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INTERVIEWEE: Gene Tinney

INTERVIEWER: Jennifer Garcia, Andre Kirkland, and Carl Wright

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Garcia: Okay. My name is Jennifer Garcia and I am at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School Twisted Pencil on February 14, 2006 to interview Gene Tinney, the name-- oh, about his or her personal history of his childhood.

Kirkland: My name is Andre Kirkland. I am at the William H. Turner Technical High School Twisted Pencil on February 14, 2006 to interview Gene Tinney on his childhood.

Wright: My name is Carl Wright. I am at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School Twisted Pencil room. I am here to interview Gene Tinney about his personal history.

G: Okay. Describe when and where you were born and a bit about your parents and your grandparents.

Tinney: Okay. I was born in the South Bronx in New York City. Both my parents are from the Caribbean. My mom was from Jamaica, my father's from Guyana in South America and they met in New York several years earlier. So, it took two people coming from two different places to a third place and I grew up most of, let's see, until I was a junior in high school in New York City and then my family relocated to Long Island, which was very rural and a radical change from New York City and that's where I think I

became an environmentalist because I could appreciate all the wildlife and all that good stuff.

G: And when you moved to Miami, you continued school here in--?

T: Oh, no. I moved to Miami many years later. I got-- I moved to Miami in 1974. By that time, I had lived in Los Angeles, and in Europe and in Boston and, you know, and all of that. But in the three decades or so since I've come to Miami, I've seen it change quite a bit.

K: What part of town did you move to when you moved to Miami?

T: My first landfall in Miami was in South Miami and then I relocated to Coconut Grove. I lived in the Grove for, oh, about a year and then moved to, well, Biscayne Boulevard and Thirtieth St-- Thirty- First Street, whatever that's called now. And now, I live in, well, some people call it Buena Vista West; others call it Little Haiti, but that area.

K: Can you describe some of your early memories of Miami?

T: Early memories of Miami- of course, it's not the same as memories of early Miami. But certainly my first memory, well, the day I got here the Drug Enforcement Agency- the DEA- had a building in downtown Miami, (we saw?) the rooftop garage was collapsed that day from the weight of the cars and the following day, President Nixon resigned. So that was my arrival in Miami. And at the time, it was much less, as they say, developed, okay? You had I believe what is now the Sun Trust building might have been the tallest building in downtown and there were, as I'm thinking, just much more open space, perhaps. The-- it was different. It was-- Coconut Grove, which I came to know pretty well, was just this really interesting, precious enclave of, you know, Bahamian descendants and so forth. The-- and we had a group-- there a group there called the

Miami Black Arts Workshop- which was basically African American visual artists- and I joined them and that became a very strong bond and just a great experience bringing art to the people and the people to art and all of that. The-- what else can I say about-- well, what-- Miami was still going through its, I don't know what to even call it-- the-- there was kind of the old Miamians who still weren't very comfortable with the large Spanish-speaking presence and you had folks, you know, wanting to oppose bilingualism and all of that, you know?

K: When coming to Miami in 1974, were things for black people, like, still segregated, or everything was open to them?

T: No, segregation was over but interestingly enough, whereas in any other part of the south, you would have heard that being described as something positive. Here in Miami, I was kind of surprised that a lot of people had very fond memories of when it was still segregated. It turns out that unlike other parts of the south, the section of Miami called Overtown right near downtown- which was part of the original city, Colored Town- was very thriving, very prosperous, had, you know, black-owned hotels and all of this. And people pretty much said that the two things that the construction of the expressway which just destroyed a lot of that community and integration had actually destroyed some of that. So, it was a really-- an interesting twist but, of course, by the same token, you just didn't have those restrictions. I mean, I grew up in the north, I'm not gonna say that there wasn't prejudice and discrimination up north, but we didn't have anything like Colored waiting rooms and so forth. I mean, I don't know how I would have reacted to, you know, having to go to a Colored drinking fountain [laughs] or something like that.

W: Going back to early childhood days, what did you intend to do in your adult years for a profession?

