

INTERVIEWEE: James Moss

INTERVIEWER: (Tavaris Wright?) and (Joe (?) Pierre?)

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(Wright?): We thank you for joining us here at Turner Tech. My name is Tavaris Wright and this is--

Pierre: Joe (?) Pierre.

Moss: Okay, my name is James M. Moss. Okay?

W: Thank you.

M: And I'm glad to be here. I hope that what I say to you might be of some help to you.

W: Yes, we feel like this is a honor for you to come and talk about, you know, segregation and things that happened in the past.

M: I feel as though it's an honor to come and talk to you. I would hope that I can say something that may come to inspire.

W: Okay.

P: Can you please describe when and where you were born and a bit about your parents and grandparents?

M: Okay, I was born in the-- in Nassau, Bahamas. At an early age, my mother sent me to an island called 'Crooked Island', spelled C-R-O-O-K-E-D Island. And I'd like to-- I'd like to make note of this: the name 'Crooked' has no-- nothing to do with the character of

the people that lived on that island, okay? It's only-- the name is only because of the physical shape of the island, that's why they call it 'Crooked Island'. The people were fine people and my grandmother was superb and you know when I-- you know I'm not gonna say anything bad about my grandmother any way, so, she was superb. In living in Crooked Island, I have experienced a whole beautiful life. It was a pri-- kind of primitive life, it was-- not kind of primitive, it was primitive. Like at night, it was night, you know? Like in the city, nighttime-- you only know it was night because you see the light on, right?

W: Mm-hmm

M: And you don't even think about night because you doing the same thing like you do in the daytime. Nighttime there was night, it was dark and the only lights you see is lamp lighters and the moon if the moon is out. That was kind of the place that I was living in and I enjoy-- you enjoy yourself, you do most of your enjoyment during the daytime because at night, naturally, it is dark and you can't do too much, but they used to have fun at night, they have little dances and people put little lamp--um, lanterns and whatnot and people-- social things that they had and they had a wonderful time, people getting married and-- just like in any other big city, things-- life goes on there. One of the things that I experienced at-- my first experience of a white man was in Crooked Island. This was my first en-- first time I saw a white man and he looked-- boy, I'm telling you, he looked so different. You could imagine never seeing a white person all your life and then here comes this white person. He was standing there and the sun was setting and he was standing like in this-- and the sun was shining on him and it looked like-- like blood was gonna come out of him or something. So, I investigated (?) during the night. He was a

missionary and my ins-- my own private self, I investigated and I discovered that he was--
- he was a man, like anybody else and nothing to be afraid of. Any other questions?

P: When did you, like, move to Miami?

M: I moved to Miami in 1944. I was seventeen years old. My father sent for me- he was here- and he sent for me and I came in at the International Airport in Thirty-Sixth Street and when I got to Miami, ooh boy, I was so-- I (wasn't being?) uptight, I said, "Hey man, all this light, I'm gonna have me some ball here." [laughs]

W: So you wasn't used to the light?

M: Oh yes, I was used to the light in Nassau, but I like light.

W: Oh, okay.

M: You understand?

W: Right.

M: I didn't like the darkness thing, although I enjoyed myself-- as a youngster it was alright, but when you become seventeen now, you begin to look into different areas.

W: Right.

M: And I thought maybe light was-- well, young people, you know, they want to be in what's happening, you know, and I thought I-- what I would be in what's happening. But as I drove down with my father, as he began to drive down the street and we drove home and he-- I noticed that the light began to diminish, you know, less light until we got in the spot, there was no light.

W: Right.

M: And I say, "(Look at me?), I'm going back to this Crooked Island thing," then he said, "Son, there where you gonna be living," so I said-- that kind of killed my spirit. But my

uncle was living in Miami- in the city of Miami- and then my father per-- gave me permission to go and visit him on the weekends, you know? And there where I discovered my first-- then had-- I had my first encounter with segregation, okay?

W: So it was a shock to you.

