

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRYANT MITCHELL

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Bryant Mitchell on October 16, 2015, in Alexandria, Virginia, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here today.

Bryant Mitchell: I'm happy to be here.

SI: To begin, could you tell me where and when you were born?

BM: Yes, I was born in Hampton, Virginia, July 13, 1947.

SI: What were your parents' names, for the record?

BM: My father's name was Henry Bryant Mitchell and my mother was Gertrude Marian Phillips Mitchell.

SI: Beginning with your father's side of the family, what do you know about the family background, where they came from?

BM: My father's family is a very interesting one. He's from Ahoskie, North Carolina, which is a rural town in, say, not the shore, not the shore of Carolina, but just due south of Suffolk, Virginia, and it's all agricultural. The town had a population of about five thousand people. My father's family, I would say actually both sides, my mother and father's families are teachers. Most of them were teachers and it was very unusual to have folks who historically were from families of former slaves and then educated people. My father was one of three and his mother, who made her living by washing clothes for the rich white families in the area, sent three children to college. [She] sent my father and his oldest sister to Hampton Institute then, which is now Hampton University. Yes, I'd like to say that--my father's father died when he was three years old, so he was raised, really, with a stepfather--but the family was a very tightknit family, the extended family also. Like I said, it was very unusual to me to see so many black families from this impoverished area go to college and get degrees. It was unheard of, like, my father graduated Hampton in 1938, I think it was. Even when I went to Rutgers I noticed that many of the children, many of the white students, their parents didn't go to college. But here it was. I had both parents who, out of the segregated South, both had accomplished educational levels that were very unusual for the whole general population of America. So, it shows how they were a very determined people and very, very inquisitive people. In our family, and this is my mother's side also, education was everything and you didn't necessarily see this in the urban areas of black people. You didn't see such an emphasis like you saw in North Carolina, but

now my mother's family, my mom was the youngest of five. The oldest was Uncle Saul, and then she had three older sisters and they were teachers or professional people. All the black men that I knew back then, if they weren't doctors or lawyers or something, they worked for the federal government, especially down there. That's a huge employer. My uncles were Postal Service employees despite the fact that they had all finished college. My father said that, "I could make twice as much money being a mail carrier than being a black history teacher." So he taught for a little while in Raleigh, North Carolina, when he first graduated Hampton. He was a history major. He taught at a deaf-and-dumb school there. That's where he met my mother, who happened to be a secretary there when he was there. That's another instance of, I swear, love at first sight. [laughter] I mean, it's the kind of meeting that you just read about somewhere, but it literally was because they married--my father died in 2002--so, they were married for fifty-some-odd years before he died. So, my mother's family, they were all now what we would call middle-class blacks in Hampton, because of those positions they had working for the federal government or being teachers. Hampton's not an agricultural area like my father's town of Ahoskie was. I was born in Dixie Hospital in Hampton, which of course was segregated. Let's see, what else do you need to know about those things?

SI: Your father's father passed away very young.

BM: Right.

SI: He was raised with a stepfather.

BM: Right.

SI: Growing up, did you know any of your grandparents?

BM: I knew my father's mother for a little while, Grandma Moore I called her, because when she remarried she took Mr. Moore's name. Now, my father, I always liked to say that it was more a generational thing when males didn't talk much about their past. You always had to pull it out of them, but my dad, he never ever talked about his stepfather. From what I have found from his other relatives in that area, his stepfather was a very dutiful and nice guy. So you would've thought that maybe the guy was an extra hard disciplinarian or abused my dad physically by spanking him when he did something wrong or something like that, but no, he just never mentioned it and he was evidently just an upstanding guy. Yes, his mother, I knew her. I guess Grandma Moore probably died when I was

maybe five years old or so. There was a lot of intermarrying in the South and you could really tell because Grandma Moore did look like an Indian. She had hair like an Indian, straight hair like an Indian, and she just looked like an Indian. Now, my dad's father looked like he was probably my complexion and all and purely African-American, probably, but lead me some more.

SI: I was just curious if any stories came down through the older members of your family about what life was like in the rural areas.

BM: Yes. It was very difficult from my perspective because, like I said, everything was extremely racially segregated then. Also, my father had to travel by at least two white schools before he arrived at his school in Winton, North Carolina. So it was about ten miles away from his home. Also, black children didn't go to school for nine whole months. When the harvest season came around they shut down the black schools and they had to work in the fields. So, I mean, that's one thing that really struck me when I was a kid and my dad would tell me about that time. Now they did have segregated school buses though. My father didn't have to--he's not one of these guys that you hear they say, "Well, I used to walk twenty miles to school every day, barefoot." [laughter] No, it wasn't that bad, but yes, everything was very segregated. My mom, like I told you, came from Hampton and a more middle-class family. When she visited my dad, because my dad grew up in a small, shotgun house [with] only three rooms for five people, my mother says she remembered once when she was there this car pulls up with a white lady in it and she beeps on the horn for my grandma to come out. Then, my aunt [and] Grandma Moore had to carry these big bundles of clothes that Grandma had done for this lady, had to walk them out to the car, and then walk the new dirty clothes back. But it was just another part of the South where you saw the caste system in existence. But I grew up with all that kind of stuff. In a way, it prepared me to look at the world realistically, and coming from two fine families, I had the wherewithal and the courage and confidence and all to know that I had a lot of self-worth. As a matter of fact, when I was that little I was probably a little too precocious, [laughter] but yes, that's one of the biggest anecdotes I carry from that era. Now, my father did have some cousins and we'd visit them down there. I remember one cousin Dad had, they literally were still sharecroppers. The house looked just like the impoverished, rambling-like houses, up on brick columns, just roughhewn wood they were made out of. I remember at that house, I could look down through the floorboards and see the ground, and so, they had no insulation. The kitchen would be another part off from the house. I mean, it was really just poorly constructed and [as] a little kid coming from Hampton, like I said, from a

middle-class background and all, to see this kind of poverty made a lasting impression on me. It made me realize that I was lucky; I was a lucky kid, yes.

SI: Your parents met when they were both working at this school in Raleigh.

BM: Yes.

SI: Aside from that secretarial job, did your mother have any other jobs?

BM: My mother has always been a secretary and my sister, who is now a professor at Rutgers, Carolyn Brown ...

SI: Yes, an illustrious professor.

BM: Yes. You know when one is a teenager or in college and all and you're talking with your parents? My sister always--she didn't berate my mother--she just said, "Mother, why didn't you ever try to establish a professional career? Why were you always [a secretary]?" I always thought that my sister was being unduly harsh to Mom, but it was really just daughter and mother talking and all. But you could tell that my sister felt that Mom was so much more talented, that Mom could've done more. Once you think about it, she was absolutely right, because my mother's a very good musician. All of the siblings in my mother's family were musicians. My uncle played double bass. The next oldest was Aunt Margaret, who we nicknamed Peggy, she was a violinist. The next one was La-La [Charlotte Phillips]. She was a viola player. And then there was Agnes. Agnes is the only one who didn't play an instrument, and then my mother played cello. So a tradition in our family for years, until Agnes [stopped doing this], what Agnes couldn't play she made up as a hostess. And so every Thanksgiving she fed, like, thirty-five people in her house and we always had an informal music recital. My mother and her siblings played hymns, music, and classical music for us at Thanksgiving dinner. I'm the only person I know to this day who had such an environment on Thanksgiving Day where all the siblings played classical orchestral string instruments. We'd have this ensemble every single Thanksgiving, never seen a family ever do that. So, I don't want to just ramble, so if you had some more questions or whatever ...

SI: I do want to get a slice-of-life look at what you went through. What was your neighborhood like where you grew up in Hampton?

BM: In Hampton, when I was a little guy my parents didn't own a house yet. They were living with my grandparents, with her parents, and so I think they lived there. Maybe--well, they lived there [when] my sister was born, and then when my mother became pregnant with me three years later. My sister was born in 1944. Then, when my mother became pregnant again with me, my dad and her said, "Yes, we've got to move now. It's not fair to your parents." So we moved to this place called Newsome Park, which was temporary housing for World War II. These houses literally were like glorified cardboard and they were up on little brick pilings and everything. They had a coal stove in the middle of the living room area. It was very temporary housing for us and you have to understand for Hampton, which is a real military complex, I mean, they had a very large increase in population. Developers couldn't keep up with the demand. So we stayed there for a year until my parents could buy a brick townhouse in Newport News. Aberdeen, it was called. I was there until, I guess, [I] was around four years old and then we moved back to Hampton, because my grandfather sold my parents some land he owned across the street from his house in Hampton. So, I mean, I really lived a very privileged life. Sometimes, I feel sort of guilty about it because I had my grandparents living across the street, which not many people had a chance to do back then, especially during the war when folks moved around a lot and all. But life in Hampton for me was great because of that. I had an aunt [La-La] who lived three doors down. This is all a suburban area. It was Langley Field Road. It was in Hampton, which is a flat, spread out, regular town, and the largest employer Langley Field Air Force Base. [Unknown to my mom at the time three of her friends working at Langley were not clericals, but were the protagonists and mathematicians working in the top-secret NASA program seen in the popular motion picture "Hidden Figures".] My mother worked there as a stenographer at Langley Air Force Base while my father was a postman. We were living in Hampton but his postal route was in Newport News, which is the next-door city. Life in Hampton was very close-knit. All my mother's siblings lived within two miles of each other. So I had a lot of contact with them on Sundays, visiting aunts and uncles and that kind of thing. So I had a very, very supportive, loving family. I guess it was so good that when my father decided to become an Episcopal priest that my mom was glad to leave Hampton, because she was the baby of the siblings. Like I said, they all lived so close to each other, they couldn't help but try to suggest how "little sister" should conduct her life. So, my mother was glad when my father sort of took her out of the nest, but in Hampton at that time, it's amazing, as I look back at how I lived during this segregated time. My sister was three years older. We went to I guess you would call it nowadays in your generation, a magnet school. It was Phenix Elementary School. It was an experimental school for black students on Hampton University's campus and they're public schools. It

was Phenix Elementary and Phenix High School. So, I went there from first-second grade. I did the first and second grade in one year. My sister and I, we probably lived five miles from the school. To show you how things have changed, we rode our bikes to school starting when I was six years old. No one felt that they would be harmed, even young blacks in a racially segregated era. The parents knew that as long as your kids were responsible and, plus, I had my older sister right with me--I don't know if they would've let me do it by myself; no, I'm sure they wouldn't have--but as long as we were riding together it was permissible, no problems with it. Then when I got into third grade--I would catch the bus, the public bus to and from school. Blacks were supposed to sit in the back of the bus and, here I was, seven years old, and I refused. I used to just go sit, get on the bus, sit right behind the driver. I think all the drivers said, "This kid knows he's not supposed to sit here," but I was such a little guy they probably said, "I don't want to make any stink over this," because I never did go to the back. [laughter] I know it was very disturbing for them. If my mother had gotten on and done that the bus driver would've told her to please step behind the white line in the back. They had a little line there for you, man. In the movies and all, the Lee Theater which was in Phoebus, that was the nearest theater, I had to go another town over, you'd have one ticket office, the window in front for whites and a little side window on the same ticket booth for blacks. We had to sit upstairs too. Blacks had to sit in the balcony. What was funny to a kid like me, I could see better in the balcony anyway, because adults wouldn't be in front of me and I'd be trying to look around them and all. I guess, a lot of folks, I'm sure racial segregation psychologically scarred a lot of people, a lot of black people. But like I said, I was so sheltered and all and had so much love and esteem and everything in my family that I saw it as sort of an instance where a little guy can prove that he's entering--he wants to be a man. You know how little guys pretend that they're more responsible than they are? [laughter]

SI: You said you were about six or so at this time.

BM: Yes.

SI: This would have been around 1953 or 1954.

BM: Yes.

SI: Did your family ever comment on this or was it just so ubiquitous that there was nothing to say?

BM: They would say--they never knew I was riding in the front, I mean--and I think when I finally told my parents that I think they knew I was such a small age too that maybe these bus drivers realized, "There's no sense in making this kid move." Even if they had asked me to do it, I don't know, maybe I would've done it, maybe I would've sat in the back, but they never did. I was definitely aware of it, but look, I'm riding on the bus by myself. A public transit bus, coming from school, going to school. So, I'm just sure that these bus drivers just said, "I'd better just not say anything. I don't want trouble on the job either," and he probably also thought that the other white riders would say, "Oh, this is just a little kid." I never remembered any of the white passengers, though, saying, "Get in the back, boy." Never remembered that, but there were a lot of other racial instances. Once, when I was with my dad and we were going to see my mother's brother who lived in Phoebus, there was a drugstore near their house. My dad took me in to get something to drink or whatever and we had to stand at the end of the counter. Blacks weren't allowed to sit at the counter. So, my dad was ordering something, but I sat down on the seat while Dad was ordering at the end of the bar. I sat down at the end next to my standing Dad and the white owner of the drugstore said--and I was tapping my feet on the little stainless steel railings on the bottom--and he said, "Stop tapping. You get off of that seat, boy," and he came close to me. I can remember my father, man, just saying loudly, "If you touch my son, I will kill you." Man, that guy's face just turned red and he didn't say a word, and then, my father said, "Let's go, son," but that was the first instance where I had seen my dad stand up for me like that and knowing that it was all just because of legally mandated segregation. So, I mean, that really made an impression with me. Also, from Hampton, my uncle used to travel a lot. He and his wife had no children, and so my uncle--this is another instance in my life that I'm fairly certain no other black family has done it--we camped. We took a camping trip that my uncle organized from Hampton, Virginia, to California and back. The summer of 1954. We stayed at campgrounds all the way across the country and we would stay with friends of my uncle in different cities. He had a friend that lived in San Francisco. We stayed at his house a couple nights. There were--let's see, who was it?--it was Uncle Saul, "Wickie" my uncle's nephew, Aunt Charlotte [La-La], my cousin Karen, my father, my mother, my sister and myself. We traveled in two cars. My uncle had a bright red Chrysler New Yorker 1954, and we had a '54 Chrysler Windsor, and we had a tent. We went all the way across the country and back. I told my uncle, over and over again, [that] it was the most significant educational experience. Here I was, six years old and I turned seven on the way back in Kansas City. It's the most inspirational educational experience that I'd ever had in my life and I have known of no families, much less black families that did that. [It] that took a whole two months to go from Hampton across the country and back



camping. What I did, I got a chance to meet real Indians, [and] I got a chance to experience real racism. I remember in Omaha, outside of Omaha, in a campground these guys just called me a nigger and everything and I went and told the adults, my uncle. My uncle went to this kid's parents in the campground and told his father. Then when my uncle was walking back, he said he heard the kid crying. His father spanked him, reprimanded the kid right then and there. "You don't call anybody a nigger," which my mother just asked me last night, did I remember that? I don't remember that, I don't remember the kid saying that. Now I do remember when we went to Las Vegas that we were going into a casino and stuff and one of the hosts there just said, "You can't come in here. We don't accept negroes in this casino." So it was a very interesting time. This was 1954 and, I mean, I've been to the Badlands, I've been through the Mojave Desert, I've been to Mead Lake, I've been to the Grand Canyon. I didn't get a chance to go into Disneyland because for some reason that day it was closed. It was fairly new then in 1954. [Editor's Note: Disneyland was still under construction in 1954. The theme park opened in July 1955.] I remember, when we were crossing the Mojave Desert, a little six-year-old guy's got to have something to occupy him and we only crossed the desert--you crossed deserts at night--and you'd have these big water [containers], these like calfskin water things you'd put on the front of your car. In case you ran out of water, you had it to put in your radiator. I remember, we were going from Las Vegas to LA, I think, or to San Francisco, but anyway I counted over two hundred-and-some semi-tractor-trailers back then. I had never even seen tandem trailers back then. So for a little guy, man, six years old, I mean, this was utterly fascinating, you know what I mean? [laughter] It was great, but I remember, when we were coming back we had a friend who was a doctor in Kansas City. We stayed at their place, but I remember, it was the first time I remembered, it was always very hot and humid in Hampton in the summer, okay, but I was a little guy--you could go around with your shorts on and your Buster Brown shoes, no shirt. I ran outside and they have this gorgeous jungle gym set and I jumped up on it and burned my hands. It was 120 [degrees]. I'd never experienced heat like that in my life, in Kansas City. So, there's all these little things that a kid can really [feel] that made indelible impressions on you when you're a little guy, but it wasn't until I was an adult that I realized what a feat this was. Oh, another thing, when I tell you I was pretty spoiled after the first night, I guess the first night was in West Virginia, in this campground or something. It was so cold and we all had cots inside the tent. Now, the tents back then didn't have floors in them, it was just open bottoms. You just put in the pegs and everything. Of course, I didn't do that because I was six years old, but anyway, we didn't know then that if you just put newspaper down over the cot it wouldn't be so cold under the bottom. After that first night, I slept in the front seat of the car the whole rest of the way, the whole time. I do remember

at Yosemite I saw Old Faithful geyser one day, and then I asked the ranger. He said, "Well, no, it's going to erupt tomorrow morning at six," blah, blah, blah, right. My parents said, "Man, you got up by yourself, walked all the way to where Old Faithful was, and then, came back," before anybody in the family had known that I had done this by myself. That was interesting too because it's the first time I'd seen sulfur ponds and stuff, that smelled just like rotten eggs, I mean, but for a kid to see this at such a young age was phenomenal, I mean, just utterly phenomenal. When we were going through the Badlands, my dad ran over a chipmunk and I got so mad at him that I didn't speak to him for twenty-four hours--like he did it deliberately, right?

SI: Around this time, was that when your father became a minister?

BM: Yes. My father went to the seminary when I was eight years old. So my mother--okay, this is also [something]--my dad was a pure Southern Baptist, Ahoskie Baptist Church in North Carolina, but my mother was born Episcopalian. My grandmother was an Episcopalian, my grandfather was Baptist, my mother's father was Baptist, and Mom's was St. Cyprian's Church. Well my dad said, "I'll go to your church." My dad became so enamored with the Episcopal Church that one day, he told my mom, he said, "Gertrude, I think I'd like to be an Episcopal priest." And my mother, man, said, "Heck no. No way, no way--I'm not going to be a minister's wife. You have to go to school for three whole years. What about us?" because my dad was the first black Virginian to attend Virginia Theological Seminary, which is to this day the largest Episcopal seminary in this country. My dad though, because of segregation and all, my dad wanted to go to divinity school in New York City. However, the Bishop of Virginia, who of course was white, when he found out my dad wanted to go to seminary, he said, "Henry, I don't want you to leave this state." He said, "I want you to apply to Virginia Theological," and he said, "If you go there, I'll keep an eye on you." In other words if anyone tried to harm my dad or treat him unfairly there, he would intervene, the Bishop would intervene. I have met--God, was his name Goodwin?--I've forgotten the Bishop's name, but anyway, it's too bad I wasn't old enough to have known him, because I really would've respected him more than I had respected probably any white male up to that time because he was really sticking his neck out. [Editor's Note: Reverend Frederick Deane Goodwin served as the ninth Episcopal Bishop of Virginia from 1944 until he retired in 1960.] Before, only African or West Indian blacks had gone to the Seminary because they consider themselves foreigners and the Seminary consider them foreigners, but not an Afro-American. My dad, my mother couldn't change him, man. She was really vehement about his not going to seminary. She apologizes about this every time now, because I think what my

father liked about the Episcopal Church is that, compared with the Baptist religion, where each church was autonomous; he liked the structure, a formal structure to it. He liked its theology. Its theology was pretty much set out, but he also liked that they demanded three years of graduate study and I know this affected my dad. Once you've accomplished all of that preparation and everything, the Episcopal priests were given a certain amount of respect because of that. They just weren't guys who took a correspondence course and could get a church going, like a lot of Baptists did, and just go in and preach and build it up as much as you want. My father liked having a formal structure, bishop on down. But my mom said, when my dad left and I saw my mom crying, here I am eight years old, I came up to her and I told her, I said, "Mom, don't cry. I'm the man of the house now. We'll be okay," and she said, when I said that, she stopped crying. She said she [thought], "Who does this kid think he is?" [laughter] Mom couldn't believe that but I thought that, but yes, they were rough years. My dad could only afford to come home maybe once a month. He'd come home for the weekend and then go right back. My dad learned Greek, Hebrew, everything there. It's pretty ecumenical in their training at the Episcopal seminaries. I mean, I'm telling you, I think that really, really intellectually satisfied my father and my mother apologizes to this day [about] how much trouble she gave him. She realized that this is what he wants and needs to do, is to be a priest, to be a minister to people. So that's it.

SI: If you do not mind going into those years a bit, was your mother the sole breadwinner then? Was your father able to work part-time and send money home?

BM: No, he couldn't. They wouldn't allow you to and, yet my mom, it was tight. As a matter of fact, it was so tight budget-wise that--thank God though, remember, my grandmother and grandfather lived across the street. Before my dad went to seminary too, Dad was working two jobs. He was working as a postman and a real estate agent at night and on weekends. I spent all my days with my granddad. Every Monday we'd go to the fire station and I'd sit in the fire trucks. All the firemen are white. They didn't say anything about it. They knew right then and there that there was just some kind of a special bond between this black grandfather and his black grandson and, see, they had to see, within themselves that this was right. He made kites for me and, I mean, I knew in those years, I knew my granddad more. I spent more time with my granddad than my father because when my father came home, I'd probably be asleep already. So, it's just having that extended family around, spoiled, man, I'm telling you. I just lived a very, very privileged childhood and after my father finished seminary you're assigned to mission churches. My dad was assigned three churches, Danville, Halifax, Virginia, and Chatham, Virginia. They're all within driving distance,

those three towns, maybe thirty miles from each other, and he would rotate which Sunday he'd have to [minister to each community]. The thing is we lived in Danville at this boardinghouse because blacks didn't have any temporary place to live. We lived at this boardinghouse, Mrs. Bailey's, Mr. and Mrs. Bailey's boardinghouse. I had to go to the school, Westmoreland School. The Episcopal Church didn't even have a church there. We had to rent space in the YWCA there to hold services and when they assigned you those mission churches that's what they mean. Mission churches are the least sustainable economically. [laughter] At least in Halifax there was a clapboard facility and a rectory, which we did move into like seven months later from Danville. Chatham was so small, the church I think could hold maybe thirty-five people but it was really a miniature, nice church, brick, I mean, nice detailed woodwork inside and all. Almost like a dollhouse, it was so tiny. Those days, that year-and-a-half or whatever it all totaled out to be, were pretty rough. It was rough on me because, because I was a year ahead [having completed the first and second grade in one school year]. I was always the smallest guy in the class, and then, I'd be bullied. The first time that I knew that I was the smallest in my class--I'm going back now to Phenix Elementary in Hampton, when I was about fourth grade, I guess--we were in an assembly and my best buddy was sitting about six seats away on the end. Then there was this big kid, Walter Cuffey, who was a deaf-mute, about three years older than everybody else. I mean, he was like the size of a man. Robert looked at me, around Walter, and shook his fist, and so I looked at Robert and shook my fist. Well, Walter Cuffey thought I was shaking my fist at him, and then he pointed to me and said that he was going to beat me. So, I didn't take it seriously. At the end of class I looked outside of our classroom--and it was Mrs. Austin, [she] was the teacher then--I looked outside and there were all these people gathered to see Walter Cuffey beat me. Then when I tried to sneak out the other end of the hall and all, these other kids--see, now, this is the mob mentality--the other kid says, "There's Bryant, go get him." These kids dragged me into this circle of kids. Walter Cuffey was getting ready to just cream me. Mrs. Austin happened to look out the window and it's a first-floor [classroom] window, so this is really going on about twenty yards from her window. So, she comes out, Shaun, and saved me, literally. I mean, by a few minutes, man, saved me from being pummeled by this guy who never should've been in the school anyway. So, that was the first instance that I knew that being small was going to be a problem, but being able to be articulate too saved me. When we had moved to Danville, I went to this school, Westmoreland, and there was this guy, Mallard, who wanted to [beat me]. All the girls liked me--they thought I was cute--and so, Mallard didn't like that. He was a bully, and then I noticed that, "Who was the baddest guy in the school, though?" I mean, in the class, was Jerry Williams. Jerry Williams' father was the only black

lawyer in Danville. Jerry was like--whites would've thought he was like landed gentry, because his dad was the big lawyer in town and stuff--and Jerry was a tough son of a bitch. I befriended Jerry. I made Jerry, man, my best buddy, alias protector. [laughter] When Mallard saw that I'd hang out at Jerry's house and stuff like that because all the blacks lived in the same area in any Southern town--any little Southern town, they're all clustered together--but, when he saw that I had befriended Jerry, man, Mallard never messed with me again. I learned. Man, you learn how to survive. It wasn't until later when I went away to prep school up in Pennsylvania, that's when I agreed to take the ninth grade over again. Now, man, I'm the same size as everybody. That's one reason I did that, but those were unstable times because when you first finish seminary you do have to serve. The Diocese wants you to serve these mission churches and it's very, thank God, temporary. So, then my father finally got a permanent assignment to Trinity Episcopal Church in Charlottesville, Virginia and that's where we moved. That's when I got involved in the integration suit, the desegregation suit and all, as one of the named plaintiffs.

SI: Before we get to that point, I wanted to ask about these other schools. You said that Phenix was on the Hampton Campus.

BM: Right.

SI: What did you think of the teachers there?

BM: The teachers at Phenix were exquisite. As you can imagine being attached to the University, to Hampton Institute, they got the highest caliber of black teachers that were around. Do you know it wasn't until we moved to Danville that I realized that a lot of black folks and a lot of white folks didn't understand the King's English, never knew how to do the verb tenses and all? "We was going here," and stuff. I'd never heard that in Hampton because everybody in my family was educated and all of my parents' friends were and all the kids. Phenix Elementary was such a good school I never heard anyone splitting verbs. I mean, you learned that stuff. Number one, you learned it in your household. Number two, it's reinforced when you were learning grammar in school. So it's just another instance where I was just in the right place, another privilege, another privilege in my life, because it wasn't until I was in Danville, which is a poor city. The biggest employer there was the Dan River Mills and it wasn't until we bought this house in Old Town [Alexandria] here and Hodding Carter was our next-door neighbor. Well his wife, Pat Darian, was from Danville. I didn't know that they called people who worked in the Dan River Mills "lint heads." That was very derogatory,

[laughter] no, but Danville was that poor and I think it still is, but the school there was Westmoreland I went to, in Danville, a black elementary school. It was in the black neighborhood, so it was only like a few blocks from where we were living with the Baileys. It wasn't as good. I never had another public school that was as good as Phenix. After leaving there I went to regular public schools, regular black public schools. And yes, it was nothing compared to my boarding school. I mean, that was exquisite teaching there. I got along very well. Like I mentioned, the only problems I had was, occasionally with a bullying male and other than that no. I had all kinds of girlfriends and I really enjoyed myself. Plus, when you move into town and people see you're the Episcopal priest's son and all, they knew a little bit about you just from that. I mean, they knew that I was going to be a preacher's kid, which meant devilish as hell, too. [laughter] I always tell people to this day, "Yes, I was a typical PK, typical preacher's kid," thought you could get away with all kinds of [stuff], very mischievous.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: When your father got his assignment to these mission churches, was the family also involved in his work in the church? Did you have to do anything related to the services on Sundays?

BM: That's a real good question. I'm surprised you asked that. Yes, especially in those little [communities], in the mission churches at Danville, Halifax and Chatham. My mother was the organist, right, and then who was the acolyte, the altar boy? Me, yes, and my sister, my sister didn't do anything. So, she did not participate at all in the formal liturgy or anything, yes, but no, we helped. It was a family effort and to this day, I go to Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill, which is attached to the Virginia Theological Seminary, and as you can imagine, I said, "They don't teach the altar boys and girls as well as we were taught." I mean, I can really critique how to be an altar boy and help the service run smoothly up around the altar but the kids today don't. I guess if I taught the acolytes in my church, which I haven't committed to I could have them have more of a service-oriented mentality about it to help the priest during the liturgy and all.

SI: This was around the time you were eleven. This was 1958. Obviously, many things were happening across the South.

BM: Right.

SI: Many of them were centered in churches.

BM: Right.

SI: Did your father attempt any social justice type activities?

BM: Well, no, my father was an ardent Civil Rights activist. When he was assigned his permanent church in Charlottesville, Trinity Episcopal, he was so successful there. He eventually built a new church there, a new Trinity Episcopal. All of this is near the grounds of the University of Virginia. My father, when we moved there, it really struck him that this is a university town of one of the top flagship universities in the country and [there was] no black middle-class. There was not one black attorney in Charlottesville. The town had a permanent population of about thirty-five thousand and if you took into consideration, this is back then [in] Albemarle County. Within which it was, about seventy thousand people [and] not one black lawyer. The one black doctor didn't even have hospital privileges at the University of Virginia Hospital. So, my dad just said, "In this idyllic, gorgeous, university town, it's a backwater for black people," because all the blacks worked for either the fraternities or the University Hospital as orderlies or maids for the wealthy whites in the town and stuff, no black middle-class. So, my father said, "There's a leadership [gap]." My dad's going to be a leader anyway; there was a leadership void there. My father started poverty programs. He started Camp Faith for the summertime. He talked to this white man who owned a manufacturing plant in Albemarle County, [and] had a whole lot of land around it and all. My dad talked with him, he says, "I want to hold a camp for indigent kids from the city here, because," he said, "you have a lake," a pond, "you have the space." My father said, "I'll organize the whole thing if you'd let us," and the man said, "By all means." My best friend, Paul Scott and myself, we drove the school buses and to and from the camp, and then my dad started ...

SI: How old were you when you did that?

BM: Oh, back then I was a teenager, I was sixteen. I was driving the school bus at sixteen, yes, for the summer camp. I got my license, my school bus license. Paul and I did. I wouldn't recommend it for anybody who runs any facility because Paul and I would drag race on the highway with the buses, with kids in it. I mean, no, too young. [laughter] I drove my bus so fast one time from the camp back to town to let the kids off I shattered the driveshaft into four pieces. I was going so fast down this hill with the bus--never let any immature teenagers have a job that responsible. Yes my dad became chairman of the Democratic Party there, he was [also] on the school board. My dad was the most influential black person in

Charlottesville and they lived there for eighteen years. I was there for two years and when my father asked me, "Would I like to be a named plaintiff in the integration suit against the Charlottesville School System?" I'm twelve years old, I said, "Heck, yes. That's what I mean--some excitement for once," and the ironic thing about it is that we had fourteen named plaintiffs and two of us dropped out. I dropped out because [of] the school system. That's when Virginia started its massive resistance program and offered to pay portions of your cost of education for white kids to go to privates. To form and go to, attend, private schools, as opposed to going to an integrated school, whenever the edict is passed down by the courts to integrate. [Editor's Note: In *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the US Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" precedent established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and ruled that state-sponsored segregated schools were unconstitutional. However, the Supreme Court ruling only stated that desegregation should proceed with "all deliberate speed" and left the burden of desegregation on individual African-Americans to bring enforcement suits in federal district courts. In Virginia, initial efforts to slowly implement limited desegregation were swept away by Democratic Party machine boss US Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr.'s call for "massive resistance" by the white majority in 1956. In August 1956, Governor Thomas B. Stanley and the Virginia General Assembly, backed by the state's major newspapers, passed a slate of "Massive Resistance" legislation, including funding for private, segregated education. From 1956 to 1958, local desegregation suits were launched in the federal courts, including the *School Board of the City of Charlottesville v. Doris Allen* (240 F. 2d 59 [4th Cir. 1956]). In 1957, Virginians elected J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., a proponent of "Massive Resistance," as their Governor. In September 1958, after federal judges ordered schools to be desegregated in several lawsuits, including the Charlottesville case, Governor Almond ordered the schools to be closed. In January 1959, both federal and state courts ruled the school closings unconstitutional. In February 1959, Almond backed away from "Massive Resistance" to allow limited school desegregation; however, widespread desegregation in Virginia did not occur until after the 1968 US Supreme Court ruling in *Green et al. v. County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia*.] So, what they said is that, despite the fact that the fourteen named plaintiffs scored at least two years ahead of the grade they were in, they said that we were intellectually incapable of learning in a white students' curriculum, right. So, they had all fourteen of us tutored in the superintendent's office, which happened to be just about four blocks from our house and behind the elementary school I would've gone to, but the named plaintiffs represented grades one through twelve. The ironic thing about it all, I was one of the two who didn't go through the whole legal process, but my dad and I are the ones who are on the movie, the documentary,



*Eyes on the Prize* [(1987)], walking into the courthouse, in the Harrisonburg Western Federal District Courthouse, to trial. It was a very, very interesting time, because, despite the fact, after that one year of being tutored by the retired teacher, white teacher, to teach all fourteen twelve grades in one room, in two rooms, really, they said, "Well, we're still not going to let you integrate the schools." So my father had to tutor me for a year. He tutored Judy Saunders and myself. We were in the same grade. My father tutored us that at our house and then when the case was dragging along and they thought that my father would have to tutor us again my father said, "I can't sacrifice my son's education any longer." There was an Episcopal minister of the University of Virginia at St. Paul's Church, which was the biggest Episcopal Church in town, right across from the rotunda at the University of Virginia's Campus, Ted Evans. Reverend Ted Evans was a good friend of my father's, white, of course. My father said, "I've got to send my child to boarding school." So, I looked at St. Paul's School and Groton up in New England. They were all very stuffy, all-boys and everything, and then, my dad talked with Ted Evans. He said, "Well, why don't you look at the school I sent my son and daughter to, Solebury School? It's a small Quaker school, coeducational, about thirty miles, in New Hope, Pennsylvania, north of Philly there." And he said, "Yes, my son went to Harvard and my daughter went to Radcliffe from there." When I looked at Solebury, it had been a Dutch farm and these four gentlemen started a boarding school there. The topography was a little bit like Charlottesville, rolling hills, but it was gorgeous. Only 220 students, fifty-fifty boys-girls, fifty-fifty boarding-day. So, I visited and I fell in love with it, and so my parents said--oh, when they interviewed me in Charlottesville, one of the founders interviewed me. He was a Latin scholar. I didn't find this out until my fiftieth anniversary last summer because one of the teachers there, who happened to be the assistant headmaster then, was there and he said, "Bryant, Pop Shaw said he interviewed you and all. He says, 'Yes, the kid is very intelligent and everything, but all of his education has been in black schools in the South,' which he knew were underfunded, under everything, underachieving, everything. He says, 'I'm just wondering, I don't know if he could keep up here.'" And I just found this out last summer, at our fiftieth reunion. Bill Berkeley told me that, and then Bill said that some of the other [administrators], Bill said he spoke up and all and he said, "No, we're going to give this guy a chance," and made honor roll all the way through. Oh, I forgot to tell you too. I had my first football uniform when I was five years old. My dad bought me one. I looked like one of those bobble heads. The helmet was so big, you could almost [fall over], but I played with teenage guys in front of my buddy--my buddy, Tommy Jordan, lived two doors down--he had a great, big front yard. We'd play sandlot football in his front yard during football season and the big guys, the teenagers, because I was a little guy,

six years old, five, six and stuff, they wouldn't hit me head on. They'd try to clip me with their arms and stuff, but that's how I learned how to [play]. That's how I learned shiftiness, because I was always one of the lightest guys on the team, but I was always the fastest, too, but that's why--I was developing skills back then. Well, I started playing formally, because we had a sandlot team in Charlottesville, too--we never won a game. My father was coach, we never won a game, [laughter] because we were playing guys three and four years older than we were. When I went to Solebury in the ninth grade I started playing varsity and I became very, very good. My parents said, when they took me there to school for that semester, for that first semester and all. This other soon-to-be friend, Terry Thompson, said, "Do you like football?" I said, "Of course." He said, "Well, let's go out and look at practice," and my parents said they didn't see me again until Thanksgiving. I didn't even say goodbye to them. Here they are dropping me off at boarding school, and like I've always told people, I was so secure with my family. I've never been homesick a day in my life. That was an interesting time. Oh, also my father and the NAACP, of course, we were members of that. When we would picket certain stores at that time when I was in Charlottesville, when I was eleven and twelve a redneck spit on my sister once in the picket line and I was going to fight him, at twelve years old, right. This guy would've creamed me, but my father held me back and all, and then, he just said, "Son, you don't have the temperament to ever be on the picket line again. I'm not going to let you, because this is a nonviolent movement." [laughter] That was it and that was wise because there's no way in the world I could've let somebody spit on my sister. I mean, I used to get--these weren't bullies, but you know how teenage guys are--my sister's three years older than I am and these teenage guys would say, "Hey, man, is your sister putting out?" and stuff like that. I'd fight him, man. I'd charge right into these guys and they'd kill me, but it's just that to talk about my sister in that light, no, no, no.

SI: I would imagine that, with your mom and father working so many hours, you must have been very close.

BM: My sister and I were not close at all. I think we loved each other but she is three years older and the perfect budding lady. We never had mutual friends or anything, we relate better as adults. Oh, I had so many friends in the neighborhood and I was always an outgoing kid and all, but my best friend, Paul Scott, the altar boy, he lived about four blocks from us. This is what was cool about being young. I would eat dinner at my house, or I'd go down to Paul's house and eat another dinner, or I'd eat dinner at Paul's house and when I came back home I'd eat with my family again--and you never gained a pound, right. I mean, it was beautiful, being

able to eat like that. Paul's mother was an excellent cook. So, if I were going to forfeit one of those meals it'd be my parents', it'd be my mom's meal. I'd eat at Paul's house. She'd have rolls and all this stuff every meal, but yes, I had lots of friends. As a matter of fact, I had so many friends, I told you I was a PK (preacher's kid), [and] I started a casino in my house, in my parents' house. About six or seven of us would be playing poker down there and all and, of course, I was winning--I was the house. My father caught me, punished me, [and] wouldn't let me leave the house for, like, two weeks after school. And [he] made me give back all the money to our [football team]. Our football team was the Crusaders, our sandlot team made me give all my money to the Crusaders, which we would spend on refreshments and stuff like that. My mom was so embarrassed. She says, "Do the parents know that you were running a casino in our basement?" I said, "Probably not. Well, Mama, we're all guys. We aren't going to tell our parents that we're gambling." [laughter] I had a bunch of girlfriends. This was another thing wrong with me being a grade ahead like this. See, this is all prior to boarding school. There'd be dances at the black recreation center every Saturday night and stuff and we'd go there after we played football games. At times, some of my guys would have bandages on and stuff to get some sympathy from the girls and junk. But I remember one time, because I was shorter than everybody else, maybe four or five songs would go by before I could conjure up the courage to walk all the way across that gym floor, which looked like miles, to go over and ask the girls that you had a crush on to dance, right? So, the one I had the crush on, Carolyn Hopkins, I mean I walked all the way over. I bet it took me a half an hour to get up the nerve to ask her to dance, right. I get over there and she's sitting there with her friends and stuff. In the loudest voice she could conjure she says, "Bryant Mitchell, I can't dance with you. You're too short," and then I said, "Jesus Christ." I didn't say Jesus Christ. I probably said a few choice curse words and had to walk all the way back over. I think the cool thing about it is once I went away to boarding school, I'm thirteen and you're growing fast, now, right? Man, I came back home--see, I'd grown maybe three, four inches in one year--and so when I came back then the chicks after that, man, my whole time when I was in boarding school, my mother said, "Before every holiday, girls would be calling the house and saying, 'Is Bryant coming home?'" I said, "Yes, it's about time." [laughter]

SI: Let me pause for a moment.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You talked about how your father asked you if you wanted to be one of the named plaintiffs. Was the idea that you would enter the school and force them into taking this issue into court? Which came first?

BM: Okay. Of course, everybody knows *Brown v. Board of Education* was the catalyst for all of this, for each locality. Of course, the NAACP, if there's one thing they were expert at that was filing Civil Rights litigation with the best plaintiffs possible. Even with *Brown v. Board of Education*, I understand that there were a lot of people, students, who they turned down because they had blemishes in their background and all. So, the NAACP really screened their named plaintiffs [and] vetted them very well. So, when they said that [in the *Brown* case], it's just a matter of time before the NAACP chapter in Charlottesville said, "We have to better the education of our children. No more of this separate but unequal." So, when they filed the suit they needed all twelve grades represented and all. That's why my dad asked me, "If you'd like to be one of the named plaintiffs..." My sister didn't want to be but teenage girls, young girls, they're not as precocious, I don't think, as young males. As a matter of fact, out of the twelve named plaintiffs, out of the fourteen named plaintiffs, I think there were, what? One, two, maybe only four girls. All the rest were males, yes. At least when we were all being tutored in the superintendent's office that time, there was a sense of camaraderie amongst the plaintiffs, but then that next year we had to get different tutors for each grade like Judy and me. If it hadn't been for Judy, I would've really been bored to death being tutored alone. I think it's good that-- what do they say, "It's too bad life's wasted on youth?" [laughter] I think, because I was that young and all I was able to accept our situation and it was all so new that I never really [questioned it]. And a kid's never going to look that far in the future anyway, but I did know that this lawsuit had to be done. I knew we were getting the secondhand books from the local school boards and I knew everything was secondhand. Everything was less than proper. So, I don't know, it's just instilled in me because of my dad I'm sure, being the Episcopal priest and all, I'm sure that I felt--plus, I loved adventure--it's a chance to do something to help a lot of people, and you're too young to know all the repercussions of it anyway. It's just something that's very, very exciting.

SI: Were you shielded by your parents from some of the more violent reactions to what you were doing?

BM: Not so much, no, I wasn't. What I was shielded from was I never knew I liked business until I finished law school. I wanted to have a paper route when I was a kid. There's no way in the world my parents would've let me have a paper

route and take papers to white people's houses because she said, "A lot of them would insult you." So, being protective, it kept me from venturing out into learning about business when I was a kid. So that was a clear manifestation of [how] your parents were aware, but didn't really want you to be afraid of living. But if you ever stepped over that line, like me getting a paper route and what, two-thirds of my customers would be white? Then, my parents didn't want me to have that type of an individual exposure with different white people at that age. I told them about it many times after I became an adult, because I did have a couple of buddies who did have paper routes and they always had some money in their pockets [laughter] and here I was on an allowance.

SI: Do you know if your parents received any hate mail or phone calls?

BM: Oh, yes. When we were named plaintiffs I'm sure, I mean, my father would get some, but he'd never say anything to me about it in detail because he wouldn't want to frighten me. He never showed any fear and I think that's because he believed in what he was doing and he was a religious person. He knew that if he had to sacrifice, he would. One instance is on the picket line, and I wasn't on this one because [I] remember my dad said I didn't have the right temperament [laughter] to be peaceful under stress. You may know of him, Paul Gaston, who was a history professor at the University of Virginia, a very good friend of my father's. He was beaten up by some rednecks on the picket line in Charlottesville. It didn't deter him at all from picketing in the future. One thing, I think my father's church too had to be probably the only integrated church in Charlottesville. Because we were so close to the University of Virginia, and my father was such a good leader, I'd say--say if the church had two hundred members I'd say thirty of them, if we had thirty whites, thirty would be University of Virginia professors. [laughter] So, it meant a lot to my father to have folks who were intelligent, and caring, and white to be a part of the congregation. He's a good man. He's buried on the Seminary grounds. When he died in 2002, we had a standing-room-only funeral at the Seminary, and he's buried right there at their cemetery which was a real honor, and my mom will be buried right next to him.

SI: What was the atmosphere like in the classroom for the year that you were tutored in the superintendent's office? Was it hostile?

BM: No. I tell my mother not to use this word ever--pathetic. It was a pathetic effort. It had to be one of the most demeaning--here I am, what was I? Seventh grade or something, eighth grade? [The classroom environment] had to be one of the most demeaning things I'd ever participated in in a school setting. They have

this one lady, who was a housewife, now pulled out of retirement to teach twelve grades [fourteen students] at once. So, what you'd get is, you'd get an assignment and you'd just complete it. I mean, there's no discussion with anybody, there's no nothing. I mean, it was just "massive resistance." They didn't want integration to desegregation to happen and they put every little hurdle in its way that they could. The one thing though, the one thing [about] that massive resistance, I told you how the state offered scholarships to kids who wanted to go to private schools. Well, the dummies wrote the legislation so [that] it didn't say whether you wanted to go to school in state or out of state--as long as you were a Virginian, you were entitled to this scholarship. So, I went to Solebury School with the help of that scholarship and I had a classmate, a roommate, [and] an apartment mate in the University of Virginia Law School who went to Andover with that money. Then, there was Ron Wesley, who's a lawyer in Richmond now. He's from Lynchburg, Virginia. Conway's father was a dentist. Ron Wesley's father was a doctor in Lynchburg. Ron went to The Hill School in New Jersey [Pottstown, Pennsylvania] with the help of that money. So, they never anticipated that when they did this legislation, that blacks could use it, too. They're the only three guys I know. Most blacks, number one, didn't have a private school to go to locally, or number two, never thought of using it to get your children "out of Dodge."

SI: Tell me a little bit more about life at Solebury. You were a boarder there. What was student life like there?

BM: It was very, very fulfilling. I mean, the year I went, I was the only black male, but, yet, like I told you, I'm an outgoing type person and I was a good student. I mean, I took everything I did seriously. As a matter of fact, I wasn't even the PK up there, man. I was a model student because I knew my parents had sacrificed to send me away to school to get a good education. So, I wouldn't sneak down to the girls' campus at night, like some of my buddies did and all. To this day two of my buddies think that I used to go down there with them, because the girls' campus was a mile-and-a-half away, the girls' dorm at that time. Now, they're all on one campus, but these guys really thought [that]. What they didn't understand is that my parents and I would've been devastated if I got caught sneaking down to the girls' dorm at night and expelled. I mean, that was the deterrent for me right there, "I can't goof up, man. This is an opportunity that not many children are offered." So, immediately after my first year, ninth grade year, they saw that I was a good student, good person and everything. They made me a hall proctor that next year, and so I was a leader at the school the whole time I was there. Now, in order to avoid going to Quaker meeting, which is totally quiet--you may sit there for two whole hours and no one'll say a thing, --being an Episcopal

priest's son, there was an Episcopal church in Solebury. Little Solebury the village, but it was, like, two miles up the hillside. Every single Sunday, I would round up my Episcopal buddies and we would walk to church at eight o'clock in the morning up that hill dressed in suits and stuff, man. When I look back on that, I said, "What made you do that?" I mean, why? And I did it religiously. We'd walk up in snow and rain, all the time I did it, every Sunday. What was beautiful about Solebury, in addition to being coeducational, was I have an older sister and stuff. And I thought that St. Paul's and Groton, even though they're still some of the top blue-chip boarding schools in the country, a little too stuffy for me and when they would brag about, "Oh, we have a dance with our sister school at least once a month," they thought that was normal. For me, a guy who grew up with a sister and all and she'd have her girlfriends and stuff would be visiting the house and everything, for me to be in an all-male environment like that, to me was sort of unnatural--plus I liked girls. So Solebury, though, being a Quaker school, it was very, very liberal, very tolerant, to the point where you could hang yourself with freedom. I've had people, adults now, who if they knew I went to Solebury, they'd ask if it would be a good school for their child. I tell them, I say, "Is your child, number one, is he a good student?" They said, "Yes." I said, "Does he have a lot of discipline?" and he said, "What you mean?" I said, "Can he make choices on his own, without being influenced by peers and everything?" and they'd say, "No, I don't think so." I said, "Don't send him to Solebury." I said, "If he's not intellectual, if he's not a mentally strong individual, he won't survive there. He'll get in trouble. He'll sneak out. He'll go out in the woods smoking pot with the rest of the kids or he'll go out drinking in the woods, things like that, that all of us do," but I said, "They may get carried away with that freedom." So, I said, "Don't--send him to a military school or something instead," because at Solebury you do have to [watch yourself] and the faculty members. Faculty members were almost like surrogate parents then and some of them lived on campus, but they always had to share duty. Just like in the military, you have an officer of the day who would be the responsible person on shift. Being a Quaker school, it was very moral without being doctrinaire--it's a good way to say it--without being doctrinaire like a religious school would be or a military school. Also, being between New York and Philadelphia, I mean, we'd have school trips and stuff to cultural things in both cities all the time. Also, there was a Quaker-sponsored program where you would help indigent folks do repairs, painting in their homes and stuff like that. That was an activity you could do on weekends. I never did it once. I was always playing a sport. I'd always be at a game or something. So, I couldn't leave for the weekend like that to do good community work.

SI: You spoke a little bit about the football team at Solebury during our break. You said that they were covered by *The New Yorker* once.

BM: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about playing for Solebury? What teams did you play? Do any games stand out in your memory?

BM: We played a few of your state's [prep schools]. We played Pennington Prep. We played mostly Philadelphia and Friends schools. We played Germantown Friends. We played the George School in Newtown. We played Newtown Prep. We played Bryn Athyn in Philadelphia, Germantown Friends. We didn't play Episcopal because they were too big. We played all the smaller prep schools in that area, the Hun School, [in] New Jersey. Yes, we were like "the mouse that roared," because we were by far the smallest school with a football team. There was the Penn-Jersey League, and then there was the Penn-Jersey All-Star Team, of which my senior year I made first-team All-Prep with them. This was an extreme honor. Number one, because it was the first time my school had a representative, but number two, because I'm on this team with guys from Lawrenceville Prep and Bordentown Military Institute. They had postgraduates, man. The photos were taken at Lawrenceville Prep. When I went to the photo session at twelve--it was twelve noon--half these guys had five o'clock shadows already, the postgraduate guys. So, for me to make a team with these behemoths, and of course I was the smallest guy on the team, I was a running back. But for me to make that, I think that's why when I applied to Rutgers and stuff, that they gave me a chance, because they looked and they said--this is another instance where, when I went back to Rutgers and all, I met alumni who used to come see me play, more than once. Well, there was this one alumnus who was very instrumental, I think, in taking a chance on me playing there and they said, "But, his school, man, I mean, his conference is so small. I mean, how good can he be and everything?" This guy said, "Hey, he's one of the fastest guys in the state, okay," and he said, "Plus, he'll get a degree in four years." That's what he told them, which was not a given, because a lot of football players can't take a full course load each year and have to stay longer to get their degree. So, it was real nice to hear that. My coach, my high school coach, he had come from--what, Point Pleasant, New Jersey? He had been a coach in the high school there. How he came to our school is that when Solebury was looking for indigent students, I don't know how they went to--Don Musselman was the coach's name--I don't know how they went to him, or either Don came to Solebury and said--and these guys [recruits] are all white--he says, "I have this guy who is a very good student, but he needs more challenges in the



classroom." His name was Paul Princehorn, brilliant guy. His brother, his younger brother, was a Jersey hoodlum, was a pool shark. They'd wear the leather, the black leather coats and the pencil pants and the pointed-toe shoes and stuff, man. So, Musselman said, "He'd make a good quarterback and stuff and Solebury ought to give him a chance." The thing is, Paul was a year ahead of me, yes, but what's funny is that once he got there [the coaches] asked Polly Leshan, our English teacher, who was the daughter from Radcliffe I told you [about], from the minister in Charlottesville, they said, "How is Paul doing in class?" She paused for a while and they thought she was going to say, "He's having a hard time." She said, "He's the most brilliant English student I have ever taught," and that really just [sold it]. After that, Don Musselman brought up Terry Thompson, who was a roommate of mine, who was a white kid who was a good athlete and student. He's a bank president now, just retired down in South Jersey, and then who else? Then, John Brown came the year after him, who was another white. He was a top junior league baseball player down on the Jersey Shore, but these three guys--so, Solebury, a school that small and stuff and you're getting very individual attention and all--as long as a kid was a good student, boy, they'd nurture you. I mean, they would just [work with you] and you'd learn so much. I mean, I had this science teacher in the ninth grade, Mr. Ammirati. [He was] real Catholic, nine children, [laughter] best teacher, one of the best teachers I've ever had in my life. He taught us so much in general science in the ninth grade. I learned more from [him] than in Rutgers in science, or anywhere else, because you have a class of, what? Eight students? Man, you could go as fast as you want in terms of learning subject matter, and so, all of that, and he was just a brilliant teacher, but it's that kind of [thing]. If you're a boarding student--my wife loves our daughter so much and everything that she wouldn't dare let Phillips go to boarding school. Now me, hey, if Phillips wanted to go, I'd do it. So these guys are still [friends], I can see them ten years, twenty years later and we'll pick up just like that, because you didn't just go to school with these guys. With the boarding students, you lived with them. You knew everybody so well. You never missed parents. You know what? Another thing it gives you is that, as a person, you are getting more responsibility for your own conduct than you ever would at home. In other words, you grow up fast, or if you're like some of these kids I told you [about who] are not boarding school material, they get lost and they fail. Yes, we had very wealthy kids, the ones whose parents are so busy and so rich they're traveling all over the world every time they need a place to house these kids. We had a lot of those, and then the day students were always pretty good students. Hey, you're right there in Bucks County, man, everybody had money. Now, myself and the other guys I just mentioned to you, the players and Lucian Peebles, a few of us had work-study to help pay for our educations, right. So, we washed, we were dishwashers with the

industrial type, the commercial type dishwashing machines and all. To this day, the washing machine in our house--we've been there twenty-some years--I've used it twice. I can wash dishes faster--by the time a dishwasher warms up and everything I've finished the dishes, because I learned all this in prep school. I learned how to be fast and do it without breaking anything, but it was the camaraderie. Oh, and no school snow days. You're living on the campus. I walked fifty steps to the classroom. Oh, I'm forgetting the most important part about it--we had this black cook, Elva. She was from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. She lived above our dining hall. Elva was the best cook to this day that I've ever had. When I'd go home and see and talk with other guys who went to boarding school and stuff [they said] they all hated the food. I said, "We didn't want to come home, because we'd have worse food," [laughter] but she was the best of the best. Who ever heard of serving baked Alaska in a boarding school? I mean, that's how good a cook she was. I'd never even had it before, but then I see this thing. A baked good that you put the ice cream in the oven and it comes out and everything tastes [great]? [laughter] It was just [great]. Being a dishwasher, my partner and I, whoever the two who were paired up for doing dishes and stuff, Elva would always say, "Are you guys still hungry?" when we got through doing dishes, "Are you guys still hungry? How'd you like some more eggs or how'd you like some more bacon or how'd you like some more fried chicken?" I mean, it was just--hey, everything was in place. [laughter] We had good academics, we had a good social life, [but] not everybody liked it. Some kids couldn't make it. Some kids would get homesick, go home. Some kids would flunk out. I saw stuff like that [boarding school] as getting a break in life and if you get a break, I think you ought to take advantage of it. Anything to enhance what I'm doing, I'm going to give it a try and, even if I fail at it, I'm still going to try.

SI: In the summers, would you come back to Charlottesville?

BM: Yes, I'd go back to Charlottesville sometimes. I got a job at this resort on Cape Cod, the Wigwam. It was one of two black owned resorts back then. This is coincidental because the owner of it, Mr. Mitchell, no relation, was from Lynchburg, Virginia. He was a self-made man who never went past, I think, the tenth grade in high school in Lynchburg, but he used to drive for this wealthy white man in Lynchburg, who used to spend his summers on Cape Cod. Mr. Mitchell would be, like, his driver, at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old. He would hunt and fish up there, Mr. Mitchell would, and then he just said, "Well, I'm going to try to get money together and buy about five acres up here and start a little resort," and that's what he did. He started with this one cabin. He never had the heart to tear this cabin down, man. This cabin was, like, literally a log cabin.

Everything else is a nice cabin, modern and stuff, but he just didn't have it in his heart. This is what he started, but he was a self-made man, because he had a barbershop, a dining room and a bar, a luncheonette for breakfast and lunch, and then, about twenty cabins, houses. He manned the luncheonette in the mornings, he cut people's hair in-between, [and] he would be the cook for dinner. And [Mr. Mitchell] would have me digging cesspools with him, septic tanks, during the day sometimes. I mean, he owned an airplane, a Piper airplane, and a Cabin Cruiser. But this is a guy who's not even a high school grad, man, but I worked up there. I figured it out--we're supposed to work eight hours a day, right? No, you're on call at a resort like all the time. I figured I was making twenty-five cents an hour, [laughter] but, yes, in the summers, I'd do that. Then, my father started Camp Faith and he could hire my buddy and myself as bus drivers and camp counselors. So, I'd make a little money there in the summers, but mostly in the summers. I trained because the black high school was about not even a quarter-mile from our house. As a matter of fact, I could see it from our house and I would train on their track. So, when the end of July rolled around--no, actually, I'd start training in the beginning of July and, in August, I'd have to go back for early practice and stuff. This was at Solebury and in college. The best thing about it is I could date all the girls when I went back home. At the resort, I was a little guy--I was about fifteen, sixteen, seventeen--and Mr. Mitchell would have the most gorgeous waitresses. They would come from Dillard University in Louisiana. Otis Air Force Base was near, was on the Cape, so naturally all the black airmen and stuff would come to the black resort for social life at night to the bar and stuff. These girls, I'm telling you, they're just like you would expect New Orleans girls to look like--they were just pretty. But here I was, they were college students, here I was this little high school guy just salivating at these girls, man. They treated me like [their] "little brother." They didn't know I had a serious crush on them, and then I'd say "These lucky darn airmen--they could come in and see these beautiful girls and stuff." But, yes, no, it was a nice life, man. He worked me extra hard up there, but it was a worthwhile experience.

SI: Was it ever difficult to go from what sounds like an extremely positive experience at boarding school back to the segregated South?

BM: Do you know what? At that point, I never even saw it that way; I guess because I knew what it was. Even in Charlottesville, I mean, I had white girlfriends and black girlfriends.

SI: Really?

BM: Yes. You've got to remember too, it's a university town. Let's just say normal white people outnumbered rednecks in a university town. So, it wouldn't be like Spartanburg, South Carolina, man, or something like that and all. Those plantation mentality states, I mean, cities and stuff. No, it's a whole different mindset, even during segregation. But yes, I think that's attributable to a smarter population. Now my prep school, see, being a Quaker school and all, it was going to be more liberal than any other type of institution anyway. The place where I saw the most racial, probably, differences was at Rutgers. [laughter] It probably was, and I'm not blaming the whites or the blacks--it was both. I soon realized that the North was just as segregated as the South and in one respect more so. Whites and blacks were so interdependent in the South, even though it was uneven in terms of socioeconomics they couldn't do without each other. In the North, many blacks and whites never ever even knew each other. At least in the South, if your mother works for a white family that family at least gets to know her children. I mean, there's more--instead of just an economic interdependence it's like a psychological interdependence too. Up North, no, it's cold, man. It's cold-hearted. I realized very--oh, I don't know if I should say that--very early on, to date the black girls at Rutgers who were from Newark and stuff like that, they weren't friendly to me like girls in the South are to me. It's like they had a defensive measure to protect themselves and that they didn't look at guys like me in a trustful light immediately. I think it's all attributable to having to survive in an urban area, a complex urban area than in the little cities and towns and stuff like you have down South. But I did notice that there just seemed to be more of a division between blacks and whites in the major cities in the North than there are down South.

SI: Let us get into your years at Rutgers. You mentioned that there was an alumnus who was influential in getting you to come to Rutgers.

BM: No, he was a behind-the-scenes person. He didn't even know me but he had just, I guess, seen my record and had talked to people about me and probably had talked--I don't even know if he had talked to my coach--but they had to convince Coach Bateman to give this guy a chance and they were alumni who did it. [Editor's Note: John F. Bateman served as head football coach at Rutgers from 1960 to 1972.] See, they saw my record, all the yardage I had gotten in high school and everything. Also, you've got to remember, there was freshman football then. Freshmen couldn't play varsity. It was an NCAA regulation and Rutgers had its biggest recruitment year ever. We had 155 guys on the freshmen roster alone. So, I was like, ninth halfback on the depth chart. I was so far down the depth chart that they issued me high-top football shoes. I was so insulted [laughter] that I

called my father that night, with my little dime and the collect call, right. Payphones, no cellphones, now, Shaun. So I told him, I said, "Dad, you've got to send my nine-nine shoes up here, man. These guys have issued me high-tops. Dad, they have me on nineteen left halfback." Back then [if] you wanted stuff done fast, no UPS and that stuff, you put it on the bus. You put it in a package, sent it to the New Brunswick Trailways. I'd go down [and] pick it up the next day. So my dad sent up my own [shoes], because I had all this stuff from prep school. So I had my own shoes and all that stuff, and then at the first practice and all they had these guys. All-State New Jersey, All-State New York, All-State Massachusetts, All-State Pennsylvania, All-State Ohio. I saw these big jokers running and everything, and then I just said, "No, I'm better than these guys." Well, number one, I knew I was the fastest person on the team so I had to get some recognition there. I may have been the smallest back but I was the fastest back and I was a lot more muscular then than I am now. As a matter of fact, I've only gained ten pounds in forty-five years, except its redistributed and it ain't as solid. [laughter] It's the aging process and I still work out three days a week, anyway. When I saw my competition, I just said, "No, I can beat these guys." Now, number one, I knew that half of those guys were going to flunk out at Rutgers. I knew after one year and I knew, believe it or not, all these big jocks you see who are so macho and everything, they get homesick. They've never been away from home before, okay. So, they drop out for that reason, too. So, I was so nervous about it that when we had our first away game--out of 155 guys, they're only going to take fifty-five. I was so scared to look at the locker room travel roster, I sat in front of my locker and all. The right tackle, Dave Zimmerman who's from Ohio, he said, "Mitch, are you going to go? Let's go look and see if we made it." See, I knew he made it because he was one of the top recruits. So, I said, "No, Dave, I don't have the courage, man. I don't want to look," and he said, "Okay." So, he went and he saw my name on the roster. He came back, he said, "Mitch, I'm really sorry, man, but you made the travel roster, [laughter] as a kick returner." I said, "Hey, that's better than nothing. I made it, I made the roster." So, the first two games I did kick returning and I did so well I made the permanent travel roster. Then, when we were at--I think we were at Lehigh--I just got so frustrated, because the freshman team only played five games. This was so good about the NCAA then--you only played five games your freshman year--because it gave you time to study and adjust to college. That was the philosophy. So, I went up to Coach [William] Speranza and I said, "Hey, Coach." "What, Mitchell?" "Let me run from scrimmage, man." He started laughing, "Ha-ha-ha, Mitchell, what makes you think [I would do that]?" I said, "Coach, let me run from scrimmage, man, in the second half," because I talked to him during halftime. He started laughing. He said, "Okay, Mitchell." I got two TDs in that one half, man. Ever since then I started all

the rest of the freshman year and all through varsity. I had a different experience at Rutgers than a football player could have now because I had different roommates all the time. I had an Orthodox Jew up at the Heights. I had the President of SDS, Rich Najarian--he's got to be in your history books--he was a roommate of mine one year. Juan Torres, who was a Puerto Rican from Paterson, New Jersey. He's a corporate lawyer in New York City now. He went to Columbia Law. Then I had Michael Jackson, who was one of the founders of the RU African-American curriculum. He was two years behind me, but we shared an apartment my last year at Rutgers. Now, the guys have to live in a jock dorm. You don't get a chance to get that [exposure] and I can honestly tell you I don't think my coaches liked me living with Rich Najarian, the SDS President. Do you know where the Ledge is? [Editor's Note: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a popular student activist movement during the mid to late 1960s that expanded across college campuses across the United States. They protested against racial discrimination, the Vietnam War, inequality in the United States and for women's rights, but, eventually, fractured off into various splinter groups that advocated their own interests, sometimes through violent means.]

SI: Yes, it is still there. It is not called "The Ledge" now. It is called the Student Activities Center.

BM: [laughter] When we go up for that weekend on the 6th on the black experience at Rutgers thing, my wife and I are staying Friday and Saturday night, because I didn't want to drive home at night anyway, but Rich Najarian's coming down. [Editor's Note: "Black on the Banks" was a two-day conference held at Rutgers on November 6-7, 2015, organized by Distinguished Professor of History Douglas Greenberg that brought together African-American alumni who were enrolled at Rutgers University in New Brunswick during the 1960s and early 1970s.] Rich is a lawyer, he's a retired lawyer, from Jersey City now. He's coming down and Michael Jackson, my roommate who helped found, start, the African-American curriculum, Rich is coming down, we're going to take a photo in front of the Ledge, because that's where we used to hang out. That used to be the student ...

SI: Yes, the student union.

BM: Yes. So, we've already planned that and Rich can't do it until Sunday because his son's getting married on Saturday, that Saturday, but he's going to drive down. Yes, were going to [take] a commemorative photo. That's where I would hang out there, man. I didn't hang out at a fraternity and stuff. I always had

a good excuse not to join a fraternity and it was [the case that] I had buddies in each. I had buddies in Fiji, buddies in Deke, buddies in [all of them]. So, I said, "No, man, I mean, I have friends in each one. I couldn't decide which one to join," but I'm just not the type of person who needed artificial friends or whatever. I don't know what it is. I just didn't need it. I'd rather have my own set of very diverse friends because like I told you, I had white, black, Hispanic, all kinds of friends, and that's what really helped me at Rutgers. To have that freedom. At first also, the coaches would select your courses and I fought that. I said, "No, I want to be an art history major," and they said, "No, it's too much reading and writing if you're going to play football." I said, "Look, I can read [laughter] and I can write and I'd like to learn to read better and write better," and so they didn't fight it.

SI: Do you recall which curriculum they were trying to funnel football players into?

BM: Yes, a lot of the guys--you don't have it anymore, we called it the Ag School. It's part of Cook, now, isn't it?

SI: Yes, today, it is called the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences on the Cook Campus.

BM: Yes, see, no, it was really an Ag school then. I just saw [that] we still do have a farm and everything there, which is the way it ought to be, but the mere fact that they were funneling a lot of my guys into the Ag School meant that it had a little bit more tolerance, I think, academically. So, now don't get me wrong, because I had Rich Koprowski, an electrical engineer, we had guys who [took difficult courses] but historically, did you know that, other than the quarterback, the smartest positions generally on any football team are offensive linemen? Nobody guesses that. Even in the Big Ten, [offensive linemen] have the most challenging courses.

SI: What attracted you to art history?

BM: At first, I wanted political science but then I saw how boring it was. [laughter] So, after that I said, "I need something--I'm not *that* good a writer so I'm not going to major in English." And then, I wanted something that was exciting and that I could learn history at the same time. So, that's why I did it and I'm glad I did--and it didn't harm me at all in getting into the University of Virginia Law School or anything. If you can read, and you can write, and can think critically you can do anything you want to do. It was a small department and like I told you

I didn't realize, until I read Ms. Berendsen's obit about five years ago, how big she was in the field internationally and here she was at Rutgers. [Editor's Note: Dr. Olga Paris Berendsen served on the faculty of the Rutgers Department of Art History from 1965 to 1984.] I mean, that's what really ticks me off about the prominence that football's getting there now--and, see, my sister, who is biased, of course, and Doug [laughter]--it diminishes, it's not giving Rutgers' academic prowess the respect it deserves. My sister says that your History Department, your English Department, they're nationally respected and stuff, but she said, "But, Bryant, you get the Legislature who doesn't want to allocate the necessary funds for the best teachers." See, when I was there, academics wasn't pushed to any background. I mean, even the guys, like I told you, football players flunked out, man. They didn't keep them there just to play. If they couldn't make the grade, it was more harmful to them to keep them there, but because of money it's all changed. This Big Ten joining--I feel sorry for Maryland the same way because I hear about them every day, I read about them every day, and Maryland's never as good a school academically, as far as I'm concerned, as Rutgers, okay--but for Rutgers and Maryland to think that they could join this league just for money, it's obviously a more complex issue than I can be aware of. I'm not on the Board of Trustees or anything, but I just hate seeing the academics downplayed and this athletic program--now, see, I'm not against football. I mean, I've always told people, "If you want your son [to succeed], if he's a superstar football player and he's a very good student, don't waste his time sending him to an Ivy League school, don't waste his time sending him to a football school--send him to Stanford, let him do both if he's a superstar, but you don't have to send him to Alabama or something." Bruce Hubbard, who used to be on the Board of Visitors, he's a friend of mine. He was in our class. He was a history major. He's a big lawyer in New York and his son went to Harvard, his son wanted to come to Rutgers and play football. Bruce said, "I'll be damned. You're going to Harvard and play football," and that was [the right move]. My father never told me what to do. He'd always pose questions of me, make me figure it out, but Bruce was right. [laughter] He was right. He says, "If you can get into Harvard, you go to Harvard. You want to play football? Play at Harvard."

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Which professors stand out in your memory? You mentioned Professor Berendsen. Also, over lunch, you were talking about Mason Gross. Who really stands out prominently in your memory?



BM: Okay, out of personal bias, you know I'm going to say Mason Gross. [laughter] I think philosophy was a perfect subject for him to teach, but Ms. Berendsen, of course, would be it for art history, especially German art. But this is funny, I never thought--I took geology--it was one of the most interesting [classes]. It was a mass class, one of those [with] two hundred people in it and all, and then you'd have your, what, graduate assistants for the small ones?

SI: Recitations.

BM: Yes, but one of the most interesting classes I'd ever taken, I mean, just out of the blue. I just didn't expect it to be that interesting and that clearly stands out for me because I'm taking these liberal arts courses. Oh, I took my first painting class ever. As an art history major, they made you take at least one studio class. My teacher, professor, was a Mr. Prichard, who was real. He was black, spoke fluent French, but lived in New York City, and so after class he'd do just like my sister does--I told her, I said, "I don't like you commuter professors, because you're not hanging around enough for us to get to know you and stuff." Mr. Prichard was my studio art teacher and he really pulled that out of me, especially oil painting. Another thing I forgot to tell you about Solebury, Solebury's arts department is phenomenal, especially their drama department. See, my classmates were Tony McKay, who was the Broadway actor Scott McKay's son; Celeste Holm's son, Dan Dunning, he was in the class ahead of me; James MacArthur, he finished Solebury years before I got there and stuff. The drama department was really just picked out of Manhattan and dropped there on a lower scale to Solebury, but I always was upset that I never tried--I was so intimidated--the arts. Even in painting and everything like that and sculpture, it was intimidating to me. It wasn't until, like I told you, my fiftieth anniversary reunion that David Leshan, whose wife was my English teacher at Solebury my ninth grade year, told me, he said, "Bryant, don't regret that." He says, "You know why?" I said, "Why?" "You didn't have the time. You couldn't do it. You couldn't be an athlete and devote the time to rehearsals and everything that the arts required." He says, "It's just unfortunate, but there ain't but twenty-four hours in a day." So, that made me feel a lot better, but yes, those were the courses and the teachers that meant the most to me. The rest I'm sure you have, I don't know though--you wanted to be a professor and stuff--do you remember all your professors when you were at Rutgers?

SI: Yes.

BM: See, you're tuned in to that.

SI: I meant anybody that stands out.

BM: Yes.

SI: Your studio art teacher apparently meant a lot to you.

BM: Yes, but, I mean, aren't there some history courses that you took that you don't even remember the professor?

SI: Yes.

BM: Okay, that's good. It's not just me.

SI: No, a lot of people cannot remember.

BM: Yes, just blah [laughter] or didn't like that emotional charge in it, in the subject matter.

SI: Some people just go in and read out of a textbook.

BM: Yes.

SI: Those professors are not very memorable.

BM: Okay, so, it's not just me, thank God.

SI: You also went to Europe for the summer as part of your art history education. Was that for credit? How did that come about?

BM: Oh boy, I think maybe Ms. Berendsen had sort of said something about it in some class or something. I don't know, but I think it's because sometimes, she'd say, "This piece is still hanging in such-and-such cathedral." Here I am, an ambitious, adventurous guy, said, "Hell, I want to go see this stuff," and I told my parents. They thought I was off my rocker--no, they didn't [laughter]--and she said, "Well, what group are you going with?" I said, "No, I'm going by myself." The only thing I regret about that trip is that when I got over to London--see, at Solebury School, I had this buddy who was a townie. He was like a man-child. Larry Randolph was his name. I met him because we scrimmaged South Hunterdon High School and he was their best back and I was our best back. He was a townie. I was a preppie. After the game, we started talking. He's black and

on a majority white team and I'm the only black guy on my team. So, I find out he lives in Lambertville, New Jersey and while he was in high school he had a trash service. He had a Triumph Bonneville motorcycle. He had a ski boat. The guy's, what, eighteen years old? So, he taught me how to ride this Triumph Bonneville and everything. So, when I went to Europe that time, I told my parents, I said, "Hey, Mom and Dad, can you lend me five hundred bucks. I want to buy a motorcycle while I'm here." Man, my parents, hey look, they did have a threshold and that was it. They said, "No way. You already have the Eurailpass and we're not going to let you drive around some darn Europe, man, by yourself on a motorcycle." I said, "Mom, they can only hold one girl at a time. [laughter] This may be your best [option]." I told Ms. Berendsen, "I'd like to do that," and, man, she was real excited. She said, "Well, look, you and I are going to have meetings and we've got to plot out an itinerary for you." I can tell you, Shaun, this lady and I had to be so far apart in terms of, here she is, an old, European like duchess, and, here I am, this little black guy from Virginia. I mean, we were so far apart, if people saw us together, culturally, visually, everything, but here she was, man. She really took the time out and everything because she knew I was really interested in art. She's dead now and this is one of those instances where, I told you, if you had only known when you were younger you would've stayed in touch with her. See, Frank Ammirati, that ninth grade science teacher at Solebury, I became a member of the Board of Trustees there and stuff. I saw him periodically until he died. He got to see me develop, but Ms. Berendsen, she probably--she couldn't forget me. I may have been the last black male football player student she ever had, first and last she probably had. [laughter] No, I get the most out of every area that I can while I'm there.

SI: Let us talk a little bit about changes at Rutgers. I always tell my students that this was probably the period of greatest change in Rutgers history, in culture, student attitudes.

BM: Right.

SI: When you entered the antiwar movement for example, was just getting started on campus. There were some teach-ins. How did you see that movement evolve during your time there? Were you aware of it?

BM: Oh, all of us were, especially in terms of getting more black recognition at Rutgers. Yes, we protested a lot. We sat-in in Mason Gross's office. I remember, one night we were negotiating, the black students and Mason, in his office. Mason just got tired and he says, "I have to go home and get some sleep. We'll pick up

tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, if you'd like. Please don't trash my office, if you could." He looks at me directly. [laughter] So, the man was just so smart, I mean, the way he handled it even. He says, "We have some problems here and we can't resolve them tonight. I'd better go back and recharge and let's pick up again tomorrow." I mean, it was just all so much common sense. Yes, I can honestly tell you that with my family being musicians, my mother's family and all [being] music lovers, I had no idea how big Paul Robeson was until we started protesting, investigating his experience at Rutgers. We all just knew immediately if you had to say it was because he was black or was it because he's a Communist clearly the Communist part was a lot worse than the black because they wouldn't even have given him the grades he deserved if it were just black. If it were a Rutgers prejudice against Robeson there's no way in the world he could've finished first in his class or nothing, see, but yes, I'm telling you [that] our generation, not only were we more sensitive to that outside world and our place in it, but we acted on it. Kids don't do that anymore; not many people do that anymore.

SI: This was part of your work with the Black Student Union.

BM: With the Black Student Union, too, yes.

SI: You entered in 1965.

BM: Right.

SI: When does that consciousness start? When do people start saying, "We have to do something?" What was the catalyst?

BM: Probably wasn't until that next year, because there were only fourteen blacks in my class. So, we did need a certain [quorum]. The younger kids who were coming in behind us were like young kids. They wanted action too, and they had just come from the outside world and stuff. So, they really had something to look forward to and, face it, the more blacks we got there, the more voice we could have. But there's one thing about if you're black--because your color's so identifiable, you're going to stand out anyway. So, if people see more than five of you together, they think you're protesting. [laughter] It is--I mean, it's just a white person's normal reaction to blacks--and so, as a minority, yes, we had to do that. We had to get respect for one of the greatest alumnus who ever went to the school, but it's because it's a political [process]. Legislatures run state colleges. When you have to deal with them in your negotiations you're really up against a formidable foe, and all that recognition for Robeson, especially if it were for his political

leanings, but what they didn't understand, see, nobody--you understand this, because you're a history major. You understand history exists in context and you understand--you'd have to understand--that a man who's discriminated against by a color is going to look for other avenues where he can get respect. He may not even know. He may not even remain a Communist all his life because he may find out, "Look, God, this is just plain old discrimination. It doesn't make any difference what my political leaning is or what," or, "I want to be a Communist," but you find out it doesn't work as good in the system here, or Communism has the same kind of sameness of everyone, squashing creativity and all of that. But politicians can't afford to look at things that exhaustively. They're looking for votes. That's their job. So, they really fought it, man. The school really just really didn't [stand firm]. I'm curious what would've happened if--now, Bloustein would've been almost as good, I guess, with handling that stuff--but this President now, I think, man, he wouldn't have a clue of how to deal with that kind of an uprising. [laughter] I mean, I don't know how we took him anyway. His former school had how many students, three thousand? [Editor's Note: Dr. Robert Barchi was announced as the twentieth President of Rutgers University in April 2012 and took office in September 2012.]

SI: The Jefferson Medical School?

BM: Yes. There's no way in the world I would've taken forty-five thousand students after that, man.

SI: You took over Mason Gross's office. What was that like? What do you remember about it?

BM: Oh, very stately. It's like I told you. That's Queens College and you've seen pictures of the Oval Office and stuff--it was like that kind of an atmosphere--very, very nice antique furniture and all, very tastefully done, sort of formal, spacious, with a whole bunch of little kids sitting on the floor. I mean young students, not nearly enough chairs in there for us, but it was very civil. I mean, it wasn't insulting in any manner. I don't know how anybody could be insulting the way Mason could conduct a meeting, and by that, I mean ninety percent listening. He had enough sense not to just fight back, but to listen. Between that and knowing him personally, and seeing how good a teacher he was too, I mean, there's no way I can't be biased. [laughter] He's about six-foot-five. I mean, it was just what a flagship university needs, man. But especially to deal with a New Jersey Legislature, man. I mean, New Jersey's a mobster state and everything else. [laughter] It's not like the landed gentry that UVA exists in. I keep telling guys

that even in the Virginia Legislature, McDonnell's the first one to be indicted for anything, and it's all because of the good, ole Southern boy etiquette ethic. [Editor's Note: In September 2014, Robert F. McDonnell, former Governor of Virginia, and his wife were convicted on federal corruption charges.] You don't curse at anybody on the Senate or the Legislative floor. You call them, "The Honorable," blah, blah, blah, and behind his back, "You son of a bitch," [laughter] but you don't do anything, you don't do graft--it's not part of the job. It breaks up the Southern ethic and the Southern contradictions.

SI: Do you remember any other public actions or marches, picketing, that sort of thing?

BM: Those happened right after I left, when that next class came in, yes. The biggest demonstrations happened right after I left in '69, because Michael--what was he, two years behind me? He was the first African-American major, I think. Yes, it took two whole years after I left. Yes, I understand it got pretty testy after I left, but I don't think any of them knew I'd already been through that stuff when I was twelve and thirteen years old. [laughter] They didn't have a clue that I'd already been in the courthouse and all of that stuff.

SI: You mentioned earlier that women from urban areas were more defensive, I think is the way you put it.

BM: Yes, well, just harder, harder people.

SI: Did you find any other barriers between yourself and the people in the Black Student Union, where you were coming from the Southern background?

BM: Yes, sometimes. I had two other buddies from Charlottesville who had come up--one went to Livingston. Both went to Livingston--and, yes, even the girls up there said we had more manners. We treated them. We held the door open for them and things like that when we dated them and all. They just said we had more manners and it was interesting. Now, because I was a football player I don't have the time to hang out and *kibitz* and stuff. When I'm not playing football, I'm studying, and on weekends, I'd have a date. I wouldn't be hanging out with the guys and all that kind of stuff. So yes, I couldn't. There's no way in the world I was going to get chummy with a lot of anybody.

SI: You said that you and your friends would hang out at The Ledge.

BM: Yes.

SI: Do you recall going to concerts there, that sort of thing?

BM: We'd go to concerts. They would be in the old gym.

SI: They would not be at The Ledge.

BM: Yes, old gym. And another thing is that, see, my sister lived in New York, so sometimes I'd spend weekends going to shows and stuff in New York City and all. But I wasn't [on campus much]. I had a car and, like I said, I wasn't a member of a fraternity but it was the same way. I noticed in Charlottesville, whenever I was home and stuff. Once I became a teenager and all, I never just hung out with the guys and stuff. I always took girls on dates. I always had a date and I didn't double date or group date, like the kids do, like my daughter does now. That's all they do now, but that's fine with me because she's just not alone with some crazy dude. So, I like that change, [laughter] but yes, I had my close-knit bunch of friends. Like I told you, they were very diverse and I wasn't about--they had started a student floor, a black students' floor in the dorm. There's no way I was going to live in a black student section. I didn't come all the way to college, man, to separate myself. I mean, doesn't the definition college mean you explore? I mean, you can voice your opinions and everything and you can unite for special issues and things, but half of college--that's why when they talk about remote learning and all through the Internet. I don't care what people say, we're social animals. You've got to know people and the more variety of people you know, the better understanding I think you're going to have of the world and the better tolerance for people [that are] different from you. So, I never even thought of that, but then again, I'm looking at kids who have just grew up in an all-black environment--maybe can't make that adjustment without it being an issue. That's just not me.

SI: Many of the people I have spoken with who were involved in different movements in the 1960s discussed how they sometimes overlapped. Were you ever involved in any antiwar activities along with the black student movement?

BM: I was in it. I was definitely in it. I can tell you, I can honestly tell you, I sympathized with it. I was playing football, pre-season, up in Canada with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats when I graduated that summer. Then my draft board in Charlottesville, there were three members of the draft board. The chairman was

my family doctor, a black man. He had three sons. Do you think any of them were assigned to Vietnam?

SI: No.

BM: They waited for you to graduate. They had to, because you had a student deferment, and I had lottery number forty-two. So, I was up in Canada and the season hadn't started yet. It wouldn't start for two more weeks and my Charlottesville draft board drafted me. My father offered, he says, "If you want to defect, I can spot you some money until the season starts," I mean, talking like a true priest. I told him, I said, "Uh-uh, Dad," I said, "my buddies I grew up with in Charlottesville, man, they never had the privileges I've had," and I said, "boy, my conscience, there's no way in the world I could not go." So, that's why it wasn't a hard decision for me to make. I was drafted, man, and that's when I started that whole new part of my life. I didn't get involved in the antiwar effort. I was against it. I was against it to the point--I made that compromise to go--but they offered me, they wanted me to enlist for an extra year to go to officer training school so [that] at least I could start as a lieutenant, a second lieutenant. I said, "No, no, I'm doing the bare minimum. You have drafted me," and I didn't file as any conscientious objector because I'm not, but thank God I'd been to Rutgers, had the college degree and all. So, they assigned me as a combat MP instead of just a regular infantryman, except I was attached to the 25th Infantry so I was in the thick of it anyway. [laughter] Not as much as they, because they're out on patrol in the jungle. I didn't have to do that. I led convoys. We'd lead guys, we'd lead convoys to a certain area, and then they went on out into the woods themselves. I tried to get out on a mental deferment when I was down at the induction center, but they said, "Mr. Mitchell, you've got some weird views, but the mere fact that you have views means that you are sane. Bus is waiting for you." That's exactly what they said, "The bus is *waiting* for you." [laughter] The first time I tried it I was with the shrink and I missed that bus. Then, when I got back to the induction center, man, the lieutenant of the day, he said, "Mr. Mitchell, you're an unlucky guy." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because, yesterday, man, you were going to be my Marine officer of the day." They were going to draft me--see, they could do that then--they were going to draft me not into the Army, man, they were going to make me a Marine officer. Officer training in the Marines, man? No, that's at least a three, four-year commitment.

SI: Do you recall what you told them, these weird views that you were espousing?



BM: Oh, no, I don't remember. [laughter] Obviously, they weren't good enough. You know what it is? If you say something that's consistent, no matter how weird it is they'll tell you you're not crazy. You can say, "Well, I like pulling fingernails out of cats," I mean, the toenails out of cats' paws and, "That's it?" or, "You don't do it to every animal you see?" or something like that. These guys are going to say, "Okay, this guy's just perverted, but he'll make it. He's not insane," no. And then I was the best shooter in my whole battalion. Out of eighty-two targets, I hit eighty from fifty yards to 350 yards and they wanted to make me a sniper. I changed that, boy. I told them, "No way. I'm not sitting up in some tree for five days, man." It's a whole different thing in the jungle environment being a sniper. Like I told you, I just wanted to fulfill my commitment, so that I wasn't any different than any other draftee, and then, go on. I hadn't even decided--I knew, when I finished Rutgers with an art history degree that I would have to go to graduate school at some time--but I didn't decide on law school until I was in the Army because I saw so much injustice and stuff there. Well, it was all just another young person's disillusion, because I thought the law was about justice and it's not. It's a big business [laughter] and I didn't realize that until after my first year at the University of Virginia Law School. I get in there, I said, "Jesus Christ, man," and that's why I only practiced for two years with the government and went into business, went into real estate instead. Everybody wins in business. If you strike a deal with someone, buyer, seller, agents happy or tenant, landlord, agents happy. But, in the law, nobody wins but the lawyer. It's so traumatic. The adversarial system is so traumatic, so expensive. All my buddies who are locked in now, because they have families and big mortgages, they're making a million a year and they're still unhappy because it's a cynical business. There's a few guys who really love the "jousting," who love the battle, and you're dealing with people's problems every day. So, I didn't have the psyche for that.

SI: Let us conclude for today.

BM: Okay.

SI: We will arrange another meeting. Thank you very much. This has been a great interview. I look forward to continuing.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/15/2016

Reviewed by Bryant Mitchell 9/16/2016