T: I think I was one of those who was officially undecided for a long time. [chuckles] But by the time-- by the time I got to junior, senior year in high school, I think I pretty much decided that I was going to try to pursue dentistry as a career. It-- I can't say all together why it looked like something I could handle. It looked like a profession that might be less demanding than being a doctor, but still challenging and specialized enough. And, you know, I imagine those who have artistic temperament would like to work with their hands and so forth. The idea of, you know, creating, you know-- recreating natural shapes and caring for, you know, people's dental health was appealing. After I got into college and realized that, well, there were other things I might have been a little better suited for, I kind of switched off to that - which was foreign language. But, I think as a youth I must have gone through wanting to be just about everything at one point or another.

W: What do you remember about local or national efforts to bring full civil rights to black Americans?

T: Naturally, I was-- as you can tell from the gray beard, I was around long enough to have been here when the Brown vs. Board of Education decision was handed down and watching kind of from a distance because in the north-- like I said, this was something we were reading about in the newspapers. I mean, the integration Little Rock High School, I mean, federal troops and the governor standing up and defying the law and-- I mean, this was a whole different sense for us of how life in America should have been. I had heard stories from schoolmates, classmates who very often would go south in the summertime, you know, spend time in the country with their relatives and-- [audio cuts off] --you

know, it sounded just very strange to me then that, oh you mean, because you're Colored, you don't get the same service as someone who is white? [chuckles] It was-- but I mean, it's one thing for that to be just done by ignorant people, but once the law changes, then you expect that the people who are supposed to be about the law- the governors, the law enforcement- would be upholding it and it was a real reality check to see that that wasn't happening. And then, of course, from there we watched the whole movement under Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X coming on the scene, the Nation of Islam. And all of that segued into what was called the "Black Consciousness Movement". So it was-- in New York, we didn't have that kind of raw, naked segregation but it was there. I mean, you couldn't just move into any neighborhood you wanted. You-- you encountered- if you went into certain neighborhoods- you might not be received very warmly, you know, that kind of thing, but nothing official.

G: What do you-- how did your school handle the effort to integrate?

T: Well, here again, growing up in the north, we were integrated all along, but then-- yeah, we-- see, the South Bronx at that time, some people called it 'The Beautiful Bronx'. In the 1940s, '50s, the Bronx was like the promise land and people-- on my block, everybody was there: there was black, it was Italian, it was Jewish, there was, you know, white people from the south, there were-- and, you know, everybody was-- we played, we -- that was it, that was how it was. So, that carried over into the-- naturally, into the schools. For a portion of the time, I went to Catholic school. By the time I got to high school, that's when, you know, I could see that, okay, there were some things like for example there was supposed to be, you this-- you know, between the Irish and the-- you

know, groups that didn't quite always get along, but it's kind of minor because the thing was were all there together so, you know--

G: Did you ever suffer any, um, wait-- any haunting memory of discrimination or separation of the races?

T: I've been trying to give that one some thought. I'll tell you, the only haunting memory that I can think of came much later after-- you know, long after I was out of school. And this is one that's still a mystery to me. My brother, my cousin, and I went to Canada. We just-- you know, it's our big adventure. We were going to drive from New York to Montreal and Toronto. You know, we were leaving the country. And--well, you know, we had heard that things in Canada were just a little more mellow, people didn't have all that-- and sure enough, I mean, there it was. I can't say that it was all-together absent, but generally speaking, you know, you walked into a store or something, I mean, it was just another customer walking into the store, you know, you didn't have people with that on-guard [laughs] and all that kind of thing that we had been used to. The strange part was we had gone from Montreal to Toronto and then we came back across through Niagara Falls. And somehow when we got to Niagara Falls, we knew we were back in the States-- the whole racial thing was back. And from that day to this day, I cannot tell you what it was. I have gone back over it, what was it that we saw or heard or felt, but it was, you just knew. What made that haunting was that, that there was something so invisible that at the same time was so present and so absolutely there. And if it was just me, I would-- but then, you know, all three of us, I mean, just knew, we knew it. So that-- in the category of haunting memories, that's the one that would do it, you know?

G: When you came in 1974, there was the-- many assassination occurring just right before. What was your response to Martin Luther King's murder in 1968? [whispers]

Stop.

