on the en-- you know, serving the line. So we had it set up with them that we would come into the line, and we wanted them to serve us. So we got in the line and when we got in the line, they started serving us. So when we got to the cashier, the cashier refused to accept the money, so what we did was say, "Well, we'll be downstairs. Whenever you get ready for the money, you can come and get it." We had touched a nerve then. We could have very well sit down and eat it right there, you understand what I mean? But sometimes you gotta be careful how you handle things. We touched the nerve already, we got-- we have more or less (larger?) complaint. So what we wanted to

do then-- that's all we want to do, just want to make them take note of what was happening. So, we didn't sit there and eat, we took it downstairs and ate, okay? We could have very well sit there, but that probably would have caused more confusion and who knows? It might have lead into something more serious. So after that, things changed, the situation changed. Tell me-- let me tell you how it changed, now. You know how it changed? It didn't change so that we could go and sit and then eat with everybody. It changed-- they went and build, they build a new [laughs] piece to the building. [laughs] Okay? They build a new piece to the building that we could go and get something to eat. Thousands of dollars! You know how expensive segregation were? Thousands of dollars, they went out and build this thing just so we could go get-- and not sit here or something already built and a whole lot of room. So with Bell Telephone Company, I can tell you about them. I worked for Bell Telephone Company for thirty-seven years. I decided, and I looked at the bulletin and it says, "If you want to be a switchman, fill in the application" and "There's an opening for this and that". And so I did that only to find- because I was a janitor cleaning the floors- only to find in the trashcan, my applications, they'd throw it in the trashcans. They didn't even go to be considered. But it happened in 1954, after the Supreme Court decision with the Wade [Brown] versus Education thing, I wrote a letter top the district manager telling the district manager that I thought it's about time that I get into the mainstream of Bell Telephone Company's business. He wrote me a letter back and told me to go take a test. So I went and took the test. Now the thing that I would like to make note of here, for any young people, to you or any young people who may hear this story is that it pays to be ready. Prepare yourself, be ready for any eventualities, okay? What I mean by that- they sent me to take a test, I took the test, and I passed the

test, okay? If I did not pass the test, and the test was set up particularly to keep me out, okay? I passed the test and I went to work for the central office. Now the central office is where all the telephones hook up. They're hooked up there- everybody's telephone is hooked up there, and you have all the different equipment and switches and whatnot- we went there today- and in doing so, I-- and as I mentioned to someone before, my salary raised per week \$40 more per week than I was getting for eighteen years that I was working there. Eighteen years. Although they considered themselves giving me a little raise every now and then. For eighteen years I was there, and this job that I get-- I have now was \$40 a week more and this job was called an 'entrance job', you see what I'm saying? An entrance job. We were working there, we were not even counted as an entrance-- being employees as who have been entered into the company so to speak. So I worked for Bell Telephone Company for-- I worked in the central office, I worked as a (freight-man?), I worked as a switchman, and I worked in the engineering department, and after working for Bell for thirty-seven years, I retired as a (long-line?) technician.

G: So what do you remember about the efforts to bring civil rights to black Americans?

M: What have I done?

G: No, what do you remember about it?

M: Oh, (try to?) remember about efforts? I remember a whole lot. I could remember that here in Miami, we had some great civil right movers- Father Theodore Gibson was one, Reverend Graham was another, Garth Reeves was one, and a host of a-- Athalie-- M. Athalie Range was one. [telephone rings] A whole host of people, and I could remind-- remember that they worked very hard on getting a place-- a beach for black people to enjoy themselves. At that time, you couldn't-- you were not allowed to go to any one of

the public beaches in Dade County, not only in Dade County, in Florida- the state of Florida. You were not allowed to go. And they-- what they did to pacify black people, they went and they did a little thing on Virginia Beach-- Virginia Key, and make a little beach out of that for black people. And in order for us to get to that, we had to take a boat, there was a boat. Naturally, somebody always making money on you, you know, even that, that evil was because someone wanted to make some money. So we had to take a boat to Virginia Key if you wanted to go to the beach. So those-- that's something that I can remember very, very vividly.

G: Okay, what do you remember about the early days of integration?

M: What can I remember about the early days of integration? Well, the early years of integration-- it's kind of hard to separate integration from segregation in the sense because one came in and the other never left. [laughs] You know what I mean? We feel as though we integrated- well, in a sense we are, you know it's integrated, you can go anywhere you want to go. But even now, that evil that segregated discriminating evil still exists. And we still have to do things to try to alleviate-- to get rid of that. And some of the things that we can do are ask our young people, say to our young people to stay steady, keep a good head, plan for the future, don't get yourself in trouble with the law because that is-- that is a dead destructive thing. The very moment you go to prison, that's the end of- almost the end of you. I'm telling you, very few people who have been to prison came out and do well, very few. The fact is, it's designed not only to take away your freedom, but it is designed to keep you down. There's a-- there's no--there's no-- from what I learned, there's nothing happening in the prison, in the state of Florida that gonna educate you for any betterment when you come out. You're not doing anything

like that-- of that. So, what happens to you? You come out and the first thing it is said-- it is on your record that you've been to prison and if you've been to prison, no one wants to bother with you. Therefore, how you gonna-- how you gonna make it? How you gonna make it? And young people find themselves right back in the same old thing because they're struggling out here trying to make a living and they can't-- they can't get a job, some of them-- most of them can't get a job. And why they can't get a job? No education, you can't do anything without simple things. And nothing simple nowadays, everything is tech-- technology moving fast. There's no such thing as a-- you know long years ago, you get your pickaxe and go out there and make gobs of money, that's not so now. They have machines will run over you in two seconds what you can do in five years. So, technology is the thing and we have to learn to do things. And how you do that? By going to school and studying and learning and stay out of trouble.

Unknown: Anything else?

G: Yeah, did you hear Martin Luther King's speech?

M: Pardon me?

G: Did you hear Martin Luther King's speech?

M: Did I hear it? [both speak at the same time]

G: Yeah, 'I Have A Dream' speech.

M: Yes. Oh yeah. I wasn't in Washington. I wish I was there, but I wasn't there and I heard the speech and I was so proud. And a matter of fact, I'm proud today, and I think all black people should be proud of Martin Luther King.

G: So, alright, when-- what did you think about when the leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King when they-- when they got assassinated, how did you feel about that?

M: Okay, I felt pretty badly about the assassination. I felt real bad about uh-- about uh Malcolm X. Malcolm X was one of those leaders who was straight to the point and didn't, you know, he didn't bend one way or the other, he was right to the point in what he believed in at the time. And shortly- in my opinion I think it was- shortly before his assassination, he began to see that sometimes you have to take a little, you know, take-- you can't just [punches his hand] more or less push things through all the time, sometimes it takes a little time to study and how you're gonna do it and what effect it would have and all that kind of stuff. So, in my opinion, he discovered that maybe he should kind of start thinking about some things and shortly after that, that's when he was assassinated. I felt really bad, real badly about him because I thought he was a magnificent leader but I felt more so bad about King because of the way he was doing his-- he was so concerned about people- all people- and in such a Christian way, in such a religious way and although he was (studying?) in what he, you know, what he wanted to do, because if he didn't-- if he wasn't, there would be n-- would not have been marches and the counter sitting and the whatever that took place to cause a change. But he wanted to do that and he didn't want to do it with violence. And I guess that why I felt so bad [telephone rings] badly about him, yeah.

G: So from the 1950s -- or from the 1940s, in between that time and 2002, do you think we've made some major changes?

M: Oh yes, we've made some progress, a whole lot of progress. We made some-- people have made the progress, of course it could be more. I think we should have made more progress, but I don't think its because people wasn't ready or willing to make progress, I think because there were still stumbling bl--blocks in a way that perhaps held us down or

held us back from making more progress than we have made. But we have made progress., we continue to make progress and I would say to young people, “Don’t give up, continue to press forward.”

G: For us-- these are your hopes for the future?

M: Pardon me?

G: (Yeah) these are your hopes for the future?

M: My hope for the future-- I do hope that-- well I don’t think young people will ever go through what I’ve been through because I don’t think they would stand for that, okay? But I do hope that the future brings a whole lot of happiness and joy to young people, more so than we have had in my age (time?). I know that there’s some things that happening today that might be very, very, you know, dangerous for youn-- well, it’s still--it’s dangerous now. We have contemporary disease like AIDS, we have this terrorist thing that may affect the lives of young people, one way or another, (?) directly with violence or in a way in which they themselves will kind of have to clear it up and clean in up, but I do hope that-- and I do believe that bad as it looks, our young people will overcome all those obstacles.

G: Alright, thank you [inaudible] .

END OF INTERVIEW