HALLIE Q. BROWN COMMUNITY CENTER

COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

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Overview and Summary Form

Fall 2025

Project Overview: The objective of the Rondo Movement History Interview Project (conducted between September and December 2025) has been to document the activities of Black people in the Rondo community to build political organizations and movements during the American Civil Rights and Black Power eras (roughly the 1950s through the 1970s). This project consists of six oral histories with Rondo community members connected to Hallie Q. Brown Community Center who were politically involved in the '50s through '70s period. This project will hopefully be the first installation of an ongoing series of oral histories conducted out of the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center Community Archives.

Interviewer Biography: As of the fall of 2025, Mackinnon Williams is a senior in History at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He created and ran the Rondo Movement History Interview Project in the Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives during an internship position at the Minnesota Historical Society Community Engagement Department. Mack was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, attended Garfield High School in Seattle's Central District, and was introduced to the Rondo community as a college student. He is also an organizer for Solidarity Twin Cities' community program The Nu Skool of Afrikan American Thought, and Macalester College's Black Liberation Affairs Committee student organization. Mack was formally introduced to project interviewees by Hallie Q. Brown Executive Director Benny Roberts.

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a) **Interview Summaries:** Summaries of the 6 oral histories from the Rondo Movement History Interview Project are listed chronologically below. These summaries are repeated within the respective transcripts of each interview.
b) **Interview Transcripts:** Transcripts of the 6 oral histories conducted in the Rondo Movement History Interview Project are presented chronologically below in the order of 1) Russel Balenger, 2) Nathaniel Khaliq, 3) Clem Crowe, 4) Yusef Mgeni, 5) Debbie Montgomery, 6) Steve Winfield.
c) **Supplementary Materials:** In addition to the 6 interview transcripts, materials from this project include 9 pages of physical documents such as interview notes, questions, and protocol which have been digitized. These documents reflect the preparation process for interviews, and any notes written during interview sessions. These documents are presented chronologically.

*This overview and summary form was produced in December 2025 by Mackinnon Williams, HQBCA/MNHS.

Interview Summaries:

Name: Russel Balenger Oral History

Date: September 30th, 2025

Place: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: Being born and raised in St. Paul; living south of St. Anthony Ave, where the hole was for Interstate 94; his family's home burning down when he was 7 years old; how his parents Russel Balenger and Lillian Balenger came to St. Paul; his father's work on the railroads; lightskinned members of his family and how they navigated St. Paul; reconnecting with his cousin Nelson Balenger; memories of his father's temperament; his family being separated after the house fire, and moving into a new house on Dayton Ave; an incident with the white Kosa family who rented from his mother; his mother's jobs and temperament; his mother's political involvement with North Central Voters League, Target Area A; childhood responsibilities for maintaining the family's home; exploring the neighborhood as a child; being stopped by police as an 8 year old on Selby Ave; discovering Unity Church and House of Hope; hitchhiking to Winona, MN as a 12 year old; white flight out of Rondo; Black neighbors in the neighborhood; his mother organizing balls for Black people in the community; his uncle Gordon Parks; Black social clubs, the Sterling Club, the Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; his mother leaving the back door of their home unlocked in case someone needed to hide from police; police officers in Rondo back in the day mostly being Black; his family's relationship with Patricia Caponi; being the first Black camper at a youth camp in the Boundary Waters; Judge Archie Gingold paying for his youth camp fees; his mother's work ethic; his hustle in high school; getting his first job; how the North Central Voters League started; his connection to Moorhead State University; how his brothers started Inner City Youth League; talking about Black history in class at Central High School; the riot on Selby Ave in 1968; responses at Central High School to Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated; going to the Soviet Union as an exchange student while in high school; going to Ghana in his later years; experiences in the Soviet Union as a Black person; segregation in St. Paul, not being allowed in parts of the city.

People/organizations discussed: Thomas Hickman; Russel Balenger (father); Lillian Balenger (mother) formerly Lillian Parks and Lillian Hickman; Gordon Parks (uncle); Charles Balenger and Martha Balenger (father's parents); Laura and Nelson Balenger (father's siblings); Nelson Balenger (cousin); Kosa family; Target Area A; Ramsey Action Program; Russel (grandson); North Central Voters League; Saint Paul Police Department; Unity Church; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; House of Hope Presbyterian Church; Esther Peake; Anderson family; Chester Oden; Anna (aunt); Anura Si-Asar; Jackie Balenger (brother); Sterling Club, Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; Officer Skelly; James Mann; Urban League Guild; Patricia Caponi, formerly Patricia (Pat) Parlin; Archie Gingold; Merle Harris; S. Edward Hall;

Nancy Parlin; Moorhead State University; Black Panther Party; Bobby Hickman (brother); Eamon Peck (unconfirmed); Ted Hamm; Readus Fletcher; Mahmoud El-Kati; Martin Luther King Jr.; The Circle of Peace Movement; Artika Tyner; Ronald Reagan; Ed Sullivan.

Name: Nathaniel Khaliq Oral History

Date: September 30th, 2025

Place: Residence of Nathaniel Khaliq, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: Being born in 1943 at 304 Rondo Ave and raised in the Cornmeal Valley section of the Rondo Neighborhood; Cornmeal Valley and Oatmeal Hill; Black businesses in Rondo; moral standards in the community; being raised by his grandparents Reverend George Davis and Bertha Davis; the self-sufficiency of the Rondo neighborhood in his childhood; Black men in the community working on the railroad and in the packinghouse; being told certain areas of the city were off-limits to Black people; his grandfather being the last homeowner removed for the construction of I-94; racial housing covenants and eminent domain; riot in Rondo in 1968; the Saint Paul police going buck wild in dealing with Black folks; police officer Allan Lee being killed in 1949 and the city cutting power in lower Rondo; the "true face of life in St. Paul for Black folk"; people in the neighborhood shooting at police and fire trucks; urban renewal; pressures on Black men working as railroad porters; Black women in the community working at the Twin City Arsenal and in domestic roles; educated Black people being barred from work; benign neglect by the St. Paul police towards Rondo; organizing to close an establishment on Dale and Selby which was a center point for crime and violence; the El Rukns gang from Chicago moving into St. Paul; working with Bobby Hickman, Kwame McDonald, Katie McWatt; St. Paul police disregarding gangs; arson fire which killed babies; ad hoc Black radical organizations forming during the Black Power Era; stories of police ignoring crime; police harassing his family at home; major drug sweeps in St. Paul during the Republican Convention; investigating an arson fire that killed five children; getting affordable housing built in Rondo; trying to slow gentrification with the Summit-University Planning Council; the creation of Unidale Mall; the economic engines of other ethnic groups in Saint Paul; his involvement with the Nation of Islam and the Muslim communities in the Twin Cities; friend Abdul Kareem surviving a shooting in North Minneapolis; Islam being one of the greatest experiences of his life along with having children and being married to his wife Victoria Davis for 52 years.

People/organizations discussed: George Davis (grandfather) and Bertha Davis (grandmother); Russel Balenger; Allan Lee; Darrell Cruz; Kwame McDonald; Bobby Hickman; Katie McWatt; El Rukns; MOVE Organization; Inner City Youth League; Summit-University Crime Prevention Council; Black Underground Army; Black Liberation Army; NAACP; CORE; SNCC; SCLC; Minneapolis Star Tribune; Bill Clinton; Janet Reno; Lonnie Atkins; Roy Wilkins; Summit

University Planning Council; Unidale Mall; Help Development Corporation; Kraus Anderson; General Mills; Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, W.D. Muhammad; Abdul Kareem; Masjid An-Nur; Victoria Davis (wife).

Name: Clem Crowe Oral History

Date: October 2nd, 2025

Place: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: Being born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1951 and raised in Omaha, Nebraska until moving to St. Paul in 1968; witnessing Interstate 94 being constructed when he moved to Rondo; recognizing the bond the Rondo community had; growing up in Near North Side, Omaha; a war between Black men and local police in his childhood; a police officer being killed on Victoria St and Selvy Ave by Inner City Youth League; St. Paul riot at Stem Hall in 1968; joining the Black Panther Party at the age of 16 in Omaha; barber Ernie Chambers in Omaha; principles of the Black Panther Party; village atmosphere in Omaha; Black male unemployment and disenfranchisement through the welfare program; the Black family unit and gender; Make America Great Again; his conviction that slavery has not ended but has instead evolved; his work at Teen Teamworks with Minneapolis Parks and Recreation; Black youth not being able to write or pass driver's exams; the U.S. creating a cheap labor force; his parents being sharecroppers in Texas; his father running away from the plantation to Fort Worth and buying the rest of his family out of bondage; the meatpacking industry in Nebraska; communal services in Omaha and Rondo; the Black Panther Party free breakfast program in Omaha; Black wealth and self-sufficiency in Rondo; Nathaniel Khaliq's family being evicted from their home during the construction of Interstate 94; playing sports at Central High School; teaching at Mechanic Arts High School with no resources; women in Omaha also working in meatpacking; memories of his mother being present when he was a child; Eddie Bolden and the Black Panther Party in Omaha; the Black Muslims and Nation of Islam in Omaha; Black servicemembers and professional athletes in Omaha; BANTU organization; the war zone atmosphere in Omaha with the police; the harassment of Black students at North High School in Omaha; Black men in Omaha being disappeared by the police; BANTU taking over North High School in protest; fighting to not have to enlist in ROTC; BPP programs in Omaha, how food was acquired for the breakfast program; Black flight to the suburbs, loss of role models; Black children today being wrongfully placed in Special Education; attending Macalester College from 1969 to 1973 as part of the Expanded Educational Opportunities program; Macalester College almost being a Black college during his time there; the Macalester Black House; campus takeover protest at Macalester.

People/organizations discussed: Inner City Youth League; Black Panther Party; Ernie Chambers; Teen Teamworks, Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board; Allied Universal;

Nathaniel Khaliq, formerly known as Nick Davis; Mechanic Arts High School; Dan Stafford; Eddie Bolden; Nation of Islam; Christchild Community Center; Gale Sayers, Bob Boozer, Bob Gibson; Black Association for Nationalism Through Unity (BANTU); Dennis Womack; Michael Jordan; Macalester College, Expanded Educational Opportunities (EEO) program; Upward Bound; Mahmoud El-Kati; John Patton; Arthur Fleming; Hubert Humohrey; Karl Egge; Robert Bunting; Richard Nixon; James Stewart; Walter Mondale; Melvin Collins; Macalester College Black House; Young Holt Trio; Friends of Distinction; Stevie Wonder; Olatunji and Drums of Passion; Doris Wilkinson; Black Liberation Affairs Committee (BLAC); Imani publication; Sounds of Blackness; Gary Hines.

Name: Yusef Mgeni Oral History

Date: October 16th, 2025

Place: Residence of Yusef Mgeni, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: His great-uncle Fredrick McGhee; the founding of St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; being born in St. Paul on July 24th, 25th, and 26th 1948; attending St. Peter Claver Parochial School; a summary of his educational journey; the one year he lived in Washington D.C.; a summary of the lines of work he has been in; Fred McGhee's role in founding the Niagara Movement and the NAACP; his time living in Los Angeles, California; a cross being burned in front of his childhood home; his father not being present in his childhood; people in the Rondo community supporting his educational journey; the close-knit nature of the Rondo community; the Duluth lynching; Northern segregation; the Underground Railroad in Minnesota; being involved in the Expanded Educational Opportunities program at Macalester College; Black intellectuals and leaders visiting the Twin Cities; Rondo and North and South Minneapolis being colonies; the history of the Rondo neighborhood; Black businesses in Rondo; the employment available to Black men and women up until the mid-1960s; the railroads; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Black inventors in Minnesota; school experiences at St. Peter Claver; Cyrus Ettinger's investment in his academic career; working as a bomb inspector at John Wood Foundry; finishing high school; the Civil Rights Era in Rondo and St. Paul; the gang era in Rondo; the Black Power Movement in response to gangs and the drug epidemic; story about Mahmoud El-Kati in DeLand, Florida.

People/organizations discussed: Fredrick McGhee; the St. Paul Pioneer; Charles Drew; Daniel Hale Williams; W.E.B. DuBois; Samuel Hardy; St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; National Black Catholic Congress; John Ireland; Montreal Star; Stephen Theobald; St. Peter Claver Parochial School; University of Minnesota; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Southern California; the Humphrey Institute; Metropolitan State University; National Rifle Association; Tom Hardy; Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Howard

University; Urban League; Inner City Youth League; African American Leadership Council; NAACP; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Norris Bumstead Herndon; William Sherman; Niagara Movement; D.W. Griffith; Arthur McWatt, Katie McWatt; US organization; Black Panther Party; American Civil Liberties Union; Pilgrim Baptist Church; Negro Leagues; Elmer Jackson, Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton; The Innocence Project; National Lynching Museum; Bryan Stevenson; Moses Dixon; Perfect Ashler Lodge; Hallie Quinn Brown; Martin Luther King Center; Al Stafford; Community Employment Training Act; North Central Voters League; Great Northern, Northern Pacific Railroad; J. Edgar Hoover; Alprentice Bunchy Carter; Mahmoud El-Kati; John Warfield and Jan Warfield; John Patton; Gary Hines; Macalester College Black House; Malcolm X Pan-African Institute; Anyanya; Booker T. Washington; Marian Anderson; Paul Robeson; Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House; Nacirema Club; Cozy's Bar; The Elks club; The Celebrity Club; Joseph Rondeau; Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph; Marvin Roger Anderson; Dred Scott, Harriet Robinson; Francis Scott Key; Billy Williams; Roy Wilkins; Whitney Young Jr.; Maudine Cooper; Frederick McKinley Jones; Garrett Morgan; George Washington Carver; Dennis Lewis; John Hope Franklin; Richard Wright; Ta-Nehisi Coates; Isabel Wilkerson; Benjamin E. Mays; Barack Obama and Michelle Obama; Cyrus Ettinger; Ermin Hogan; Maulana Karenga; Lerone Bennett Jr.; Abraham Lincoln; Antioch University; Stillwater State Prison; Cambone Kamara; Jim Griffin; Vusumuzi Zulu; Spike Moss; James Sackett; Ronnie Reed, Connie Trimble; Nathaniel Khaliq; Kwame McDonald; Gangster Disciples; Crips, Bloods; Sabathani Community Center; Anura Si-Asar; Minnesota Historical Society; Moussa Foster.

Name: Debbie Montgomery Oral History

Date: October 30th, 2025

Place: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: Her birth and upbringing in the Rondo neighborhood; her childhood home at 978 St. Anthony Ave; her childhood home being taken under eminent domain during the construction of Interstate 94; neighbors in Rondo and her family; growing up in the Oatmeal Hill section of the Rondo neighborhood; getting involved with the NAACP as a child; participating in the March on Washington in 1963 and the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965; racial demographics of Rondo; Oatmeal Hill being where many Black professionals lived; growing up playing sports at Oxford Playground; her talent at speed skating; playing sports with boys; learning from youth in the NAACP about the Southern Black experience; her grandfather's work as captain of the Red Caps and her grandmother's work as a matron at the Union Depot; the home on 889 Iglehart Ave which her family moved into after the first home was taken; fighting in junior high school; joining the St. Paul Police Department in 1975; being tasked with patrolling Rice St on midnights as a new officer; being sent to negotiate with the Hell's Outcasts;

fellow Black officers; being promoted to sergeant and supervising the midnight shift; riding the trains to visit the South and take part in Civil Rights Movement trips; the 56 mile march from Selma to Montgomery; the Selby-Dale riot of 1968; her time on St. Paul city council; African Americans being the only community in St. Paul without an economic engine; student activism at the University of Minnesota, the Morrill Hall takeover; memories of friends at Macalester College.

People/organizations discussed: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Robert Montgomery (husband); Isabella Gilbreath and Albert Gilbreath (grandparents); Minnesota Historical Society; James Bradford; Dwayne Gilbreath, Dale Gilbreath, Darryl Gilbreath (brothers); St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Father Denzel Carty; NAACP; Harvey Jones; J.J. Hill Elementary School; Bill Peterson; Mary Meyers; Dave Winfield, Stevie (Steve) Winfield; Jackie Coulter; Jeff Nelson; John Marshall High School; Mechanic Arts High School; Central High School; Sue Compton; Sonny Massey; Humphrey School of Public Affairs; Arthur Naftalin; Jim Gillette; Billy Burton, Hell's Outcasts; Kenny McIntosh; Freddie Slemmons; Gordy Kirk; Ku Klux Klan; Irvin Bruin; Margaret Bruin; Pat Harris; Dan Bostrom; Dave Thune; Minnesota Vikings, Ed McDaniel; Jimmy Lee Recreation Center; Renee Tyler; Melvin Whitfield Carter III; AFRO Department at the University of Minnesota; Matt Stark; Sam Myers; Jeffrey Hassan; Bill Hart, Brian Lozenski, Tia Simone-Gardner, Duchess Harris.

Name: Steve Winfield Oral History

Date: November 25th, 2025

Place: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/transcriber: Mackinnon Williams

Subjects discussed: Being one of the Rondo sons; him and his brother Dave Winfield being raised in the Rondo neighborhood by Arline Winfield, a single mother; growing up at Oxford playground; never hearing of Oatmeal Hill and Cornmeal Valley terminology growing up; not knowing what was happening when Interstate 94 construction started; having to run laps through the highway construction site for sports; Debbie Montgomery being an idol of his in sports; Rondo being a mixed neighborhood; him and his brother Dave wanting to be professional bowlers as children; Zoilo Versalles on the Twins making him and Dave interested in baseball; streets and sections of the neighborhood that Black people weren't allowed into; James Griffin and Jimmy Robinson coaching and playing mentor roles; getting into coaching and officiating for sports; the relevance of the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam in the Black Power Era after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968; forming the Black Student Union at Central High School with Russel Balenger; memories of AAAC at the University of Minnesota; The Way Community Center and riots in Minneapolis; the Stem Hall riot in St. Paul in 1968; the beginning of Inner City Youth League; playing varsity baseball at the University of Minnesota as

a freshman, leaving the team; not regretting choosing community activism over professional sports; Reverend Spence and New Hope Baptist Church.

People/organizations discussed: Dave Winfield (brother); Arline Winfield (mother); Oxford playground; J.J. Hill Elementary School; Marshall Junior High School; Central High School; University of Minnesota; John Cotton; Mack Burch; Bob Carter; Ernie Johnson; Bill Peterson; Tom Hardy; Debbie Montgomery; Kenny McIntosh; Ronnie Reed, Michael Reed, Duane Reed; Kenny Christian, Lenny Christian, Denny Christian, Benny Christian, Quinny Christian; Dwayne Gilbreath; Billy Collins; Zoilo Versalles; Harmon Killebrew; Rod Carew; Bob Allison; Bob Carter; Russel Balenger; Jimmy Martin; St. Paul VFW Hall; Elks Lodge; American Legion; James Griffin; Jimmy Lee; Jimmy Robinson; Frank White; Gail Anderson; Roger Neal; Martin Luther King Jr.; Black Panther Party; Ronnie Reed; Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad; Afro American Action Committee (AAAC); The Way Community Center; Spike Moss; Bobby Hickman; Katie McWatt; Patty Hickman; Inner City Youth League; Gordon Parks; Robin Hickman-Winfield (wife); the Loft Teen Center; Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center; Stacy Robinson; Ujamaa Place; Darryl Spence; New Hope Baptist Church.

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Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

September 30th, 2025

Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Russel Balenger Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

RB: Russel Balenger (interviewee)

01:27:42 runtime

Subjects discussed: Being born and raised in St. Paul; living south of St. Anthony Ave, where the hole was for Interstate 94; his family's home burning down when he was 7 years old; how his parents Russel Balenger and Lillian Balenger came to St. Paul; his father's work on the railroads; lightskinned members of his family and how they navigated St. Paul; reconnecting with his cousin Nelson Balenger; memories of his father's temperament; his family being separated after the house fire, and moving into a new house on Dayton Ave; an incident with the white Kosa family who rented from his mother; his mother's jobs and temperament; his mother's political involvement with North Central Voters League, Target Area A; childhood responsibilities for maintaining the family's home; exploring the neighborhood as a child; being stopped by police as an 8 year old on Selby Ave; discovering Unity Church and House of Hope; hitchhiking to Winona, MN as a 12 year old; white flight out of Rondo; Black neighbors in the neighborhood; his mother organizing balls for Black people in the community; his uncle Gordon Parks; Black social clubs, the Sterling Club, the Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; his mother leaving the back door of their home unlocked in case someone needed to hide from police; police officers in Rondo back in the day mostly being Black; his family's relationship with Patricia Caponi; being the first Black camper at a youth camp in the Boundary Waters; Judge Archie Gingold paying for his youth camp fees; his mother's work ethic; his hustle in high school; getting his first job; how the North Central Voters League started; his connection to Moorhead State University; how his brothers started Inner City Youth League; talking about Black history in class at Central High School; the riot on Selby Ave in 1968; responses at Central High School to Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated; going to the Soviet Union as an exchange student while in high school; going to Ghana in his later years; experiences in the Soviet Union as a Black person; segregation in St. Paul, Black people not being allowed in certain parts of the city.

People/organizations discussed: Thomas Hickman; Russel Balenger (father); Lillian Balenger (mother) formerly Lillian Parks and Lillian Hickman; Gordon Parks (uncle); Charles Balenger and Martha Balenger (father's parents); Laura and Nelson Balenger (father's siblings); Nelson Balenger (cousin); Kosa family; Target Area A; Ramsey Action Program; Russel (grandson); North Central Voters League; Saint Paul Police Department; Unity Church; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; House of Hope Presbyterian Church; Esther Peake; Anderson family;

Recommended bibliography entry using The Chicago Manual of Style:
Balenger, Russel. "Russel Balenger Oral History." Interview by Mackinnon Williams. Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives: *Rondo Movement History Interview Project*, September 30th, 2025.

Chester Oden; Anna (aunt); Anura Si-Asar; Jackie Balenger (brother); Sterling Club, Cameo Club, the Regalettes, the Untouchables; Officer Skelly; James Mann; Urban League Guild; Patricia Caponi, formerly Patricia (Pat) Parlin; Archie Gingold; Merle Harris; S. Edward Hall; Nancy Parlin; Moorhead State University; Black Panther Party; Bobby Hickman (brother); Eamon Peck (unconfirmed); Ted Hamm; Readus Fletcher; Mahmoud El-Kati; Martin Luther King Jr.; The Circle of Peace Movement; Artika Tyner; Ronald Reagan; Ed Sullivan.

00:00:23

MW: So to start us off, today is September 30th, my name's Mackinnon Williams, I'm here with Mr. Russel Balenger to do an interview on the history of Rondo and Mr. Balenger's life. So, to start off, could you introduce yourself, talk about your connection to the Rondo neighborhood and yeah, your family's connection here?

RB: Sure. I'm Russel Balenger. I was born and raised in St. Paul, began in the Rondo neighborhood. We were on the south side of St. Anthony, which is where the hole is for I-94. Our family— our family home was burned, so we were moved out of Rondo at the beginning of the transfer of this land. We never knew how the fire started, but it was a crisp winter's morning. We were all standing outside watching as the flaming off the house— and it was a large house. It was said in the newspaper that it was the largest residential fire in St. Paul that year. It was a big home, my father rented rooms to the railroad workers that he worked with who came into town and families that were migrating north. So, at some times there would be two or three families living in that house with us— not in the same rooms but— there were three finished levels on the house.

MW: In the house at that point, it was your parents, and then did you have any siblings?

RB: Yes. I have five siblings, their father is Thomas Hickman, and I'm the youngest. And I was— my father, Russel Balenger— the only son. So, my father was 51 when I was born, my mother was 40.

MW: And how did your parents come to Rondo?

RB: My mother came— she was born in 1911— and she came to St. Paul when she was 16 years old with my uncle Gordon, who was 15 or 14. My father came to St. Paul in 1915 as a young teenager and briefly went to school and then quickly went to work. He had a career on the railroad, and he came with his mother and father, Charles Balenger and Martha. And he had a sister, Laura— who lived across the street, by the way— and a brother, Nelson. My mother had 15 brothers and sisters in Kansas, and a number of them found their way to Minnesota— but were pretty spread out.

00:05:11

RB: My aunties and uncles would come visit, and I think we had our first family reunion in 1971, which my mother put together. And I think of that first family reunion, we had almost 150 people I've never seen. And it's a good old time.

MW: And then what was your father's role, what was his position working for the railroads?

RB: I believe at first he worked in the— he was a waiter and then he was a porter. And I think it was because he was a very lightskinned man, and I think— you know, there was a lot of colorism in those days. And so my uncle worked at the capitol and I remember towards the end of her life, my aunt chose to pass as white. She never had children.

MW: What did that look like for your aunt?

RB: Well, in her last years, she lived in a nursing home, which— I think today they would call it, "Assisted living." But at that time, she didn't really care for us to visit because she— they didn't know that, or she didn't think they knew that she had this family. But when she died, they called me and told me that she needed to be buried. So, evidently they knew. Growing up, I knew there were Balengers that were family members, but many of them— there was my cousin Nelson and his family had— he was older than I was, he moved and I didn't see them again for 50 years. And I just happened to be walking through Macy's and I looked at a guy and I thought, "Strange." And just— there was a connection— and I walked past him and I seen he had a name tag on, it said "N. Balenger," on it. I said, "Nelson?" And he didn't remember me. So those were the days when everybody was calling each other "Cuz." And so I turned, he said, "How can I help you, sir?" And I said, "I'm your cousin, Russel." He says, "How can I help you?" And I said, "No, I'm your cuz." And he says, "Yes, what do you need?" And I said, "Holy smokes." But another colored cousin that he did know let him know that we were indeed cousins. And so we've been golfing together for about 25 years. And the Balengers have kind of found their way to each other. So, we're now talking about a family reunion, which probably needs to happen soon. And as I mentioned, there's— I met a cousin in Washington State who called and said, I think I'm a Balenger.

00:10:10

RB: And he had been adopted as a little boy, so as a baby, I guess. But he had found his birth mother, so he got a clue there. So I'm working on how this whole thing happened and how the

story all comes together. So there's— I was my father's only son, but I have 28 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren- one on the way. So it's kind of like we're back. There's a gang of us now.

MW: It sounds like you're back. Did your father talk about— did he talk about his work when you were growing up, his being in service positions, the social dynamics on the railroad?

RB: No, my father was a quiet man. You know, he might grunt or make a noise when he's bothered with something. And one of my biggest memories is— in those days, if you were— colored is what they called us then, you had a job and a hustle. So everybody had something they could do after the work. My father's was leasing the space in that house. A part of that was to make the house beautiful, so, we lived on two lots, and the lawn was always so meticulous that we were afraid to play on it. So we would go to the playground. My mother was always— had business to take care of, so my father would wear a suit under his bib overalls, and he would take the jacket off, and he'd have a white shirt and tie, and he'd have bib overalls on, and he'd be in the yard. And my mother was ready to go, she said, "Russel, we have to go." And he'd peel that off and put his jacket on. And then they'd go wherever it was that they needed to be, wherever they needed to be.

MW: Was your father involved or were you aware of any labor organizing that was happening with the railroads?

RB: You know, I can't say, I'm not sure about that. I was pretty young then when— I was about seven years old when we came out of the Rondo neighborhood. We were separated as a family

for three months, and we used to talk about it after we got back together, and we all thought that was more like three years. But I was the youngest and smartest, and I could do the math. It was three months. [Laughter] And we found a house that was four half blocks south of where we were, which was like being in another world. So we were on Dayton Avenue, I own that home now. It was a duplex and it was on the corner. It was one block north of Selby. And at that particular point, we were the first Black family that far south of Rondo. When we moved into the place, there was already a renter upstairs, and I remember the people's name was Kosa.

00:15:01

RB: And in those days, you could burn the trash outside. I would go out and burn the trash with Mr. Kosa every day. He seemed to be a real great guy, real great man, and he and Mrs. Kosa were very nice people. But one Sunday— I believe it was either the first or the second month we were there— he came down on the Sunday, we were having dinner and he said, "You're a lovely family. And we've enjoyed being here, but we just can't rent from niggers." My mother put her hands on the table, and— which meant, "Shut your mouth, I've got this." And she told him that they'd been lovely tenants and if they would need a reference at any time to let her know. And that was the end of that. And I don't think, I don't think there was another white tenant for— maybe until I started leasing it. That was a lot of years later. The house has been, the house is now 100 years old. And it's been in our hands for about 70 years.

MW: And what was your mother's name?

RB: Lillian Parks. And later Hickman, and then Balenger.

MW: Okay. And she, like you said, she had a lot of business to handle. What was her work?

RB: My mother. My mother was a— she was like a boss. She would, she was always kind of pushing the line and finding— if she could find a job. She wanted to work downtown, but she didn't do cleaning and she didn't do menial jobs. It was a time when, if you were of color, you would be the last hired and the first fired. So I'd see her come home and she had lost her job. It had been taken from her, but I never seen her cry or seem upset. And I think it was because perhaps we didn't really need the money. She loved to dress. I never saw her in a house dress— they were called. When she would go shopping, she would take me with her, and the saleswomen would come up and say, "I've got a beautiful house dress over here." And she'd ignore 'em. She liked designer fashion, and our home was always beautiful. There were six of us with my brothers and sisters, and we each had a job. My job was to take care of the outside of the house. I had a sister that had to do the glass in the house, and a sister that did the furniture. And my brother was— my oldest brother made sure everything was as it should be. She kind of ran us like a business. We called her, "Mother." She didn't promote "Mom," or "Mama." And it was, "Mother would like you to do somethin'." So after North Central Voters League, she decided she was going to start an agency called Target Area A, and that was on Central, close off of Dale Street, and it was to help people find assistance and jobs and—whatever the need was, she was on it.

00:20:22

RB: I suppose it was a nonprofit then, I'm not sure, but she had built it up to her— she had a pretty good sized staff. She started a program to help people who were up in their age get food

on a regular basis. So, Target Area A became Ramsey Action Program, and now it's called CASH. And when she turned to them, it was really being— business was happening in three different counties. She was— she took over the congregate dining program, she had eight professional women on her staff and a secretary that was a white fellow named Bob. I've always kind of felt— I'd like to watch her do business, and when I'd come in, she'd say, "Bob, would you get us some coffee?" I always kind of felt like she was getting back, and she was a real character. So, at that point, my father had— after the fire, he was never quite the same, and he had a series of strokes when I was around 12 years old and ended up in a nursing home. Then it was really on my mother to see about those of us that relied on her for support. So, I was pretty good at— I'd gotten pretty good about how to shovel the snow and cut the grass. I was kind of particular, so that everything was perfect- and then the neighbors began to ask if they could pay me to do their yard. I remember my mother telling me once that I was making more money than she was. And so— I have a grandson, Russel, who's eight years old, and we're working on his first project, there's a neighbor that they will be in Europe for the next three months, so we'll keep their surroundings beautiful. They're right across the street. So it's nice because it kind of tightens up the block. And we're still kind of fussy about the yard. Yeah, I can just take off on some things so you gotta kind of pull me back.

MW: Sounds good. I had a couple other questions about the neighborhood as you were growing up, and then I'm curious about your mom's more political life, because that sounds pretty extensive. So in this second house that's on Dayton, on the southern periphery of Rondo. You moved there when you were how old?

RB: Seven years old.

MW: Seven years old. And then this is when your family is in a— you're the only Black family, surrounded by white people. What were the interactions like with the other families around you? Was there a police presence in that neighborhood at the time?

RB: Well, as long as we stayed in that house, everything seemed to be fine.

00:25:06

RB: I was young, so I didn't know what to be looking for, but I was also the youngest in my family, and my next sibling was eight years older. So, she was kind of at an age— and the next one— they didn't have time to really watch me, "Watch me" watch me. So, I was very independent and my mother would leave. She had this job she was putting together. She was working and doing some work for North Central Voters League and another job. And she would say to me, "Don't leave the yard." And of course that sent me exploring the block. And the next day or a week later, she would say, "Don't leave the yard, don't leave the block." And I'd say, "Mm-hmm." So I'd go a little further. I remember taking her finger and saying, "Don't go up on Selby." And so I had to go see what Selby looked like. When I got up on Selby, the police did come up and they had me put my hands up against the wall. They went through my pockets— and I was a pretty skinny kid. I can remember now that they could only get two fingers in my pocket. I didn't have anything. My mother died never knowing I went up on Selby. I never told her, because she told me not to go up there. I want to say that— you know, you hear the stories, particularly a lot of— I've heard a lot of Black folks say, "And then my mother made me go out

and pick that switch and she gave me that whoopin'." My mother never whooped me and my father didn't either. So— but she could look at me in a way that I could see she was ashamed and that hurt more. But I had that job at about eight years old of tidying the outside of that house. My brother Jackie [Hickman] would come and tell me, "You need to do this and you need to clean this up." And then, as I said, at 12 years old, my father went into this nursing home. He just couldn't— he was bedridden, really, until he died. So, at eight years old, after I got tired of being mad about the police, I crossed over Selby and headed on up the street and found myself at- there was a big church, looked like a castle. It was Unity Church, Unitarian, were big supporters of Hallie Q. Brown [Community Center] and the food assistance, and they were warm and friendly. Then maybe a few days later, I'd go a little further and I went to House of Hope. And little by little, I'd go further. I had a nephew who was four months younger than me and he lived a block away and he began to follow me or go with me. That made me a little nervous because I didn't know if I was gonna get found out because of him. Eventually, I think before I was nine years old, we'd gotten— walked as far as we'd run into the river. That was a good walk. I remember us hustling back because we wanted to get home before my mother got home from work. So that was, I think I've kind of always been that way. At 12 years old, I saw on TV, I saw somebody put their thumb out to get a ride.

00:30:05

RB: So I went out and I put my thumb out and a truck driver picked me up and took me four hours away from here to Winona [Minnesota] and dropped me. Luckily, this white family came up and said, "What are you doing here?" and I told them the story. They took me home with

them and had me sleep in their house and called my mother and told her that they would get me back to her the next day. The next year, when the weather broke, she sent me to the Boundary Waters [Minnesota], to a camp that was, I'd spend 30 days in the wilderness. She'd tell me to watch out for those bears. [Laughter] And I did, I was good at it too.

MW: Mmm. So you were traveling.

RB: By that time, it was, they called it, "White flight." People began— "For Sale" signs started coming up. People were moving out. But just as quick as people were moving out, Black folks were moving in. And there was a lady named Esther Peake who bought two houses next to us. She was a society columnist for the Sun newspaper. The Andersons moved across the street, he was a railroad man. Chester Oden, who owned Road Buddies restaurant on University, was a Black restauranteur, bought a house across the street. My cousins— some Balengers moved over on the other side, and pretty soon the neighborhood had gone from white to black. And the houses were— the house that burned— the insurance company, I remember my mother saying the insurance company gave us $4,000 for- the house was built for $6,000. My father put an addition on the house in 1948. And then they gave him four grand for it. And I think that's what really was— was really a hardship for him. My mother was kind of a tougher bird and she just didn't dwell on what happened. She was more about what was going to happen next. She was just tough, and by that time, my uncle Gordon [Parks] had built a pretty good career and was a photographer for Life Magazine and would come and see her. And my Aunt Anna lived not too far from us. And by that time, Anura's [Anura Si-Asar] grandmother had moved to St. Paul, Aunt Mary. She was my brother Jackie's godmother also. She was a tough old bird too. You didn't

give her any lip. So in those days, it was difficult for Black folks, other people of color, to be able to rent a room at a hotel or tha— like a ballroom where they could have a large party.

00:35:08

RB: My mother was, she had grown up seeing white people have these large gatherings, formal balls. She began to make that happen. My uncle [Gordon Parks] had gotten a start taking some photographs at a store called Mrs. Frank Murphy downtown. So then he— his career blew up and they, they like taking credit for that, so they had pictures of my uncle in his, in their store and my mother liked to shop there. It was probably the ritziest store in the region, I would say. And they would [Inaudible] came with a crowd of these women that were all getting dialed up, men all had tuxes of their own and tails and that's how they would party. They had a place called the Sterling Club, which I've been a member of— at one point, chairman of the board. They've been around for over a hundred years and still have a house about three blocks from here. And that's where they would have their parties and they would get together, and then pretty soon the hotels began to rent to them in the prom ballroom and that type of thing. They had social clubs and there was the Cameo Club, which my mother was president of at one point. And the Regalettes, the Untouchables, there became a number of these clubs, and each of them was beginning to have their party over here. They could do the bum's ball, and everyone would dress up like a bum would in formal attire, and then they'd party! And cotillions, my sisters would be debutants, and I would have a job to roll down the white carpet for them to come down on. She always had work for me. I don't ever remember having a babysitter. If my sisters couldn't do it, then I had to take care of myself. As a kid going to school, I stood in the window and watched the other kids

headed to school and I'd let myself out. We didn't lock the door in those days. At night, my mother would always say, "Make sure the back door is unlocked in case someone needs to get in."

MW: Why was that?

RB: Because there could be trouble. There could be— there was a, in those days, there was the police presence, but for the most part, the police officers were Black in the Rondo neighborhood. There was one police officer, his name was Skelly. He was white and he was big and tall. But unlike now, if the police were looking for you, they'd come knock on the door. They didn't bust in your house. And for the most part, at a very young age, you would learn that when the police, when you opened the door and the police were standing there, you would say, "So and so's not here." And I know I learned it.

00:40:00

RB: I probably had it when I was in kindergarten. Because I had, it was a big house and police would come rarely, but on occasion. So, and they knew you. So, as I got older and strayed further, and I remember Mr. Mann [James Mann], who before he died I called Uncle Jim, and his oldest son is like a brother to me. He would see me, and he could tell by the look on my face, "You look like you're about to get in trouble. Go home." And the first time when I got home, he was already there, I guess, to see if I went. I remember his wife was a real good cook. They lived in the neighborhood too. And I, for a while, I would show up over there around six. I knew that's

when dinner was served. Yeah, I remember him saying, “Does he live here now?” No. I’m straying, I know so—

MW: No, that’s good. These are all interesting stories.

RB: You’ll edit this stuff.

MW: Yeah, of course. I’m curious, I’m curious about your introductions to Black political organizing and movement building here. And maybe to start, you could talk about your mom’s work, since it sounds like that might have been an introduction.

RB: It was. My mother was on the Urban League Guild, who worked with the Urban League. And I didn’t say, but my first grade teacher was a little white woman with blue eyes. Her name was Pat Parlin. [Patricia Parlin Caponi] And my mother was very forward thinking. She went over to the school and met this woman, invited her to the house. We lived across the street from the school, and I’ve got pictures of her over at our home having cocktails. Mrs. Parlin married an artist, and his name’s Caponi so she’s Pat Caponi now, and she’s 95 years old, and I talk to her every month. Growing up— so my mother died 50 years ago— but Mrs. Caponi’s been there. I think for a while, her children wondered why I was always talking to their mother. But— and she always had something for me to do. She would show up at anything I was doing— there she would be! And I watched this little white woman fight for people’s rights. And she at one point was vice president of the Urban League Guild. She thought she was a token, but she wasn’t. My mother, she always made friends with the— whoever was running the St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers, and she would invite them to her house, to meetings and other prominent people. So

she was building a network. I would watch this when she worked for North Central Voters League. She was having conversations with people that had political endeavors that— they were trying to make some moves. She was very opinionated about who we should vote for and she was very good about getting that word out, so the politicians would find their way to our home. They would come and she would— she didn't go to them, they would come to our home and one of us was to answer the door. She wasn't doing that. One of us would go get coffee and cookies or whatever she had in there. She would have a meeting that included Hubert Humphrey and Fritz Mondale.

00:45:00

RB: I was told at one point that that camp she sent me to in the Boundary Waters, it was a very— it was for rich kids. I didn't know, I was the first Black camper, but I was really good about it. I knew how to read a map and how to use a compass. I had been in the Boy Scouts and been on a number of two day camping trips when I went to do that. And she told me that Judge Archie Gingold had paid for my trips to the Boundary Waters, which— I had to go each summer for three summers. One day I was taking my daughter to the hospital to get— she broke her arm and I had to get the pins out of her arm, and the nurse said, "Judge Gingold's in the other room, he's going to need such and such." And I said, "Can I talk to him?" And they said, "Yeah." So I went and went to thank him for sending me to that camp that changed my life. He said, "Oh, you don't owe me any thanks." He said, "I made a call to your mother because I wanted to become a judge. And she made some calls for me and here I am." And I thought, "I never heard that part of the story." So my mother would do that job and then she would come home. She would cook dinner

and then she would start on the telephone. I never knew exactly what all she would be talking about for most of the evening but many times I would walk in and she'd fallen asleep with that phone in her hand, and I'd take the phone out of her hand and help her get to her room to go to sleep. That's just how she worked. She was tireless, she always made happen what she planned to make happen. I told her once that I wanted something, but I didn't get it. She told me, "You didn't want it bad enough," and I went back and got it. So that's— in a lot of ways, she built me. The expectation was for me to always have A's in school, and I did. My hustle in high school was looking at people's homework and telling them where they were wrong. I built that into a business where I had a team working with me in my homeroom class to look over that paper. I got a quarter for making sure your homework was right and my team got free lunch every day. I paid for it. What it did for me was it prepared me for college because a lot of us weren't going to college then. So not only did I decide to go to college, but I had to figure out how to pay for it. And I did. I'd like to say that I was— my first job was at 10 years old, and there was a little department store on Selby Avenue. The first time I walked in there and asked them do they have a job? They told me to get out. And the next week I'd come again and say, "Do you have any jobs yet?" And they'd tell me, "I told you to stay away from here." Third week, they said, "Listen, kid," in the fourth week, they said, "What is it you can do?" And I had a job. Then I found a place that would let me wash some of their windows. I had a job and a hustle, and I had to go to school. And I played baseball. And I could swim.

MW: You could read maps, it sounds like.

00:50:01

RB: I could read maps. I was so good with that map. Here's what happened, is the white kids were all buying candy and treats for their self to go on this 30-day trip. And something inside of me said, "You're not gonna get left behind anywhere on this trip. You need a map and a compass of your own." And that's what I spent my money on. So the guide we had wasn't as good as I was reading that map. There was a point where I had to take part of the trip forward and meet the other part later. I was 15 years old and seven days later, I met him many miles from where I left him, where I left the other group. So, you couldn't tell me much in those days. But as I got older and looked back on it, I thought, "Why would they let me do that?" [Laughter] At one point we were on the lake when it got dark and you can't see where you're going. I hadn't thought that far ahead, but we got there.

MW: And could you give an overview of the North Central Voters League, just what that was and how that came about?

RB: The North Central Voters League started, I remember my mother taking me to Merle Harris. He was a Black businessman in St. Paul, and he owned the meat market on Iglehart and Grotto. She went there and they had a conversation with— and Mr. Hall was there. [S. Edward Hall] Mr. Hall was a Black— had a barbershop downtown, and I'm told it had 12 chairs in this barbershop, but only white men and the bankers and that would be getting their hair cut there. It wasn't a place for us to go get our hair cut. But it was the bankers, and all the rollers would be in that barbershop, and Mr. Hall could tell you what was going on in the city. And so they began to plan who would represent us best in the political scene and what was necessary for us to move forward. And a lot of that came from being able to know what was going on. So, I don't know if

you know this, but straight up Marshall, a block past Western, that's four or five blocks, there's a bust in the park of Mr. Hall, because he was so well respected. That's when the planning— and people were really working. I'll dig through my stuff— Mrs. Caponi would send me pictures, copies of different events that my mother had gotten her involved in. And it's very interesting to see back in the '50s and them working together to try to change things. Mrs. Caponi is a beautiful lady, and she's really a tough bird, too. I would ask her, "How did she end up having this class of Black kids?" She said, "I thought you were all special." She made us read. And she had a farm in Roberts, Wisconsin. That's a long way if you don't have the freeway. And there wasn't a freeway then. She would tell me the stories about how when her kids were born, nobody would drive out there and see them except my mother. She said, "She would come around the corner in that great big Cadillac of hers. I didn't know how she found me. And she would hold my children." So they were real friends.

00:55:27

RB: When I went away to college, it turned out Mrs. Caponi's sister [Nancy Parlin] was a professor there at Moorhead [Moorhead State University]. So, I had somebody kind of watching. In those days, it would cost nine grand to go to school. That was a lot of money. They were very strategic. And this North Central Voters League was— it grew, but things were changing fairly rapidly. Pretty soon, Mr. Harris had a shoeshine stand on Selby and Dale that had sort of a roof on it and maybe six chairs, and in those days everybody got their shoes shined. It was— nobody was wearing tennis shoes, everybody had some leather shoes on. There was a restaurant right behind it called Louisiana, which there is now, but this, the Louisiana that's there now on Dale

and Selby is the new structure, but it used to be an old, very nice restaurant. And my mother would take us there about once a year. And I remember the food was good. I don't remember what we were eating, but I knew it was good. And there was— down on Victoria and Selby— my brother had gotten beaten up by the police pretty badly. It was not too long after he'd gotten out of the Air Force. He thought he was going to come out of the Air Force and be an airplane mechanic like he had been in the Air Force, but they wouldn't hire him. Then he had bought this car and he was doing work that was not what he wanted to do and got stopped by the police and they gave him a bad beating and he was bloodied up in the hospital. When he came out, my brother Jackie [Hickman] was at his side for a long time. Then it was right at that time, there was some noise about the Black Panthers [Black Panther Party] in California. My brother Jackie and my brother Bobby [Bobby Hickman] went out there and met with Huey Newton and some of the other folks that were getting the work going in California and came home. By that time there was one club, I think it was Celebrity Lounge— maybe it hadn't started yet, but there was a pool hall up there and there— Eamon Peck [Inaudible] had started a boxing gym up there. But I think it was, I'm going to say, I think it was 1965.

01:00:01

RB: Mr. Harris had identified the building on the corner of Victoria and Selby and said it was going to be— the people that were in there had now gotten out because of the white flight. And so that building would be vacant. It belonged to Ted Hamm. Ted Hamm was owner of Hamm's Brewing Company. My brothers went down there— and I think they pretty much just, I think my brother Jackie pretty much just promised that that building would remain in good shape if he

would rent it to them. And he did for a dollar a year, they'd take care of the building. So I and my friend Readus [Fletcher] were recruited to come in there and clean out all the debris. It began to do a photo group and an art group and then there was a boxing gym put in and offices upstairs. There was a house behind it that had been boarded up all my life. I would pass it going to school— grade school. And when we were cleaning up Inner City Youth League, I was 15, and Mahmoud El-Kati had shown up, and he was giving us history lessons. While we were sittin' around doing nothing, he'd start telling us about all the things we'd never heard. I and a friend began to— it was, my mother made it my job if I was going anywhere on the weekend or during the week, I had to go to the library first on Saturday morning. First I'd go swimming at the Wilder Pool downtown— had to walk down there— and then get over to the library and get some books. I usually went to the Science Museum [Science Museum of Minnesota] because I liked seeing the mummy and all that. And I had a few friends that would go with me after a while. Then we'd come back and study and read. At that point, I was mainly getting the Black authors that I could find. It really had a very overwhelming effect. But as I was in high school, when the history teacher would say "What happened on such and such date?" I could tell him what happened that I'd read in that Black history.

MW: Can you give an example?

RB: Well, they were talking about something about the summer of 1919. It was— I think they were talking something about, he wanted something about the automobile industry, and I told him it was the Red Summer and more Black people were lynched than any other time. It may seem hard to believe because his hair is thinning, but I had the first afro at Central High School

back in 1966. And the teachers— one teacher, he was, he just kind of lost himself and would lean over and whisper “Nappy head” in my ear. I knew I was getting the best of him. I was the only one that would— the rest of the students would put their heads down and go to sleep, and he permitted that, but I had to engage him. He gave me the only “D” I ever got. My mother came up, mink coat, man tailored suit, and said, “You’re not the teacher.”

01:05:00

RB: I went to what was supposed to be an accelerated class and did extra credit work and actually got an “A+” from that teacher and that other one was dismissed. I guess I wanted it bad enough. There were, there were a lot of difficult times. At a point, there was a riot on Selby Avenue.

MW: In ‘68, right?

RB: Yeah.

MW: What do you remember about that?

RB: I remember a lot of the buildings were burned.

MW: How did it start?

RB: There was an event downtown, and the police beat up this pregnant woman, Black woman. And I just remember everybody. It went up. By that point, we all were walking around fancying ourselves as Black Panthers. We all had a black leather jacket and beret. We were gettin’ our history down. We were becoming— militant, is what they called us.

MW: King had been killed at that point, right?

RB: Yes. And that was— I believe that was April of '68. [Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4th, 1968] I'd shot my mouth off so much at school by then that they came and got me and said, "King's killed. What should we do?" This was the administration. I said, "We'll have an assembly and then let everybody go home." And we did just that. They let me say a few words, and things were changing at that point. It was that fall that I left for school. And just prior to that, because of that camp in the Boundary Waters, I heard some of the guys talking about an exchange program with the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. And I said, "How do you do that?" And they said, "Oh, you gotta make an application, nana naanaa yenaa" I'd make sure I had everything. As soon as I got back, I got hold of those people and I said, "I'm gonna go." And I remember telling my mother, "I'm going to Russia." She just patted me on the arm and said, "Of course you are." So I did everything they asked. It was almost a year in the process. One day I got the letter and it said I've been chosen. I was, out of 16, I was the Black kid. I remember telling my mother that I was chosen and it was $4,300 and change to go. You could almost buy a house for that. My mother said, "Oh my God, we don't have any money." I said, "I'll get it. I'll get it." She was— I don't know how it all happened [Laughter], but I was able to go. I was a kid, I had that wanderlust and I liked to— I was only going to be gone 8 weeks. The other kids, when we all came together and met at this airport, they were all crying and they were afraid. I was like, "Hey, it's only 8 weeks." My mother started crying. Because she said, "Please stay with the group, please." And I was like, "Okay! I'll be fine." Do you know, when I got there, when we finally got there, they all got together and they were gonna— there

were Russian people said, “You’re to be in your hotel by 9 o’clock.” I told him, “My mother doesn’t tell me when to come and go to bed.” So they said, “Okay, you can go out.” And there was this big tall guy named Tofik that followed me everywhere I went. There was this white kid who said, “I’m rooming with Russ,” and his folks own billboards in Rochester or somewhere. I would come back and tell him what happened— for about three days. Then I went and said, “He’s coming with me.” They said, “Okay.” And we had a great time.

01:11:00

RB: I don’t know. I think, uh, my kids are like that now and my grandkids are pretty— no telling what they’re gonna do next. I had this group come to my circle [The Circle of Peace Movement] and they said, “We don’t know why you call yourselves African Americans. You’ve never been to Africa.” I was caught off guard on that one. So I went to Africa. [Inaudible] I got a ticket. There was this woman. Have you met Artika Tyner?

MW: Yeah.

RB: Artika said she was going to Africa on Facebook and I said, “Me too.”

MW: Ghana?

RB: Ghana. Then everybody behind it started saying, “Me too, I’m going, I’m going.” I think there were 16 of us by the time. When I got there, I posted something on Facebook. Oh my God. My grandkids started calling, “Stay with the group, grandpa, stay with them! Don’t go off.” I said, “Ehhh. Please.” I did pretty good.

MW: Let me ask one question about the USSR trip, and then I think we could wrap up this session, schedule another one down the line. This has been great. I'm curious, so the Soviet Union trip, that was in '67?

RB: I'll get clarity on that.

MW: We'll say '67. What was the— I assume that was your first time out of the U.S. What was the experience like being a Black person in the Soviet Union? Or visiting.

RB: Well, on the way to the Soviet Union. I had to go to Nova Scotia— first to New York, then to Nova Scotia, then to Amsterdam— England, and then Amsterdam. But when I got to England, was it Amsterdam? In the gift shop, they had Black dolls, never seen one before. So I bought a couple for my niece, nieces.

01:15:02

RB: And then coming from Amsterdam into Moscow, one of the first things I saw was a billboard with the Statue of Liberty holding an assault rifle on Black folks and an American flag. I was in that frame of mind by that point after everything that I'd read— was like "Right on." [RB holds up the Black Power salute] For the most part, people were very friendly. I moved differently than the other kids because they had come from privilege. I knew we weren't in America anymore. I had been in neighborhoods where I knew, you better be careful. I had friends that lived in St. Anthony Park, and people might try to run you over when you're crossing the street. It was a different time. You could be explained away at any time. We weren't shooting each other. We didn't have guns back then. If you got caught out here on Rice Street up the way,

if a white group caught you, you could take a pretty bad beating. You knew where not to go when it got dark. In those days, we had teenage nightclubs where you would go have a "coketail"— not a cocktail, but it was off Lake Street, kind of where the neighborhoods kind of blended. I'll give you more as I think about it, but it was a different time. When Selby burned, it was like those people got out of there and never came back. Selby looked like a war zone at a point. There was still the hole where the freeway would be. That stayed like that for 10 years. You could cross the bridges, but it was sand down there. There was no road yet. So when that riot happened— or it wasn't quite a riot, Selby got burned down. If you got caught on the other side of the freeway— is where I was— the police were sitting on all the bridges, so we wouldn't be able to go back and forth. My friend, who was in the documentary [*The Brothers of Rondo*] lived on the other side of the bridge and picked me up. So after that, it was a lot of vacant lots where some buildings had been. And my brothers and some of us began to plant food in them. We thought it was a revolutionary thing to do. Wait a minute, so you were asking me—

MW: I was curious about the Soviet Union.

RB: Yeah. Because—

MW: You said that you were moving differently out there from the other kids.

01:20:17

RB: Because the people were very warm. They were very interested. They wanted to know who I were. There were a number of Africans there. You'd see one every now and again. Okay. They didn't speak to you because they saw us as different. But I'm a people person. I'd go for my

walks. People would say, “Hi.” I think the first week— I’d already been taking Russian lessons here, but it wasn’t sticking. But when I got over there in the first week, I’d picked up enough Russian to kind of say, “I’m sorry”, “Hi,” and, you know, “Goodbye.” They had this song they would like to sing called Midnight in Moscow. And I could sing that with them. And over there, you can drink if you can hold a glass. And they’d invite you up on the porch or in the yard. And I’d go kick it with them. It was— they didn’t like Americans, but it really meant white Americans. But they were okay with my friend Wes, ‘cause we were hanging out together. There were all negative images of America. So it wasn’t— they didn’t have any problem with Black folks. But, they weren’t fond of the white Americans, and they really needed to be careful. Now I did kind of— with Wes— put together a little party, and we had invited the nurses from the medical school to come up. They came and made us pack our junk and get on a plane and go to the next city. [Laughter] I don’t know what they thought was going to happen. But other than that, they were just lovely. We had to come through Checkpoint Charlie. You know what that is?

MW: I don’t know.

RB: Okay. We went to Germany and West Berlin. And you had to go to East Berlin, which was communist, to get to go to Russia. And to come back, You had to come through East Berlin to West Berlin, and they called it Checkpoint Charlie. You heard Reagan [Ronald Reagan] say, “Tear down that wall.” It was a wall there. And me and Wes were sitting together and we exchanged passports as a joke and they didn’t think it was funny. They were like, got really all wound up in there. I was quick, “We’re sorry, we’re sorry.” And they let it slide. [Laughter] Geez. I was so glad when we got to— we got to West Berlin coming home. Those other kids that

were with me, they were crying and they went to their rooms and they were just like decompressing and I was like, "I'm getting ready to party." I was leaving the hotel and "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Can we come with you?" I said, "Come on." Because we were— you know, they didn't carry on like I did. And we went to this club and I saw Black folks coming in and they'd disappear. And when I first got there and I was walking down the street, I could hear Aretha Franklin coming out of the pizza shop.

01:25:13

RB: And I said, I'd never heard that here. Our music, it was a different time. Our music wasn't on the radio. It wasn't, at that point.

MW: That was in East Berlin?

RB: That was in West Berlin. But in America? You might see it on TV, in The Ed Sullivan Show. The plane— when I came into Moscow, Ed Sullivan was on the plane. I started kicking it with him. And pretty soon we leave [Inaudible] In the bathroom. So I go in the bathroom and I go in this room where I seen them slip into— it was a whole 'nother club attached to this club. Wandering around, I had a good time. But it was, sort of, it was liberating in a lot of ways. But I did feel like— a lot of the white kids that I went with kind of felt a little different about me after that. We had a few reunions, but I met with Wes maybe about eight years ago. And his brother's president of the country club. I showed up. I didn't know— I said to him, "I don't know, how am I going to recognize them?" And sure enough, our hair was all white. And Wes and I, we just

hugged and hugged and hugged. And his brother was like— he was so stuck up. It was just, but I haven't seen him since. I haven't seen any of them. So, yeah.

MW: That's quite a story. That's quite a trip.

RB: Yeah.

MW: I think we could wrap up there.

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

September 30th, 2025

Residence of Nathaniel Khaliq, St. Paul, MN

Nathaniel Khaliq Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

NK: Nathaniel Khaliq (interviewee)

01:00:54 runtime

Subjects discussed: Being born in 1943 at 304 Rondo Ave and raised in the Cornmeal Valley section of the Rondo Neighborhood; Cornmeal Valley and Oatmeal Hill; Black businesses in Rondo; moral standards in the community; being raised by his grandparents Reverend George Davis and Bertha Davis; the self-sufficiency of the Rondo neighborhood in his childhood; Black men in the community working on the railroad and in the packinghouse; being told certain areas of the city were off-limits to Black people; his grandfather being the last homeowner removed for the construction of I-94; racial housing covenants and eminent domain; riot in Rondo in 1968; the Saint Paul police going buck wild in dealing with Black folks; police officer Allan Lee being killed in 1949 and the city cutting power in lower Rondo; the "true face of life in St. Paul for Black folk"; people in the neighborhood shooting at police and fire trucks; urban renewal; pressures on Black men working as railroad porters; Black women in the community working at the Twin City Arsenal and in domestic roles; educated Black people being barred from work; benign neglect by the St. Paul police towards Rondo; organizing to close an establishment on Dale and Selby which was a center point for crime and violence; the El Rukns gang from Chicago moving into St. Paul; working with Bobby Hickman, Kwame McDonald, Katie McWatt; St. Paul police disregarding gangs; arson fire which killed babies; ad hoc Black radical organizations forming during the Black Power Era; stories of police ignoring crime; police harassing his family at home; major drug sweeps in St. Paul during the Republican Convention; investigating an arson fire that killed five children; getting affordable housing built in Rondo; trying to slow gentrification with the Summit-University Planning Council; the creation of Unidale Mall; the economic engines of other ethnic groups in Saint Paul; his involvement with the Nation of Islam and the Muslim communities in the Twin Cities; friend Abdul Kareem surviving a shooting in North Minneapolis; Islam being one of the greatest experiences of his life along with having children and being married to his wife Victoria Davis for 52 years.

People/organizations discussed: George Davis (grandfather) and Bertha Davis (grandmother); Russel Balenger; Allan Lee; Darrell Cruz; Kwame McDonald; Bobby Hickman; Katie McWatt; El Rukns; MOVE Organization; Inner City Youth League; Summit-University Crime Prevention Council; Black Underground Army; Black Liberation Army; NAACP; CORE; SNCC; SCLC; Minneapolis Star Tribune; Bill Clinton; Janet Reno; Lonnie Atkins; Roy Wilkins; Summit University Planning Council; Unidale Mall; Help Development Corporation; Kraus Anderson;

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General Mills; Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, W.D. Muhammad; Abdul Kareem; Masjid An-Nur; Victoria Davis (wife).

00:00:04

MW: Great, okay. My name is Mackinnon Williams. I'm here with Mr. Nathaniel Khaliq at his home in St. Paul, Minnesota. Today is September 30th, 2025, and we're here for a discussion about some of Mr. Khaliq's life work. So, to start off, Mr. Khaliq, could you briefly introduce yourself, give your birthplace and birth date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

NK: Born September 11th, 1943, at 304 Rondo, part of the Rondo neighborhood that was referred to as Cornmeal Valley. It was Cornmeal Valley and it was east of Dale Street and then west of Dale Street was Oatmeal Hill. And so, we lived in the lower economic part of the community, even though there were folks that were doing, y'know, better than others.

MW: Thank you. And then what were some of the— you spoke to some of the class dynamics- what were the race and class demographics and dynamics of Rondo at the time?

NK: Well, from what I remember, it was majority Black. We had over two or three hundred Black businesses. Many of them weren't storefronts. Many of them were housed in people's homes and stuff. We had connectivity and cohesiveness that we could depend on each other. It was a strong, strong safety net. There was high moral standards that the elderly set for us. I was raised by my grandparents, and my grandpa was a evangelist preacher [Reverend George Davis] and my grandmother [Bertha Davis] was blind. But she was a— she could do just about any and everything any other stay home mom could do. During that time, everything that we needed was

pretty much self-contained in that community for many of us. Many of us didn't travel outside the community. We've— that was it. Everything was right there. We felt safe, loved, and nurtured. It was really a— even though we were very poor, we didn't know we were poor because we felt that there wasn't anything missing in our lives. Everything that we needed or wanted was right there for us. Like I said, everybody pretty much knew each other. Everybody looked out for each other. Any kind of problem, you didn't call 911, you'd talk to your neighbor or your relative about it and try to work it out. During my growing up, up until 1956 and somewhat even after that, we didn't hardly know anyone that was in— well, we didn't know anyone that was in any institution. No one was in jail; no one was in prison. Most of the Black men we knew were working on the railroad, maybe the packing house. Even though those with degrees that we knew of— that may have had degrees in higher education— didn't get the same opportunities as white folks. I don't remember knowing anyone that lived outside of our community. We were told don't go to— "Don't go on Rice Street because we're not welcome over there." They didn't have signs or anything up— and were told to stay off Selby. We didn't realize the impact of racism— and I'm talking about the younger folk— that was going on around us, around the country. Every now and then, we would hear a little bit about what was going on in Mississippi or a place like that.

00:05:07

NK: And so, we had after hour joints in Cornmeal Valley, where folks would go on the weekend or after hours and do their thing, even though they were illegal. But even then, there wasn't any drama. We didn't hear about any drama or— folks went there and pretty much did their thing. As

the freeway started, we were at the first phase of the freeway from the Capitol up to Western Avenue. My grandpa was the last house on Rondo between Western and Rice Street. He was about the same age as I am now, about 81, 82 years old. They wanted him to move. He kept telling him, “No, I’m not moving. I want you to pick up my house and set it back. And that way you can still, do your freeway.” Of course, they weren’t— they weren’t having that. They would try to send different people from the housing authority to reason with them. He said, “you know what, I got a shotgun.” In the newspaper article, when they finally evict’ him, it said, “Pastor threatens authorities with a shotgun.” So first they sent someone in to cut the power off to the house. He came out with his stuff and said, “Come on down from there, young man.” He came down. Then shortly after that, in September of 1956, they sent a brother to catch him off guard. Then the police came in and they physically removed him— and I got pictures of him being handcuffed, led to a squad car, and they moved him on by Regents Hospital. That was very impactful for me. I came home that day— I’d started spending time with my mother then— but still stopped by the house, and they were gone. There were moving vans there, squad cars, and then some of the workers from- I don’t know if it’s the highway department or public housing or whatever— were, making the house uninhabitable inside. So that’s when it dawned on me about— slowly but surely— about racism and how they would never treat an elderly white man that way. Then unlike other parts of the city where the freeway came through and may have displaced white folk, they had the choice to move wherever they wanted to. We didn’t have that choice. They had covenants that had, “Do not sell to Negros” and so forth. We moved when I started living with my mom at least five or six times and ended up in a public housing project. And, not only was the community, far as all the benefits that we had from being together and

everything, but we lost— unlike white folks who may have been displaced— we lost generational wealth. We got zero equity. Once they came through, a lot of folks had contracts for deeds and whatever equity they had built up in those contracts for deeds was gone. A lot of people were not able to relocate, and then the big hit, of course, was for the businesses, those that were storefront businesses and those that had businesses in their home. We were scattered throughout the city. As a result of that, I think we lost our moral authority, and little by little, we started taking it out on each other. I mean, the tension and the anger was at a boiling point, because from Western going west, they hadn't started tearing down as much. It was, it was a slow process.

00:10:04

NK: We had a major riot in Rondo.

MW: In '68, right?

NK: Yep. I believe it was 1968 on Kent and Rondo, because of an altercation between a white cop and a brother who was with his wife— wife or girlfriend at the time- and the officer came up and said, "Who is this b—?" [Enunciation left as original] or whatever, and all hell broke close. Did you ever see the clipping?

MW: I haven't seen the clipping. Mr. Balenger told me a little bit about it this morning.

NK: Yeah. I was in high school at the time, and it was— it was a big time. I think they arrested 200 people. We didn't tear anything up, but we tried to deal with the police. They had, they put dogs on us— not on us, I wasn't out there, but on the folks. And the other thing— these people

that were involved in the riot, they were regular folk working nine to five, raising their families and everything. But they set an environment where folks said, “They running us out of here. They coming through the freeway.” The police was on— I mean, they had gone buck wild in how they dealt with Black folk. They’re asking for ID, almost like apartheid South Africa. And like I said, these weren’t radical people. These were regular, everyday folk that said, “Enough is enough.” They raised up and made a statement. Then, the other thing I can— that I think about, and for years I didn’t realize that it was something that actually happened or whether I was having some kind of hallucination. But in 1949, an officer named Allan Lee got shot. I was six years old.

MW: In Rondo.

NK: Yeah, in Rondo. There was a liquor store robbery. There was a shootout between this guy named Crutcher and the police department and Allan Lee got killed, and they cut out all the lights in lower Rondo in our area. I don’t know how far the radius was, but I know at 304 Rondo between Farrington and Lewis and Carroll and St. Anthony, the lights were out in our homes and on the street. And they were going with flashlights and dogs and stuff looking for this brother. They would have never done that— that wasn’t the first or the last officer to ever be shot, but they shut it down and ended up shooting a brother in the face who was drunk and didn’t get the memo about not coming out. And so little by little, we started seeing the true face of life in St. Paul for Black folk. After they came through with the freeway, little by little, and folks were still rebelling against them, they used to have incidents where some brothers, unbeknown to whom, would call 911 and when the police or the fire trucks would respond, they would shoot at them. It

got to a boiling point and people downtown never did anything to try to rectify, pacify, or somehow have a meeting of the minds and see how we could work through this. And then the double whammy came with urban renewal, when the government came and said, "We're gonna try to get you all in a situation where you can reclaim some of your generational wealth, some of your businesses, some of your homes, and on and on and on." They start, tearing down houses and so forth. Little by little, they tried to make— they made a concerted effort to try to replace that. So I'll stop there and see if you want to—

MW: This is great. I want to circle back. I think I have a few follow up questions to each part of the story.

NK: Yeah, go ahead.

MW: I'm curious—

NK: You're gonna edit this, right?

MW: Mmhmm. Yeah. In Cornmeal Valley for these adult men who were working for the railroads— or the packing houses for that matter—

00:15:12

NK: Yeah, different places, yeah.

MW: Did you hear about people's, the dynamics of these men's work growing up? Was there agitation around service roles if they were working for white people or about the work in general?

NK: Well, you know, especially those on the railroad— they called them a certain name. I forgot the name, how they referred to all of them.

MW: The porters?

NK: Yeah, the porters. Most of the jobs that, especially Black men were working in, they had to stay in their place. You didn't challenge yourself or say anything. You went along to get along because you knew you had a family to support. A lot of the jobs were not living wages. Back then, it wasn't unusual for the head of the household to be working two jobs. So they were, there were different, different and difficult times for a lot of brothers. I hear— I never knew my father, but I hear stories about Black men that, they didn't hardly say anything. They kept whatever they was dealing with inside. Some of them ended up— the weekend would be the time for a little bit of freedom to hit the juice. Some of them would come home after a long road trip on the railroad and just let their hair down and stuff. But, they didn't hurt anybody. They was just dealing internally with some of the trauma that they were going through. And so, it was difficult times for many of them, I'm sure.

MW: And what were the main jobs for Black women that you were around at the time?

NK: The what now?

MW: What were the main jobs for the Black women that you were around at the time?

NK: Well, a lot of them worked at the Twin City Arsenal, which was a place I believe in New Brighton that made bombs and bullets and stuff for the war. From what I understand, it was a pretty decent paying job. Many of them, like my mom, she worked as a maid in a St. Paul hotel.

And my aunts worked in Highland Park, cleaning white folks' homes and maybe watching their kids and stuff. Yeah. And some of them had different businesses in the neighborhood. But they were contributing as much as they could at that particular time. And many of them, even though they were single or stay-at-home moms,.

MW: And was that World War II at that point, or the Korean War?

NK: That was between as far back as I can remember. Maybe '50s yep, the Korean War period, all the way up to— until the freeway was completed—

MW: Okay.

NK: — and highway state connected.

MW: Did people ever talk about those domestic roles of working in homes or doing the childcare work for white folks?

NK: Well, you know, they were just there. They were going through the motions to provide for their family. And for the most part, people treated them okay. Yeah. They treated them, I never heard of any horrific experience that Black women had working at homes. I'm sure there was some, but I never heard of any.

MW: Sure. And then you mentioned some people who were educated and had degrees, but then couldn't find work, couldn't find academic work, was what you meant?

NK: Well, I think a lot of them, their earning power was suppressed, even though you would hear about the "First and only this and the first and only that." And that really doesn't mean anything if you're not lifting any

body, or you don't have the authority or the ability to lift the second, third and fourth up. Every now and then somebody would get in a position, but it wasn't universal. I mean, just like the fire department over the years, they had a few token Blacks on there. But then, in the '60s , folks had to go to court to get on the fire department, to get on the police— St. Paul Police Department. And nepotism was running buck wild. They hired everybody but their mamas on there, damn qualifications or anything. But when it came to us, you know, the standards would always be different.

00:20:31

MW: Would you say that the role of the police and the presence of the police shifted over the course of the '50s? Or do you think that it was consistent with Rondo?

NK: I don't think it ever shifted until we started raising hell about it. I don't mean just screaming and hollering but holding the elected officials accountable to hold them accountable. The whole issue with the police department wasn't just how they treated us in our encounters, whether it was a traffic stop or a neighbor calling because there's too much traffic in your house. But we didn't even get equal protection under the law. It was a benign neglect, you know, kind of policy. Like Dale and Selby, when after Rondo, when our community started, for all practical terms, disintegrating to a low level where we had— and I don't mean all of us, of course— but a small segment had no love or respect for one another. Any kind of differences that a brother had with

another brother, they— at some point it up costing people their lives, over senseless things, not anything really major, but that was a mindset. It was a difficult time we didn't have safety nets and those moral curtains there to keep us in check, “Hold up, man, don’t do that.” We just lost it. And next thing you know, here come the gangs and the crack. And so that was unfortunate.

MW: How would you say you were introduced to political organizing or movements in your lifetime?

NK: I think it started with Dale and Selby. That used to be referred to as Little Korea, the Wild, Wild West, where they had establishments there that really didn’t have a license to sell liquor and so forth. Brothers would drift in there. At one point, and I’ll show you a couple of newspaper clippings, but at one point, I think there was four murders in a two or three month period at the same establishment. The city was hands off. So we would start complaining to them and fall on death ears. I wasn’t involved in anything then. But I had a nephew, Darrell Crews, who was 16 or 17 years old. He was probably about six feet tall, brother. Our neighbor next door and another childhood friend had an altercation up there and had his stomach slit open on a Saturday afternoon, outside and in broad daylight. I had another friend that lost her brother up there. So we said, “You got to hold this establishment accountable.” And since they wouldn’t do it. So we circulated a petition and got over a thousand names on it. I asked Kwame McDonald and Bobby Hickman and Katie McWatt. They were all pillars of the community. I talked to them, and we got the pe tition, and we went down there with my cousin whose son got killed and demanded that the city, take some kind of appropriate action. And so, they eventually closed it down.

00:25:08

NK: There was some in the community that said, “Wait a minute, you’re shutting down a Black business, and we don’t hardly have any.” We said, “If we got to rely on Black businesses like this, we don’t need Black businesses.” It was an ugly situation. People wouldn’t even wait for the bus up there. Like I said, the city was out of sight and out of mind. You know, they said, “They’re gon’ just deal with that there.” We told them, “You wouldn’t allow this in any other neighborhood.” Then there was another establishment on the corner that was open at the same time, but they hadn’t reached that level, but they started getting close to it. That was our first introduction to gangs in St. Paul, a gang called El Rukns from Chicago.

MW: Say that again.

NK: El Rukns. And they ended up having a public execution. A brother, I believe his name was [Redacted per interviewee wishes]. Anyway, we had a public execution on the corner in front of 30 or 40 people on Dale and Selby. It was a Pac-Man game that people used to play and they bet on the game. And this young man won. But the member of the El Rukns didn’t want to pay him. So they had an altercation, they beat him up, dragged him outside, and held his arms. And the so-called leader gave the demand, “Shoot him,” shot him and dropped him in the street. And even though there were over 30 or 40 people that told us who were eyewitnesses, they wouldn’t talk to the police or anyone else to hold these people accountable. We called on, Bobby Hickman and Kwame McDonald and Rasheed Bilal at the local mosque, we went to seek them out to meet with them. Black men to Black men, we had a conversation, “Y’all just can’t come in our community and do this.” We weren’t used to this kind of madness, even though we had the club next door, but we dealt with that. Now here comes the gang situation. Once again, we asked the

authorities to deal with it. We demanded funding for our local youth organization so we could have some intervention and prevention programs in place. Of course, they dismissed it. The police chief in St. Paul, and I believe in Minneapolis, dismissed the whole idea that we had a gang problem. I mean, this was early on.

MW: And when would that have been?

NK: I want to say early ‘90s and late ‘80s.

MW: Okay.

NK: I’m not an expert on any of this. And I’m just a brother out here trying to survive, and make it. But I believe they sort of planted the seed, “This is how you take care of business,” because they were very well, in a wrong way, respected, but more importantly, they were feared because they didn’t play. . But, anyway, that in my estimation was the beginning. And then, the system had a lot to do with how this whole crime and drug and gang— crack epidemic and how all that got out of hand, because they could have responded in a more meaningful and productive way in working in cooperation with the community, not just on the criminal justice side, but also on the prevention and intervention side.

00:30:20

MW: Was there an organization behind you when you and— you were with Kwame McDonald and Bobby Hickman for that petition effort?

NK: Bobby Hickman was the executive director of the Inner City Youth League, which was known and established in the community. And Kwame McDonald was the head of the Summit-

University Crime Prevention Council. And Katie McWatt was a respected community leader. I was unknown to most at the time, but they had credibility and was always working on behalf of the community on what we were trying to do and understood the importance of it.

MW: What organizations were around during the Civil Rights and Black Power Era or specifically for that the uprising in ‘68?

NK: Well, there were a lot of ad hoc groups. “Black Underground Army,” the Inner City Youth League , NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], Urban League, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] and others. The Black Liberation Army, they started establishing themselves in different cities around the country. People— at least from what I remember in the Twin Cities, we’d say we were part of it, but we were not a chapter. But it gave us some credibility. And so those are the ones that I could think of. Then there were some brothers that were very strategic.

[Conversation redacted per interviewee wishes]

MW: Did you see a similar back and forth of— I guess— police and city control and then Black uprisings here as in other cities in the U.S. like Watts or other cities in California?

NK: Well, it never got to that point where we were able to organize and do the kind of damage— I’m talking about economic damage— that was done in other cities. You know, later on, we realized that— some of us realized— and I’m not saying one way was better than the other in getting a result.

00:35:00

NK: If I was of the same mindset I was as a young man, I would have handled it myself. But, I had a family. When I was a basketball coach and we whipped this one white team pretty bad and I left to get the car and then I had to make a run to come back, my youngest son and one of our other players was assaulted by a big ol' white boy and had bruises on their neck, visible bruises. I got back and we called the police, waited, and it was a squad car maybe a block away, and gave them a description of the car to the dispatcher. So— make a long story short, nothing happened. Nothing happened. No prosecution or anything. When our community started turning white— because at one time it was all white, and then white flight, and this block was almost predominantly Black, and then it started turning white again. My middle son had a high school graduation party, broad daylight, between two and five or six o'clock, and they were playing music. Some of it was rap music. I was on the fire department then, I had a rough night. One of my kids, "Hey, dad, the police are here." I said, "What?" I look out the window, two cops are in the yard. They said, "Turn that damn music off." And I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Your music is too loud. Turn it off." I said, "Do you have a warrant or anything?" And they said, "No." I said, "Get the— off my property." And the rest of the day— and I got a video of it— they rolled around the block, kept driving in front of our house. I was the president of the NAACP then, and so I had to get real harsh with them. "Why are you doing this to me, man? Why are you harassing my family?" After everything was over, one of my white neighbors came and said, "Hey Nick, I'm sorry about the cops. I didn't know it was gonna get like that." I said, "Are you the one that called 'em?" He said, "Yeah, because I had company over and we didn't

like that music." I won't tell you what I said. I was active then. The next day in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, they had a big article about me not cooperating with authorities. And then a guy named Joe Soucheray, who is still on the radio— well, I don't know if he's on there now— but a redneck from— you know, never said anything positive about Black folks in our community— was putting me on blast on the radio. You know, "That Nick Davis or Khaliq or Kalau, whatever the hell his name is, he thinks he's above the law!" [Nathaniel Khaliq was born Nick Davis] Anyway, the guys, some brothers from the fire department heard them because the white boys used to like listening to him. They said, "Man, they really doggin' you on the radio. Call—" And I said, "No, I'm not calling him up." They said, "Come on, man, you got to call him up." So I called him up. He said, "Hello, Nick Davis? Or Khaliq? What do you want me to call you? I said, "I just have a few words," and I went off on a tangent about our history, about our oppression, and hung up on them. And so, just something like that. They had— and our neighbors across the street— they thought it was a drug raid going on because they had other squad cars parked on Selby. When they pulled up, they thought a drug raid was going on at our house.

[Conversation redacted per interviewee wishes]

NK: Look up what happened when the Republican Convention was here in St. Paul. They went buck-wild and— setting brothers up and locking them up.

00:40:25

NK: Remember I was telling you about one of the worst massacres of five Black children— got burnt up in an arson fire. You can read it later, but I just want to show you the headline. We knew within a month because— you know, when I was with the NAACP, we would go to the prisons.

We would help some brothers with post-conviction cases. We would help make sure living conditions were right. So we had a connection to the street and the streets talk. And we found out within two weeks who was responsible for that horrific act. And they sort of played crazy on it. It should have been major, major news. It should have been major demands by the authorities and others. You know how much the reward was when this first happened? Three grand. And we went downtown and raised hell and finally got it up to maybe about $30,000. But I'm just saying all this to show you what our experience has been here in St. Paul with the police department and how they, in some ways, contribute to what, what's been going on. And little by little, we, chipped away. We established a police community review board. We filed a complaint with the Justice Department and got the Justice Department to come in and had a mediation in it and establish one of the first mediated agreements between the community, the Justice Department, and the police department that had some standards and stipulations and changes, in policy there. And it took almost four years— even though the same people that were convicted four years later, the police had their names two months, three months after the incident happened. They had over 7,000 hours— and that's the whole long story, but the feds got involved because we wrote Clinton [Bill Clinton], Janet Reno, and all these folks. They had 7,000 hours of wiretaps. Instead of indicting four, maybe five or six at the most, they indicted 57, 56 or 57 brothers and sisters. Not for the murder, but for other crimes that they overheard during the wiretap. And that doesn't happen with— but anyway. So that was part of our whole history with the police department. Racism and housing, Selby Avenue, back in the day, remember I told you that they didn't want Blacks, we were told not to come up on Selby, and we broke that barrier and used to go into restaurants and they would— after Blacks would eat, they would break the dishes like it was

hurting us. We said, “Oh, we really need to go in there and break all their dishes.” Then we wanted to build affordable housing on the other side of Selby. And they didn’t want us up there. We had to have an act of protest to go out to the president of the city council’s home and demand that they give it up. And so eventually, the affordable housing was built. It’s still there. And they said it was going to destroy the neighborhood, homes over there for three, four, five, six hundred thousand dollars and affordable housing is still there.

MW: Wow.

NK: It was called Lonnie Atkins Town Home— not Lonnie Atkins, Roy Wilkins. Yeah, after Roy Wilkins. We’ve been nipping away at it. And so, my involvement started out with Dale and Selby and then the president of a community organization called the Summit University Planning Council, which— there’s 17 of them in the city of St. Paul. And they act in an advisory role. We were trying to slow down the gentrification in our community, and where the city would have a policy if you were white and you lived outside of Summit-U— now, when I say Summit-U I’m talking about Rondo included in that. They would give you down payment money or other financial assistance. And a lot of people that were already living here that wanted rehab money, they had to go through hell and high water to get that.

00:45:30

NK: And like I said, there was efforts made. We’ve had at least five subsidized housing complexes that was started or established by Black organizations, including churches and stuff. We control none of them now. Are you familiar with the Unidale Mall?

MW: I'm not sure.

NK: On Dale and University? If you get a chance, check it out. And one of these times, I'm gon' take you on a little tour and point out—

MW: That'd be great, yeah.

NK: And show you some of these places that we had control of, but we didn't have the safety net of the system to assist us. But the Unidale Mall was started by Help Development Corporation. It's still over there, but our footprints are nowhere. It's Asian owned and operated. And it started out as a partnership between Help Development Corporation, which was a— I think they were a little ahead of their time trying to rebuild, reestablish the economic engine that was destroyed with the freeway. And they— in partnership with Kraus Anderson, who's a large construction conglomerate that still operates today, and I think they may have built some stadiums, but they're still big time. But that was a partnership. But once they ran into some bumps in the road, everybody said, "Well, y'all can't do this." We had a Black hardware store. There was a Black liquor store in there. There was an alternative school in there. And little by little, they were, pulling in other businesses. But that fell by the wayside. And so, I can show you several apartment buildings right around the corner that a brother built and— ran into some difficulty and didn't get the safety net. On University, University and Western, the Asians have a— forgot the name of the restaurant— but the original restaurant and owners of the building ran into some rough times and had to give it up, but the Asian community said, "Oh, time out, don't put it on the market. Let's work something out." And they ended up turning it over to a nonprofit and forgiving like a 300 something thousand dollar loan. And so, we've been mired in racist policies

and practices that have led to the great disparities that we have in Minnesota. We got the greatest health, criminal justice, employment, education— all those indicators, we're pretty much at the bottom. And some of them, I think we compete with Mississippi. And how could that be when at one time, Jet Magazine and Ebony Magazine held the Twin Cities up as a model for Black folks to come to? General Mills and all the Fortune 500 companies that are here used to send delegations to the HBCU schools [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] in recruiting brothers and sisters to relocate here. Nobody has been able to figure out— and there's a lot of folks a lot smarter than me— on the hell, what happened? And we still don't know what happened, but we know we're catching the hell and we catch it. It's unfortunate. So I know I got off script, but—

MW: That was great. One other thing that I wanted to ask you about, I know that you're Muslim, and I read that you were involved in the Nation of Islam at one point. What was the Nation of Islam presence in St. Paul like back in the day?

NK: Well, back in the day, the Pioneers, as we referred to them, had visits from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] — and this is their story, not mine— that found out that they were affiliated with the Nation of Islam early on under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad and would try to discourage them, "You know, you really don't want to be any part of that." So early on, it was just a very small, dedicated group of brothers and sisters here in the Twin Cities. And every now and then, you would see— not so much the sisters— but the brothers out here selling Muhammad Speaks, newspapers and stuff, and having that conversation.

00:50:42

NK: Back then, the majority of the converts were people coming out of institutions, prisons, and many of the sisters were sisters that were out there a little bit. I got involved and started listening to the Nation of Islam because of Malcolm X, like a lot of brothers. That was one of the first books I read, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. You know, many of the paths that he walked down, was, "Oh, okay, damn, he was able to turn his life around and elevate himself to a level of honor and respectability." I don't know who it was, but someone— that I may be getting the quote messed up, "But you don't judge a man from the depths in which he comes from, but the height in which he reaches." Many of us saw that as a way of regaining a sense of dignity and respect. He said, "If you only have one suit, you clean it and wear your suit and tie every day." There was something— we didn't agree with everything, Of course, we never had a discussion or debate about, "Hey, brother, why is the white man the Devil and the Black man God?" Many of us had white blood running through our veins. So we didn't go there. We just looked at what we could get out of it. Little by little, we could see ourselves being elevated— some sense to all the madness that was going on in the world. But the most important thing, we felt like— not invincible— but we were very, very proud and we weren't going to back down or allow anybody to take our dignity away from us or treat us less than the man. Our little community started growing a little bit as younger brothers started getting involved. Many of the young brothers that was getting involved were brothers that were in college. A few brothers and sisters had degrees. So we had a temple over in Minneapolis on 4th and 38th. I think it was Temple number, maybe 87. And we had a brother named Brother Kareem that was the head of that. And in 1970s and we sat in chairs, some of us didn't know anything about— I shouldn't say we didn't know anything— we didn't practice a lot of the traditional rituals that are part of Islam. Touched a little

bit on Ramadan, but nothing real serious, and the five prayers, we met on Sunday, not on Friday for Jummah. And when Elijah Muhammad passed, many of us was more caught up, and I don't want to speak for anyone else, but for myself, many of us was more caught up in the Black liberation part of it— Black man, Black businesses. And Elijah Muhammad was the most successful of any Black leader in this country, along with the help of Malcolm X, of course, in bringing about a transformation with so many folks that were downtrodden and had all these businesses all over the country— Black businesses and stuff. So in 1975, when the honorary Elijah Muhammad passed, may peace and blessing be upon him, his son took over, W.D. Muhammad. And W.D. Muhammad was not that that deeply involved with the Nation of Islam. He had went on the Hajj and everything, like Malcolm, but he saw a path for Black folk through orthodox Islam.

00:55:04

NK: And so little by little, he'd start making the changes, removing the chairs, sitting on the floor, and getting deep into the Quran— many of us hardly read the Quran in the Nation of Islam. I'm speaking for myself and some others. We would look at it, skim through it, certain quotes we'd make reference to and so forth. It was a true lifesaver for many of us. I just think now, in the old— the Pioneers back then, we would get discouraged because we would be in a building and the roof would be leaking. We'd have buckets all over and everything. And they'd say, "Brother, don't get discouraged. Allah's going to bless us, and pretty soon there'll be a mosque on every corner." Now with the influx of the Somalis— and we, a lot of us talk about that, how the brothers and sisters are smiling in paradise, looking down at, "Yeah, I told you." It

has been a beautiful transformation. We've always contributed to the betterment of the communities in which we were located. And, people would say, well, "Why are y'all dealing with the police?" And we'd say, "Man, we're working with whoever we need to work with for the betterment of Black folks, because we hold the police accountable too." Everybody needs to be held accountable. But Black blood, no matter who spills it, we want some justice. A mother and a father and an aunt and a son and a daughter, they don't cry any harder whether the pain or injustice was inflicted by one of us or one of them. You know, it's the same pain. And so that's been a real good experience for me and many of the brothers and sisters I've been knowing over 40, 50, almost 60 years. We still have that love and relationship that we had from back in the day. We can still pick up the phone and say, "Brother, I got a problem." One of my dear brothers, and I'm going to say his name, brother Abdul Kareem, He's 75, 76 years old, a stroke survivor, walked with a cane, coming out of the Masjid An-Nur [mosque] in North Minneapolis. And there were some brothers there selling dope. He went up to them and said, "Brothers, this is sacred ground." It was on our parking lot. "Y'all can't do this here." "You old—!" and went off on him, not knowing who Brother Abdul Kareem was. He used to be a knucklehead back in the day. He said, "Uh uh, don't do that, get away from here," and start fussing with him and raise his cane up. They got in the car and drove, went down to the corner, made a U-turn and came back and shot him. He survived and everything. We said, "Oh hell no." Now, back in the day, we would have handled that situation differently. But we have grown and matured, and our understanding of Islam is much better— the culprit was arrested. We showed up at every hearing at the courthouse to make sure that he was held accountable. This has happened in the last year. So that's been one of the greatest— besides being married to my beautiful wife [Victoria Davis] for

52 years. That's been one of the greatest experiences— and of course, my children and grandchildren that I've had in my lifetime. I can certainly attribute that to a lot of my growth and development. You know, after Rondo, I served eight months in Boys Totem Town for car theft and went up there and half of the neighborhood was up there. That's just getting back to that moral authority and the safety net that we had back in the day. Because back then, we couldn't think of anybody that was in any of those places. Then from 1960, excuse me, 1956, within five or six years, we had lost— some of us have lost our way. And I don't want to blame it all on the freeway, but that certainly had a lot to do with it. It had a lot to do with the home ownership— used to be close to 50%. Now it's probably hovering around 30%. Like I said before, all those social and economic indicators have just plummeted, have gone downhill. So, it's unfortunate. And I don't know how we regain our way, but we just got to keep on fighting and scratching.

01:00:34

MW: Well, that answers my questions really beautifully. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about while we're on the recording?

NK: No, I talked too much.

MW: That's good. Never too much for me. I appreciate you taking the time, Mr. Khaliq.

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

October 2nd, 2025

Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Clem Crowe Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

CC: Clem Crowe (interviewee)

01:57:40 runtime

Subjects discussed: Being born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1951 and raised in Omaha, Nebraska until moving to St. Paul in 1968; witnessing Interstate 94 being constructed when he moved to Rondo; recognizing the bond the Rondo community had; growing up in Near North Side, Omaha; a war between Black men and local police in his childhood; a police officer being killed on Victoria St and Selvy Ave by Inner City Youth League; St. Paul riot at Stem Hall in 1968; joining the Black Panther Party at the age of 16 in Omaha; barber Ernie Chambers in Omaha; principles of the Black Panther Party; village atmosphere in Omaha; Black male unemployment and disenfranchisement through the welfare program; the Black family unit and gender; Make America Great Again; his conviction that slavery has not ended but has instead evolved; his work at Teen Teamworks with Minneapolis Parks and Recreation; Black youth not being able to write or pass driver's exams; the U.S. creating a cheap labor force; his parents being sharecroppers in Texas; his father running away from the plantation to Fort Worth and buying the rest of his family out of bondage; the meatpacking industry in Nebraska; communal services in Omaha and Rondo; the Black Panther Party free breakfast program in Omaha; Black wealth and self-sufficiency in Rondo; Nathaniel Khaliq's family being evicted from their home during the construction of Interstate 94; playing sports at Central High School; teaching at Mechanic Arts High School with no resources; women in Omaha also working in meatpacking; memories of his mother being present when he was a child; Eddie Bolden and the Black Panther Party in Omaha; the Black Muslims and Nation of Islam in Omaha; Black servicemembers and professional athletes in Omaha; BANTU organization; the war zone atmosphere in Omaha with the police; the harassment of Black students at North High School in Omaha; Black men in Omaha being disappeared by the police; BANTU taking over North High School in protest; fighting to not have to enlist in ROTC; BPP programs in Omaha, how food was acquired for the breakfast program; Black flight to the suburbs, loss of role models; Black children today being wrongfully placed in Special Education; attending Macalester College from 1969 to 1973 as part of the Expanded Educational Opportunities program; Macalester College almost being a Black college during his time there; the Macalester Black House; campus takeover protest at Macalester.

People/organizations discussed: Inner City Youth League; Black Panther Party; Ernie Chambers; Teen Teamworks, Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board; Allied Universal;

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Nathaniel Khaliq, formerly known as Nick Davis; Mechanic Arts High School; Dan Stafford; Eddie Bolden; Nation of Islam; Christchild Community Center; Gale Sayers, Bob Boozer, Bob Gibson; Black Association for Nationalism Through Unity (BANTU); Dennis Womack; Michael Jordan; Macalester College, Expanded Educational Opportunities (EEO) program; Upward Bound; Mahmoud El-Kati; John Patton; Arthur Fleming; Hubert Humohrey; Karl Egge; Robert Bunting; Richard Nixon; James Stewart; Walter Mondale; Melvin Collins; Macalester College Black House; Young Holt Trio; Friends of Distinction; Stevie Wonder; Olatunji and Drums of Passion; Doris Wilkinson; Black Liberation Affairs Committee (BLAC); Imani publication; Sounds of Blackness; Gary Hines.

00:00:10

MW: Alright. I'll just introduce us, then we can get into it. For the purpose of this interview—my name is Mackinnon Williams. I'm here with Mr. Clem Crowe. We're at Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. It's October 2nd today, 2025, and we're here for an interview with Mr. Clem on some of his life and work. So to start us off, Mr. Clem, could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

CC: My name is Clem Crowe. I was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1951. I was raised in Omaha, Nebraska and my family moved here to St. Paul in 1968, which happened to be my last year of high school. So I finished high school here at Central [High School]. At that time, Rondo neighborhood was split. When I got here, Interstate 94 was not finished. It was not there. It was just dug out. We used to play down in there. It was just dirt. So I was able to witness and experience that first real neighborhood split, which was caused by that freeway coming through. So it became that side of the freeway and this side of the freeway in terms of our community. And—

MW: Which side were you staying on?

CC: I happened to be on the north side of the freeway.

MW: Okay.

CC: At the time I didn't know the gravity of that move. Maybe about a year later, I really— dawned on me what it was. Being new to the area at the time, I just saw it as, "Okay, they're doing some construction," but I didn't know the impact they had on the community as a whole. But I did immediately recognize the bond that the community had, coming from Nebraska, coming from Omaha. In Omaha, our community was pretty much isolated, just like this one was, so that that communal survival was necessary and very prevalent at the time. In Omaha— well, now they call it North Side.

MW: Okay.

CC: But back then, we were not called North Side. We were called Near North Side. [Laughter] Because there were still a number of white folks on the North Side. So as we sort of filtered into that area, they'd call it Near North Side. You know, I always wondered about that as a kid. "Where is that at?" Okay, but that's what our community was referred to, being Near North Side. Very isolated. Which, like I said, it required that communal— "Everyone take care and look out for everybody," atmosphere. During that period, not only in Omaha, but even here, I mean, most Black communities around the country at that time, it was a— what I would consider almost a war between Black men in particular and local police forces. As a kid growing up on Omaha, I saw a number of my friends that were killed by police officers from junior high and up. A lot of

times you would get guys, Black men would get picked up by police, supposedly taken downtown and never heard from again. Okay. That was pretty prevalent.

00:05:01

CC: So when I got here, same scenario. It was really basically us against them. I had a couple of my buddies back then, who took the war literally and ambushed and did kill a police officer right here in the middle of, from what was then Inner City Youth League. Which is right on Victoria and Selby still today. They called an emergency house, which was about half a block from the city— from Inner City Youth League. When the cops showed up, they snipered and they killed them. They ended up going to jail for it. But at that time, I mean, it was us against them. Totally different than anything I'd ever seen before. We had a— what I call the St. Paul riot, from a concert happening at that time, was at the civic, what's called Stem Hall.

MW: Stem Hall.

CC: Stem Hall. It's part of what was the Civic Center of downtown St. Paul at the time. There's a concert there. And somehow things got out of control. There were a lot of teens at that time, there was a young concert— that were brutalized by the police. In particular, what really set it off was there was one young lady who happened to be pregnant at the time that got billy-clubbed down there. And that— from Stem Hall all the way back up to Selby, and around Grotto now, that's where it all happened. You know, it's pretty, pretty bad. A lot of folks got hurt. I had a friend that got shot. So I was looking at this as— being new to the area, just being here a year. But I could see that unity with the people. And fortunately, I got accepted immediately into that fold. And I

was treated just like one in the community. I think a lot of it had to do because I also was into sports. Hooking up with those athletes here, I got into the fold pretty quick. I had, going back to that reference, I joined the Black Panther Party. I was 16, in Omaha. There was a— actually he was my barber, named Ernie Chambers. And his barbershop was our meeting place. That's where I joined that. He also became at one time a senator from Nebraska. Ernie Chambers, you can look him up. Very intelligent. I think the most humorous thing I remember about him when he was in the fin— he sued God. [Laughter] Yeah, he brought a lawsuit against God, which, you could check that out. It was really hilarious, but made sense, you know. But from that period was, I feel, the development of my personal convictions, because the Party at the time instilled, basically, "Each one teach one. Each one protect one. And each one support one." So this was in order to become a part of that Party. [Inaudible] Yeah. You know, we instilled in us— was that in order to become a part of that party, you had to commit to those principles and commit to those principles as long as you exist. So your efforts and your purpose doesn't stop until you can no longer do it.

00:10:42

CC: Which is why I'm still doing it now. It was a time when— once again— it was a village raising everyone. Okay. Every elder out there was responsible for me as a kid. And I had to be a support to them. Many times, I would do something out there as a kid. By the time I got home, my mom and my dad would say, "Hey, so and so called me, told me they saw you." Okay, but that was— I even had parents come out and discipline me and then call my parents and I got it again. So that was the closeness. Those were the survival methods. Which I feel are missing

today. Those things are not there today. We've become more individualized as opposed to communal. We were more communal back then. And I— like I said, I've been here long enough to see progression and regression as far as our existence. Coming up as a kid, everybody I knew had mom and dad. Everybody I knew had mom and dad, as I was old enough to see them implement the welfare program, which— to this day— I give credit for producing those single-family homes. Because at the time, Black male unemployment was probably 85%. They just weren't hiring us for anything. So they implemented the welfare program, which stated, "We will take care of that mom and we'll take care of those kids, but that man cannot be in that house." So a lot of men were faced with staying with my family and watching them starve, or leaving and watching them survive.

MW: There's a dependency on the state that also forces that split.

CC: Yeah, forced it. Plus— I mean, at that time, welfare workers would show up at your house, just show up unexpectedly and search your house to see if there's anything in there that belongs to a male. Uh, or, "Do you have anything in here new that you didn't have before, like a toaster or a TV or," okay, and whatever that toaster or TV cost, they would deduct from your monthly stipend. Or if they found men's shoes or clothing or something, they would take your stipend away. So that was the condition that, like I said, put the— forced Black men to leave that house so that their family could survive. And that was the early '60s. Okay, early '60s, late '50s, early '60s. So subsequently what I've seen is, first of all, that was the breakdown of the family unit. Which I consider the strongest institution in the country— is the family unit. So there was a

considered effort— and that's been the main theme since they brought us here, the divide and conquer, on any level. And in that time, it was, "Yeah, we break that family unit up."

00:15:28

CC: And that's exactly what they've done. So that subsequently, we're in a position now where we have young men raised by women, okay? So that male perspective is blurred, okay? Now, taking nothing away from our women, 'cause there are women who have done exceptional jobs raising men. But the bottom line is that can only go so far. There's just some things that women cannot teach men, that only men can teach men. And that element is what's been lacking for years now. It's evolved now to where it's— you know, white folks make jokes. "Did you know your daddy?" It's become a norm in this society perpetrated by that system. So once you can control that, then you can control that population. What I see and feel now when these folks are talking about, "Make America Great Again." Question— when was it great? Back when we were—! Okay? That's how it got great. Now, human nature is such that we do what works for us. We learn this as infants, okay? We learn to cry when we're hungry. When we need attention, we learn to cry— because that's how we get attention. So that works for us. We learn that from infancy. So whatever works for you, that's what you tend to do. Well, that's what worked for them. In this country. And they tend to get back to that. And like I said, I see now, I've made comparisons. Yes. They're almost there again. My conviction is that slavery has not ended. It has just evolved. It's just taken out different forms, became part of the fabric. I try to explain to a lot of the young folks that I deal with now— to bring to perspective of right now, we're talking about bringing manufacturing back to the country. Big deal. Well, you have to understand why

did manufacturing leave the country? Well, they left the country because— cheap labor force, all around the rest of the world. Okay? I would tell folks, those Nikes you wear, the folk that make them Nikes were getting paid 75 cents a day, working 12, 13 hours a day, making 75 cents a day, not an hour, a day. And then you're paying $120 for those same shoes. So you see where Nike would be? Well, now, if Nike is getting pressure about making those shoes here, their requirement is that, "I still need that cheap labor force." So I've watched since— I think— 1965, how this country has been developing and making that cheap labor force by mis-educating, non-educating our population.

00:20:11

CC: I work with a teen program in Minneapolis Park Board, and I've been with that program now 30 years.

MW: You said, which program is that?

CC: It's called Teen Teamworks. It's with Minneapolis Park and Recreation. And I've been with that program for 30 years. And for the last, I'd say almost 15 years, I've been yelling and screaming and hollering about these kids— these are now 14 and up. But I have these kids that are— on average, we'd have maybe 150, 200 kids every summer that we hire in this program. I'd say 80, 85% of them can't sign their name. They don't teach cursive anymore. None of them can read a clock if it's not digital. None. "I can't even read the clock." So, I explain to them— first of all— if you can't sign your name, you'll never be admitted to a contract. For example, we used to give them checks. They get paid, they get minimum wage, $15 an hour, and they get checks.

They couldn't cash their checks. They can't sign a name. So now we give them all cash cards. But I explained to them, "You're in a position right now that the slaves were in." It was against the law for them to write or read. So, they just had to put an X down and someone who could verify who they were had to sign that name. Gotcha. Well, you're in the same position right now. You can't sign your name. So you're going to have to put an X down and someone's going to have to sign that can verify who you are. And that's generations. It's not just here. I mean, we got whole generations of folks who aren't educated, got diplomas, read on a 3rd, 4th grade level, bring no skills to the table. But one thing we all have in common is we all gotta eat. So in order to eat you got to do something. So, you bring no skills to the table. Then I'll show you what I want you to do and I'll pay you what I want to pay you. Because you have no leverage. And our federal minimum wage is still $7.55 an hour. That's all I'm really required to pay. And nobody can live on that these days. But that's the position that we're in. I mean, I see mass generations of them. So that now, the majority of our kids have sort of phased out. They don't even want to be a part of it. They don't even want to be a part of it. I've got a number of guys, you know, 16, 17, all the way up to like 22, 23, 24 years old. No driver's license. Can't pass the written test. No driver's license. First of all, that eliminates a whole line of jobs for you right there. Just on that. I've got a relative, I've got a grandson who's like maybe 23. Can't pass the written test. And I watch him— I mean, he's not unintelligent or anything, but for some reason, these guys cannot pass that written test.

00:25:08

CC: The program that I work with in Minneapolis Park Board, there're kids there that the Park Board would hire right now. All you need is a driver's license. The job's waiting— I mean, these folks want to hire these kids right now, because they've proven that they can do the work. They've already done the work through this program. All you need is a driver's license. And I can right now think of at least six guys that I've dealt with personally that are in that same situation. Just one of them now, he got a security job somewhere overnight.

MW: Allied [Allied Universal].

CC: These jobs over here that you— all you need is a license for— you can make starting $28 an hour, but now you're over here at the security, making less. So, like I said, slavery just evolved. They created a cheap labor force so that these corporations can come back. It's taken them a while, but they've got enough. Like I said, I started watching this in like '65. There was a concerted effort at that point. This was after the riots of the '60s. There was a concerted effort to pull back what was gained through those. That's how a lot of us got to school, got to college. You know, white folks were scared at the time and, "What y'all need, what y'all want, okay, we'll do this, just don't—! Stop burning stuff!" So we got a chance to be a part of something and we took advantage of it. We did, we took advantage of it. Those that got the opportunities took advantage of it, which proved that all we needed was an opportunity. We weren't asking for a handout, "Just give us an opportunity?" But then I began to see it pull back. All of those things— and even now, a lot of folks don't realize I was like 14 years old when we got the right to vote. And now they're trying to pull that back. We were allowed to go to school, a lot of us got the opportunities. There are now more of us Black men in jail than there is in college. And that's not coincidence, a lot of

that is by design. I see that because— Black men back then, making that decision, "Leave your family," but then at the same time you gotta eat too, so what do you do? What's left for you? Something criminal. You got to break in, you got to steal, you got to sell, you got to do something to survive. No one's going to hire you. One thing we got in common is we all gotta eat. And you got to do whatever's necessary for you to eat. So yeah, that's why we got hustlers and pimps, and dealers.

MW: I think one thing that was standing out to me as you're talking about the generations— and I wanted to go back to Omaha and the [Black] Panther Party there. One question that had just come to mind in me is for the elders who were around the community when you were a child in Omaha, how many generations from slavery would they have been?

CC: Oh! Well, my parents were sharecroppers—

00:30:01

MW: Mmm. And from Fort Worth—

CC: Texas. Actually— they were in East Texas, around Jefferson, Smitherman, right across the Louisiana border. They were sharecroppers. As a matter of fact, my dad— at 14— ran from the plantation and went to Fort Worth. And he worked— well, he left twice. He ran away, went to Fort Worth trying to find work, but those folk came and got him and brought him back. And then about a month later, he took off again.

MW: Would he have been stuck in a contract at that point?

CC: Well, it wasn't a contract, they owned you. Basically. I mean, it was—

MW: A "contract."

CC: You're on the land. This is your job. You got to do this, because you owe us—

MW: Right. You go to prison—

CC: —For the seed that we gave you, we gave you a little piece of land for you to work for yourself and you can keep whatever you get, but we give you the seed and then you gon' owe us so much from what you make. But you're obligated to take care of that land as well as ours. Okay. So he actually left the field, left the mule and everything, and went to Fort Worth. [Laughter] But that second time he went, he was able to stay, they couldn't find him. He worked in what they called the tar pits back then. He worked and made enough money to come back and pay for the family to move off that plantation. He paid for them to move. I always thought about that. At 14, I know I wasn't that [Laughter]— naw, I wasn't that tough. And I thought about that. At 14. To do that, to go and get your family. He had three brothers and his parents, and he made enough to purchase them to pay their bill to get them off that. And they all moved to Fort Worth, to Fort Worth.

MW: And was that reflected in the community in Omaha as well?

CC: Yes definitely. As a matter of fact, a lot of those elders, those men that were in Omaha at the time— the only real employment back then was meatpacking. At that time, Omaha was the largest meatpacking in the country. Before that, it was Chicago. Livestock. Well, that all moved

to Omaha. As a matter of fact, back then, Nebraska was called, “The Beef State.” It wasn’t the Cornhusker State, it was the Beef State. And that was because of it. All the major meatpacking plants were right there. They were in South Omaha. But we were in North Omaha, everybody, and all those men, numbers of them. They all worked at that meatpacking. They all worked there. So, they had all of that in common. Now, my dad, he ended up retiring from there. That’s how we got here. In the ‘60s, late ‘60s, that’s when those meatpacking plants closed in Omaha. The majority of the Black men that were in North Omaha at that time moved here.

MW: St. Paul?

CC: Yeah. We came here. It was like a migration.

00:35:01

CC: As I remember, my dad was here about almost a year before we moved the family up. All those men were here getting established before they moved the families. They were here with the plant work. Actually they did had an impact that changed St. Paul.

MW: How so?

CC: Well, before then, very few Blacks were here. Very few. And we came en masse. This community in St. Paul was really small— as a matter of fact, we used to walk it. It was Western to Lexington, Selby to University. That was it. That was it. That’s where e’erybody lived. As a matter of fact, at that particular point in time, that area comprised two percent of the land in St. Paul, but it housed twenty percent of the population.

CC: And then they split that in half [Laughter] okay, with the freeway. So we were condensed in there. But those guys that came here from Omaha started a lot of businesses. There were pool halls and we— we called them jitneys. Ubers now. Uber and Lyft now, we called them jitneys. That was our cab. I happen to know one of the guys that ran one of the biggest ones here. We called him Omaha. That's where he was from. We called him Omaha. But it was a shoe shine shop, didn't have any polish or nothing in it. That's where we ran the jitney. You know, you call there, "I need a ride," they say "Okay," send a car to you, take you, charge you three, four dollars take where you want to go. That was our, what is now the Ubers and Lyfts. A lot of our survival methods, the lottery, that was our numbers. We started that, the numbers. Now it's the lottery. Uh, breakfast program. We started that— the Party.

MW: In St. Paul.

CC: All over. That was part of the Black Panther Party, feed those kids in the morning. Now, also in Nebraska at that time we had— was it Ralston [Ralston Purina Company], Kellog? Most of the cereals had big plants in Omaha. They'd donate cereal to us, you know, but nowadays we got a breakfast program. Sickle cell [Sickle cell screening programs]. We started that. A lot of things that are prevalent now started in our communities. Our survival methods. It became adapted by the larger society. We basically were showing them how to do it. We still do. Which is why you had places like Tulsa, Rosewood, East St. Louis. When they saw those communities flourish, our communities they'd say, "No, we can't have that." They'd go and burn them down, which was the same thing here in Rondo. When their freeway came through, this community at that point

was becoming very self-sufficient. Most of the Black men here at that time worked on the railroad, red caps.

00:40:12

MW: Porters.

CC: Yep. Most of the Black men that were here in this area back then, that's where they worked. But in Rondo, they had their own doctors, lawyers, started their own credit union. That's how they bought all those houses. Pharmacies. They had a— they weren't asking the outside society for anything. And pretty much stayed to themselves. They were fine. "We're doing it. We ain't botherin' nobody." But, outer society, "Hey, what's going on?" Okay. These guys, they got their own credit union. They come in, a dollar, a couple dollars in the credit union every time they get paid. Pretty soon, yeah, you get a loan and buy a house. Furniture store, same thing. Layaway. So that's when they, "Got to find out what's going on in there." So, they brought that freeway in— divide and conquer again— took away a number of houses, a lot of them by eminent domain. Folks got nothing for them, or those that did got pennies on the dollar for their home. Friend of mine, Nick Davis [Nathaniel Khaliq], his family was the last one.

MW: Yeah, his grandpa.

CC: Yeah grandpa, they were the last one. It was just taken. Businesses gone. Just like that. It was the equivalent of a Tulsa, the equivalent of a Rosewood happening here at Rondo. That's what happened here. When I got here— I noticed that Central High School was the main high school for the area, for Rondo. They even had a honk. That was the Central honk. So everybody

in the community— you pull up to my house and you blow the horn! It was that Central honk in particular. Like, wow, okay. And then I learned by playing sports at Central, I played basketball. Even though at that time, we didn't have home games at Central. The gym was not suitable. I hate to even describe what it was. So we played our home games at Como, which at that time was a junior high. But when we played, the place was packed. Everybody from the community was there. Now, what I learned was, if we lost a game it was rough, but if we lost to a white team, oh now you couldn't walk the streets. I mean, people, "What are y'all doing? What's wrong with y'all?" It was that. "I'm like, okay, we got support, if nothing else." So that engulfed me, that closeness is that much, even to where, "We're watching everything you do, and we're supporting you in everything you do." That's what I saw when I come here for Rondo. That was Rondo, at that time.

00:45:05

CC: And like I said, I've seen it being dispersed. I watched it. I taught for a number of years— I started at Mechanic Arts High School. That's where I started. I taught a World History class. I had 34 students. I had seven textbooks. Paint was peeling from the ceiling. Radiators clanged. Pipes covered with asbestos that's peeling. I'm supposed to teach World History. I got seven books, the 34 stu— that was the situation. We couldn't even get chalk. "We got chalk?" "Naw" "We ain't got nothing?" But that was the conditions back then, and this was— when did I start? '73, '74.

MW: Once you graduated.

CC: And I'm like, wow. Fortunately, we had teachers back then who were committed and cared so that regardless of those situations, we made the best of it. We got our own surprise that, you know, they're crying now about teachers— we've been doing that forever. As I'm looking back at just the staff that was at Mechanic Arts at that time. Dan Stafford, the Staffords. They were all teachers, coaches at that time, but they were a group also as a staff. I became part of that staff, so that it was communal education. And that's the only thing that got those kids through. I was able to— I guess— teach the French Renaissance. The superintendent was touring the schools, and he came into my classroom and watched these kids recite verses, events from the French Revolution. They did learn. They're not expecting them to know anything because like I said, "And you only got seven books?" "Yes, I only got seven books. You know. We shared!" Not trying to take any of the credit myself. They shared, they helped each other, but that, I feel is what's absent a lot. Not, you know, with our teachers, but our counselors. I understand a lot of it, at this point, you don't have the support. So you do your job and you get out of there. You do the best you can. You get out of there. "If I can save one," you know, it gets to that. "Okay, I can't save them all. I can just save one." No, you gotta be responsible for all of them." That's the mindset. "The lowest one is the one I'm going to spend the most time with. Now we're going, "Okay, this one's got potential. So the rest of them, I'll just—" So I think that's the biggest change I see now in terms of the education and support, even in the sports. They talked about that, too. I'll tell my folks, my friends. "Better keep working. Future looks bleak."

00:50:21

MW: We do still have to eat.

CC: You still got to eat, yeah.

MW: And so, I was wondering— I had two questions about the Omaha days. One question that I was thinking of as you spoke about the meatpacking work is I was curious what the women were doing in the community, like what their work was at that time, how they found employment. And then the other one after that is I was hoping you could just overview how the Black Panther Party comes to Omaha from the West Coast, and then how you got introduced?

CC: The women back then, there were women that worked in the meatpacking.

MW: Mmm!

CC: Oh yeah! There were women that worked in the meatpacking. There were some that could handle the knife real well! [Laughter] But the majority of them were housewives. Like, for instance, my mom, she worked one day in her life. That was the family structure back then. The men were providers. The women were the homemakers. That role was much more appreciated and given much more weight than it is today. The importance of that position, that mother being at home was paramount to us. I remember the first time that I saw that was kindergarten. We lived in the projects, and next door to me was the only— I think there might have been three white families in the project. Next door to me was one. And the kid was my age, name was Sammy, I'll never forget. But we were in the same class. They gave us a little project for Mother's Day. Fill a milk carton with dirt, put a little bean in there, and the plant will grow. So that was our— and we decorate the little milk carton. So by Mother's Day, you had a little plant there. Sammy and I, we had our little plants and we were running home with— we can't wait to

show our mothers. So, I get home and I show my mom my plant and she's happy and I'm— well, Sammy got home and mom wasn't there. She was at work. And I remember seeing Sammy just sitting out on his front steps with his plant. The next time I saw that plant was in the trash. And like, I don't know if he got discouraged, I don't know what happened, but something where that exchange didn't happen with his mom. That was the first time when I really appreciated my mom being there. My mom was always there, and there were eight of us. Yeah, there were eight of us. My mom, she never worked. Even after my dad passed, he had a raise where she still never had to work.

MW: Wow.

CC: That was sort of instilled in us as— that's your responsibility as a man is to take care of your family. You provide for your family. And you make it so that your woman, your wife, see, all she has to do is take care of that family. Take care of that home. Okay, that was our structure. And that's what they broke up with that welfare.

00:55:20

CC: So now a woman, you got to be the one to provide for that family, raise that family, nurture that family. Okay, educate that family. Now it's all on you. Okay. "We'll take care of you as long as you provide and abide by these rules." Well, those women that couldn't abide by those rules— you got to do what you got to do!

MW: Right. They're punished for it.

CC: They're punished for it. Back then, like I said, when I was a kid, everybody had a mom and dad. I mean, it was everybody. I mean— By the time I'd say 15, 16, that's when we started to see. "Well, we know your dad, but he's staying over here." "Yeah, I know he's your dad, but he's staying, how come he's not staying—." So, I started to see that. I'm trying to remember this guy's name. I can't remember his name, but I remember he was one of the first ones to come to Omaha from L.A.

MW: He moved out there? Or he visited?

CC: Well, yeah, he moved to Omaha and that was sort of how the Black Panther Party— because he was part of that.

MW: Okay. Was it Eddie Bolden?

CC: Aahhh! There you go, okay! So yeah.

MW: And what year would that have been?

CC: Whew! Now you really— let me see how old was I?

MW: You said you were 16 when you—

CC: 16, so that would have been like. '66, '67.

MW: Okay.

CC: Yeah. I would imagine he probably came like maybe '61, '62, somewhere. Because we got pretty well established. But at the time, Black Muslims was prevalent in Omaha.

MW: The Nation [Nation of Islam].

CC: The Nation. They were everywhere. So there was that choice, was that, "Where were you at? With us." I tried the Nation, as I was young, but I made a mistake of showing up one day with a pork chop sandwich. So that sort of ended. [Laughter] That sort of ended my Nation— I was like, "My mama's pork chop." So that sort of pushed me [Laughter] towards— although the principles of the Black Panther Party appealed to me, really, plus there was that "Stand up and fight," that type, and I was more of that. And at the time, I began to lean more toward Malcolm than Martin. That appealed to me more, because I wasn't the type that— "Man, if they pour some stuff on me, it's gonna be on. Yeah, I'm not gonna just say no." Yeah, I made that decision. I'm not that guy.

MW: No milkshakes.

CC: So yeah, I'm not that guy. I gravitated more toward that, "Hit me, I got to hit you back."

MW: Were there any other organizations that were forming up around that time?

CC: Well, yeah. There's also a major air base in Omaha. Offutt Air Force Base, Strategic Air Command.

01:00:26

CC: And there were a few brothers that were in the Air Force that had— would come to the community. There was one particular community center, it was called Christchild Community Center, where these brothers came and they would work with the kids in the community, but they

were more geared toward that military. Although I— that's how I learned how to play chess— with this group. And then they would sponsor softball teams. So, if you wanted to play softball and stuff like that for the community center, these were folks that— So there were a number of things. Then we also had some professional athletes at the time, that were from Omaha, that came back and started implementing programs. There was Gale Sayers, Bob Boozer, and Bob Gibson. Now, Bob Boozer played basketball with the Lakers. Gale Sayers, [Inaudible] I just know he was a Bear, Bears running back [Inaudible] "Nah, you can't live here." Yeah, Benson area, they wouldn't sell them a house. "Now you stay over Near North Side." Okay, so that was the atmosphere in Omaha at that time. Which made these parties like the Black Panther Party and these other ones like Bob and these guys, they started first— and it's still there today. They started a little restaurant called Time Out. Okay. Burger joint. You could get chicken burgers. It's still there today. You know, it was one of the first businesses— Black-owned businesses— in our community back then, you know, major. And then they also opened up a service station, gas station, car wash. Then they bought a McDonald's chain. Okay. So they were starting to implement that entrepreneurship. So we had those, and I was dipping into each one. [Laughter] I was dipping into each one I could, to get as much as I could and learn as much as I could from these folk, you know? And like, I'm thinking, you mention that BANTU [Black Association for Nationalism Through Unity] group, you know.

MW: And what was— what'd BANTU stand for?

CC: But see— and then here's another thing. Outside of all of this, like I said at that time, it was like being in a war zone almost. I mean, we were so pressured— monitored and attacked by the

police force at that time— that anytime that you left home, okay, it was, "Keep your head on a swivel. You know, if you see the police coming, go the other way," that type of thing.

01:05:17

CC: So that— that pressure, was such that most of us almost cocooned ourselves. We look for drama, you just look for it, because you expected it. Even in the high school that I went to, North High, at that time we had like 1400 students. We had 40 Blacks. Between classes, any time that you went through the hall, we had to go in a group— you couldn't go individually. I had a friend, Michael West. We were in class. He got called to the principal's office. Before he got to the principal's office, he'd gotten his jaw broken. So I would come to school and— flagpole right in the middle of the school. And there'd be 15, 16 kids there with hoods, sheets on.

MW: Wow.

CC: So, and even in the high school.

MW: And you talked about— people were getting taken downtown and disappearing.

CC: Disappearing. Never find— Oh yeah. We knew a number of guys that got picked up and we'd never hear from them again. That was, yeah, that happened a lot. Or, I know one time a friend of mine, they picked him up and took him 75 miles out of town, dropped him off. Then have to get back to Omaha, stuff like that. After you get beat! It's not like they just drop you— you get touched up, then kicked out. Or, I knew some guys that, they were the type that, "You gotta bring it to get it," that type of, you know, those were some of those that— we never heard

from them again. Never heard from them again. Then you call down and, "No, we, we, we, we have no reports of a man picked up or we don't know anything about that." And we saw the police pick him up! "This was the car. We gave you the number of the car that picked him up." "No we don't have any report." That happened a lot. As a matter, I just saw, not long ago, I think it was HBO [Home Box Office], that had done a film about North Omaha. And they followed these three guys, the young guys coming up through there, and they were able to see, they showed how they would get picked up, taken away, just for being out. Not that, "I didn't catch you doing anything." Many times we'd be just standing around and police would pull up and, "I'm going around the block. Don't be here when I get back." That type of— and they would go, and if you were there, okay, that was enough. Take you out. So that was the atmosphere. When these groups— after a while, anything, it's gonna bust. You can only fill it up so much, it's going to bust. And that's what happened. That's what happened down there. Fortunately, for me, my family moved here. Because at my high school, I was one of the troublemakers.

01:10:00

CC: Me and a guy named Dennis Womack. Because my high school was very strict in that— first of all, you had to wear a belt, you had to have your shirt tucked in, the girls couldn't wear sandals, they couldn't wear pants, you couldn't have hair on your face— which was the start of my confrontation, because by the time I was a junior, I had a nice little goatee. And the school had their rule, but my dad also had his rule. His rule was, "I'll tell you when you're old enough to put a razor on your face." So I got sent home one day because of my goatee. So that was one of the few times my dad came to school. We got that settled. But I got a lot of animosity behind

that from the counselor because my dad really put a flame under him up there about that. So I'm walking around with a goatee, I'm breaking the rules. But what really blew it up was they expelled this sister because she came to school with a 'fro. They were like, "Oh no." Not suspended, expelled her— "Don't ever come here with a 'fro.". That was when we sort of took over school at that point. It was a full blown out inside the school riot, and all the folks— white folks— left and we barricaded the school, and we were in there for about three days. Okay.

MW: [Laughter] How did that get organized?

CC: Well, it was just a— it didn't, it wasn't planned. You know what I mean? It just, everybody just sort of, "That's it." That was it. Now, like I said, myself and— at the time— Steve Womack, we were sort of the spokesmen, I guess.

MW: Okay. This was for BANTU?

CC: Yeah, not that we wanted to— you know, we just spoke up.

MW: Yeah.

CC: Okay. We didn't plan to be— But people started listening, and it just evolved. But, I know they had it in for me. They had it in for me because not only that— I was also fighting them on— they had a requirement back then of ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. Okay, that was a requirement in order to graduate. And I was not about— I was not about that! "No, no, I'm not doing that." You had to take it in order to graduate. I refuse, it's my senior year coming up. I'm not— "We're gonna have a problem." And like I said— for me— fortunately, we moved. So I

didn't have to make that. But that was— I was going to the end. "If I don't graduate, I don't graduate, but I'm not committing to this ROTC. They sent me the uniform, they send you the whole everything! Uniform, all of that. "I'm not putting that on, I'm not wearing that!" And it was like, "Well okay, but you're not going to graduate." I had a lot of fights back— in school, outside of school, the whole bit. But being in that Black Panther Party, I knew I had that support bond. Plus, I was constantly getting knowledge and information on how to deal with these situations from some of my elders back then.

01:15:00

MW: What were the programs like for the Panthers in Omaha?

CC: Well, first of all we did our food program. We also had counseling, tutoring— we had tutoring programs after school, where we were actually able to use— like the junior high school I went to, they would let us in in the evenings. So, like from six to like eight, we would have tutoring.

MW: Night class.

CC: Night class. And we would go in. Now, I was— fortunately, I was a student, but I wanted to go anyway, just to be hanging out! So, I would go anyway, for the tutoring, but it was fun. But it was also— it wasn't just math. We threw in life lessons too. They also threw in survival methods and life lessons as well as— yes, there's math and science and this that you need to, and we need to do the English— yes, but. There was that counseling in there also. And we were able to express ourselves, where there was no one else in the school. It wasn't like we could go to a

counselor in the school. “I’m having this problem at home, I’m having”, that wasn’t available for us. But those tutors that came in in the evening, we were able to, “Yeah, I might be a little hungry. We didn’t eat today.” Or, “I’m having a problem with this kid. I’m having a problem with this teacher,” that type of thing. That was what the Party did a lot of. Okay.

MW: One thing I’ve always wondered about the food programs, and you spoke to this a little bit earlier, is where was that food getting sourced from?

CC: At that time, there were businesses in Omaha. Like for instance, I know it was Purina, Ralston [Ralston-Purina], Kellogg. There were a number of major cereal producers.

MW: The corporations.

CC: Corporate. You could smell the cereal in the morning. Yeah, you could smell them in the morning, you know, going in. We also had a—

MW: And they were collaborating or there was an agreement with the Party?

CC: They would donate. Yeah, we went to them and they would donate— you know— products to us. A lot of it was stuff they didn’t sell. But it was cereal. There was a— I remember it was called Roberts [Roberts Dairy].

MW: Okay.

CC: Milk. It was a dairy— big dairy. They even sponsored, I know, the first football team— third grade, first football team I played for, it was sponsored by Roberts Dairy, our uniform had “Roberts Dairy,” so they were invested in the community already, sports wise. So when we

approached them about the program, “Okay,” so they started donating the milk. And we would meet, like depending on what part of town you were in, we usually had a community center somewhere. Well, most of us was in the projects. [Laughter] A lot of projects— each project has their own little community center type. So we’d use those facilities in the morning. You’d get there in the morning, “Breakfast, get to school.” Then after school, “Come back, we got programs— we got— for you to do.” We didn’t have the latch key, okay? We had, “Come in here after school, we do these games, we do this.” They also had a big— I remember as a kid— Cub Scouts. It was real big, and they were done in the families homes. They didn’t have a big spot. I know I had a den mother, okay? And we would meet at her house. And it was only about !seven or eight of us in the troop, we’d make little crafts and stuff. Until I realized, “This is going to— developing sort of a military background to it.” So by the time I got the Boy Scouts, I’m, like, “Faah! Think I’m gonna back off of this one. You can have the badges— I see where this is going.” Said, “No I’m not that guy.”

1:20:07

MW: Mmhmm.

CC: But that was a big thing back then, too. So, all of these factions were going on in that small little area. So we had choices and we had exposure in the community to every— I mean, doctors, lawyers. They were there.

MW: That was the case in Omaha?

CC: Yeah, that was the case. And everyone was right there. I remember going to some of my teachers' houses— junior high school teacher lives right there. He lived by the Y [YMCA, Young Men's Christian Association]. So I'd go to the Y every day. When I came back, I stopped by, "Hey, how you doing?" We stopped by, talked with him is, he was an example. I could see right there. "Okay, yup, I see you doing well." And he'd spend the time and let me know what I got to do to get there. We were exposed, whereas I'd say in the '70s, early '80s, we sort of overcame and all our doctors and lawyers and Indian chiefs moved to the suburbs. So all of those examples were gone.

MW: Yeah, because they weren't confined.

CC: They weren't in— "Oh, we go to the suburbs." They moved out, left. After a while, the only ones that we saw driving— the big cat— in that car, were the preachers or the pimps. Those were your examples. The drug dealers, the pimps, the preachers, those were the only ones with the cars and the big houses, so that that that was your example. Back then. You can't be what you can't see. So you never saw— all you saw was— We're all products of our environment. So that was their environment. And that's what they were producing. And a lot of that was not by coincidence. A lot of that was by design. That's divide and conquer again, any way necessary. You want that under all of these circumstances, you were still able to achieve a level of success. "Get them out of there. You don't need those role models." And that became a big thing back then. To this day, I can't think of another race in this country where role models are so privileged, so emphasized. "Y'all need role model— Y'all need role model—" No. No. We need parents. That should be your role model. Not the basketball player or the football player. No.

That shouldn't be your role model. You don't know nothing about them except they play ball. You don't know what type of person they are. You don't wanna be like Mike! [Michael Jordan] You don't know what Mike's— you dig into Mikey, "Hey, maybe I don't want to be like Mike! Yeah, I might want to play like Mike." But that emphasis came. "You gotta have role models, you gotta have role models. Be like, be like." No, your role model should be that parent. That should be your role model. They take that away. And then by the '90s, they start empowering the kids! Now, you know like, how your parents discipline you? "Pick up the phone and call me, I'll come get them." Oh, okay? I remember when I started because I had kids at the time, they were like high school, starting junior high school, my kids, when all of that came about. They were like, "Yeah, we can call." I said, "Yeah, well, you can. But make two calls." [Inaudible] For the police, one for them."

[Inaudible]

01:25:30

CC: But they don't have to see them as authority figures. So if your parents don't have no authority, what does the teacher have? What does the policeman have? You don't respect— The kids I deal with, if I want to discipline them about anything. The first thing I hear, "Don't touch me. Don't put your hand on me." "Or, what?" "I'll call the police." "What?" "Don't touch me. Don't put your hands on me." And I'm like, "No, no." So that's what I see now. It's that they don't respect authority on any level. Which is detrimental to them when they hit these streets out here and run across that police officer who's gonna tell you, "Stop resisting. Comply. Stop

resisting. I'm only gonna say it once or now you get shot." But they don't have any reason to respect any type of authority or recognize it. If I don't have to listen to my parents, who would I have to listen to? And I see a lot of that today. And still working somewhat with the school system, I see those kids get into school, majority of them get put into Special Ed. Not because they're special. Teachers don't want to deal with the behavior. "Put them in Special Ed." I know friends, guys that, "Yeah, they put me in Special Ed." [Laughter] "Yeah, I got an A for not tearing the class up today." "What?" "I got an A today, for just paying attention." "What?" "That's all I had to do." Oh, come on. So that miseducation, non-education is creating, once again, that cheap labor force. Bringing it back to that cheap labor force. And that's what's happening to a lot of ours. I see a lot now, right now. They're all Special Ed. And I'm looking these kids up, "All he needs is someone, you know."

MW: Give that attention, support.

CC: The future looks bleak. I tell my friends, "These are the folks that will be paying your social security. Mm-mm!" They're not even working. And if they are, they're not making that. Okay. So what's that gonna do for you? I hope folks are looking at that. I hope folks are seeing this progress. Like I said, guys like you, I admire right now. I'm so happy to see a Black person in college!

MW: Thank you.

CC: Especially a male, a Black male in college. And like I said, Macalester [Macalester College], to see a Black person there! Oh! Oh!

MW: I actually— that's perfect. I wanted to talk about— so you went to Macalester College 1969 to 1973 in the Expanded Education Opportunity Program [Expanded Educational Opportunities], which we know as EEO. [Laughter] Can you talk about coming from Omaha to St. Paul, but then from the Black Panther Party—

1:30:11

CC: Yeah—

MW: And you said North High in Omaha— You were at another school where there were probably 40 Black students!

CC: Yeah!

MW: Can you talk about your experience going into Macalester and the environment there?

CC: It was really— [Laughter]

MW: How did you—

CC: How did I get there?

MW: How did you get recruited? Yeah.

CC: Okay. They had a program, when I was at Central High School, they had a program called Upward Bound. And I got exposed to that program. And what really brought me to the program was that it was like on Saturdays you get to go out to this college.

MW: Macalester.

CC: Take you out to Macalester. And they— you get to sit in a class to learn about how college classes work. Plus they paid you $350.

MW: Okay. [Laughter]

CC: I said, "What?! Oh well, yeah, yeah." And you got to do a one-on-one with the students. Who would— because they might have been teachers or getting into a teaching program. But I remember there was this girl, this lady that was my counselor at the time and a tutor. And I just got to talking with her and I'll never forget, you know, she started using these words. I'm like, "Wait a minute, got too many syllables in that word, but what do you mean?" Using all these big words. And I began to talk to her about that. And so then she began to explain to me that that was normal diction. She gave me my first thesaurus. "Oh, okay. I got you. Alright." So I stayed with that program, Upward Bound program. Then that summer, we got to stay on campus. Stayed on campus. We had and took courses. Okay. So you got the experience of being in a dorm and that whole bit. And so I liked that, but, I'll tell you, at the time I had no intention of going to college. Although I did have about six athletic scholarship offers, small schools around there. But at the time, I was into drafting, architectural drafting.

MW: Okay. Wow.

CC: I got into that at seventh grade. And that was my thing. All through, and I mean, that was my thing. And I had planned to go to what is now St. Paul College. Back then it was called Technical Vocational Institute, TVI. They had a 10-month program for drafting, which I had, that was me. "Okay, I'm going to there, get out of there, making the bucks." Well, three days after I graduated

high school, I get a letter from Uncle Sam talking about "You're 1A and drafted for the military service. I'm like, "I'm not that guy! I'm not that guy." You know, "Military? No." And at the time, the only way that you could get a student deferment— you had to be enrolled in a four-year school. Mine was a two-year. That didn't qualify. So that's when I went out to Macalester and said, "Well hey! I'm coming in, all right?" And they were like, "But Mr. Crowe uh, we sent out the letters of acceptance in April. This is June." I went, "I understand, but I'll be here in September." [Laughter] "So you do what you got to do. But I'll be here in Sept—" And, fortunately, I had the grades and I had been through the program. So, they sort of let me slide on in. And that's how I really, I got to Macalester. So I said, "Okay, now I'm going to college, what the hell am I going to do here?"

1:35:12

CC: They say, "What's your major?" "You got drafting?" "Nah, we don't have that." Fortunately, there were some upperclassmen that sort of took us under their wing. Because I remember registration day, I'm in my dorm, I'm knocked out, I'm laying, I don't care, and I hear a knock on my door and this girl just said— she was a senior at the time— she said, "You gotta go get the classes." "What do you mean get the classes? Don't they send me my classes?" "No, you gotta go." "What? Okay." So, she took me over and started— "No, this is what you gotta do." "Okay." "And what's going to be your major?" "I don't know!" "What did I like?" So I said, "Well, I liked history. So I put History, history major." Because I did like history, "Now I'll do that."

MW: Was Elder Mahmoud [Mahmoud El-Kati] there at that point?

CC: Yes.

MW: Okay.

CC: He was, I sat at his feet many a day. I sat at his foot many a day. Not only him, he was there, there was a guy named John Patton. Taught music. He was quite a character. He had sung all over the world. I don't know if you remember, if you ever saw— he played the preacher in The Color Purple. He was Shug Avery's dad. He was the preacher. That was John Patton. He taught him the concept. Between him and Mahmoud, they kept us together. They put the meat on our head— brains. Because at that time, they brought in 75 of us.

MW: For EEO?

CC: For EEO.

MW: And you were in the first year of it?

CC: The very first year. And we sort of took the campus over. Actually, Macalester was somewhere you could almost say was a Black college.

MW: Yeah. Highest per capita number of Black students from a school that wasn't an HBCU, if I remember right.

CC: Definitely. And graduated at a higher rate than any in the country, we started with 75, we graduated 52. But like I said, it was very communal. Matter of fact, I brought this for you. [Macalester 50th Reunion EEO Committee's "Macalester College's Expanded Educational Opportunities (EEO) Program publication]

MW: Wow.

CC: You really want to know about the program, that's it.

MW: Thank you.

CC: Now, you can take that, but just make sure I get it back whenever you're done. But that's going to give you a lot of insight. When we got here, the program was such that the president at the time, Arthur Fleming, he was on the [Inaudible] program, he was the head of that in the White House. And he came and started this program here in Macalester. And I was always curious about why these people— Hubert Humphrey came there, to teach Political Science, they had two Econ professors, Egge and Bunting. [Karl Egge and Robert Bunting] They were two of Nixon's top aides.

MW: Wow.

CC: And they're teaching economics there, but every couple of weeks, they'd be gone. They'd be called to Washington, Nixon's been calling these guys to Washington.

1:40:01

CC: And then you got Professor Chase, that's Chase Manhattan Bank! They're paying this cat a dollar to teach math. I'm like, "Wait a minute. Why are all theeese people comin' to this little bitty spot here on Grand and Snelling. What's going on in this little? So something's got to be going on here." So I was glad to be dug in there and be a part of it. And some of the professors

that they had at the time were, I mean, top shelf. Yeah. The History department, there's a Professor Stewart. I think he just—

MW: James Stewart.

CC: James Stewart, he just passed recently. Ahh. Yeah. We spent a lot of time. I learned so much from him. And, all of these guys and folks was at this school, and I'm like, "Oh, something's going on." You know, Mondale [Walter Mondale] he was the speaker at my graduation. Is Nixon coming? That's all I wanted to know. But I was fortunate enough, I think, to be exposed to these folks and be able to pick their brains somewhat, and get a different perspective from their viewpoint. Now, we had problems with some of those professors because we would have classes where professors would give an assignment and then say, "Well, you know, the Black students, y'all just read this."

MW: Wow.

CC: Woah, woah, woah. "Because y'all are here on this program." So they didn't feel we was qualified. "You're just here be— you're EEO. But we're not going to require you—" No. We had to go through that. There's a young man named Melvin. [Melvin Collins]

MW: Yep.

CC: You know of him? He'll tell you what— we had to do a lot of. We took over a building out there! Yeahhh!

MW: Yeah I was gonna ask, were you in that?

CC: Yeah!

MW: What was the story of that? Because that would've been the second building you took over.

CC: Well. [Laughter]

MW: It seems like you like to do this.

CC: I don't think it wasn't any— But see, like I said, I'll always watch. They start these programs. They see that they work, their success. And then they constantly start to break it down, break it down, break it down. I'm like, "You know it works. What, what, why?" And they don't, "We really don't want it to work." Okay. Originally it was supposed to be 75 of us brought in every year. They said after that first 75 of us, "Aah, maybe make it 50. Maybe make it 30." So I'm saying that's what we were fighting. Plus, "Nah, we don't want no special—"

MW: Yeah.

CC: Okay. And we're not here. We earned— everybody here got grades. Everybody here got— it's like, okay. We had a bunch of 'em— went through three years. Bunch of them. Even myself. I had a double major. I had a double major. I majored in history, sociology, plus got to teach, you know, education was my minor. So I'm trying to get everything out of here I can. You know what I'm saying? I want everything I can out of here while I'm here. So the drive, the intelligence and all of that wasn't a question. They questioned it. They assumed we didn't have it. They dealt with us like on those levels. We had to fight that for a year. "Yeah, you guys just read the first chapter." No, no, no. So it was really different.

01:45:10

CC: But like I said, the program itself was really successful because it basically put us on a level playing field. Yeah, full scholarship. And at that time it only cost $3,500 a year. But that was one of the highest around at the time too! It wasn't like— that was still high to you. They gave us $150 a month spending money, you got $75 a semester for books, meals, and room and board, everything taken care of so you didn't have to worry about all those. All you had to do was go to school. Like most of those kids, they went to school there.

MW: Right.

CC: Most of those kids that went to the college, they're not worried about tuition. They're not worried about room and board. They're not, you know. So they sort of just gave us the same playing field. Okay. And that's all we asked for. Now, if we don't make it, that's on us. But we did. So the proof was in the pudding. Given the same opportunities, we can achieve just as much and well as anyone else. And that was the fight. "What do we do to prevent that?" And I think that's where we are today. That's what they've been doing ever since. Because I know for a while, a long time, Macalester, only Black faces I saw there, they were African.

MW: Yeah.

CC: That was it. "Where's, you know, where the homeboys at?" For a while that was it. Which is why I said, I'm so glad to see you. You're in there now. But we, because of Arthur Fleming, we were able to advance things, he supported us in other ventures, like, for instance— we had a, well you probably heard of the Black House.

MW: Mmhmm.

CC: Yeah. That was just remarkable. They spent, I think it was $1.5 million on that house at that time.

MW: Wow.

CC: Oh, it was— But that was our cultural center. That's where we kept each other together. That's where we met. That's where we studied. That's where we ate. They hired a sister to cook, so we'd go there and get our greens and neckbones and grits, that they didn't have at the commons [Kagin Commons]. So, we were able to just feel comfortable there in this campus. So that was our spot. It became the spot for the Twin Cities.

MW: They were bringing speakers.

CC: Listen. Not only speakers, but every weekend Black folks from all— the U, everybody, Duluth, Wiscon— Every weekend, the Black House at Macalester. And we had bands in there, we had it, the whole bit. It was a thing. Everybody talking, "The Black House, the Black House." Four floors.

MW: Mm!

CC: Oh, yeah, the attic to the basement was finished. Speaker system run through the whole place, very comfortable, relaxed. But they also gave us entertainment. We convinced them we needed our own entertainment too. So they had a little fund. We were able to bring some nice bands. We brought Young Holt Trio and Friends of Distinction. We had Stevie Wonder. We had

Olatunji and Drums of Passion. “We needed this type of,” and they provided that for it. So, like I said, it was great.

01:50:30

CC: Plus, I probably made more money back then than I have since I’ve left! Because like I said, you got this every month, you know. So then by the time I was like a junior, I was like— I found out if you moved off campus, you can get your room and board money. What?! Okay! So that was like, what was it, 350? Room and board every month, I got that. My apartment was only ninety-nine dollars of money at the time. So yeah, yeah! I was getting that. Then I took out work study. And they had a plan to go like, if you could find a job that was related to your field of study, then you could get work study. Well, yeah. I got a job in Minneapolis at the Blaisdell YMCA, dealing with the youth over there, which was part of my sociology major. So I was getting the work study. Plus I was getting paid from the Y. So hey, I was, I was doing real well back then. But like I said, it was, by the time I was a junior, that’s when we got the building because we kept saying, “You’re breaking this down, you’re breaking this program down every year from what we started out and they created with.” And there’s no justification. It's not like we weren’t successful, because we were. You couldn’t say that it wasn’t working, because it was. So why are you, how can you justify breaking it down? But I had a professor, never forget, Doris Wilkinson. She sort of took me under her wing. She was a sociology professor. She took me to a trustee meeting one day, snuck me in the back just to listen. And all these guys are cutting this— I’ll never forget this one woman who walked in the door. Mink, diamonds everywhere. She

walked up to the front and informed them that she did not go along with this "E. E. O. program," and if it was not eliminated immediately, she would pull all her funding from the school.

MW: Wow.

CC: And she was upset because she had to come here and interrupt her second tour around the world that she was on. But then, yeah, start hearing that. "Yeah, we're gonna pull a lot of funding. We don't want to see it. It's all my money. We ain't getting the money if we keep the program." So that was why we sort of got in there with that BLAC [Macalester Black Liberation Affairs Committee]. But there were a number of organizations that got started through that. Okay, did the BLAC. We even had our own newspaper.

MW: Imani.

CC: Imani. Sounds of Blackness started there.

MW: Macalester College Black Choir.

CC: Dupre Hall. Gary, [Gary Hines] I was just talking with him last week. They had a piano in there. So he'd go in there, the opera piano, and then the kids just start coming in and all of a sudden they start, "Can you sing?" "Yeah." Boom boom boom.

01:55:00

CC:As a matter of fact, I have their very first album that they did—

MW: Wow.

CC: While at Macalester. I've been keeping it all these years unopened. Okay. This might be worth something one day. It's like been over 50 something years now. I've had this, but I've got their very first album. I've tried to stay a part of Macalester. I donate a little bit here and there, I take part in that. I'll be there next week for a little buddy of mine that I played ball with, they put him in the Hall of Fame. I'll be there for that next week. And I've tried to make all the reunions, you know. I'm a Golden Scot, so, I appreciate and enjoy my experience there. It did a lot to form the person I am today. Okay. Well, I shouldn't say form, I should say put in perspective, because I think the formality started long before I got there. But being there put a lot of perspective for me— [Inaudible]

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

October 16th, 2025

Residence of Yusef Mgeni, St. Paul, MN

Yusef Mgeni Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

SM: Sedric McClure (co-interviewer)

YM: Yusef Mgeni (interviewee)

01:56:51 runtime

Subjects discussed: His great-uncle Fredrick McGhee; the founding of St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; being born in St. Paul on July 24th, 25th, and 26th 1948; attending St. Peter Claver Parochial School; a summary of his educational journey; the one year he lived in Washington D.C.; a summary of the lines of work he has been in; Fred McGhee's role in founding the Niagara Movement and the NAACP; his time living in Los Angeles, California; a cross being burned in front of his childhood home; his father not being present in his childhood; people in the Rondo community supporting his educational journey; the close-knit nature of the Rondo community; the Duluth lynching; Northern segregation; the Underground Railroad in Minnesota; being involved in the Expanded Educational Opportunities program at Macalester College; Black intellectuals and leaders visiting the Twin Cities; Rondo and North and South Minneapolis being colonies; the history of the Rondo neighborhood; Black businesses in Rondo; the employment available to Black men and women up until the mid-1960s; the railroads; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Black inventors in Minnesota; school experiences at St. Peter Claver; Cyrus Ettinger's investment in his academic career; working as a bomb inspector at John Wood Foundry; finishing high school; the Civil Rights Era in Rondo and St. Paul; the gang era in Rondo; the Black Power Movement in response to gangs and the drug epidemic; story about Mahmoud El-Kati in DeLand, Florida.

People/organizations discussed: Fredrick McGhee; the St. Paul Pioneer; Charles Drew; Daniel Hale Williams; W.E.B. DuBois; Samuel Hardy; St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church; National Black Catholic Congress; John Ireland; Montreal Star; Stephen Theobald; St. Peter Claver Parochial School; University of Minnesota; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Southern California; the Humphrey Institute; Metropolitan State University; National Rifle Association; Tom Hardy; Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Howard University; Urban League; Inner City Youth League; African American Leadership Council; NAACP; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Norris Bumstead Herndon; William Sherman; Niagara Movement; D.W. Griffith; Arthur McWatt, Katie McWatt; US organization; Black Panther Party; American Civil Liberties Union; Pilgrim Baptist Church; Negro Leagues; Elmer Jackson, Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton; The Innocence Project; National Lynching Museum;

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00:00:00

YM: So Fred [Fredrick McGhee] had this case. I can tell you some of his cases were incredible.

SM: Can we do it afterwards? Let's get him— if you don't mind.

YM: Well, the man called Fred a, "Damn nigger liar," in the courtroom. Fred slapped the other attorney full in the face. The judge not only made the white lawyer apologize, he made him send a letter of apology to the St. Paul Pioneer— before the Pioneer Press. Okay, Fred died in 1912.

SM: That's right, he was over in Wisconsin. He got sick or something, right? He had a cabin or something.

YM: He had a cabin on the, what's that river they innertube on over there.

SM: The Apple River or?

YM: The Apple River.

SM: Yes.

YM: And who's the guy, Charles Drew used to come up here? Daniel Hale Williams, DuBois [W.E.B. DuBois]. And they would all go up to Fred's cabin if they were giving a major speech or writing a book, and they would all critique it and dry run it and, fine tune it. But, Fred was a hell of an attorney. Fred was the founder— him and Samuel Hardy were the two founders of St. Peter Claver African American Catholic Church on I-94 and Lexington. Fred also was one of the founders of the National Black Catholic Congress. And Fred traveled with Archbishop Ireland, who was a chaplain in the Civil War, who ministered to former enslaved people. Fred and John Ireland traveled up to Montreal. There was a Negro who was a columnist on the Montreal Star newspaper, whose name was Stephen Theobald. He was born in French Guiana, and they recruited Stephen, brought him to St. Paul, converted him to Catholicism, and John Ireland got him in the St. Paul Seminary. He was the third Negro Catholic priest in the United States, and the first one west of Chicago, who was the first full-time priest at St. Peter Claver African American parish, because John Ireland— Black Catholics weren't welcome in the white Catholic churches. So John Ireland the Archbishop, would serve Mass— St. Peter Claver Church was downtown. They bought an old Swedenborgian Church on Fifth and Market Street, which is where the St. Paul Hotel is at today. John Ireland said he was gonna serve Mass until he could recruit a full-time priest. Stephen Theobald lived down on Farrington and Fuller. His house is still there, right behind where the second St. Peter Claver Church was, they bought land. There's a church on the corner of Rice and Aurora next to where Sears Automotive was, right across the street from the House of Representatives. Neighbors— including Legislators across the street, said, "We don't

want no Negro church across from the state capitol." So they made St. Peter Claver swap with a Lutheran church who owned land on Farrington and Aurora. And St. Peter Claver built their church on Farrington and Aurora. And the church on Rice and Aurora is a Lutheran church that Bob Battle is the pastor for. I'll shut up. So go ahead, Mack. Sorry, I got a lot of stories.

MW: To introduce our interview, my name is Mackinnon Williams. I'm here with Elder Yusef Mgeni, as well as Sedric McClure from Macalester College.

YM: Just Yusef.

MW: Just Yusef? Okay. I'm here with Yusef.

YM: I'm an elder in training. I'm only 77.

MW: Sounds good. We're here today for an oral history interview on some Rondo movement history. We're at Elder Yusef's house. Yusef's house. Today is October 16th, 2025, and Yusef was just giving us some background context on his great uncle, Frederick McGhee, some of his family's history. So to start off, Yusef, could you please briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and then describe your connection and your family's connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

YM: Okay, I am a native of the Rondo neighborhood. I was born July 24th, 25th, and 26th, 1948, because my baptismal record, my hospital record, and my birth certificate each have a different date. [Laughter] So I had three golden birthdays, I was living in California at the time, in LA and in Watts. And I'm 77 years old. I've been retired for 15 years. And I have always been an information freak. I attended St. Peter Claver Parochial School, a Black Catholic school. We

were taught by a group of Black nuns called the Oblate Sisters of Providence. And we had to study Black history. We read *The Miseducation of the Negro*. We read books on early African American history. When I was in the third grade, all the way up to eighth grade, I was bored when I went into the public junior high school and the public high school.

00:05:30

YM: I attended the University of Minnesota. I monitored classes at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and USC [University of Southern California]. I took graduate classes at the University of Minnesota, the Humphrey Institute, and I matriculated from Metropolitan State University because I didn't want to give anybody credit for my education. I'm a lifelong native. Apart from the five years I spent in LA, I spent one year in Washington, D.C., where the women, the sisters outnumbered the brothers about 12 to one. And I was staying in the, what's the name of that hotel? It's a very large, very famous old hotel in D.C. I was in public broadcasting, right on television at the time. And it—it'll come to me. The National Rifle Association was across the street. And at 4:30, the employees got off work. 90% of the employees who do the telemarketing and the membership renewal and phone calls were Black women. And it looked like a sea of locusts was coming out of the National Rifle Association because it's like two thousand Black women were coming down the steps. There were about 38 steps. It was on a hill. I was waiting for a brother named Tom Hardy from St. Paul, who worked for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and taught at Howard University to come pick me up because we were going out that night. But I tell people I was born, raised, and miseducated right here at the taxpayer's expense in St. Paul, Minnesota. And I didn't have a white teacher until I— full-time white

teacher, until I started in high school. And people say, "You from St. Paul, Mississippi?" And I say, "No, St. Paul, Minnesota." Because this was a very segregated town. There was like a bubble over the Rondo neighborhood. It was called Selby-Dale, Summit-U, Rondo, Darktown, and various other not so polite names. But— I was in broadcasting, I was in construction, I was in community organizing, I was in teaching, I volunteered for 40 years in the prisons to work with Black men and women and juvenile Black cultural groups. I've served on more than a hundred boards of directors, nonprofit, local, national, regional organizations, worked for the Urban League, for Inner City Youth League, for— volunteered, served on the boards of many of the nonprofits, African American Leadership Council. I'm on the executive committee of the Minnesota-Dakota Area Conference, NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. We call it the state conference. I'm also on the board, the executive committee of the St. Paul chapter, the Roy Wilkins chapter, which was founded— my great-uncle, Fredrick McGhee, created the Twin Cities chapter of the NAACP in 1911. He died in 1912. And at his memorial service at Hallie Q. Brown [Hallie Q. Brown Community Center], Black intellectuals and civil rights leaders from throughout this country came to Minnesota to participate in his memorial service. If you've seen the picture of the 13 men sitting at the foot of Niagara Falls. My great uncle, Fred McGhee, was the one sitting with the young 10-year-old on his lap. The 10-year-old was Bumstead Herndon [Norris Bumstead Herndon]. His father started the first Atlanta penny insurance company and was a millionaire. And if you take the Black Atlanta tour, you go to the Herndon mansion. Because all of the Black buildings in Atlanta were built out of brick. And when Sherman [William Sherman] burned down Atlanta, he burned down all the white

buildings. All the historical buildings were built by Black former enslaved tradesmen. And so W.E.B. DuBois credits Fred McGhee with being the founder and the original person who came up with the idea for the Niagara Movement. They rented a hotel in Ontario— in Buffalo, New York, and when they got there, the innkeeper said, "We don't rent to darkies." So they got on the tourist boat, went across Niagara Falls to Ontario, where a Canadian innkeeper was only too happy to rent them his entire hotel. And that's when the first Black professional civil rights organization was formed, the Niagara Movement, 1906.

00:10:07

YM: Three years later, the Niagara Movement would morph into the national NAACP, which was an integrated national civil rights organization. The Niagara Movement was all Black professional men. Fred created the Twin Cities chapter of the NAACP in 1911. He died in 1912. And in 1913, they created the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, which is 112 years old, in his honor, in his name. Later that year, the Minneapolis NAACP chapter was established, 1913. So the Twin Cities chapters, Minneapolis and St. Paul, are 112 years old. Those are literally not the first, but among the earliest of the civil rights organizations that were politically active. When *Birth of a Nation* came out, D.W. Griffith's first motion picture, the Minneapolis and St. Paul NAACP picketed the theater every night to try and encourage the theater owner to discontinue showing it. The President premiered it in the White House and said it was like history written by lightning. But Fred was an incredible human being, died very young in his early 50s. And Fred belonged to several national Black professional men's organizations. And there's a book written about Fred McGhee [*Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861-1912*], but Arthur

McWatt— Katie McWatt's husband— who was a historian, had significant challenges with some of the material contained in the autobiography and the biography of Fred McGhee. My Aunt Freddie, my cousin Fred, his father, Frederick, were all named after Fred McGhee. But lifelong native, other than the time that I spent in DC and in Los Angeles, I was in LA in the '60s. Okay. And you couldn't have had any better rites of passage. You know, I was fooling around with US [United Slaves], with the Panthers [Black Panther Party]. *Hair* was playing on Sunset Strip. I was 6'6", so I was going to a different jazz club every night, and I was 18 years old. I was dating 35-year-old civil rights paralegals from, what's this, real radical public law organization? American Civil Liberties Union. I was dating paralegals—Black women— and living large, okay, 18 years old.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

But my grandmother was the first female and youngest president of the St. Paul Urban League.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

00:17:37

YM: So my mother was the first Black secretary in the St. Paul Public Schools, and they burned a six-foot cross in our front yard directly across the street from the front door of Pilgrim Baptist Church when my mother took the job as senior clerk typist at Washington High School on Rice Street. So my grandfather, my mother, my father, my grandmother, people in the, my father played in the Negro Leagues. He was a world champion bullshitter. I didn't know him well enough to love him. He left— my mother fired him when I was two because he laid his hands on

her. And he promised to take me and my brother fishing. We would sit up all night and fall over and bump heads and wake up. Every time a car went past the house, we would jump up and grab our little toolbox with the fishing stuff, our little cane pole with the Seagram cork bobber. Still waiting for that Negro to come pick us up and take us fishing. Never did make it. But I'm a native. I'm a proud son of Rondo. Prostitutes used to shake my hand and press money into my hand when I was attending the University of Minnesota and say, "You're going to school over there at the U, aren't you?" And I'd say, "Yeah." And they'd say, "Well, when you get your edu-muh-cation, we want you to bring it back and contribute to this community." And the Black nuns at St. Peter Claver handpicked me to be a priest when I was like in the second grade. That was not going to happen. And they used to tell me, "Be a credit to the race, boy, be a credit to the race." And I didn't know if they were talking about the hundred yard dash or the Indianapolis 500. "Oh, please!". I would go in the barbershop and the brother would say, "If I had your height, I'd have made a million dollars!" And I'd say, "You can have a million dollars, please let go of my cheek!" I shot pool to pay my first two years' tuition at the university. And later played golf, but not as good as I shot pool. So you can give me the high sign, telling you about myself. So grew up in this neighborhood. Referred to my best friends' mothers as "ma'deah", you know, mother dear, shorthand "ma'deah."

00:20:06

YM: And I had to ask my grandmother for permission before I could date somebody because we might be related. I mean, it was a segregated community. It was a small community. If you were six blocks away from your home in Rondo and put bottles up on somebody's fence and throw

rocks at them, somebody's mother or grandmother would stick her head out the window and put her hands on her hips and say, "Boy, if you don't cut that mess out, I'm comin' out there and whoop your ass. And I'm gon' call your mother and your grandmother and you're going to get your ass whooped two more times when you get home." We say, "Oh, please, the devil must have made me do it! Please don't hurt me. Don't call my mother and my grandmother. It'll never happen again. Oh, I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me." And we'd be picking up glass, man, putting it in— we used to have 55 gallon barrels in our backyard. We'd burn trash every night. We didn't have pickup. But I am a product of the Rondo community. I am a true son of Rondo. I've never forgotten that, and I've always been very proud of that. Because those Black nuns at St. Peter Claver gave us one hell of an education.

[Recording paused]

00:22:44

YM: But that's who I am. You know, I'm just an average Negro. Born, raised, and miseducated in St. Paul, Minnesota, and had a lot of mentors, Black men and Black women, who threatened to whoop my ass if I didn't amount to something and be a credit to the race. So I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter about getting involved. And I've learned a lot, I've remembered a lot, and I've been involved in a lot.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

MW: And one other question I had is— I know in the Voices of Rondo interview [HAND in HAND's RONDO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT], in that transcript, I saw that you briefly mentioned that your parents and grandparents remembered a lynching in St. Paul.

YM: There were a number of lynchings in St. Paul.

MW: Is there anything you're able to share about?

YM: There were— Jackson, McGhie, and I forget the third brother who were lynched in June of 1920 up in Duluth, Minnesota. [Elmer Jackson, Isaac McGhie, Elias Clayton] They hung the first brother so fast they snapped the rope. They had to put two ropes around his neck on 6th and Duluth Street, threw the ropes up over a light post and hung him. They hung all three of them. They were roustabouts with the circus, and a white girl was late getting home and she told her parents that she'd been raped by three Negroes. They tore down a telephone pole and used it as a battering ram to break into the Duluth City Jail and drag them brothers out. And people got on trains in North and South Dakota to come up here for that lynching in Duluth. They had the brother who started The Innocence Project. He's got the National Lynching Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Bryan Stevenson— was their keynote speaker a year ago. They do a march every year in memory of somebody, Jackson and McGhie. I can't remember the third brother's name, but—

00:25:50

YM: There's a lake on Dale Street between Maryland and Front and Como. Growing up, it was called Nigger Lake. Now they call it Marydale Lake, Maryland and Dale. My grandmother made

us call it Steering Wheel Lake. We couldn't call it Nigger Lake, but that's what everybody called it. And on the west side of Dale, there was a small pond that was called Little Nigger Lake. And I could tell you a lot of stories about discrimination in this town. There was a terminal of the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War operated out of the Union Depot by a brother whose name was Moses Dixon. And he has only recently been discovered, and a white woman historian, has been researching him and giving talks in a pub over near the High Bridge on Moses Dixon. So he was the conductor on the Underground Railroad in St. Paul back before the Civil War. There was the Perfect Ashler Lodge, a group of— a Masonic order that owned a building on Aurora and Kent, one block east of Dale and one block south of University. They sold that building in 1929 to a group of people in the community who named it after a Black woman who was very famous named Hallie Q. Brown. You know what they sold it for? A dollar. The Black community owned that building. The city owns the Martin Luther King Center and Hallie had to come up with a half million dollars to pay part of the one point, one and a half, $1.7 million cost of Martin Luther King Center. Park and Recreation controls 48% of that building and Hallie leases the other 52%. Penumbra [Penumbra Theatre] leases their space from Hallie. Ever since it was started by Al Stafford, who created the acting group as a CETA, Community Employment Training Act, jobs program back in the late 60s, early 70s. But then you had the North Central Voters League back in the 50s and 60s on Grotto and Igelhart that was involved in voter registration, voter education, they ran Katie McWatt for city council. They ran one or two people for the state legislature. It was a civic engagement club, a lot of the brothers who were involved there were retired people who worked on the railroad. That's how a lot of Black men

got here on the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific Railroad. My father worked for the Great Northern, played in the Negro Leagues, played for the St. Paul Colored Giants who won the Black National Baseball Championship in 1906. The Colored Gophers. St. Paul Colored Gophers, 1906. This is before the Negro Leagues were created. And then he played for another group. I had one of my mother's sisters' husbands played for the Kansas City Monarchs. I played baseball and football and shot pool growing up.

00:30:09

YM: But this has always been home. Black folks tend to revolve around wherever mama's at, and mine happened to be here. So after I spent five years in Los Angeles, I came back. My mother died in 1999. And I lived in LA from— I graduated in '66, so from 1964 to 1970. That was when the riots were happening out there. It's when J. Edgar Hoover raided Panther headquarters in every city in the United States. That's when US and the Panthers got into the shootout on the campus of UCLA and Alprentice Bunchy Carter and another brother were killed. So I've been very fortunate. I've been blessed. A lot of Black men and women have taken me under their wing, have mentored me. And like I said, have threatened to whoop my butt if I didn't amount to something and make a contribution to the community. I was very involved with the EEO program at Macalester College [Expanded Educational Opportunities], with Mahmoud [Mahmoud El-Kati], with John Warfield, John and Jan Warfield, and with John Patton, who was a musicologist, who was one of the founders of the Sounds of Blackness, because Gary Hines, I think, had a football scholarship to go to Macalester. And that's where the Sounds were created, Macalester College. And that's why we used to go to Black House for the Malcolm X Pan-

African Institute. And we had radio programs, we had TV programs. We had a forum on the crisis of Black leadership. We would hold— we helped purchase 1000 transistor radios and sent them to The Sudan to a group called Anyanya who was fighting— we supported all of the liberation movements. We had marches on African Liberation Day. We had Kwanzaa celebrations at Black constituency governed community organizations, mostly at The Way in North Minneapolis. And we brought speakers. We brought South African actors, W.E.B. DuBois, what was the Tuskegee boy's name? Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson. Those people used to come to the Twin Cities to St. Paul or Minneapolis. And they would have to stay at Hallie Q. Brown or at Phyllis Wheatley [Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House] because they couldn't get a room in the white hotels. They would perform at Northrop Auditorium and then they would go to sleep in the Black community at a Black community center. And we used to have union picnics where every Black church in St. Paul and Minneapolis on a Sunday in July would have picnics at Minnehaha Park out near Minnehaha Falls. And you never saw so many pretty sisters in your lifetime. And my mother and my grandma would say, "Boy, don't leave the sound of my voice. Okay. If I call your name, your ass better be right here at my kneecaps, okay, in a minute." And it was called union picnics. There was sort of a social rivalry. Minneapolis had two colonies, South Side and North Side. St. Paul just had Rondo. Then after I-94 was built, all the poor white folks lived, the poor Mexicans lived on the West Side, which is strange because it's the South Side of St. Paul. And then the poor white folks and the poor Italians lived over on the East Side. So a lot of Black folks moved over on the Lower East Side. But interesting times.

MW: And you're referring to these as colonies. Could you explain that phrasing?

YM: Which?

MW: You said there were two colonies in Minneapolis.

YM: North Minneapolis and South Minneapolis. There were two Black communities in Minneapolis.

MW: Okay.

YM: There was basically one in St. Paul.

MW: You're saying the Black communities were colonies?

YM: Yes.

MW: Could you explain that further? I'm curious.

YM: Well, there were segregated communities. That was the only place that you could rent or buy or— and only the privileged few could buy their homes. Rondo was the business strip in St. Paul from Rice all the way to Lexington, or at least to Chatsworth. In Minneapolis, you had 4th Avenue, The Nacirema Club— Nacirema is American spelled backwards. You had Cozy's Bar, and then over on the north side, you had Cozy's. You had the Elks club. You had a lot of joints. We had the Elks. We had The Celebrity. We had a lot of Black— there were a couple of dance halls, a couple of bars. I wouldn't call them nightclubs. There were a couple of bootleg liquor joints. There were a lot of after-hour houses.

YM: There was a policy of containment. That's why we call them colonies. Because you couldn't live anywhere. You couldn't live on Aurora. You couldn't live on Dayton. You couldn't live anywhere west of Chatsworth. You couldn't live anywhere east of Farrington. And that goes back to the beginning of the century. There was a Frenchman whose name was Joseph Rondeau. R-O-N-D-E-A-U. sometimes spelled D-E-A-U-X. And he married a half-Indian woman, lived at Fort Snelling. There was so much discrimination against him that he moved in here. And this area was called the Rondeau Addition.

[Recording paused]

00:41:54

MW: One question that I was thinking of as you spoke about the neighborhood is, I was wondering, what were the common professions for people around you when you were growing up? And also what were the labor conditions? What'd you hear from people about their work?

YM: Sure. Well, up until the mid-60s, early mid-60s, the only jobs that Black men could get were working at the packing house, working on the railroad, or working in some of the hotel kitchens. There were several packing houses over on the West side. Black men could work there. was usually one Negro in each of the hotels shining shoes, there might be one or two in the kitchen. Most of the Black women— see up until 1980, in 1980 there were 447 different occupations listed by the Department of Labor. Women were restricted to just 11 of those 447 occupations. Black women were relegated to domestic work, janitorial work, raising somebody else's children, there were a handful in public education, but only a handful. Like you could

count them on your fingers. It wasn't like there were a bunch of us. And most worked— 50% of the Black people in this country in the 1950s worked for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, or what was the other train union?

MW: The Pullman.

YM: The Pullman.

SM: The Pullman Car Porters.

YM: Pullman, Pullman or Sleeping Car or the one of the waiters. And that's why A. Philip Randolph was so powerful. That is how he organized the first March on Washington. And a lot of that organizing was done in the basement of the Union Depot in downtown St. Paul. A lot of people don't know that. Hmm. And you still run into people like, you know, Marvin Roger Anderson from Rondo. He was a red cap. Babington-Johnson got here on the railroad. Mmhmm. So this was a railroad town, a river town. And the railroad came right up along next to the river.

00:45:00

YM: This was one of the final ports for the Underground Railroad. As people came here, some continued on from here up to Canada. But this was far enough north, it was a free state. Dred Scott and his wife lived at Fort Snelling— Harriet Robinson— and their daughter, while his case wound its way through the U.S. Supreme Court. And the judge who handed down the Dred Scott decision that said that Negroes have no rights which a white man is bound to respect, was from Maryland. And he had his law office. Guess who his partner was in his law office? Who's the boy that wrote Star-Spangled Banner?

SM: Francis Scott Key?

YM: Yeah. That was his office partner. And if you ever look up the original stanzas of the Star-Spangled Banner, it's real hard on Africans and enslaved people. Okay. So they were a couple of dirty bastards. They were. Now I forgot what your question was.

MW: About the labor conditions, that you were answering on the railroads and that domestic work and the service work. What did people think of that or how did they feel about their work?

YM: Well, the brothers on the railroad used to— we would say, "Hello, Mr. So-and-so." Somebody would say, "You look tired." And he would say, "Well, I walked all the way from Seattle, back and forth on that train. I deserve to be tired." They took a lot of pride in what they did. They worked hard on the railroad. They worked all day and all night, many days and nights. When they came home, you know, they might have three or four days off. They partied hard too. Okay. Those were the only jobs they could get. They were proud. They took a lot of pride in themselves and in what they did. I got to stop saying, "Um." They were respected because they were hardworking people. Rarely missed work because if the slightest infraction, you'd lose that job and it might take you a year to find another one. So people valued them jobs. They often put in a word and worked real hard to try and get their kids and their relatives and their friends jobs when they were available. But they were basically the jobs that nobody else wanted. There were a couple in the post office. Like I said, there were a couple in the hotels, but they were shining shoes or working in the kitchen. They weren't at the desk. There might have been one Negro in Montgomery Wards, in St. Paul insurance companies, in the Great Northern Building, or, and we had a— the governor of Minnesota, the longest running employee in the state of Minnesota was

a Black man named Billy Williams, who was a baseball superstar when he was younger. And he was the governor's executive assistant and he worked for like 17 governors? And did not a bill go into the legislature that did not go across his desk. And he knew all the legislators and all the white men sucked up to Billy because Billy had the governor's ear and Billy was the governor's executive assistant. And when the governor was absent or drunk, Billy told how the state was going to run. The leadership in the community were the ministers and the professionals.

MW: Okay.

YM: Hallie Q. Brown created the St. Paul Urban League. Roy Wilkins was the chair of the board of Hallie Q. Brown. That's why they called the NAACP chapter here, the "Roy Wilkins chapter." And there was a young fellow named Whitney whose girlfriend was going to college here, and he would come up and visit her. Roy Wilkins convinced him to volunteer at the Urban League. You know what his last name was? Whitney Young Jr. You know who he was? He became the president of the National Urban League. So you had the president of the National NAACP, you got the president of the National Urban League, you got Maudine Rice [Maudine Cooper], you got Hilda Brown, you got all these people involved in the Harlem Renaissance and these national civil rights organizations come out of Minnesota.

00:50:14

YM: So we used to say there was Minnesota Negroes everywhere. There was just more of them here than anywhere else. And you can take that any way you want, good or bad. But there were people who were from here, Frederick McKinley Jones was an inventor. He invented the

refrigeration unit. A guy— general from the military came to Thermo King in Minneapolis. You know where International Market Square is on Glenwood and Lyndale? It used to be Thermo King. A general from the military came and said, "You know, the boys fighting in the war, are getting tired of Spam," and you know, they couldn't get them any fresh meat or dairy or vegetables or fruit because it couldn't survive the boat ride over there. And the guy who owned Thermo King said, "Well, we're going to have to really think about, it just can't be done." And Fred said, "Well, give me a couple of weeks, let me get back to you." He invented the refrigeration unit. When you see these trucks pulling up with milk or meat or cheese or dairy goods or liquor or somethin' cold, Fred invented the refrigeration unit. When you see somebody got one sticking in their window, that's Fred's invention. You know when you go to the movie theater and the ticket would come up through the thing? That was Fred's invention. Do you know the soundtrack for silent movies? Was Fred's invention. Okay? Fred had more than 100 patents. Fred was a teetotaler. So the guy who owned Thermo King built him an apartment on the 2nd floor in the factory. So all he had to do was get up in the morning, come downstairs, go to work. And Fred was a hell of an inventor. When Fred died, his wife got not a nickel of the patents that Fred created that earned tens and hundreds of millions of dollars for that company. She moved to Arizona and lived off of her Social Security benefits. That's all she had. And she got none of, you know, Fred's shares or anything from any of his inventions. And there were— a group of Black journalism students did a documentary, okay, on Frederick McKinley Jones. He invented the first snowmobile.

MW:

YM: Wow. I mean, he invented all kinds of shit, okay? And nobody, you know, you can't, you know, Garrett Morgan invented the stoplight. He invented the gas mask. He went down in a mine in Ohio and saved 35 miners and they accused him of witchcraft. 'Cause he took the mask on him. He had to hire a white boy to demonstrate his mask to the United States military. Because they didn't believe him. They thought he was doing witchcraft. Okay. Putting a mask on and walking through mustard gas, poison shit you know, all that. Black inventors. You know, it wasn't just the peanut boy, George Washington Carver, or the sweet potato boy, you know. The Black inventors were phenomenal. You know, Charles Drew, Daniel Hale Williams. Charles Drew died on the doorstep of a white hospital in Chicago that refused to give him a blood transfusion, which he invented.

SM: Wow.

YM: Okay. And Daniel Hale Williams dedicated— first open heart surgery— dedicated one of his books to my grandmother, my grandma Connie, when he came here to go up to Fred McGhee's cabin on the Apple River in Wisconsin to talk about some— one of the big shots was doing. So small community, very close knit, very tight, tightly woven. Whatever— in school, when somebody got sick and went to the hospital, they would take a classroom of us. We would go to the house. The boys had to cut the grass, cut the hedges, you know, wash this, that, the windows, you know. The girls would cook, do the laundry, clean the house, sew. and do all of that. When they came home from the hospital, they had a week's supply of food. The grass was cut, the hedges were trimmed, the windows were washed, everything. Well, we were wore out, okay? They worked a little bit of Black off our asses but that's where the community service

came from, okay? The mother house for the Oblate Sisters of Providence burnt down in Baltimore, Maryland. Seven 01 Gun Road out in the suburbs of Baltimore. I sold 5,000 of them, "World's Finest Chocolate" candy bars. And they had a big glass bowl, bigger than a fishbowl. And everybody who sold a case of candy got their name put on a strip of paper and they put it in there. And they wiggled it around and they said, "Our first winner of the silver dollar is Charles Anderson [birth name of Yusef Mgeni]. And the second winner of"— I think I won eight of the 12 silver dollars.