M: It was a shock to me. It was a shock to me and, you know, because I couldn't believe it. Like-- but my father was trying to see if he could try to keep me to-- try to teach me or try to get me in a position where it wouldn't be too much of a shock, you understand what I mean?

W: Right.

P: Yeah.

M: So when I got to-- to go to the bus stop to buy my ticket, my father had already told me, "You're gonna have to stand on the porch until the lady comes and pick up your money." So I stood on the porch and the lady comes and picks up my money-- no, asked me what I wanted, I told he I wanted a ticket and the lady comes and f-- the ride the bus and she came and bought-- brought the ticket to me and that was my first encounter: you couldn't go inside to buy the ticket, you understand?

W: Right.

M: Only white people can go in there, you couldn't go in there because you were black.

W: Right.

M: So secondly, I encountered the segregation with the bus. With the bus, you stand in line like everybody else and I noticed the white man took all the tickets from the white people.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: And after all the tickets have been taken from the white people, then he began taking tickets from black people. And I don't care in what position you were standing, how near you were to him, because I had my fla--fl-- flipping in his eye all the time.

W: Right.

M: He was not considering your ticket until every-- whenever he gets those white people on the bus. When you get on that bus, if all the seats were taken by white people, you stand up. If all the seats were taken by white people and all-- and there were one or two up front, you still couldn't sit down because there was a big sign there that says, 'Colored Seat from the Rear'. It was a big sign and this was a state law, you know, this was a-- this was a legal thing as far-- I mean, as far as the Constitution's concerned, it was not legal, but it was a legal thing as far as the state was concerned that black people sit the black-- back, and white people sit in the front.

W: Right.

M: So if you violated that law, let's say for instance I said, "Well, I'm gonna sit in the front." So if you sit in the front, they stop the bus, call the police, and put you in jail.

That's what they did with-- with a woman named--

P: Rosa Parks?

M: Right! So you understand?

W: Right.

P: So how did you feel? Did it make you feel in way by you having to sit in the back of the bus not to get on the bus?

M: It make you feel in a way that you don't want to get on the bus, yes, but you do realize if you're going to travel--

W: The bus is the best way

M: -- and if you don't have a car,--

W: Right, right

M: -- you gonna have to get on the bus!

W: Right.

P: Do you--

M: Or the train, whatever.

P: Do you remember--

M: It was the same thing with the train now.

W: Right.

P: Do you remember, like, what part of town did you move to?

M: What kind of what?

P: The town that you moved to when you first came to Miami?

M: Okay. Oh yeah, I moved-- when I first came to Miami, my father took me to a place called 'Redland'- Redland, Florida- that's down there by Homestead, down in the citrus grove and the farmland down there, okay? So I was down there with my father until after I become, I think I was almost eighteen, I moved to Miami to live by my-- to live by myself. My father told me that I could (move?) Miami-- to Miami, but what he did, he went-- although he told me-- make me-- made me feel as though I was going to be living by myself, no, he made sure I was there with some lady- some old lady (?) house and she was a strict-- strict as my daddy. [laughs] But I enjoyed the mere fact that I had moved out of that darkness down there and come up because enlightenment was the thing that I was seeking. In other words, not only the light itself like the physical electric light, I'm

talking about light, like learning something and doing something, you know? That's what's my thing.

W: Right.

P: Alright, do you remember anymore, like, memories dur-- [both speak at the same time]

M: About seg--segregation?

P: Yeah, segregation.

M: Oh yeah, did I tell you the whole story about Bell Telephone Company? I think I did.

If I didn't, I've been saying it so much today I guess I-- [all laugh] Yeah, I could remember-- I could remember police took me to jail once.

W: You remember for what reason?

M: For-- guess what he did. This is what happened: I was driving coming from-- from Northwest Second Avenue Overtown and this-- they were in an unmarked car, right? And they were blocking the road, so I pumped my horn- whomp!- and he looked at me, he didn't have any police clothes on and he start talking again, so I pump- whomp!- and he came down there and say, "What's the matter with you, boy?" I said, "You're blocking the street, I wanna go." "You get out the car." Then he showed me the little piece of badge. So I got out [stands up]. When I got out-- before I got out, he (told?), "You walk that straight line." It had a line there was drawn--know the lines in the street?--

W: Right, right

M: -- that separates the--

W: The median, right.

M: "You walk that line" and when I started to step on the line, "Oh yeah, you drunk" [sits down] before I step, and took me to jail.

P: So he wanted a-- a reason put you in jail.

M: Oh yeah! He put me to jail! He-- just to show you how much authority they thought they had. The same thing is happening now, that's why I'm so-- I would like to kind of drop something to you young people: stand up for your right, but not in the position that-- not so much that you gonna get yourself shot.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: You understand what I mean?

P: Yeah.

M: Stand up for your right, but don't push it in the way where you're gonna get yourself hurt. He did that simply because he had the authority to do so. Took me down there, took me to jail. And then, you know, let me tell you, when he got me down to jail, the sergeant asked him, "What you bring this man down here for?" And he said something to the sergeant (well like?) disobeying or something, I don't know what he said to the sergeant. So they kept me down there overnight.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: Overnight they kept me there. Next morning, you go to the judge and after expressing to the judge what happened, the judge let you go, you see what I mean? But he has already done his damage.

W: Right, right, mentally.

M: He done the damage to me.

W: Right.

M: You see? Because he had made me stayed in jail for a night in which was wrong. And so I go to the judge-- before the judge, he didn't even show up.

P: [chuckles] Who, the cop didn't show up?

M: Didn't even show up. So the judge say, "Go home." You see what I'm saying? So for young people- you young men- be careful. And they have a way of pushing you, because they want you to react to certain things and so they can have this--use this so-called power, you understand? And sometimes they're wrong as hell, but they will do it. And when you get down there, you have these other people who kind of encourage him and who-- who somehow don't look at it from the right-- from the right point of view. As you know, if you read the newspaper, you have a whole lot of them down there now charged with doing some wrong things some years ago. So be careful and don't put yourself in the position where you gonna be-- some policeman gonna have to come by for-- you know, don't, like, argue and all of that and somebody gotta call the police. Don't put yourself in that kind of mess, it doesn't even make sense. Argument come up, usually it's because two people don't understand what's going on, right?

W: Mm-hmm.

M: That's why they have arguments. It's better (justice?). Just walk away. Say, "Okay man, you right, I'm sorry" and just walk off. Instead sometime trying to push your-- what your belief and sometime, you'd be right but that your right sometimes can cause you little problems, you know? If you see (where?) gonna cause you to hurt someone or someone hurt you, it's better to walk off, isn't it?

W&P: Yeah.

M: Yeah, okay.

W: Well, how did your school handle the effort to integrate?

M: Okay, my school did not have that problem because, like I said, I'm from the Bahamas, right?

W: Right, right.

M: I didn't have that. I don't know how the schools handled to effort to integrate-- of integration here in Miami. I couldn't very well tell you how it-- how they do it-- how they did that, but I know they had-- there was a problem here in Miami in getting the school integrated. I know-- I think it was Father Theodore Gibson's son was one of the first, he tried to get his son-- he was the head of the NAACP and he tried to get his son into a-- to integrate (to the?) school. And it started with his son and some others and I know there was some problems, and I know there was a whole lot of talk and the school board did some things and the court passed a whole lot of laws and all kind of things. I know it was a whole lot of problem.

W: Right. What thoughts do you have about the changes that were made in the 1950s and the 1960s?

M: My thoughts about the changes? I think we have made some changes.

W: Right.

M: Huh?

W: Yes, I--

M: I think we have made some changes, we have done well. I think we have done well. We could have done better. Was it our fault we didn't do better? No, I don't think it's our fault. I think that the same old evil, that same old evil- the segregation evil- still exists, still lurking underneath, you know what I mean? Comes in different ways, different clothing so to speak, but it's the same old thing trying to hold black people down. And it

does exist here and it's gonna depend on you young people to root it out, and how you go about root it out? By getting yourself an education, that's how you root it out. You don't root it out with no guns and knives and all that foolishness because that will never work. You'll root it out by educating yourselves and applying your education where it'll be better for you and your children. So that what I'm depending on all of you to do, get yourself an education, be prepared.

W: Right.

M: And don't drop out and all of that and give up, don't do that. Your parents are sending you to school and your parents are not wrong, they're trying to help you.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: Your parents send you to school so you can be able to help yourself, right?

W: Yes.

M: Do that. Go to school and make your parents happy. They'll be happy when you go to school and finish your education, make them feel good that their work was not in vain, you know what I mean?

W: Right.

M: And when you-- it'll become a day when you gonna have children.

W: Right.

M: And you're gonna probably do the same thing.

W: Tell them the same things.

M: You understand what I mean?

W: Yeah.

M: So how you root out the evil of segregation? By education, that's how you root it out. And that's go for you, it goes for the other side, too.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: (Your?) white people gotta be educated. They gotta understand that it's not a good thing. It's not a good thing for the country, it's not a good thing for the-- for America. And I think, you know, when I look at it, I look at it from the September the 11th, right?

W: Okay.

M: September the 11th says a whole lot to Americans. We need to be Americans.

W: Right.

M: Or whether you are-- whether you have that feeling of-- of want to be nice and one-- that one feeling about American-- America or not, I can tell you this, when you get (all the amount?)-- the evil that Bush talk about, that evil look at all American as the same.

W: Right.

M: That's right.

W: Like putting all your nuts in one basket.

M: That's right, that evil looks at you just like he look at that white man, and why? Because you are an American. They don't care about you being black. They may tell you that, try and make you believe that but that's not so. You are an American and because you are an American, you guilty of anything that America does. [inaudible]

W: Well, I know this tape has been short, but is there at least one more story or anything you wanna say before it's time to (close out?)

M: Oh, um, my only thing I want to say-- I--- to you all before I close out is I am-- I'm somewhat honored to speak with you today.

W: Yes, and we appreciate that.

M: And I would like for you young people to do your best, okay?

W: Mm-hmm.

M: Too many of our young people finding themselves in prison nowadays. I mean, you know, every time you take (?) newspaper nowadays, seventeen years and seem like seventeen years was a magic year or something, seventeen and eighteen years old boys is killing up each other, shooting up each other and that kind of stuff, man. And the prison, over two-thirds I think of the prison population are black young-- black men. Now, what is it? We not eating no different food from them other people eating, so what it is that making us so different from them in a sense that getting in so much problems, so much trouble? So, my thing would be-- what would make me feel good is to know that I have played some part in helping a young man to realize or to--to get what he's-- what he wants to get: good things, and I think all people-- all young people want good things. Sometimes they want it so badly, they wind up in jail trying to get good things. But there's a way of getting good things and that way is to get yourself educated. After education, you can afford of get any-- most of the time, you can afford to get anything you wanna get. Education. You go to prison, when you come out of prison, you can't even get a job.

W: Mm-hmm.

M: You can't even get a job. How you gonna get-- most of the time you wind up in prison again trying to get that same good thing, right?

W: Mm-hmm.

M: Get yourself an education. Get yourself an education, that's the thing. I know it because I know the little that I had is what caused me to achieve what I have achieved. And what I achieved? Not much, but I never been to prison, you know what I mean? I never-- I've never killed no one, I never shot anybody. I think that's a good accomplishment, even that is an accomplishment. I don't have no million of dollars, but I'm not a pauper. I'm not depending of the government to take care of me or my family. So it means that get yourself an education.

W: Well, we thank you for your time.

P: Thank you for your time, sir.

M: Okay.

W: It's been an honor.

M: Okay.

W: We thank--

END OF INTERVIEW