[pauses]

[indistinct chatter]

G: I'm sorry.

K: It's stopped.

[indistinct chatter]

[audio cuts off]

K: While growing up with great leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, what was your response to their assassination?

T: Well, the assassination of John Kennedy in '63, I think changed the whole country and pr-- I would say prepared us for other assassinations, but then when others came, it was not that-- not as shocking, although it was very devastating, of course. I mean, you know, the fact that Malcolm was killed by black people was-- that one was a heavy one for everybody, I mean. Martin Luther King, I was actually out of the country. When that happened, I was-- I had-- I was doing graduate work in Europe. I was in Holland in Amsterdam going to visit friends, I mean, just enjoying life and got to Amsterdam and was asking directions and this guy decided to show me, you know-- walk with him to where I needed to go and on-- [audio cuts off] --casually asked, I said, "I noticed all the flags are at half-mast." And, you know, I'm thinking somebody in the royal family must have passed. And he said, "Oh, that's for Martin Luther King." I said, "Martin Luther King?" He said, "He was assassinated yesterday." Oh, that was one of those, "Excuse me,

I think I need to just go [chuckles] sit down.” Dr. King’s assassination-- [cell phone rings] -- you’ll just have to ignore that. A little background music to the-- [static interference]. Okay. It launched riots all over the place mainly because-- I mean, in a way, you can say, well that was horrible because it just sort of said that the forces of violence had triumphed over his whole vision of non-violence, but it was just the anger that-- I mean, here was a man of peace who had actually spared the nation all kinds of turmoil and grief by insisting on non-violence when things could have gone another way and that his reward that was being murdered, that was pretty-- I mean, it’s still, I think, felt that way. And then of course, Robert Kennedy was killed only weeks after him so it was that kind of time? [audio cuts off]

G: Was there any effect on civil rights in Miami associated with the wave of the Cubans that came to Miami in the 1960s and what do you remember hearing about Castro and the Cuban Missile Crisis?

T: The-- the situation-- of course, coming here in 1974, I’m really kind of getting a lot of this stuff after the fact. I was in New York as the Cuban Missile Crisis developed. I mean, the fact that it was New York’s Senator Keating who first exposed-- brought to light the presence of these Soviet missiles in Cuba made it more of a story there. Somehow-- [audio cuts off] --maybe it was just naïve on my part, but in retrospect, you know, we kept saying this is the closest the world actually came to nuclear war. It just never seemed to me that that situation could escalate to the point where it would actually turn into that. It just didn’t-- I mean, it just wasn’t that-- I mean, come on, you know? What, are you gonna attack the United States from Cuba? Come on, this isn’t-- but you had egos and all that ideology that kind of just ratcheted things up to a high level of tension. As for the--

I've been privileged to meet, like, some of the Cuban families that first came and it's interesting that when they first got here, they had to go to Virginia Key Beach because they were, you know, the olive color, you know. And they were warmly welcomed and blended right in and loved the place and one of the fallouts of the whole thing is that, you know, the benefits and the gains that did come out of the Civil Rights Movement were able to benefit, you know, lots of immigrants that came who otherwise, you know, might not have had an easier-- as easy a time coming into the country.

W: Okay, last question. Describe what you remember about hearing about the '68 riots in Liberty City.

T: Only that it was pretty devastating. It was-- it was-- I mean, what I heard was that the degree of anger and just-- was so extreme. When I got here, Martin Luther King Boulevard was-- Northwest Sixty-Second Street had been renamed, it was being reconstructed as Martin Luther King Boulevard and as we speak to-- [audio cuts off] -- is still-- we in the artist community are still looking at ways to make that boulevard be very significant and be a living memorial to younger generations because everybody born after '68 has no real idea who Dr. King was, what this was about, and what-- you know, it wasn't just about one man, it was about a whole movement and a vision and a potential for the country.

W: Appreciate your time, sir.

G: Thank you.

K: We would like to thank you for coming out to Turner Tech.

T: And I thank you for the invitation.

[all laugh]

G: You're welcome anytime.

K: Thank you.

T: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW