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INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Richard Strachan

INTERVIEWER: Unknown

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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Unknown: Good morning, Dr. Strachan.

Strachan: Good morning.

U: Okay. Can you tell us a little about when you were born and a bit about your parents and grandparents?

S: Yes. I was born in a place called 'Overtown' which is located on Seventeenth Street and First Court. We lived there for a period of time. My parents- Edmond and Isadora Strachan. Then moved to the project in Liberty City called 'Liberty Square Project' and that's where my life really began in the projects.

U: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about growing up and any experiences you had while growing up?

S: Growing up, I was proud of being myself. And I made up my mind at an early age of around five years old that I was gonna be somebody in life. And I got the experience in the projects competing in athletics, competing with other students in the classroom because I wanted to be the smartest in the class. And I had kept that to myself, however, but then I worked real hard doing that. And I attended Dorsey High School.

U: As a child, what places did you go and were they segregated?

S: Places I traveled?

U: Yes, like, what places did you, like going and were they segregated?

S: Okay, during that time, everything was segregated. So I'm going all the way back into the '50s. And we could not go downtown and try on outfits, we could not go to the restroom but one and that was the courthouse. So if you were shopping and you ended up on Biscayne Boulevard and you had to go the restroom, then you in tough luck, you just had to hold and hold it until you got back to the courthouse or back home. And then your parents would get angry with you, "You knew you had to go to the restroom, you should have gone before you left here. Now I gotta take you all the way back there and come back where I am." So it was a disadvantage, but an advantage because we had a chance to fight for that.

U: Do you have any haunting memories of discrimination?

S: December 18th?

U: Do you have any haunting memories of discrimination? Personal memories for yourself?

S: Yes, when I became a man. But being s-- being segregation-- but being segregated, I knew where to go and what to do. However, as I grew up, my first experience- and I've written a book on all my integration-- integration disadvantage and it's called, *The Dade County Schools*- there should be a copy in your library- and in this book, I made mention of a visit to Orlando to the Tangerine Bowl to see a football game and I sat in the usual seat where most blacks sat during an integrated game. But this particular night, two white teams were playing and one was Miami Edison. So I wanted to see Miami Edison band, being a band director, I wanted to see what they were doing. Then the police beckoned

for me to get out of that seat and go back to the end zone. And I went to the end zone and when I sat there, someone slipped up to me and hit me in the head with a hammer and told me I should never sit up there with white folks, I'm supposed to be right back here. So there was a police officer and I said, "Sir, would you kindly tell this gentleman to get out of my face?" And the police officer turned his back on me. So when I looked around, I was the only black person at that stadium so I just told the guy, I said, "Now, I can't do anything to you now, sir, you look just like Harry Truman," I said, "But if I ever see you again anywhere, I'm gonna blow your brains out." And I felt good about that and I just walked on out of the stadium.

U: Okay. Do you remember any local or national efforts to bring back full civil rights to black Americans?

S: Repeat that again.

U: Do you remember any local or national efforts to bring full civil rights to black Americans?

S: In terms of restaurants?

U: Well, yeah, or any civil rights to black Americans in this country?

S: Any civil rights in the country?

U: Mm-hmm.

S: Well I can just say I met a lot of them. I met Reverend Martin Luther King, Reverend Jessie Jackson, Al Sharpton. I was a part of the Black Caucus in Miami and the Democratic Party so we did a lot of traveling so I had a chance to meet many of these outstanding people so I can get some strength. I met Coretta Scott King. I spent some

time in Atlanta. And so I met a lot of people in the Civil Rights Movement, if that answers your question.

U: Okay. Can you tell us-- you've mentioned the Black Caucus- that you were a member of the Black Caucus. Can you tell us a little bit about that, give us more insight?

S: The Black Caucus became prominent after we began to get a lot of blacks in Tallahassee such as Wilbert T. Holloway and Yolly Roberson and Philip Brutus and Edward Bullard, Larcenia Bullard, and Senator Fredricka Wilson. We started many years ago working in the Democratic Party. I was never a person to be out front, I like to stay in the background. So we set plans in order to get more blacks to vote and more blacks into the seats in Tallahassee and we started out with two and the first two was my football coach, his name was Kershaw, Coach Kershaw and another lady by the name of Gwen Cherry. So those were the two people who got us started in politics and to organize the black Democratic Party in Dade County.

U: Oh, okay. How did your school handle the efforts to integrate? What do you remember about early days of, like, integration?

S: Integration came in the '60s as you're well aware and I was working at a school called North Dade Junior High School. We got the letter that we had to be integrated into other schools. I was sent to Miami Central and some of the other teachers were sent to other schools. Our principle was-- all the black principles were demoted to assistant principles. So when I got to Miami Central, I was full of hate. And when I got there, there were only 200 blacks and about 1800 white students and a few Hispanics at that time. And would you believe that we were-- the students were not allowed to go into certain restrooms. The students were not allowed to sit in the front of the classroom. All the black students

had to sit in the back and they were never addressed to answer any questions, they were completely ignored. My experience-- I was teaching typing and this white student, she refused to listen she said because her father told her, "Do not let an 'N' teach you because they are no good." And so, I reported it to the principle and the principle invited the parent out and told the parent, "He is the teacher. Now if you don't want her to be in this class, then you take her out of this school." So then I passed the word that we were being backed by the principle. But I must say this to you and it's written in the book: we had to turn the school around- we had the biggest riot over at Miami Central back in 1967 when fifteen students met at my house and a few other teachers. I didn't tell them to do it, but we talked about Malcolm X and how he fought for integration and as a result of that, on-- during the lunchtime, they changed and put on white tee-shirts, I'll never forget. They went in the cafeteria and they hit a few students and in about two minutes, the cafeteria was emptied. It gave us a chance to have a meeting with the Human Relations Board and these students began to tell us exactly how they were treated at Miami Central. There were no black cheerleaders, there were no black members of any of the clubs like Sorrota, there were only black person in the band, he was not treated fairly. So after five days of meeting, then the whites began to leave this area and then the blacks began to come into this area and today, Central is different. Tech High was not here at the time, but Central changed and made it better for Tech High to be placed here where it is today.

U: Okay, you just mentioned that in 1967 there was a riot and--

S: Sixty-seven.

U: I mean '67, yes. And later that year in 1968, do you remember anything about the riots in Liberty City in 1968?

S: There was a riot when Clifford [Arthur] McDuffie was killed by police officers and I met with a few people, I didn't become involved but, I always stayed in the background. But everybody began to throw Molotov cocktails- that was a bomb that you can put together in about two minutes: just put some kerosene in a bottle and put a little rag in there and then you stick a match to it, it will blow up. So they didn't have any other strong weapons so they used that. And fortunately-- I was playing a dance and I was on my way home down Twenty-Second Avenue, I was coming through Scott project and I saw all the cans out there and I saw kids with bricks and I saw-- this young man, he ran to my car to hit the windshield because I had a nice-looking Mercedes Benz so he probably thought I was white. And he came to the windshield, he getting ready to slam it and he said, "Mr. Strachan, excuse me, man. I didn't know that was you." It taught me right there to mix with people, let people know who you are. And had I not met that young man in one of the classes, he would have smashed my windshield. So as a result of that, we got together and we met with Human Relations and we resolved a lot of things and some people were arrested.

U: Okay, do you remember going to Virginia Key Beach? Where did your family swim?

S: That was the only beach we could go to. So we were not used to any swimming pools because we didn't have any swimming pools. There was one swimming pool on Seventy-First Street and Seventeenth Avenue and they allowed us to swim for, like, ten cents. Most of my swimming was at a rock pit around Seventy-Fifth or Seventy-Sixth Street. It's now homes, but it was nothing but a rock pit. And so they opened up Virginia Beach for Colored and everybody was so happy we can go to the ocean and swim and we had to travel at least twelve miles to get there and so we started going there. We were not

allowed to go beyond that. We could not go into Key Biscayne, we had to make that left turn and go right straight into Virginia Beach. And we stayed there until night and we would go back home.

U: Okay. How do you feel about Miamians trying to preserve the landmark of Virginia Key Beach?

S: I think it's very fortunate for the young people like yourself to know how it got there and to sh-- and to work with the group. There's a group headed by Maud Newbold and she meets every month and they're trying to get more money to improve the area and to make it a landmark with pictures of persons who were responsible. We have a Dr. John O. Brown, the first optometrist in Miami along with the Reverend Graham, who died- he was the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church- and there was a Garth Reeves who is still living- he owns the Miami Times. So these people, along with about twenty-five went out there and took a swim. Some of us were arrested and after we went to jail for a few days, then the committee got together and they says, "Well, we'll let the 'N's go somewhere and take a bath", so they gave us Virginia Beach. And today, it is still Virginia Beach but with needs improvement.

U: Okay. I know you were part of the Virginia Key Beach committee. What are your plans for helping preserve the beach?

S: We-- first of all, we'd like to get all the mementos of persons like pictures that were a part of the beach and place it in a museum so everybody could see what has happened because a lot of the history of Virginia Beach is lost and we're now working to try to retrieve most of that information and set up a museum for blacks so they'll know exactly what happened.

U: What is your perspective of students doing a project and learning about Virginia Key Beach?

S: Repeat that again.

U: What is your perspective of students doing a project and learning about Virginia Key Beach, the landmark?

S: Alright, to set up a class, we're working on to set up a class in each school and this will be one of the schools to indoctrinate and to educate the students on what is happening, what they can do to fulfill the dream that we are looking forward to.

U: Okay. Is there any other stories that you would like to share about your life as growing up in Miami?

S: Yes, how much time do I have? [laughs] Because I can go all day. [laughs] I just want to say this: it's important for everyone to make up your mind what you wanna do in life. Everybody is given twenty-four hours in the day. It is all depends on how you use those twenty-four hours. You have about seven hours in school, the other hours are spent at home or on the job, so you've got to utilize that. If you don't utilize those extra hours, then you're gonna end up in jail like so many people because they did not utilize those extra hours positively- they got involved.

U: Thank you for your time, Mr. Strachan.

S: My pleasure.

[audience claps]

END OF INTERVIEW