00:55:13

YM: Boy, everybody was pissed okay? Because I sold so many of them to help rebuild the mother house because it caught on fire. And I hated them nuns until I got into public school and the white teacher said, "Look, as long as you don't mess up in here, you get a 'C.' You don't cause me any problems, I will socially promote you. Don't have to do shit." And you know what? I did even less than that. [Laughter] At St. Peter Claver, if one of the kids in the classroom didn't do their homework, they'd beat everybody in the room. We had a telephone tree that started at 5:30 in the morning. "Boy, if you didn't do your homework, you better stick all your fingers down your throat and throw up over everywhere, because if you come to school and we get beat, we're whooping your ass at recess, we're whooping your ass at lunch, and we're whooping your ass all the way home!" Now, the girls had to hold their hand out in the aisle, and Sister had a yardstick, a flat yardstick. And on the other side of the yardstick was a blackboard pointer, you know, a thin piece of wood about the size of my index finger. And there were two or three rubber bands holding the blackboard pointer on the back of the yardstick. Now, the girls

had to hold their hand out in the aisle, and Sister would pull up her sleeve and you can hear that sucker coming. “Wsssh-Pow!” Okay, boy, that hurt like hell. The brothers, we had to hold our hands out with the knuckles up, and they would turn the yardstick over. We got the blackboard pointer on the back of our hands. Okay? So if you didn’t do that homework, you better get sick in a hurry, or we was gon’ whoop your ass.

SM: The tune— “Reading, writing, arith-metic, talk to the tune of a hickory stick.”

YM: Oh buddy. I mean, there was one young brother, name was Dennis Lewis, he’s still alive. He was cutting up in class one day. And all the nuns— and they used to wear them penguin suits, you know them habits, this was all you could see, everything else was covered up, hoods and thing went down, covered their shoes. And sister said— all the nuns had telephones on their desk. And she used to say, “Dennis, don’t let me have to call your grandmother.” And Dennis said, “Well, you better do what you got to go on ahead and do.” You know, trying to be bad. Sister said, “Hello, Mrs. Lewis? Yes, ma’am. This is Sister Infanta. Yes, ma’am, it’s Dennis. I would, I would— 5 minutes? I would really appreciate that, ma’am. Yes, he’s very distracting. Thank you.” And we started. “Ooooooo.” His grandma would come in the classroom. She had a razor strap. She had an ironing cord. She had a belt. And you know when they would say, “Cut me a switch”? She would cut a switch that was the size of a fly rod. And she would peel all of the bark off of it. It was light green, okay? She whooped that Negro all over that classroom until he threw up, okay? And he cried, he hollered, he had whelps on his face, on his hands, on his arms. She beat the shit out of him, okay? This was the beginning of the school year. And from there on in, all Sister had to do was— “Oh, please, Sister, I’m so sorry. Listen, it’ll never happen again.”

The same as when somebody's grandma stuck the head out the window, "Boy imma come out there and whoop your ass." "The devil must have made me do it. It'll never happen again." We were angels for the rest of the school year, not a peep, okay? Boy they used to grill the shit out of us, man. I mean, we had algebra in the 4th grade. We had Latin. We had history. We had science. I mean, in the 4th grade, I was on a 12th grade reading level based on where the kids in the public schools were at. I had read every book in the school library. It wasn't a big library, but I had read everything in it. So my grandmother started giving me some of my grandfather's books— the Attorney, Attorney Anderson. And that's when I started reading *The Miseducation of The Negro* and John Hope Franklin and Richard Wright. Boy, Richard Wright took my ass to another planet. I read *Native Son*, I read *Black Boy*, I read *Outsider*. He wrote an essay on communism called "The God That Failed," and it's in a book called *American Hunger*. And Black Boy is in the first half. He submitted it for Book of the Month Club. They took the essay, "The God That Failed" out of it, and *Black Boy* was the Book of the Month Club nationally, the first half of the book. And it ends where he says, "I'm leaving Mississippi to take my soul and plant it in the soil of a warmer sun." And what's this boy's name? Ta-Nehisi Coates. What was his book called?

SM: That was Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

YM: Isabel Wilkerson did *The Warmth of Other Suns*, and so did he. His first book was taken from Richard Wright.

[Recording paused]

01:01:00

MW: And so how were the—

YM: The public schools were terrible. They were terrible. Kids couldn't read, kids couldn't write, kids. If you really applied yourself, you could get a basic education, but they did not go out of their way. We had segregated classes. I'll tell you one other story that's real important in terms of my development. My mother worked at Humboldt High School, Mechanic Arts High School, Washington High School, and then she worked at St. Paul College, which used to be part of the St. Paul Public Schools system. When they called our house, she was not at home if I played hooky. I missed about 400 days of high school and still got offered eight scholarships. That's what them Black nuns, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, did to my ass. They edu-muh-cated the shit out of me. Our friends used to say, "Boy, wait till you go to Marshall Junior High School." It used to be a high school on Ashland and Grotto, up there across from the Unitarian Church. Benjamin E. Mays, Barack Obama School. Yeah. Marshall was the building on the west end of the block. The east end of the block was Webster, which was elementary. And then Obama was the whole complex, Michelle and Barack Obama. And— what was his name? He taught at Marshall Junior High School. And everybody hated his guts. He was a real disciplinarian. And our— kids' parents used to say, "Boy, wait till you get to Marshall. Mr. Ettinger, Cyrus Ettinger, is going to get in your ass." You go up to Marshall and show your ass. Well, the first week, my homeroom got changed to Mr. Ettinger's class, okay? And I couldn't figure out why. Everybody in his homeroom was a knucklehead, me included. I also had him for, I don't know if it was history, or what the class was. It was kind of like a civics class. And him and I used to cuss each

other because he would have called me up to his desk and he'd say, "Look, you see that 137?" And I'm just telling you the fact. "That's your IQ. You have the highest IQ in this school. And you're a damned idiot because you won't apply yourself." And I'd say, "None of your damn business what I do, whether I apply myself or not." And the kids would be like this, you know, like a tennis match. And he'd say, "You're just damn stupid if you really don't apply yourself." And I'd say, "Well, none of your damn business what I do," you know? And I mean, he treated us like adults, so we could cuss at him. He would cuss back at us. So, my mother went to get dressed to get to school now, because she was in charge of all the substitute teachers. So, she would go in real early, 6 o'clock, 6:30. And the phone would ring. "Hello? Who is this?" "Charlie, this is Cyrus. I talked to your mother and you got 15 minutes to get your ass to school or she's giving me permission to come and get you." "Well, I don't feel well. I don't think I'm goin' to school today." He'd say, "Listen, I've been teaching for 25 years and I have never missed a day. I know you can come to school with a runny nose. Get your ass to school." And I'd say, "Well, I don't have any clean clothes to wear." He'd say, "Well, you ever wonder why my knees and my elbows and my ass shine?" He said, "I paid $13 for this suit and I intend to get both sides of my dollar and the edges. That's why I wear it every damn day. And you can sure as hell wear them perfectly good pair of blue jeans that your mother bought you that you wore yesterday. Just because the knees are scuffed, you put that shit on and get to school." And I said, "Well"— he'd already busted my fake cold and my clothes. I said, "Well, I don't have no lunch money. And if I skip lunch, I might get suspended. If I go down to lunch and don't eat, the kids will talk about me."

01:05:07

YM: He said, “What do [Inaudible] get for lunch these days? It’s two bits?” He said, “I tell you what, lunch is on me today. And one more thing.” And I said, “What’s that?” He said, “You’ve only got 11 minutes to get your ass to school.” Bang! I said, “Son of a bitch, 11 minutes? Shit!” I’d get up and brush my teeth and wash my face and my ass and get them blue jeans on and pull a Mahmoud and huff and puff all the way from Grotto and Central up to Grotto and Ashland. And I can remember a dozen mornings when he would be coming out of the building, putting his trench coat on and jamming his Lester Young pork pie hat on his head. He would see me a block away and he had a real weird laugh. He’d go, quack, quack, quack, quack. And he would turn around and go back in the building before I had a chance to catch up to him and thank him. And that happened a couple dozen times, okay? When I tried to play hooky, “Charlie, it’s Cyrus.” I said, “I know, I got 15 minutes or you’re coming to get me. Shit.” Then I would get up and get dressed and go to school. I later learned that the principal said, “I can pick 15-20 of these kids who are going to jail or they’re going in the army or they’re gonna drop out before the end of the school year.” And Cyrus said, “Well, you shouldn’t give up on them so quick. They tend to achieve whatever expectations we impose on them. And if we let them believe that we don’t think they can do it, they’ll do less than we think they can. If we convince them that they can, they’ll do more than we expect they’re capable of doing.” So him and the principal had a bet, a bottle of brown liquor. I don’t know what they were drinking, bourbon, scotch, something. So he had all of the knuckleheads transferred to his classroom, including yours truly. He would go into the office right after homeroom, and the clerk had one of them memeo machines, you know, with

the purple paper, and they would make copies of the attendance list. He would get the first one that came off the machine. His free hour was the first class period. He would go in the teacher's lounge and he would sit down at the desk in the telephone and say, "Charlie, this is Cyrus. You got 15 minutes or I'm coming to get your ass." And he would call every one of the knuckleheads in his homeroom and give us 15 minutes. And so I'd be on a lake up in northern Minnesota and I'd be saying, "Kiss my ass. Cyrus used to call you too? Shit. I thought I was special. What's he doing calling you?" "That's that shit. I thought I was special too. That son of a bitch was going to come and get me!" And my mother would be downstairs laughing and say, "Oh boy, you're in it now." He would call every one of us and tell us if we didn't get school in 15 minutes, he was coming to get our ass, okay? Other than those Black nuns— and I had the only Black teacher at Central High School, was a woman. Her name was Ermin Hogan [Unconfirmed]. She taught typing. I took her class just because she was the only Black teacher up there. At the end of that class, I was typing 90 words a minute on a manual typewriter that looked like a miniature piano, you know? It was about this tall, and in a royal typewriter. I was typing 90 words a minute. That is the most transferable skill I ever had. That's how I became a journalist. That's how I became a philanthropist. That's how I got involved in foundation work. That's how I got involved in public policy. Every job I had, within six months, I was making twice as much as anybody there, because I could— and when computers came out, I said, "Look at that, a little TV with a typewriter attached to it, shit!" and everybody else was doing like this, and I was, "brttttttt." They was like, "Damn! Will you type this for me? It should take me a half hour to do one page." "Sure." I mean, that was the most transferable skill I ever had. Computers? Pfft. For sissies. The

first job I had paid $18 an hour, I was 15 years old. I was a bomb inspector at John Wood Foundry on Front and Dale. I went down there to see if I could get a job cleaning up the lunchroom or somethin'. The guy said, "Hell, I'm looking for somebody who can read a micrometer." I said, "I can read a micrometer." He handed me one. It's like a slide rule, but it's only about seven inches long, and they carry it in their pocket. And he said, "What is, three eighteenths of an inch? Here." And I said, "six hundred twenty-five ten-thousandths." He said, "Can you start tonight?" And I measured the tolerance on the bombs that we made the shells at John Wood, and they would put them on trains and ship them out to Arden Hills. They would load the ordinance in them and ship them over to Vietnam. And I couldn't sleep at night because I would dream about them bombs.

01:10:11

YM: I had the power to reach up and grab a rope and stop the entire assembly line, a hundred twenty-five men, grown men. And they all did piece work. So, when I pulled the rope, you know what happened? They stopped making money until they corrected the fault. They used to do arc flash to blind me and just all kinds of stuff to mess with me. But them Black nuns and Cyrus Ettinger— and my mother, my grandmother, my older sisters, the Black women who stuck their head out the window and put their hands on their hips, I owe everything I am to them Black women. And I'm not ashamed to say it, to tell 'em. As I got older, Black men started to take me under their wing and tutor me and mentor me and check up on me. But it was Black women primarily who threatened to whoop my ass if I didn't become a credit to the race and amount to something. So, I was a self-fulfilling prophecy. You know, I did not want to get my ass whooped.

I mean, the last thing I wanted to do was get her ass whooped. And when Dennis Lewis's grandmother came in there, I did not want to wrestle. I did not want to fight. I mean, the last thing I wanted to do was get my butt whooped. And I'm not ashamed of it either, because I took some horrible whoopings from some of the bully brothers in the hood. But, it was— we used to play a game called Eat the Peg. You know what the white boys call it? Mumble the Peg. You had to do peg in the ear and off the shoulder and over the back and off your knee. You had to do it off each of your fingers. If the knife landed in the dirt at it at an angle, you had to be able to stick three fingers between the ground and the handle of the knife, or you had to pass it to the next person. Now, why was it called Eat the Peg? Because somebody would take a popsicle stick and find some fresh dog dookie, okay, and get a rock and pound the stick through the dookie until there was this much of a stick poking out the top of the dookie. If you lost at Eat the Peg, you had to pull the stick out with your teeth, okay? Listen, I practiced in the dark! Because, "Get over here Negro, you playin' Eat the Peg today!" They used to make all of us little kids play Eat the Peg. I was the champion Eat the Peg player on our block when I was 10 years old playing with 18-year-old men, okay? Because I was not going to eat the peg. And, man, I mean, I would not change a thing. We were so poor, we couldn't pay attention. We used to say, "We're so poor, we can't afford to go window shopping!" We didn't even know it. But everybody was poor, you know? And everybody was like family. If you were over at somebody's house playing with somebody and it was dinner time, they'd say, "Boy, get in that bathroom, wash your hands and get to this table, okay?" And they would divide whatever they had, enough for them, to make sure there was enough for you too. I don't care whether it was fried chicken or spaghetti or

anything but chitlins. I could not handle the wrinkled steaks. In college, there was a brother who used to eat chitlins and he bought a bucket and they took it out of the refrigerator and put it on the table, took the lid off and put a— what do you call them lights? Blue lights.

SM: Infrared?

MW: The black lights.

YM: Put a black light and you wouldn't believe the shit that was crawling out of that bucket a half hour later. It speeded up the decomposition process, man. Whew! No thank you. When my mother used to clean chitlins, I had to spend the night at a friend's house because there was a vent in the ceiling and my bedroom was right over the kitchen and the stove was right under the vent. My mother would clean the chitlins, and— woman next door's name was Miss Jesse. And she would come over and ring the bell and say, "Teresa, can I have the part that you cleaned so I can have some chitlins too?" My mother would give her the part that she had cleaned, because when they say, "Clean as a chitlin," you know, chitlins are pig intestines. And my mother would, she would spend hours cleaning them chitlins, and put everything that she was not going to cook and eat, she put in a bowl she gave to Ms. Jesse. Ms. Jesse would cook and eat that. My mother would just have the casing of the chitlins, you know, and that's what she would eat.

[Recording paused]

01:15:36

MW: And so moving forward, I'm curious, how were the Civil Rights and then Black Power eras felt? How was that transition in your time here and then also in California at that point?

YM: Well, in California, it was US and the Panthers. Okay, the NAACP was active. There were many chapters in Los Angeles.

MW: US, the Maulana Karenga organization.

YM: United Slaves. There was a Pacifica radio station. I lived in the jungle. Did you see Training Day? You know where Denzel's girlfriend lived? That was the jungle. I lived in the jungle. All of the apartment buildings had swimming pools, palm trees, laundry rooms. My sister fell down the steps and broke her tailbone and I went out there and got two jobs, paid the rent, bought the groceries. My nephew was five years old and I became his surrogate father. And I was like, 10th grade, 15, 16, when I dropped out of Central High School and went to California, stayed out there for five years, came back, went to night school. Because of the education I had gotten at St. Peter Claver— night school was at Mechanic Arts, which is where the Supreme Court building is at now, across the street from the Capitol. And there were a bunch of immigrants who wore bib overalls and worked at Whirlpool, 3M, or American Hoist and Derrick. In the English class, they would read the funnies in the newspaper. So I went to the last two nights of night school. I aced every one of the tests. And the last night, I'm down in the lunchroom having a cigarette, drinking my chocolate milk during the lunch break for night school. We used to go from 6 to 10 o'clock and you had four classes. They had told me I'd have to go to both sessions of summer school, and then I would have to go to day school and night school the next year if I wanted to graduate with my peers. Well, all of my teachers were sitting at a table smoking. You could smoke in schools then, in a lunchroom. They called me over and they said, "You not only have not lost anything being out of school for a whole year—" Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote an essay in Ebony

Magazine called “Was Abraham Lincoln A Racist?” Because Lincoln said, “If I could save the Union by continuing to keep the slaves enslaved, I would do so, and if I have to set them free in order to save the Union, I will do that as well.” He was not our champion savior, although most Negroes when they got to vote, joined the Republican Party because it was the party of Lincoln and “Lincoln freed us.” But they said, “You not only haven’t lost anything, you’re ahead of everybody who’s in your grade a whole year. So we’ve decided to give you all of your credits for the 11th grade.” And I went back to 10th or 11th grade, whatever grade it was, I went back to my regular grade the next year, didn’t have to do summer school, didn’t have to do night school, and I was bored shitless. I was sorry they did that because I still got offered 8 scholarships, and I didn’t really apply myself. I just sat there and took the tests and passed all of my classes for the 11th and 12th grade. Same thing in college. I went to UCLA, I went to USC, I went to the University of Minnesota, and I was teaching for Metropolitan State University before I had a college degree. I was also teaching for Antioch University over in North Minneapolis. I was teaching in the prisons. I’d go to the women’s prison at nine in the morning. I had to be at the state prison at Stillwater at noon. I had to be at the state reformatory in St. Cloud by 6 o’clock, and I didn’t leave there until 11:30. Driving after dark on them icy roads in January from St. Cloud, coming 70 miles back to the Twin Cities, was a trip! And then on Sundays, me and a brother named Cambone Kamara would volunteer with the Black culture group at the federal prison up in Sandstone, 90 miles from here.

[Recording paused]

01:20:13

YM: So here, The Minneapolis and St. Paul NAACP picketed Woolworth's and W.T. Grant's in downtown St. Paul because Blacks couldn't eat at the lunch counter in the 1960s. St. Peter Claver School— the Black newspaper said it was a segregated school because it was mostly Black. But you know what? It was 60% Baptist. And there were white kids, Indian kids, Mexican kids, Chinese kids. But, it was a black school, Black Catholic school. And we had Black nuns who taught us. You know what the tuition was? $15 a year. If your parents couldn't afford it, they could volunteer and be lunchroom monitors. And you could attend for free. We got a hell of an education. I'm telling you. Shit, when I got in the 9th grade, they were doing stuff in junior high school that we did in the 4th and 5th grade at St. Peter Claver. You know how much them nuns got paid? One dollar a week plus room and board because education was their mission. And there were St. Peter Claver schools all around the country. And them nuns taught at every one of them. Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem, you know, Chicago, all over the place. So it's in my DNA, it's in my education, it's in my upbringing. And it was in the ass-whoopings that I got. And I got my share. There was a small, very active part of the Black community, and that was the group that would protest, that would march, that would go downtown to the mayor's office or to the head of St. Paul companies or some major company downtown when a Black employee was being discriminated against. When Jim Griffin scored the highest on the police chief's test and didn't get the job, we marched down Selby Avenue. They created a position called Deputy Chief of Services.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:22:37

YM: But it wasn't St. Louis or Chicago or Indianapolis or any of the big cities. It wasn't Atlanta. And the ministers were mostly in charge of all the Black organizations. There was one Black architect— Lonnie Atkins— who was in charge of the Urban League. Like I said, Roy Wilkins was the chair of the Urban League and Hallie Q. Brown. Black professionals. There were a few— this used to be a Jewish community before it was a Black community. There were still a few Jewish elders who were very committed to civil rights, who volunteered for boards of directors, Urban League board, Hallie board. There's still a few, you know, good people, good people, who caught hell from other Jews because of their commitment to trying to help Black people get ahead. But as I said, there were Minnesota Negroes everywhere. They were just more up here than they were anywhere else. Depending on who you wanted to run with. You know, if you wanted to run with Mahmoud and Cambone and Vusi [Vusumuzi Zulu] and Spike Moss— Spike and I have the same birthday. So, every year we call one another and wish happy birthday. He turned 80 this year. I said, "Brother, you have been officially accepted into the Royal Order of Silverbacks."

SM: Because— he's from St. Louis, right?

YM: He's from somewhere in Missouri. Jefferson City or might have been St. Louis.

SM: I thought it was St. Louis.

YM: Could be, could be, I forget. He asked me to write the eulogy for his mother's funeral. I was really honored to do it. He and I have always been tight. It was me and him and Katie McWatt

would always go up to the prison when the brothers were getting beat up or they were gettin' jammed. And then we both worked for Antioch. Spike is a good brother.

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:25:11

YM: I'm using a lot of your time. What's your next question, brother? I want to be respectful.

MW: I wanted to ask just about the Black Power era. And then I—

YM: The Black Power era. There were two eras. The first one was the gang era. Okay. Integration hurt this community because everybody who could, moved out to Maplewood, to Roseville, to Apple Valley, to Burnsville, to Columbia Heights. If you got a promotion— you became a vice president for a major corporation— there weren't a lot of houses for sale in the ghetto with four and five bedrooms if you wanted a big family. So, in keeping with your new station in life, you would move out to one of the first row of suburbs, Maplewood, Roseville. Woodbury is a recent phenomenon. That was not always— there were very few, if any, Black people out there before the 1980s— 80s or early 90s. And that's the fastest growing suburb in the metro area. When the ministers and the lawyers and the doctors and dentists and architects and the professionals moved out, the gangs and the hoes moved in. If you had an after-hour joint in Summit-University— there had to be five or six of them— the police wouldn't bust you. Like I said, there was a policy of containment. As long as you kept that shit up in Rondo, you was all right. But if you tried to do it in Mac-Groveland, they'd bust your kneecaps, okay? Rondo only. And after-hour joints, they played cards, they shot dice, they'd make chicken wings or catfish

sandwiches or bratwurst or something. Somebody cooked, somebody got, 10% of the cut on whatever was in the pot. After-hour joints were open until people went home, usually when the sun came up. There was Willie Page, I mean, there was Salty Dog— would open up his coat and say, "Want to buy a sandwich, youngblood?" And you'd say, "No thanks, man." He had chicken salad, he had lunch meat, and he'd say, "What about a half pint? You want to buy a half pint?" He had about 30 pockets with half pints of the cheap shit, Boot Hill and Cabin-something or other. And he'd have, you know, 15, 18 sandwiches in pockets in this side. Salty had a brand new Cadillac, but he also had a hooptie. When he was selling half pints and sandwiches in the after-hour joints, he was driving his hooptie. He said, "They're not going to repo my hog." But— so there were a group of people here who were trying to start a Black Panther chapter. The rumor has it that they were told if they killed a cop, they would qualify. And so, a white cop named Sackett [James Sackett] was killed on Hague and Victoria, one block from where Inner City Youth League used to be. And Ronnie Reed and Larry, I'm trying to remember what Larry's last name was, were convicted. Ronnie's girlfriend, Connie Trimble, had stomach cancer. They brought her back from Denver. She claimed that she made the call saying that she was pregnant, asking for a police escort to the hospital. The cops showed up, one of them got shot and killed. There's a playground over on the East Side in the white neighborhood called Sackett Field. Nathaniel Kaliq and other people, Kwame McDonald, formed groups. We had the Gangster Disciples. We had Crips, we had the Bloods, we had a lot of the— and most of the Black gangs started as soul patrols. We had a soul patrol over in North Minneapolis that would ride through the community and prevent the white boys from jumping out of their cars and beating up Black

seniors and Black women and getting in their cars and going back out to the burbs. So, you had— the Black Power Movement was in response to the gangs and the drugs. Johnny Howard used to do marches over in Frogtown. And the hoe houses and the drug houses were like dandelions. You'd snuff one out here, it would pop up six blocks away in another slumlord's property.

01:30:03

[Conversation is redacted per interviewee wishes]

01:39:00

YM: Yeah, but what's next, bro? I want to get to everything you got before you gotta go. And you've been here for over 2 hours.

MW: Right. Those have answered my general questions. I was hoping before we close out— you could add anything else that you want to say— but then I was hoping, could you retell that Elder Mahmoud story with the—

YM: DeLand, Florida.

MW: Yes sir. Yeah.

YM: Mahmoud— Milton Williams [Mahmoud El-Kati] was a student at Wilberforce College in Ohio and from Miami. One of the other brothers at the college was from Miami who had his own car. And him and one of his buddies from Miami were gonna drive home for spring break. So Mahmoud asked him, "Can I get a ride? I'm from the other side of town, but I'm from Miami

too." So they said, "Sure, you can help pay for the gas." And he said, "Oh, I'm happy to help." And so they got in this car and they're driving to Miami. When they got to Florida— this was before the interstate and the freeways and all of that— they're on a dirt road driving down the east coast of Florida.

01:40:13

YM: They pulled into a gas station in a small town that had a blinking light at the intersection in the middle of town called DeLand, Florida. And DeLand was where Jackie Robinson used to play minor league baseball and play golf. The guy checked the oil and did the windshield and filled it up with gas. And he said, "Are you young brothers here for the dance?" And they said, "Dance? What dance?" They said, "Well, right across the road there at the hi-hat club, they're havin' a dance tonight. And every pretty girl within 20 miles is gonna be there. It costs 50 cents to get in. They're gonna have chaperones and there's gonna be a big light bulb in the middle of the dance floor. They're gonna have finger food and punch and stuff." So they said, "Well, when is the dance going to be?" He said, "It starts in about 15, 20 minutes." Mahmoud said, "Hey, we better stick around, check this out, see if we can get some phone numbers or something, you know, might have to come through here again." DeLand is up near Orlando, up near Disneyland. So they waited around and drove across the road and went in and paid their 50 cents. They put a slow record on. There must have been two or three dozen people in there. And all of the young girls were sitting on a bench against the back wall. The brothers went over there and, "May I have this dance?" And would take these young sisters out on the dance floor. Mahmoud and these two brothers was watching them, you know, trying to get the lay of the land. And

Mahmoud said, “Well, how come nobody dancing with that pretty Black girl sitting on the bench all alone by herself?” And there was a brother standing nearby who was from that area. And he said, “That’s Jessie’s girl. Ain’t nobody gonna ask her to dance.” And Mahmoud said, “Well, shoot, they got chaperones in here and there’s a big light bulb burning in the middle of the floor. You couldn’t hardly do anything inappropriate.” He said, “I think I’m gon’ go over there and ask her to dance. See can I get to know her?” So he did. It was a slow record playing and they had their arms around one another’s neck and were dancing in the middle of the floor. And in a very short while, there was quite a commotion over by the front door to the hi hat club. Milton had his back to the front door, but the girl he was dancing with, her eyes got big as a silver dollar. Okay. And so Milton slowly danced her around to see what was happening, what all this commotion was, all this shouting and hollering. And there was a six foot eight Negro with his arm outstretched with a straight razor open in his hand, and five grown men were trying to hold him, saying, “Jesse, don’t kill him! Please, Jesse, it’s not worth it! Don’t kill him, Jesse!” By this time, Mahmoud’s eyes were big as a silver dollar. And the pretty Black girl that he was dancing with had her back to the door. So she danced around to see what was happening at the front door. And her arms were holding thin air, okay? She still had her arms around Mahmoud, but Mahmoud was gone! The two brothers said, “Man, we better get out of here.” They said, “Well, we better find Mahmoud.” So they went in the bathroom, he wasn’t in there. They went in the kitchen, he wasn’t in there. And they went outside and they went around the place and— those buildings, a lot of buildings were built on stilts because of the flood, you know, the spring floods. They got down on their knees and they looked underneath and they couldn’t find him. They waited around

for about, half hour and said, “Hey, he’s a grown brother. He’s goin’ to have to find his own way to Miami.” So they got in this car and commenced to— this hooptie— pokin’ their way down this dirt road with the bright lights on, going to Miami. And the brother in the passenger seat, all of a sudden— they were about five miles outside of DeLand. He grabbed the brother behind the wheel’s leg and said, “Look out, man, there’s a deer up there on the road! Look at his eyes, they’re shining.” So the brother who was driving— I don’t know if he had the bright lights on then or he put them on— but he slowed down and it wasn’t a deer. With his arms pumping up and down in the middle of the road, was Mahmoud trotting toward Miami, five miles outside of town. So they said, “Boy, you better get in that back seat before Jesse catches up with you.” And they would never let Mahmoud live it down.

01:45:10

YM: He made the mistake of telling me one time the story about Jesse. And we had a roast for Mahmoud over at Sabathani Community Center. It must have been— oh gosh, I’d say it was in the ‘90s.

SM: It was 1999.

YM: 1999.

SM: It was me, Anura [Anura Si-Asar]. It was three celebration [Inaudible] Remember all his friends set up at the History Center and Sabathani.

YM: I remember, the History Center, not Sabathani. They asked me to come up and speak because I knew Mahmoud so well. I had known him since he had— since Milton Williams, I first

got here. I said, “You know, a lot of people have told you all of the significant contributions that Mahmoud has selfishly made.” I said, “But Mahmoud was an adventuresome brother too, and few people know much about the adventuresome side of Mahmoud.” And Mahmoud was sitting down in the front row. He said, “Oh, please, Yusef, no, don’t tell, don’t tell that. Yusef, please, I’ll do anything.” I said, “I’m gon’ tell you about Mahmoud’s adventure in DeLand, Florida.” And Mahmoud just sat there shaking his head. Boy, then people rocked and rolled and fell out of their chair laughing and had a good time. And that was the culmination of the evening was Mahmoud's adventure of D-Land, Florida. But I always told it because I loved Mahmoud, I respected him. And it wasn’t to poke fun at him, but he’s such an innocent brother. He wasn’t fearless. He just would never do anything to rile anybody or do anything wrong or to get in trouble. He was always bending over backwards to help people. And if you needed five dollars and he had two, he would go borrow three and give you five. There’s another brother whose name is Moussa Foster. Do you know Moussa? Moussa is also a historian. Moussa went to a welfare rights conference with about 20 other Black folks, and they all rented one room in a hotel somewhere back east. And so they said, “Moussa, tell us a story.” Moussa said, “Well, if you insist, I rarely speak and I seldom have much to say, but let me tell you this story.” So, Mahmou— Moussa began telling the story, and after about 20 minutes, somebody turned the light off. Moussa continued to tell the story and people started snoring, okay? Moussa turned the light on and everybody was sleeping. And Moussa said, “Well, damn, I was just about to get to the good part!” So he turned the light off and told the rest of the story to himself, and then went

to bed. But we have been blessed with some brothers who were swift of tongue and spirit. I have a speech that— in fact, I'll give it to one of you, and one of you can copy it for the other one.

[Recording paused]

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

October 30th, 2025

Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Debbie Montgomery Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

DB: Debbie Montgomery (interviewee)

01:16:03 runtime

Subjects discussed: Her birth and upbringing in the Rondo neighborhood; her childhood home at 978 St. Anthony Ave; her childhood home being taken under eminent domain during the construction of Interstate 94; neighbors in Rondo and her family; growing up in the Oatmeal Hill section of the Rondo neighborhood; getting involved with the NAACP as a child; participating in the March on Washington in 1963 and the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965; racial demographics of Rondo; Oatmeal Hill being where many Black professionals lived; growing up playing sports at Oxford Playground; her talent at speed skating; playing sports with boys; learning from youth in the NAACP about the Southern Black experience; her grandfather's work as captain of the Red Caps and her grandmother's work as a matron at the Union Depot; the home on 889 Iglehart Ave which her family moved into after the first home was taken; fighting in junior high school; joining the St. Paul Police Department in 1975; being tasked with patrolling Rice St on midnights as a new officer; being sent to negotiate with the Hell's Outcasts; fellow Black officers; being promoted to sergeant and supervising the midnight shift; riding the trains to visit the South and take part in Civil Rights Movement trips; the 56 mile march from Selma to Montgomery; the Selby-Dale riot of 1968; her time on St. Paul city council; African Americans being the only community in St. Paul without an economic engine; student activism at the University of Minnesota, the Morrill Hall takeover; memories of friends at Macalester College.

People/organizations discussed: Hallie Q. Brown Community Center; Robert Montgomery (husband); Isabella Gilbreath and Albert Gilbreath (grandparents); Minnesota Historical Society; James Bradford; Dwayne Gilbreath, Dale Gilbreath, Darryl Gilbreath (brothers); St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Father Denzel Carty; NAACP; Harvey Jones; J.J. Hill Elementary School; Bill Peterson; Mary Meyers; Dave Winfield, Stevie (Steve) Winfield; Jackie Coulter; Jeff Nelson; John Marshall High School; Mechanic Arts High School; Central High School; Sue Compton; Sonny Massey; Humphrey School of Public Affairs; Arthur Naftalin; Jim Gillette; Billy Burton, Hell's Outcasts; Kenny McIntosh; Freddie Slemmons; Gordy Kirk; Ku Klux Klan; Irvin Bruin; Margaret Bruin; Pat Harris; Dan Bostrom; Dave Thune; Minnesota Vikings, Ed McDaniel; Jimmy Lee Recreation Center; Renee Tyler; Melvin Whitfield Carter III; AFRO

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Department at the University of Minnesota; Matt Stark; Sam Myers; Jeffrey Hassan; Bill Hart, Brian Lozenski, Tia Simone-Gardner, Duchess Harris.

00:00:19

MW: Great. Alright. Well, to introduce us and start off this interview, my name is Mackinnon Williams, I'm here with Mrs. Debbie Montgomery, today is October 30th, it's a Thursday. We're here at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in the Community Archives Room. And I'm here with Mrs. Montgomery for an interview on her life and some of the political history of Rondo. So to start off, could you please briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

DM: Okay. My name is Deborah Montgomery. Well, it was Deborah Gilbreath. I married Robert Montgomery in 1966, so I turned to a Montgomery. [Laughter] I was born 4/17/46, April 17th, 1946. I was born in the Rondo neighborhood. I was raised by my grandparents, Isabella and Albert Gilbreath and we lived at 978 St. Anthony, which was on the north side of what is now '94, and the side that the highway department took to build the freeway. I think it was 1956 when they came in and did eminent domain and took all of the property, and they did not give us our fair market value for it because— there's a map, if you go down to the History Center [Minnesota Historical Society] and over the old Rondo neighborhood, it says "slum area." So they devalued our property before they did it— and you know, white people are interesting. They know how to play the game better than we do.

MW: Right.

DM: But anyway, it was interesting when I saw that because I saw, you know, that it was devalued ahead of time. But I grew up there. I lived across the street from the Wheats, which was a white family, and Dr. Berry lived on the other corner. He was a veterinarian for the University of Minnesota. Dr. Crump lived down the street and Dr. Abrams, so all of our Black doctors and lawyers and— Mr. Bradford, James Bradford, he lived around the corner. I lived up on, in the old days, they called it Oatmeal Hill because it was on the west side of Dale. And then on the east side was Cornmeal Valley. I was over on Oatmeal Hill. And I grew up there. I have three brothers— well, all three of them are dead now, but Dwayne, Dale, and Darryl [Dwayne, Dale, and Darryl Gilbreath]. And—

MW: What order are you in the siblings?

DM: I'm the oldest. My brother Dwayne, and then Darryl and Dale. So, you know, it's kind of interesting. I grew up in St. Philip's Episcopal Church with Father Denzel Carty. When you look at some history of Rondo, he was very influential 'cause he actually was very big in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and that's one reason— when I was at church, I learned about the NAACP and I got involved with it because of his role that he had. And I became the youth president at the age of 13 of the St. Paul youth branch. At the age of 17, I became— I got elected to the National Board of Directors of the NAACP in New York. Allie Mae Hampton was our youth advisor. And so, the community would collect money to send me to the National Conference and she was my advisor. I'd go to the National Conference, and I was very outspoken. As I look back, somebody said at one point, "Who is this high yella Negro

out of Minnesota comin' in with all these radical ideas?" But that was what the young people—this was at the youth level, and then they got together and collectively, because there was a college position on the National Board and they decided that I should be a representative from the youth. I ended up getting elected to that position that was actually supposed to be for a college student at the time.

00:05:16

MW: Wow.

DM: I got really involved with the Civil Rights Movement. I did the March on Washington in 1963. I did the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, that was 54 miles. I just, I really got involved because I— coming out of Minnesota at that time, we didn't have a lot of African Americans. If you go do the data, the population wasn't huge. And because we were so isolated in St. Paul and in Minneapolis, over on the north side, we knew where everybody was at. So that was kind of interesting. But yeah, when I got on the National Board, that gave me more exposure to the civil rights stuff that was going on in the country. And it was just, I was just really enthralled with what was happening and how we were being disrespected and not dealt with. That was one of my inspirations to get involved and to be very active in the Civil Rights Movement. In '68, I came back and decided to go back to the U [University of Minnesota]. I think I graduated in 71. This is in between having four babies.

MW: Wow.

DM: I was just active doing a lot of stuff. I can't remember all the places that I worked. You'd have to see if you could pull up a work history somewhere. [Laughter] But I worked at a lot of different places. I know Honeywell— my grandmother worked at Honeywell, so she got me a job at Honeywell. I was working at Honeywell for a while at the Stinson plant. I was a radical over there, so they ended up— I was supposed to be on the line, they ended up putting me—

[Laughter]

MW: Probably didn't want that.

DM: Yeah, they put me in a room somewhere—

MW: Mmhmm.

DM: Working on pieces, putting pieces together. But that was some of the stuff that I did during my young years. I don't know exactly. What else did I do? This kind of caught me off guard here. But, you know, my heartbeat is out of the Rondo neighborhood, the genesis of the African American community, not only in St. Paul, but in the state of Minnesota and having to been able to get engaged with the NAACP at the national level and to see what was going on down South and out east and the things that they were doing. And then I'd come back and try to bring that back here and get it set up. So I did some of that. I don't know. "What were the race and class demographics of Rondo?" [Reading pre-written interview question off sheet] Well, I don't know. Rondo was a diverse community, but it was primarily African American. But we had Native Americans. Freddie, I can't think of his last name right now. He was Native American. His

family lived across the street. The Wheats were white. They lived across the street. On the western half of Rondo is where a lot of the Black professionals lived. Like I say, Dr. Berry, Dr. Crump, our doctors and dentists and things like that.

MW: That's the Oatmeal Hill side.

DM: Oatmeal Hill side. I had a lot of contact with them and their kids and stuff. I ended up being one of— because I lived so far west, Harvey Jones, who lived over on Rondo, and it would have been, is that Milton, in between Milton and Chatsworth, and our family, the Gilbreaths, we were at J.J. Hill when there weren't a lot of Blacks at J.J. Hill [J.J. Hill Elementary School], because most of the African Americans were either at Maxfield or McKinley grade schools, and that was further east. So it's funny— because now we just had our 60th class reunion, and I mean, it was, there weren't a lot of Black people there. The kids at our class reunion, all they talked about is, "Boy, you were into everything," because I was in clubs, I was an athlete, and I grew up at Oxford— when Oxford was, we found out later, was a dump pit, what do you call it?

00:10:39

MW: Oh, a landfill.

DM: A landfill, yeah, and we were playing on that. We didn't realize that it was polluted. We played football and baseball and ran and had basketball. We didn't have a big— we had a warming house back in the day when I grew up, we didn't have that nice, beautiful building. Bill Peterson was a young Marine who had just got out, a white guy who got out of the Marines, and

he got assigned to Rondo Rec Center. I guess that was his punishment in life, to come down there, and here's this white guy. All of us young girls, "Boy, he's built like a stud, he's looking good and everything." He would flood the landfill in the wintertime, and then he went out and begged and borrowed and got us skates. He got, I don't know where he got the equipment from. You'd have to ask him, but my brothers, they had hockey skates, and the only skates they had that fit my feet at the time were speed skates, so I had these black skates with these long blades, and so, you know, we're trying to skate. Every winter, the St. Paul Winter Carnival used to have races out at Como Park, and so I always tease Bill when I see him. He had this old 1954 red station wagon, and he threw all of us a lil' chocolate drops in there, and here's this white guy driving us out to Como, and we're gonna go race and stuff, and so I'm getting in the race, and I got these speed skates on, and I don't know how to skate. When they blew the whistle, I just outran everybody around the ice, and then somebody thought, "You know, she's got some talent. Maybe we should try to get her in a club or somethin'." They tried to get me in the Midway Speed Skating Club, which was closer to us, and they weren't taking any of "us" into the Speed Skating, and then the Eastside Club was willing to take us, but it was too far if you didn't have transportation, if Bill didn't have his car to take us, so I couldn't go there. I never got into a real speed skating club, but I actually was in a lot of races. It's kind of like "Out of Oxford," you know, and Mary Meyers, who won the 1968 gold medal, I beat her two out of three heats, but she got to go to the Olympics [Mary Meyers won the silver medal in the 500m speed skating event at the 1968 Winter Olympics]. I didn't go anywhere, but that was just one of my attributes. Bein' a athlete, I played with Dave Winfield, Stevie Winfield, I played with the boys because I was too

good for the girls. We had a girls softball team, and I was a shortstop, and Lenora Foster— she used to be the first baseman, but nobody could catch my balls because I threw 'em too hard, that's what they used to— so she ended up being the catcher, and Willa, she was a third base, and my best friend Jackie Coulter is steward now. She ended up being the first base person that would catch my balls. I could outrun people, I could out-hit them, I could out-throw them, and so that was my softball— that's when they had me playing with the boys on their baseball team, and between baseball and flag football and stuff like that, it was just really interesting to have that experience. But it was healthy because I was outside all the time, and so that was one of the good things that I had. But yeah, no, if you talk to Stevie and them, they'd probably say I was always playing with the boys because the girls weren't fast enough or whatever. Let's see, NAACP—

00:15:05

MW: Yeah, I was curious, for the NAACP, at 13, you were the president of the—

DM: St. Paul NAACP youth group.

MW: The youth group. What was the presence like of the youth group here? What were those programs?

DM: Well, Allie Mae Hampton was our youth advisor. She was part of the NAACP adults, and so back when we were having demonstrations up here, the Woolworth's, the sit-ins. We would go down and sit in and play some of— when I say play, sit in and do some of those roles. The adults always were real cautious with us but, you know, we weren't going to sit down and not get

involved. So we were always engaged with the adult branch, and Allie Mae Hampton, who was our youth advisor, she always kept us up to speed. Like I say, the adults and them raised money so that I could go to the national conference, and then I'd get to sit in on the youth portion of the NAACP, and the youth people would tell me what was going on down South and the things they were going through, and then I'd come back and share that information with the people up here. We saw it on TV, but it's a whole different thing when you're actually talking to people that are being affected by what's happening. So that it was an educational experience from that.

MW: And was there a political education happening in the NAACP at that time? Were people studying?

DM: Yes, yes, yeah.

MW: What did that look like?

DM: Well, it was just interesting, because they would show us different sit-in movements, what we should do and not do, for sit-ins "Don't resist, sit there, be passive," you know, which is a lot different than it was later on in life. That was some of the stuff that they were teaching us when we were there.

MW: Those tactics?

DM: Yeah, those tactics. I was very blessed to have the opportunity to learn this, and then to come back and share it with the youth that were here. We saw it on TV, on what they showed you, but when you went to the conference, you got more in-depth on what was going on, and

how they were handling— the African Americans down South were handling it. So that was interesting to just get that experience and knowledge from them, and then bring that back and share what was going on.

MW: [Laughter] And you said that you were something of a radical at the National Conference.

DM: Oh yeah—

MW: What did that mean?

DM: Well, most of the youth from the South, because they were taught to be quiet and that— I would say, "Wait a minute, why aren't we doing this? They're hurtin' us on this, and we need to get together and go and protest this, and speak up on this, and—," the adults were trying to tell their young people, "You got to watch out for that one." Only because I was up north— I was not a little ahead of my time, but I was more outspoken. I didn't have a lot of restraints put on me from here. I mean, I was adopted by my grandparents. My grandmother was from Sparksville, Kentucky, and my grandfather was from Lubbock, Texas. So, they were both from Southern things, and so they were trying to always keep me grounded, although that didn't work a lot.

MW: And how did they come to Minnesota?

DM: That's a good— through the railroad from my grandfather. Yeah, most of the African Americans that came up here were either from the railroad or in the packing house. In the old Rondo neighborhood, the best jobs during that time were working for the railroad or working in the packing house.

MW: And he was a Red Cap?

DM: Yeah, he was the captain of the Red Caps. There's a picture of him somewhere with the Red Caps. If it was a good tip week, we had meat, and if it wasn't, we didn't have it, which is why I say I never thought we were poor, and if there was something that we needed, we were always able to go to our neighbors. If they had it, they'd share, and we'd do the same. So, that's the village. I tell people today when I'm talking, "We have neighborhoods today. We had a village in the old days where people kind of knew everybody and took care of each other." In neighborhoods everybody's in their own little niche, I mean, I guess you can try to open doors and stuff but it's kind of a different mode to operate in.

00:20:26

MW: And then your grandmother coming from Sparksville, how did she come up to Minnesota?

DM: I'm not really sure, yeah. I know about my grandfather more than my grandmother. I'm not sure how she got here. I guess I should Google that and find that out, I guess you can do all that kind of stuff. I'm not into that yet, but my grandson tells me about it.

MW: And she also worked at the Union Depot.

DM: Yeah, she was a matron in the bathrooms, and then she ended up working for Honeywell in the— where they put pieces together, what do you call it, the assembly line. So I guess that would have been a promotion from the washroom to the assembly line. I mean, we lived good. I mean, I didn't— we had our house at 978, we paid mortgage like everybody else did, but then

when they took our property— and that's for everybody whose houses they took— they didn't give us our market value, whatever that market value was, because of that map that said we were a slum area. They devalued our property before they even took it, and then they didn't give us anywhere near. So like, when we went up to 889 Iglehart, we had this big house, and I'm for sure, between my grandmother and my grandfather making the payments, and then we had renters, so that helped us to make the mortgage. It's interesting now, because if you go up on 889 Iglehart, it's a group home, because it was so big. I guess there's 11 people living in that house now. They actually, one day when they were setting it up, I asked the guy, I said, "Well, you know, I grew up in this house. Is it okay? Can I see what you guys have done?" They had built out the attic, and they had built out the basement, and then, like I say, the four bedrooms on the second floor, and had a big kitchen. Back in the day when your grandparents cooked, and you had meals with a big table, and stuff like that. It had a porch, which was— I miss that on my house today, because you could sit on the porch, and in the summer, if we're getting disciplined and couldn't go outside, at least you could look outside on the porch. But no, that was really an experience to go through that. I remember I went to J.J. Hill School for grade school. Like I say, me and Harvey Jones were two of the first African-American families up there. Some of my good friends, Jeff Nelson— and like I say, we just had our 60th class reunion back there, and some of the people, they would always say, "You were into everything." Yes I was. A couple of them would invite me to their houses, and they're over on the other side of Selby, but other than that it was a good group. I left from there, and went to John Marshall [John Marshall High School], and it was so funny. This is another story. There's, like I say, there was just a few of us

African-Americans at J.J. Hill, and most of the African-Americans were at McKinley and Maxfield, and so I was walking to school and walking home with my white friends, because that's who I grew up with.

MW: Sure.

DM: So then at Maxfield, at Marshall Junior High, the Black kids, "Why are you walking home with those white kids?" "Well, I've known them since kindergarten. I don't really know you guys that well." Moline Lowe, who was like a little bully, she one day at Marshall, "Well, we're gonna fight." They didn't realize I was a tomboy, and I dealt with boys all this time. They had between Marshall and Dayton, on Grotto, was "Blood Alley." That's where all the fights happened, and so anyway, we're coming home, and she's challenging me to a fight, they had been harassing me all this time, and I thought, "You know what, I'm just gonna go down there and get over with this."

00:25:18

DM: So anyway, I ended up going down to the Blood Alley, and everybody's cheering for Moline. I kicked her ass. After that I could walk home anywhere I wanted to walk home. Nobody bothered me anymore, but I started walking home with the Black kids. I don't know, I knew them from school. When it came time, after eighth grade, most of the African American kids went to Mechanic Arts [Mechanic Arts High School]. Well, because I lived up on this end, on Iglehart— back in the old days if you get a picture of the old Central High School, the front door was on Lexington. When I walked out, this is my grandmother telling the school district when they were telling me I was going to go to Mechanic Arts, she said, "She can walk out our door

and three blocks up is a high school. She is not going down there." So I ended up going to Central High School with Harvey Jones and them, and there weren't a lot of us. If you can get a picture, I think I've got one at home, but if you get a picture of our class, you can see the reflection of how few African Americans were at Central High School. But all the doctors, lawyers, dentists' kids were there, so I ended up meeting all of them only because of school. I was on the school, I was on the school board, city council, the Latin club. If you look at my yearbook, you have to get my yearbook, I was on the GAA [Girls Athletic Association] for my athletics. I was on all these different clubs, so these white kids ended up being my friends only because of the different things. I was one of only three African Americans when I graduated in '64 that was on the honor roll. Me, Sue Compton, and Sonny Massey were the only three African Americans on the honor roll. There weren't a lot of us up there, but we were the only three on the honor roll at Central. My grandparents put a lot of value in, "You're going to get a good education, and we don't want to see anything less than a B, and if you do, we want to know what the problem is," and then they just hauled my butt back up to school and talked to the teachers and said, "Okay, what is she not doing?" as if it was all my fault. It was an interesting time, but it was a good opportunity, and then from there I was able to go to the University of Minnesota. I ended up getting married, and so it took me until '71 to get out of there, but then I ended up going back later to get a master's from the Humphrey School [The Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs]. Me and, who were the two of us? There were two Blacks, I can't think right now who the other one was, that were in the Humphrey School. Anyway, I just had a call from the dean, she's a Black woman, 'cause she says, well, you haven't written your final paper. Now,

I had written my final paper, but me and Art Naftalin [Arthur Naftalin], who was my advisor, didn't like what I wrote, and so he wasn't signing off on my paper, because I was giving my view of the situation, and he's trying to tell me what the view is. I said, I'm not writing that. Anyway, I'm actually not a master's graduate from the U Humphrey School right now. I'm in the process, when I get some time, to write this paper. She just told me, I didn't have to write it, I just needed to write my memoir, so if you get this project done, I can do my memoir. But then, later on, I got hired, I worked for the city— I was a budget analyst, grants and aids coordinator, and city planner for the city. I don't know what years, you'd have to look at my work record to see. I worked for the city, because I've worked for almost 45 years.

00:30:01

Because in 19— when did I get on the police department? Have to look that up too. I can't remember. Anyway, they had a court-ordered class for the St. Paul Police Department in 1970-something, I guess [1975]. There was a psychological, a medical, and then there was this physical agility test. Somebody said they don't have any women. The NAACP or somebody, some group said, "Debbie, you need to take this test because you're the only woman we know that can pass this test." Because it was the West Point Military Physical Agility Test. You had to run 25 yards, get over a four-foot fence, 25 yards, get over a six-foot wall, 25 yards. So you had to do this obstacle course. At the time, I think there were 200 or so women that had signed up. I was the only woman that passed, and only eight men did it faster than I did. I was a jock in my younger days. I passed. I was working for the mayor, like I say, at that time, I was an

administrative assistant to the mayor. But I had passed the test, and they needed to have 10 African Americans. So 10 African Americans, men, signed up, ‘cause I said, “I don’t want this job.” The Friday before the academy started, one of the African American men dropped out. The only person they had on the list that the city had control of was me. So the mayor said, “Well, just go sit in the academy for two weeks ‘til we get it started.” So I’m sitting in the academy for two weeks. Now, remember, I’ve supposedly got a college degree and some part of a master’s degree. And I’m sitting there with these nine African American men who had GEDs [General Educational Development] and high school graduations. We had a law quiz every morning, so some of them were having some problems. Now I got a family, so I’d go home, feed my family, and then I would meet up with them. I was pretty good at picking out what the four questions were going to be on the law exam. I would study with them and say, “These are the four questions I think are going to be on there.” Even if they only got three right, they were at 75%. I was tutoring them while I’m raising the family and then trying to do it. I’m only supposed to be doing this for two weeks. At the end of two weeks, they said, “Can you stay two more weeks? ‘Cause they may think something’s up.” I said, “Well, who’s going to make up the difference? Because I got a degree and I’m making more money, and they weren't making that much money as police officers.” “Don’t worry, you’ll be taken care of.” I tell people to this day, “Never trust a politician.” So anyway, at the end of the month, I’m helping them. I thought to myself, “Okay, if I drop out now, they’ll say that a woman couldn’t do this job.” Now, I didn’t want the job, but it was a 16-week academy. So I figured, “Okay, I’m going to go through this academy and do all of the stuff,” the physical stuff and all of that. So I did all the stuff. I had the average strength of a

man. I wasn't overly strong, but I was able to compete with them. I did all of that. At the end of 16 weeks, I was ready to go back to my job. Well there was an election, there was a new mayor and my position wasn't there. By default, I ended up being a police officer because I needed a job because I had a family. And so that's how I ended up being a police officer. So I was a police officer. After the academy, you went on an FTO program, field training officer program. I don't know, it was a 36-week FTO. Every six weeks, you'd get a different officer.

00:35:00

DM: Well, five of the guys that were supposedly my field training officers, they wouldn't let me drive the car because back then they only had bucket seats. When I got in— the height, you gotta be six feet tall. I was five foot six. So I'd pull the seat up and their knees are in there. So they said, "Get over here." Well, the passenger writes the reports. So I didn't get to drive the squad car and turn the red lights and sirens on. I was looking forward to that opportunity. But they ended up finding out that I could write a complete sentence and I could spell and my reports were great. They kept having me write these reports. So finally, I had one FTO, Jim Gillette, he was just great. He actually spent time trying to teach me something. After I got off of the FTO, they took me and assigned me to Rice Street. Now remember, I told you, we only went up to Selby and down to Western. I didn't know nothin' about Rice Street. The only thing we did at Rice Street when I was growing up is we'd get in our car and go up Rice Street to get to McCarrons Lake if we wanted to go swim. We didn't stop anywhere. We just went up there.

So here I'm on Rice Street on midnights in a one-person car because nobody wanted to work with me. There were 42 bars in my beat. I have two bionic knees from all the bar room fights because the dispatchers were men and if a fight came out in one of the bars, which was regular, they'd send me first and then I'd be listening on the radio. Nobody's coming to back me up. I'm trying to go in and break up these fights with these burly guys that are drunk and they're throwing me around like a ragdoll. Finally somebody will come to back me up. So that's why I have these two bionic knees, from all the bar room fights. The city owns my knees. But I hung my own. And at the end, I gained some respect. Billy Burton, who was head of the Hell's Outcasts up there, their headquarters was at Albemarle and Front. If they were drinking and having loud music and stuff, they'd always, the dispatchers would always send me there first. So I go up there and— I'll never forget the first time I went up there. Here's all these big bikers, all these motorcycles are lined up around this house and down the block and I pull up, the music's blasting and they got beer in their hands and they're drinking. I'm in the car by myself and nobody's on the radio saying they're coming. Here's a squad car, I gotta get out. I'm sitting there and I'm literally afraid. I get out of my car and I go over to the fence and here's this big biker with his beer bottle in his hand. I said, "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me who's in charge of this party?" He looks me up and down and, what did he say to me? Something about "Black bitch," or something. It was very derogatory that, "You're telling us to do something." Anyway, I get on the radio and put out a signal 13 that I need help. Somebody needs to come. So then you could hear squad cars coming from all over, the fight ensues because they're trying to break up these drunks. I'm just trying to survive, but these guys are coming in. Finally, after a while— Billy

Burton was head of the Hell's Outcasts, and I'd say to Billy, because I'd get to call first, "Billy, can you just turn the music down? Because if the gang of blue comes, somebody's going to jail. I want you to party with your woman." I'm trying to use some psychology on him. I'm all of 127 pounds soaking wet. After a while, he starts listening to me and they turn the music down. Then my sergeant comes— now I've solved the problem, you think it'd be okay. My sergeant comes to me one day and says, "What are you doing, fucking 'em?" And I'm thinking, "Why is sex involved?! I solved the problem." You can't make this stuff up. I got to deal with the drunks and disorderly, and then I got to deal with these supervisors that are— So it was an interesting dynamic, but I survived.

00:40:27

MW: Did that ever feel disheartening to not have the force supporting you in those situations?

DM: Although I have to say, the Black guys, officers, Kenny McIntosh and them— they were in, when we graduated, they put us each in different things. And so Kenny McIntosh was five, Freddie Slemmons was one. Tony, I forgot, he was what, six? They'd hear me on the radio and they would come over out of their district to back me up because they knew nobody else, none of the guys were going to be backing me up. So that was kind of reassuring that I knew somebody was going to, my husband was ready to kill people, but I didn't— at first I used to tell him stuff and then I didn't tell him at all 'cause he'd have been in jail. I just decided that's just— So I ended up getting some support from some of the fellow Black officers that would come if they heard me. That was an interesting experience. And then I got promoted, it took me, I took the

sergeant's exam three times, passed. They wouldn't promote me because they weren't going to have a woman supervising men. And it wasn't until the third time that they finally promoted me. They made me the supervisor on the midnight shift, on the shift that I had been on, supervising the guys I'd been working with. There was no career development. Then after that, I took the lieutenant's exam, passed that, and they put me in the juvenile unit as an investigator. Kids are my passion, so this was a great position for me. I got to interview kids that were arrested, a good share of them look like us. I tried to navigate them through social services. I tried not to— that was kind of an interesting dynamic from the police point of view, because I would, instead of trying to put them in JDC [Juvenile Detention Center], juvenile justice center, I'd be trying to find a social service agency. "Why are you in my office? What's going on? What caused them to bring you down here?" What was going on? I'm trying to analyze what's going on with these kids. I added a new dynamic to the investigative process dealing with young people. Then I took the commander's job, and they made me the commander over the juvenile unit. A lot of career development, although kids were my passion. So that was okay. I mean, I didn't ask because I didn't have a choice. I had to go where they assign you, paramilitary organization. I got promoted to senior commander, and they put me in the whole, the watch commander's office at midnight. All that is, is anytime they make an arrest, they got to get it cleared by the watch commander. Most of the rookies, they end up on midnights. So they'd come in, and I'd look at their report, some of them, and I'd call the officer after they got the guy in there. I call the officers in, shut the door. "Can you tell me what he did to get down here? Because I'm reading this report, and I don't see anything that shows me this guy should be here or this woman or

whoever." And this is back in the day when you could do this. I said, "Listen, send them in here, and let me talk to them." I'd say, "Hey, now tell me why you're down here." And he'd say, so-and-so. "You know, you screwed up, but I'm going to have these officers, if you don't make a complaint against these officers, I'm going to have them take you back to where they found you." Back in the day when you could un-arrest somebody, because you can't do that today.

00:45:06

DM: I said, "And we're not going to make a complaint, right?" "No." So they were just happy to get out of there, and they didn't make any complaint against the officers. Then I'd get the officers in there and say, "Listen, I need to know the who, what, where, when, why, and how, and you got to give me a paper or report that's telling me something, because your report writing is terrible." So we had a little schooling going on in the watch commander's office on midnights. That was an interesting part of me and them growing up trying to navigate the system. So that was that. What else you wanna know?

MW: I'm curious. I wanted to talk more about the Civil Rights Movement in the South and your involvement down there. How did that develop from the— that was once you were on the NAACP National Board, that you then started to get connected in the South?

DM: Well, no, when I was on the youth group, because the kids, the youth group, they'd come back when we had the national conference, the youth would meet separately, and then we'd meet with the adults. The kids from the South were telling me all the stuff that was going on. I'm thinking, "What? And you aren't doing a what?"

MW: What would they have been telling you?

DM: They're telling me about how the people down there were treating them and not giving them services or police brutality and things like that. Because it was more passive at the beginning, you know, like the sit-ins at the counter and stuff. And I said, "Wait a minute, they're breaking the law. Why aren't we pushing this thing?" As I said, this little high yella Negro down here saying "We gotta do something," and I'm getting these kids all riled up and the adults are thinking, "I don't know what we're going to do with this one here because she's kind of taking us to the limit." That's how I got, you know, really involved with the South. To listen to my peers tell me what was going on, and it just didn't seem right, but they weren't being more aggressive to deal with some of these issues. That was some of the stuff that— it was a learning experience for me and a learning experience for them, but it was, the adults were the ones that ended up having to come and explain to me, "Well, you can't do A, B, C, and D." "Well, why can't we do A, B, C, and D?" Then that's when you saw the African American, the NAACP get a little more forthright and stuff like that. It wasn't just me, but it was just me saying this to young people in the youth group part.

MW: When was the first time you actually visited the South? Was that before the march from Selma to Montgomery?

DM: No, that was '65, '63 was when we did the March on Washington. But we had bus trips out of St. Paul where the adults would go down South. I got to be on some of those bus trips and that was my first time going down, but then I was with adults, so it wasn't— they were keeping a

good handle on me. Then after I got really involved with the youth and then I was able to go to that March on Washington in '63. And it was interesting. That was a good question that you asked because somebody said, "Well, how did you get out to the March on Washington?" There was a bus from St. Paul, but you had to pay so much money and it was a bus trip out there. Well, my grandfather was captain of the Red Caps, so we could get passes on the train. So my grandfather hooked me up with the porter from St. Paul— I don't know if it was Gordy Kirk or which one of them. I'd be on the train. Well, when you're on a pass, you don't really have a seat. So what they did, I'm 17, right? They would put me in the meal car. As a kid, they're feedin' me all the way on the train, you know, but they were keeping an eye on me. Then when I got to Chicago, the porter from Minnesota would say, "This is Gail's granddaughter and she's going on the March on Washington and she's your responsibility."

00:50:09

DM: Now, think about this. 17 year old girl with a strange man that he has now got your responsibility. But back in the day, if it was a Black guy, that wasn't an issue. They were goin' to make sure that you were gon' be taken care of. So then I'd be on the train from Chicago to Baltimore, getting fed all the way out there. In Baltimore, I'd get off the train and the porter would say, "You have to stand here 'til we clean the train and then I'll take you down to the March on Washington." So we got on a bus and then he took me into D.C. And then he said, after the march he said, "You take this bus here and so and so will be here." And then another porter brought me back to Chicago. They just took care of me back in the day. Now, you can't imagine

today taking a 17 year old girl with strange men halfway across the country, that wouldn't happen, but back in the day that was the Black culture. "She's your responsibility," and they're gonna make sure you're taken care of. That was really interesting when you stop and look at that and to see how that worked. So that's how I got to the March on Washington. And then the march from Selma was similar where I went down on the train. I was just blessed. Things happened, I was in the right place at the right time with the right people that made sure that I was safe, even though I was a little radical. They'd make sure I was fed, but they also said, "Don't be acting up on this train." But yeah, no, that's how I got around. So like I say, my grandfather and grandmother never used any of their passes. I used all the passes. I was on the train anytime I could get on a train.

MW: And you said— I remember from the Hand in Hand interview [HAND in HAND's RONDO ORAL HISTORY PROJECT], you have this anecdote about sneaking out at night on the— while on the journey from Selma to Montgomery.

DM: Yeah.

MW: Can you talk about some of those experiences for that march?

DM: Well, when we were doing the march, at nighttime we'd sleep and the ministers would have prayer services, saying prayers around the campfire and stuff.

MW: You're moving town to town?

DM: Yeah. And the kids, the youth kids that were in the march, some of them had aunts and uncles that lived off in the area, and they had been there before, so they knew how to get to their aunt's house. So they'd say, "Come on, let's go over to my aunt's." At nighttime, we'd sneak out and go through the woods. Now you have to remember the KKK's [Ku Klux Klan] out here somewhere. But we went through the woods to get to their aunt's house. As kids, you want to eat all the time, so they're cooking. Boy, I'm telling you, they're feeding us and everything. Coming back, they're kind of making sure that we get back safely. We were crazy going out the first time but then they're making sure we get back. That was some of the things we did when we were on the march. Some of them would say, "Yeah, my aunt's house is over here." So we're going through these woods and stuff. It was interesting. But it was nice to sit down and to talk to people that lived down there and to hear the stories that they shared with us.

MW: What do you think the difference was between what you would be getting on TV and then actually hearing it from people over there?

DM: Well, TV always blurs stuff over. They would tell you what was really goin' on. On TV, when they're having the demonstrations, they're out there, but the people that live there were more acquiesced, they're more quiet. They knew the white people and the white people knew them. So there was a little more passive going on.

MW: There's a vulnerability.

DM: Yes. When you're on the march, there's all these other people coming in. The communities just feel imposed upon, I guess is the best way to say that. That was kind of interesting.

00:55:00

DM: ‘Cause they had some white friends— if you listen to them— that would say, “So Mrs. Jones did this,” or, “I’m good friends with that.” Or the kids would say, “Yeah we play with Billy, but not at school,” so it was all off the record, behind— not all the time, but sometimes they did. It was an interesting experience.

MW: Were the marchers being met with white hostility? Or was there resistance on that journey?

DM: Well, interestingly, if you look at the old pictures, the KKK would be out there with their hoods and their guns on the roads while we’re marching down the street. They weren’t doing anything to us, we were just marching and they’re out there tryin’ to be intimidating. Which they were. But yeah, we were singing the civil rights songs and marching along. The people that lived there kind of knew what we could do and what we couldn’t do. We just kinda did— if somebody got out and blocked, we just, they would tell us, “We’re gonna stay here,” and we’d sitdown and have a sit down until we were able to move again. It was pretty well maintained on the ones I was on. I know I didn’t— I’ve seen them on TV where there were fights and stuff like that, but ours were pretty well maintained. The people that were leading ours— we did what the leaders told us. If they said “Sitdown,” we sat down, and then somebody would try to negotiate with somebody to say whatever. When we could get up to go, we’d go.

MW: Did Minnesota feel different coming back from the South and being in that environment? Or do you think you saw it differently?

DM: Well, I saw the South much more reality, and to listen to the people from down there and to hear the things that they go through. Interestingly enough, Minnesota was still segregated, but we didn't realize it. Or maybe they did. I don't know. Because where I grew up— like I say, my best friend when I grew up was Gail Gallius. It's so funny I say this because I need to call her. But she lived at 315 Chatsworth. I lived at 978 St. Anthony at Chatsworth and St. Anthony. And here's Rondo. And then she lived between Rondo and Carroll on Chatsworth. She was my best friend, because there weren't a lot of us down this far. I went to school with her because she went to J.J. Hill. She actually called me a few months ago. I hadn't talked to her for a while. But yeah, that was kind of interesting from that part. And then we had Marvin Anderson. I don't know if you interviewed him yet.

MW: Not yet.

DM: But his parents own these row houses across the street. And that's where I knew him from. And my, my first boyfriend, Irvin Bruin, Puggy. They lived there. His dad was in the Air Force. The day that the Air Force— I used to get up, I was up early in the morning, I'm runnin' around. I was goin' over to the house because his sister, Puggy's sister was Margaret Bruin. She's a good friend of mine. The day that the Air Force guy, there was this Air Force guy that came in full dress uniform , and I was at the door when he came to announce to Mrs. Bruin, that her husband had been killed in the, I don't know, the war.

MW: Would that have been Korea?

DM: Yeah, whatever that was. So I'll never forget that because the timing was just unbelievable. I mean, these are the things that I— like I say, I was blessed to be in the right place or the wrong place at the right time. But those are things that kind of stick with me.

MW: Sure. Do you have memories of the Selby-Dale riot in '68? I know a few different people have talked about that.

DM: Yeah.

MW: Were you here at that point?

DM: Yeah, I was here. Yeah.

01:00:00

DM: I don't remember a lot about it. What was I doin'? Well, I was married in '68.

MW: And in school.

DM: And in school, and had babies, and a husband, so I don't know that I was really involved with that. I may have been, I just don't recall.

MW: Did that feel like a large presence?

DM: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Y'know, I have been on so many committees on issues that have come up in the Rondo neighborhood. The old and the new Rondo neighborhood. I was just sittin' there— I was supposed to be at a meeting yesterday that I didn't even make because I had 20

million other things goin' on. What was it yesterday? The St. Anthony Rondo resurfacing meeting.

MW: Okay. [Laughter]

DM: I was supposed to be there.

MW: For the streets?

DM: For the streets. For the streets. But, I mean, everybody calls me to be at a meeting. It doesn't make any difference what it is. 'Cause I gather the information and then I speak up. It's kind of like— when I got elected to the city council. I'll never forget, who was I? Pat Harris and Dan Bostrom. In order to get stuff passed, you had to have four votes. I ended up having the two most conservative people on the city council and the most liberal guy, which was always a fight to deal with him. These two conservatives I had a good handle with dealing with them. But between Pat Harris and Dan Bostrom, Pat was Highland Park, Bostrom was the East Side. Dave Thune was downtown, he was the liberal. Oh my God, it was like pulling teeth to just kinda get 'em together. But that was my four votes that if I needed to get stuff done. "I need to have this for this reason." These guys, they kind of understood and came along. This guy was, "Come on over here, we need to get this done." That's how I was able— when I stop to think I got $109 million in new investment in Ward 1 in the four years I was on the council. I got the Minnesota Vikings, Ed McDaniel— we ended up being friends— to turf Jimmy Lee Rec Center. That's how we got that turf down there. And that was a million, two, quite a bit of money. They found out at the

time— that's when we found out that Oxford had been a dump. When they went to remediate it, put the turf down, they found out that information.

MW: It's toxic.

DM: Yeah. So we had they had to pay more money to get it remediated before they could put the turf down. So the Vikings paid for that with Ed's help. What else did I get? I got three things. Oh, I got 50 units. My seniors wanted senior housing, so I got the 50 units of senior housing at Carty Heights built. I mean, this was all in four years, but I was a city planner, a budget analyst and a grants and aids— so I knew how to navigate the systems in the city. I was able to kind of navigate them so that we could get this done. Then I had stuff teed up, because I's working on University to get some businesses there, because when they took the freeway, as all the data shows you, they took 300 African American businesses.

MW: That's right.

DM: We are the only community that doesn't have an economic engine. The African Americans. The Asians have University, the Africans have Little Africa on Snelling Avenue with their businesses. We're just now trying— and when I was on the city council, that's the other piece I was working on, trying to get an economic engine set up from Dale to Lexington on Selby. Then when I lost my seat— because I was getting businesses lined up to build on there and to be in there— and then I lost the election. Don't even want to talk about that. And if you talk to my Renee Tyler, she got mad at me because I told young Mr. Carter [Melvin Whitfield Carter III],

"All you have to do is make these phone calls. This is teed up." He never made one of those phone calls, so we still don't have an economic engine.

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We're just now getting that Victoria— I mean Milton and Selby— getting that little bit of a niche. If they'd have gave me four more years, we'd have had an economic engine from Dale to Lexington because I was teeing up businesses, Black businesses, to go up there and work on the land and stuff. Because remember, I was a city planner and a budget analyst, so I knew how to navigate those systems. No disrespect, young people want to do it their way, but it was a missed opportunity. And my Renee was so mad. She says, "You're just giving this to him." And I was, but he didn't do anything with it. So that's kind of sad. I don't want to talk bad about anybody—

MW: Sure.

DM: But that was a lost opportunity that we could have done. What else do you want to know?

MW: I think— this has been great. I think the last thing that I wanted to ask about, and then we could close out, is I was curious from your side of things about this U of M—

DM: The takeover.

MW: Morrill Hall takeover, yeah, in '69, how you came to be involved, or what was that development for?

DM: Well, back then, they didn't have an Afro-American Studies department. They didn't have Black professors. So here's Black students there. And in other places, if you went down South to

the HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities], here you have Black instructors, you learned about the black experience, you learned about the movements, you learned about economic development, social change, all of that was down there. We weren't having that up here. I think the young people, which was us at the time, said, "Wait a minute, we have more opportunity here, and yet we're not getting in any of those resources." I mean, you stop to think about Minnesota. We have 35 Fortune 500 companies headquartered here. What are they doing? And what are we doing to engage them? I say that now, because that's history that you can see. But back then, we were saying, "We need to have the education system at the University of Minnesota be expanded to talk about the Black experience." And if you don't want to, because they were a little shell-shocked to deal with the South, let's deal with the Minnesota experience. We were trying to set that up, so that they could at least deal with something that was a little more familiar to them— or needed to be more familiar with them. In our thinking, young people, if we got them to look at what was happening here, we could tie it to what was happening in the South, and in other parts of the East, other parts of the country. They were known, I mean, the University of Minnesota was our top institution at that time. We were just trying to help them to say, "We need some Black professors, we need an African American Studies department, we need to expand the knowledge of the white majority in this state, along with the Black minority, to make sure our students get that experience and that knowledge." So that was the thing that they were pushin' in '68. Which was kind of avant-garde, it was before the time. But, we were just, as young people, we just saw what was happening in other parts of the country. Yet, we

didn't tap the things, and we wanted to make sure that we could tap the things that were here, to benefit the people that were here. I don't know if that answers your question, but—

MW: I think it does, yeah.

DM: Gives you some in-depth thinking of what we were thinking about at the time.

MW: Yeah, yeah, that's really useful. And you said you were supporting the actual takeover.

01:10:00

DM: Oh yeah, yeah. I couldn't get locked in the building, like I say, I had a family with babies and my husband would have killed me if I'd left him with the babies and being locked in some building. [Laughter] So I would just bring food and supplies to them. "Is there, what else do you need? Or do you need me to say something?" You know, "What do you need?" But they were doing all the talking. I was, from the outside, I was still able to talk to them through the doors, through the windows, so that I could— if there was a message to be sent and they weren't heard, at least there was a voice outside that could carry that message. But yeah, that was the only reason I couldn't get in. Boy, I tell you, my husband woulda killed me if I had left him with them babies. Because they were babies! But yeah, no, it was a great experience. It was a great time. It was a changing moment for Minnesota, for the University and for this country. Matt Stark, he was one of my advisors when I finally got to the Humphrey School. I can't, why can't I think of his name? The Black guy out at the Humphrey School that was there. Oh my God. Why can't I think of his name? He just called me. Sam Myers.

MW: Okay.

DM: Yeah, Dr. Myers. Yeah, he was telling me, he says, “You gotta finish the paper.” Christ, I’m working on it.

MW: Do you remember what the topic is for the paper that you had the disagreement about?

DM: No.

MW: Okay.

DM: But, I have my paperwork somewhere in the house, I just have to find it. But it was something about— I don’t know if it was about 94 and the destruction of Rondo, or the Civil Rights Movement activities I did, one or the other. But then he finally just told me, “Just write your memoir.” So see, if I take this, I can start my memoir. Because I still haven’t, I haven’t legally graduated with my master's from the Humphrey School, even though I’ve done the coursework, it’s the paper that’s not done. But I have got my master’s from the University of St. Thomas in criminal justice, ‘cause I was one of two people, the first two people to graduate from the University of St. Thomas with a master’s in law enforcement. I think it was law enforcement. I don’t know what they titled it. Law enforcement or criminal justice at the University of St. Thomas. I got a degree somewhere at home, a certificate. I did graduate. I wrote a paper. I don’t know where it is, but that’s all another story. But yeah, no, I do have a master’s degree, and I just have to finish one. So I’ll get one from the University of Minnesota. It’s on my list of things to do. So where are you at?

MW: I'm at Macalester College.

DM: Oh, you're with the smart kids.

MW: Yeah.

DM: We used to always say that. We didn't have a lot of Black kids there, but the ones that were there were— Jeffrey Hassan is my brother from another mother, because we grew up together. And I would always call, when he got out there, I said, "Well, I always knew that you were the smart one." [Laughter] He's a good, good, dear friend. But yeah, no, that's you smart kids, the rest of us just go to the U! [Laughter] Don't say that.

MW: Cut that part out.

DM: No, but that's, that's good. I mean, it was great to have that opportunity. I don't know. Was he one of the first out there?

MW: Jeff Hassan? I think he must have been. Yeah. Because I know he was part of the EEO [Expanded Educational Opportunities] program at Macalester. I don't remember what year he was, but it would have been some '69 to '72.

DM: Yeah. He was, he was my smart brother from another mother. Yeah, no, it's, Macalester has always been an academic school. It's always been good. I think I spoke out there at a class. I don't know whose class it was. There's some Black, do you have Black professors out there now?

MW: We do now. Yeah, there are a few.

DM: Who's out there?

MW: Right now, Bill Hart would have been out there a few years ago. There's Brian Lozenski, Tia Simone-Gardner, Duchess Harris. She's been there for a long time.

DM: It might have been Duchess, they had me speak out there for something. One of them professors. I don't know, it was out there. As you can tell, I'm an atypical— I'm kind of straight.

MW: They were fortunate to have you.

DM: No, I'm blessed. I'm blessed. A lot of people always say to me, "You live in Minnesota?" I say, "The land of the Frozen Chosen, that's us." [Could also be "Frozen Chosin," a battle in the Korean War] But yeah, no, it's been okay.

Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives Oral History Collection:

Vol. 1, Rondo Movement History Interview Project

November 25th, 2025

Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul, MN

Steve Winfield Oral History

MW: Mackinnon Williams (interviewer, transcriber)

SW: Steve Winfield (interviewee)

00:45:35 runtime

Subjects discussed: Being one of the Rondo sons; him and his brother Dave Winfield being raised in the Rondo neighborhood by Arline Winfield, a single mother; growing up at Oxford playground; never hearing of Oatmeal Hill and Cornmeal Valley terminology growing up; not knowing what was happening when Interstate 94 construction started; having to run laps through the highway construction site for sports; Debbie Montgomery being an idol of his in sports; Rondo being a mixed neighborhood; him and his brother Dave wanting to be professional bowlers as children; Zoilo Versalles on the Twins making him and Dave interested in baseball; streets and sections of the neighborhood that Black people weren't allowed into; James Griffin and Jimmy Robinson coaching and playing mentor roles; getting into coaching and officiating for sports; the relevance of the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam in the Black Power Era after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968; forming the Black Student Union at Central High School with Russel Balenger; memories of AAAC at the University of Minnesota; The Way Community Center and riots in Minneapolis; the Stem Hall riot in St. Paul in 1968; the beginning of Inner City Youth League; playing varsity baseball at the University of Minnesota as a freshman, leaving the team; not regretting choosing community activism over professional sports; Reverend Spence and New Hope Baptist Church.

People/organizations discussed: Dave Winfield (brother); Arline Winfield (mother); Oxford playground; J.J. Hill Elementary School; Marshall Junior High School; Central High School; University of Minnesota; John Cotton; Mack Burch; Bob Carter; Ernie Johnson; Bill Peterson; Tom Hardy; Debbie Montgomery; Kenny McIntosh; Ronnie Reed, Michael Reed, Duane Reed; Kenny Christian, Lenny Christian, Denny Christian, Benny Christian, Quinny Christian; Dwayne Gilbreath; Billy Collins; Zoilo Versalles; Harmon Killebrew; Rod Carew; Bob Allison; Bob Carter; Russel Balenger; Jimmy Martin; St. Paul VFW Hall; Elks Lodge; American Legion; James Griffin; Jimmy Lee; Jimmy Robinson; Frank White; Gail Anderson; Roger Neal; Martin Luther King Jr.; Black Panther Party; Ronnie Reed; Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad; Afro American Action Committee (AAAC); The Way Community Center; Spike Moss; Bobby Hickman; Katie McWatt; Patty Hickman; Inner City Youth League; Gordon Parks; Robin

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Hickman-Winfield (wife); the Loft Teen Center; Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center; Stacy Robinson; Ujamaa Place; Darryl Spence; New Hope Baptist Church.

00:00:17

MW: Great. Alright. Well, today is November 25th. It's a Tuesday. My name's Mackinnon Williams, I'm here with Mr. Steve Winfield, we're in the Hallie Q. Brown Community Archives, and I'm here with Mr. Steve for an interview about his life and some of his political involvement. To start off, Mr. Steve, could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection and your family's connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

SW: Okay, well, again— you've already said it— my name's Steve Winfield. I'm one of the Rondo sons, me and my brother [Dave Winfield] grew up in the neighborhood and— raised by a single mom [Arline Vivian Allison Winfield]. My grandma lived right around the corner and my cousins and aunts and uncles were all around, the Allison family. Grew up with Oxford playground [Oxford Field] right down the street. That's where we honed our sports skills and just community interaction skills down there as kids growing up. Went to J.J. Hill Elementary School, and then to Marshall Junior High. I think it's changed now, it's the Obama School, but at the time, it was Marshall Junior High, and before that, it was Marshall High School. Then we went to Central High School after that. And then both my brother and I— I'm a year older than him— but we both went to the U, University of Minnesota.

MW: And would you say growing up— so I've done a few of these interviews— people have talked about the distinction in Rondo of the Oatmeal Hill and Cornmeal Valley— I believe, sides of the neighborhood. Which side would you say that you grew up on? Or was it a combination?

SW: Well, we grew up on— that's funny. When we were growing up, I had never even heard of those terminologies. I was growing up and we always lived where we did, a half a block up the street from Oxford playground. We were the ones that were— I don't know where the line came from or was drawn, in terms of people talking about that, so all I know was we grew up on that end of the neighborhood, on the Hill School's side of things and maybe Victoria side of things, not the Maxfield side of things. That was, you know, whole kinda different things.

MW: That was the more professional, educated side? Maxfield?

SW: No, I'm not gonna say that.

MW: Oh, uh-huh.

SW: I would just say that there was just, different folks, you knew different people, but you interacted with folks on the other side of what turned out to be the freeway.

MW: And do you remember— how old were you when the when the freeway construction started?

SW: Well, that was somewhere I'd say in the 60s. We didn't know what was goin' on. We grew up on Carroll Avenue, we'd see them digging this big trench down there and right behind us when we lived on Carroll and then behind us was Rondo, on the backside. All we knew was they were digging some big trench and we didn't know what it was. We were kids growing up. We were about 12, 13, and so that's how it was for us. I can remember that trench they were digging

in at the time, had no idea in terms of what homes were being replaced and things. We just didn't have any idea.

00:05:04

SW: I knew that when our coach in the neighborhood— and there were a lot of community coaches, Mr. Cotton [John Cotton], Mack Burch, Bob Carter, Ernie Johnson and I'm sure I'll be, forgetting some of the people, Mr. Ross and then Bill Peterson was probably the main one who was down there. I can remember it was important for him for us to keep our eye on the ball when we swung. If we didn't— me and my brother figure, "Yeah, we're hot shots," knew what we were doing. But if we swung, no matter how far we hit it, if we didn't keep our head down on the ball, say, "Take a lap," we said, "But I hit it!" So he made us go down in the hole and come up the other side maybe that would've been the Oxford end, then go up to what'd have been Chatsworth and down in the hole, come back up the side and back down to the playground again. So that's how we learned to make sure we kept our eye on the ball. So Oxford— and I know we're not going in any particular order because you go veer off to where you want to be. But I think of the people like our cousin Tom Hardy and Debbie Montgomery, who were idols of mine growing up, that was before there were women's sports in school and things. We used to have skating that went on down in Oxford. I always remember it was Debbie not being the fastest girl on skates; she was the fastest human being on skates. I don't know if she told you about that—

MW: She did.

SW: —potential tryouts she could have had, maybe for the Olympics or something, but it just wasn't gonna work out that way, back in those days.

MW: Yeah. She said she won two of the three against the eventual, I think, Olympic silver medalist. And she did mention always running around with you and Dave in the various sports, that she was always trying to keep up with you guys. So, I'm curious, what were the race and class demographics or dynamics of Rondo like during your childhood? What was your mom doing for work? What was the racial makeup of the neighborhood at that point?

SW: It was a pretty mixed neighborhood that came from down at Oxford, even before there was a playground down there that developed in probably the late '50s or something, but Carroll Avenue, we used to go to Carroll and all the way up to Lexington. There was something called the Quonset Huts, these houses that were on both sides of the street. I just kind of barely remember that, I don't know why I remembered it, Quonset Huts. But then the playground, Mack Burch was another one of those community people that helped to coach as well as helped to get the playground built and things. So the makeup was a mixed makeup and there were different people. To this day some of the the elders that are not still around, but McIntosh [Kenny McIntosh] and just different people who were there that helped us grow up. Aunts and uncles, aunt lived up the street. Another one lived over there in the other block. It seemed like everybody kind of took care of everybody. You didn't really think of race that much. And then we knew the kids on the other side of— even before it was the freeway, perhaps. Because we play ball with or against them and they'd be on the teams down at the Oxford playground. So you kind of knew

everybody, and there wasn't no, it didn't seem like to me as a kid growing up in the neighborhood that there was a lot of "This is our territory. We're gonna fight. We're gonna—"

00:10:18

SW: Kids just played with each other and parents knew each other. It was the Reed family, Ronnie Reed and Michael and Duane Reed and different people on— like I said— the other side of the freeway. I mean, you just cross back and forth and most of the kids, I think about the Christian family, Kenny Christian. Kenny, Lenny, Denny, Benny, Quinny. They were, and their dad, Mr. Christian, he was one of the old timers. The guys played a lot of fast pitch softball back in those days and he was one of the ones that played it a lot. Heard he was really fast, could fly and things like that. I remember and I regret that we didn't keep the picture of the first, it may be the only Black hockey team, that came out of the neighborhood there. Kenny Christian was one of those on that hockey team. If you talk to Bill Peterson, Bill could tell you better than I could. But those guys— Debbie's brother, Dwayne Gilbreath, Billy Collins, who was later head of the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. Those guys I kind of looked up to. Playin' ball and they had the good gloves and things like that. I was kind of looking at those guys in awe. But baseball was the thing that was important to me and my brother. In fact, a lot of people didn't know— they have no reason to know, but I remember on our black and white TV and we saw guys bowling. We said, "Man, that's what we wanna do when we grew up, wanna be professional bowlers." Then when the Twins [Minnesota Twins] came to town in the early '60s, I can't remember if it was '61 or whatever, but they— I remember looking at our black and white

TV, if we could get it to work right, we'd put a coat hanger on top of it. The Twins, signed a guy, he was from Cuba, named Zoilo Versalles. We heard that they signed him for, I think it was maybe $5,000. We said, "Five thousand doll— Aw man, forget bowling, man! We want to be pro baseball players when we grow up and things." So, one out of two of us was able to do that. I always remember that. I don't remember a lot of things, but Zoilo Versalles was the guy for the Twins. So, we grew up watching Harmon Killebrew and Rod Carew and the different guys, Bob Allison, along the way. Those guys were kind of idols that we looked up to when we grew up.

MW: And do you remember— were there instances growing up where you knew there were parts of the neighborhood that you couldn't go beyond or streets that you couldn't go up on?

SW: Yeah, there were things that you just kind of know. There were no signs that were up saying "You can't go across this street," or whatever. But, Hill school, if you go up Oxford and it's Selby— it was the old school. It doesn't look like it looks now. They've changed that to a different school. But we'd go up the hill and to Hill school, and at the time, I didn't know if any Black people lived on the other side of Selby, Hague, and Laurel and any of the streets back there. Surely not Summit or Grand.

00:15:04

SW: So, we knew when it was time to go home, get out of school, you went down the hill, back in the neighborhood, you went to Dayton and Marshall, and then Iglehart, then Carroll where we lived, and then Rondo or the freeway was back there. Or, if you went what've been west, on the other side of Lexington. You didn't, we kind of didn't go over there. I don't know if any Black

people lived over there. As I got older, I found out that, "Oh, there were some people, oh, your family used to live there?" But, we just kinda knew there were certain places that you kinda just didn't go. You kinda stayed 'round the neighborhood, except when we went to play ball against some other team somewhere else. Northdale or Langford or Sylvan, then that's when we got to travel. Mr. Carter [Bob Carter] was one of our main coaches. He took us a lot of places. Then it was Bill, kind of took over after that. Probably when I was 13 and my brother was 12, we played ball all together and there were different people such as Russel Balenger and Kakaya— at the time his name was Lansing. But there's a picture down the hallway here, I'm sure you would see it and see some of the guys. Jimmy Martin, Minister Martin and things later on. That was just part of the community, things you just knew. Tommy's Hair Shop up on Selby, my mother and all the— it seemed like all the Black women in the community, that's where they went to get their hair done and catch up on the latest information. [Inaudible] Got a little older then you knew, "Okay, that's the after-hours joint," and that's where people could go and hang out. VFW [St. Paul VFW Hall] and the Elks [Elks Lodge], later on the Legion [American Legion]. So, you just kinda knew. There were only a handful of Black police officers in— maybe only a couple. I don't know if Debbie told you about that, but before she became a police officer— she was I think the first female and she was surely the first Black female— but Chief Griffin [James Griffin]. He never got to be chief, but in the community we called him Chief Griffin. The football stadium at Central was named after him. He also was one of the first Black officials, basketball and football. Jimmy Lee, who Jimmy Lee Rec Center is named after— a lot of people didn't know that he was Black. So, they do have a kind of monument thing and some pictures

inside that let people know, “Oh, that’s who Jimmy Lee was.” I know his daughters, Patsy and Jane, they lived up a block further from us on Carroll and they actually used to babysit for us. They got us into officiating, especially Chief Griffin did— Jimmy Robinson, who used to be head of the Loft Teen Center.

00:20:10

SW: Jimmy was, I think one of the first Black officials in the Big Ten. A lot of people didn’t know that. I don’t know if he was the first or the second, but he got us into officiating down at Oxford. Me and Frank White and Gail Anderson and Roger Neal, I’m sure I’m missing some guys, but it got to be that they trained us so well that— back then in the days, if you went to play basketball at another rec center they often got a dad or somebody out of the stands to officiate. I think we were probably the first trained officials that— to our knowledge we did such a good job with it that even white teams from different areas didn’t mind. They loved coming because they knew that there’d be some great officiating and things. Most of us went on to officiate in high school and in college. We give credit to, like I said, Jimmy Robinson, Chief Griffin, and we were trained well by the people in the community. I’m very, very proud of that.

MW: And so, you’re talking about these mentors in sports from the Rondo community. I’m curious, who was around you that introduced you to Black politics, political organizing or movement building?

SW: Rather interesting because there’s a couple of ways to look at it. I think that we didn’t think about it this way at the time, but I think the so-called Black Power Movement and the respect for

each other and helping to take care of each other in the community and things. Nothing's perfect, but when we look back, all of us who are older realize how good we had it. Martin Luther King was assassinated in '68 [April 4th, 1968], I believe. A lot of things started to change openly in some of the anger in terms of, "Why can't we live there? Why can't we do this? Why can't we?" Being in high school, there were some friends I remember that went out to Oakland. That's where— the home of the Black Panthers [Black Panther Party]. A friend of mine, he played baseball with us. He was a catcher, Ronnie Reed. I think there was a Gerald, I can't remember if that was a cousin of his or a friend, but I remember they went out to Oakland and they brought back some materials, some Black materials about different things.

00:25:11

SW: And even Muslim stuff [Nation of Islam] in terms of Elijah Muhammad, how to eat to live. And so start kind of looking at some of that stuff. Like I said, when Martin Luther King got assassinated, I know that the people at— the kids at Central, we didn't know what to do per se, because we didn't have anybody that really did something ahead of us— that we knew of, anyway. So I remember, I don't know how it happened, but me and Russel Balenger— who I guess you've already talked to— but some kind of way we got voted to be the first heads, I don't know if it was the first Black student organization at Central. I don't know that we ever did anything besides have the first meeting or two, but that influenced me when I ended up going to the U. I know that there was a Black student organization out there, AAAC, African American Action Committee [Afro American Action Committee] and so I became involved in that. On the

local side, I remember The Way [The Way Community Center] over in Minneapolis and that's where—a lot of folks, especially maybe white folks said "The riots!" in Minneapolis, but I think that a lot of the Black folks, we called it an insurrection, fighting for some rights that should have been going on before then. Spike Moss was one of the leaders— there were a number of people that I couldn't name them all, but Spike, who I still know and is still involved in different community stuff, has for decades. Then on the St. Paul side, things started happening. I think there was an event down at Stem Hall [in 1968] and that filtered from downtown St. Paul and came up the hill past the cathedral and came down Selby— there was a lot of anger that was out there, and some windows or some businesses were getting broken and things like that. I always kind of laughed talking to some of the community people because there's a cleaners— I can't remember the name of the guys there, but the cleaners, it's closed now but it's still there, with the big windows, and it's been owned by different people. But, when folks came up the street and windows were getting broken, and it's like, "Hey, leave the cleaners alone, I got some stuff in there." [Laughter] I always remember that nothing happened to the windows of the cleaners, as far as I know. Then people, without going into all the details, but on the St. Paul side, Bobby Hickman was one of the main leaders in terms of the different protests and rights that were going on. But there's also the people that you maybe didn't hear about as much, the Katie McWatts or the Patty Hickman's. So those— and there were other people in the neighborhood too, but sometimes the women aren't mentioned and things like that. But Bobby started an organization, and I know there are other names, but it's called Inner City Youth League. That was so important in terms of values for Black kids growin' up in the community. You had all kinds of things that

you learned and studied, whether Black history, to boxing, to learnin' how to do photography and things.

00:30:18

SW: Some of that history there's connection with Gordon Parks, the famous photographer. He's related to Bobby Hickman and that's the great uncle of my wife, which is Robin Hickman. She'll say "It's Robin Hickman-Winfield." She was mentored under him. A lot of stuff went on in Inner City, I think. And there was the Loft Teen Center and a few other organizations that were— the rec centers were especially— Oxford was the main place. If anybody played any sports or grew up in the community at all, Oxford is where they went. When this facility got built later on, the one we're in [Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center], then some of the kids started coming up here. But Oxford, anybody who's 50 and over, that's where you got your start at. Oxford playground. Stacy Robinson, who a lot of the younger kids don't know, he went to Central and he ended up playing with the Giants [New York Giants]. He didn't get a lot of play time, but it worked out for him. He's had at least a couple Super Bowl rings that he won. If you go down to the Jimmy Lee— old timers still call it Oxford, but you see up on the scoreboard, you see it's a Stacy Robinson Field. So Stacy, who's passed away from cancer years ago, but through his connections with the NFL [National Football League] he made sure that some money came down and got through to the playground and things.

MW: Wow. Is it true— I wanted to [Laughter] I had one question that's not a serious question, and then I'll go back to those. Is it true that Russel Balenger had the only Afro at Central High School?

[Recording paused while Tyrone Terrell stepped in the HQB Community Archives to greet us]

00:34:05

SW: So your question was with me and—

MW: Did Russel actually have the only Afro at Central High School?

SW: Well— did he say he did?

MW: He said he did.

SW: Well, we both did! I don't know. I don't remember if we were the first ones, but when Ronnie Reed and those guys came back from Oakland, being out there with the Black Panthers and things, I know that, "Oh, Ronnie's letting his hair grow?" So, I know probably me and Russell, we grew our hair. Not to say we were the only ones, but if that's the way he remembers it, cool.

MW: I know, I want to talk about AAAC and Morrill Hall. I was curious, before Morrill Hall, were you involved with The Way or Inner City Youth League and some of those community institutions?

00:35:08

SW: Well, not with The Way, that's over north, like I said. Spike was the main person over there in Minneapolis over on the north side. Since I lived in this community, probably the Inner City Youth League, I was involved with them. I'd be on their board for half of forever, for decades. So that was— Inner City played a big influence in my life on the St. Paul side. One of the things— so being involved in the community organization there, but a lot of the time I spent in terms of being involved with things was the kids at the rec center at Oxford playground, so I did a lot of coaching down there. I had a streak at one time, I think I had 40 years in a row of coaching or something. Then I left for a minute and came back to it. I still do some coaching with kids and training and so forth. I do some stuff with the Twins and help do some coaching and dealing with kids in the neighborhood.

MW: So I had watched the interview that you did with the Ujamaa Place podcast, I think the Voices podcast in the last year or two, so I was drawing some details from there. I think in that interview, you talked about being at the U on AAAC, but then also on the baseball team. Can you talk about some of those tensions in your experience at the U?

SW: Well, probably the short version is, I—

MW: We can do the long version too.

SW: —I got friends that would say, "Man, you shoulda talked about—" whatever. I'll just say this, that back then you couldn't play varsity on any sports, they changed it since then, but freshmen couldn't play, and I played my freshman year. So going into my sophomore year, I think it was that spring, I ended up going out to another conference that was out in Oakland. I

think, again, maybe it was a Black Panther conference. I missed maybe the first practice or something when I came back, and all of a sudden, when I was in good graces with the coach. It was like, “What happened to my possible—" you didn’t play that many games in those days. The freshmen and the sophomores. But that kinda had disappeared. At the time, I didn’t think that much of it, but later on some of the people who were a little older than me told me, “Well, once you did that thing in terms of going out to California and hearing that you were involved with some of the Black student stuff that was going on at the U.” You know, I was still working and coaching, down at Oxford playground and part of different marches and things that were going on, Morrill Hall and things. For me, I don’t like to get a, “Well then this what happened and we did this and we did that,” or “Other people did this and that,” so I just, I was just active in different things that were going on campus.

00:40:12

MW: Sure.

SW: One of the community guys had said to me, because people have said, “Well, why didn’t you play professional baseball like your brother or somethin’?” I said, “Well, first of all, it’s not like you pick it like for a class or something like that.” He said, “You got involved in the community stuff and do you regret that you did what you did?” I looked at him and I thought for a minute and I said, “No.” Then he said, “Then you did the right thing.” This brother’s name was Tiny. He wasn’t Tiny, but he was one of the community people, just a good person. One of the people that probably mentored me just by being there. Sometimes mentors are like the Spikes

and the Bobby Hickmans, different things. They're one kind of mentor to people. Then there's the other people that are just good people, good neighbors, whether they're male or females, they take care of their family. They take care of you. If you needed something or needed help, they were there. So there's different ways to be a mentor. And yeah, so that's what I would tell you.

MW: Thank you for that. I think that answers the questions that I had really beautifully. Are there any other memories that you'd like to share on this topic or on these questions? I hear you saying you were involved.

SW: Different things that went on in the community and on campus. I would just say one of the things I've learned along the way is that not only people that you knew back then were involved in a lot of stuff, but I appreciate the fact that even in my more mature years in life I've been fortunate to run into people, older and younger, it was good to feel and see that, "Oh? People are still doing stuff." I gotta tell you that the Black churches still do a lot of stuff. One of the ones is, you know I always love Reverend Spence [Darryl Spence], just different guys that for me—everybody don't like everybody, everybody don't get along and things like that. For me, I appreciate seein' different community people being able to interact and get things accomplished. So, I think that's important. It always will be important.

MW: Sure. And what congregation was Reverend Spence?

SW: New Hope [New Hope Baptist Church].

MW: New Hope?

SW: Yeah, New Hope.

00:45:03

MW: Got it. Great. Alright. Well, unless you have something else that you wanted to get on there, I think we could conclude there. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. It's a great opportunity. I'm looking forward to listening back to this to transcribe. Okay.

9/30 Russel ~~Bal~~ Balenger interview notes

- family in house?
- Railroad unionism?

House burnt which year?

Target Area A → TCOIC?

NCVL
↓
College
↓
ICYL

Poverty program

Brothers Bobby + Jackie
meet Panthers
↓
form ICYL

-USSR

-Archival materials for NCVL

Rebellion, militant era,
goes to college
Planting food in vacant lots

Mack Williams
HQB - 9/25/2025

Interview Protocol for 9/30 interview with Russel Balenger
Past interviews referenced- Oyate Hotanin Peace Circle interview, Brothers of Rondo MNHS documentary

Mr. Russel Balenger- Cousin of Anura Si-Asar

9/30th

Family moves to Minnesota in 1907, Russel is born in 1950
Father (who he takes his name from) works for railroad for whole life, mother (Parks side?), great-uncle is Gordon Parks

Northern Jim Crow
What were your parents' occupations during your childhood?

- Took classes with Mahmoud ↓ close friend at brother's

What were common professions at the time?
Ask about domestic labor conditions, sexual exploitation, Black subordination

What was the police role and presence like in Rondo in the '50s and '60s?

8 years old stopped by the police on Selby, could you talk about your Twin Cities adventures to the Mississippi River and Winona as a child and the limited mobility for Black people, de facto segregation + Jim Crow
Open back-door policy
I know you have a relationship to Stillwater Prison, could you talk about how incarceration was impacting Rondo in the '50s and '60s?

I-94 1956-1968
September 1956- Police remove homeowners

Black organizations and movements
Memories of political organizing in Rondo in childhood?
Mother is part of North Central Voters League in '60s
Campus movement at Moorhead State College
Inner City Youth League- ICYL

How did the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements show up in Rondo and Saint Paul? Labor organizing?

Selby-Dale urban rebellion in 1968?

Trip to the USSR, racial dynamics over there (interview from 2023)

Mack Williams
HQB- 9/25

Interview questions for Mr. Nathaniel Khaliq

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

What were the race and class demographics/dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

Other things to ask about:

- Mr. Khaliq's grandparents' occupations
- Work conditions for Rondo residents in the '50s and '60s
- Police presence in Rondo, story about neighborhood power being turned off
- Struggle around I-94 construction and evictions
- Black BLA Underground organization, United Progress Inc., NOI
- 1968 Selby-Dale uprisings
- White organized labor
- NAACP

– Omit name about eviction

Mack Williams
HQB- 9/25

Interview Protocol for 9/30 interview with Nathaniel Abdul Khaliq
FKA Nick Davis

MNHS Oral History (Hand in Hand Rondo Oral History Project)

Railroads + Parkway Domestic?

Born in 1943
De facto segregation + Jim Crow -Degrees + overeducated
What were your grandparents' occupations during your childhood?

What were common professions at the time?
Ask about domestic labor conditions, sexual exploitation, Black subordination

What was the police role and presence like in Rondo in the '50s and '60s?
Police officer shot in Rondo in 1949, power turned off - Rondo Oral History Project
Born in 1943

Internal colony?

I-94
Lived with grandparents and evicted in late 1956 for I-94 construction, grandfather Reverend Davis, last family/house on Rondo

In USMC but misses Vietnam, recruitment in Rondo?

Movements + organizations
Black BLA Underground (Maoists) + United Progress Inc. -Were people talking about Black people as a colonized group?
Nation of Islam

Summit - University

1968 urban rebellion

1986 attack on home

What was the position of white organized labor towards Rondo,

NAACP transitional period, Black Power era

USMC and firefighters (broke color line in firefighter force?)

President of NAACP 1996-2011

Mack Williams
HQB- 9/25

Interview questions for Mr. Clem Crowe

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

What were the race and class demographics/dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

1951 - ft worth Texas

Near North Side

ICYL

Mack Williams
HQB- 9/25

Interview Protocol for 10/2 interview with Clem Crowe 10/2/2025

North Omaha Panther article
North Omaha BANTU Student group article

Moved here 1968

Clem Crowe interview- Probably born around 1941 or 1942
Hallie Q Brown + MLK Center
Omaha chapter of Black Panther Party formed in 1968 by Eddie Bolden, 200 members, , highly publicized case around bombing and assassination of police officer in 1970, organization later becomes National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF)
Food program?
Come to Rondo junior year of high school with family (brother Vernon Crowe owns liquor store)

Connections to North Omaha BANTU (Black Association for Nationalism Through Unity) high school student group?

What were your parents' occupations during your childhood?

Minneapolis
Teen Teamwork

What were common professions at the time?
Ask about domestic labor conditions, sexual exploitation, Black subordination

Accepted immediately

What was the police role and presence like in Rondo in the '50s and '60s?

I-94?

Upward Bound program

worked at meat packing

Differences between Urban League and NAACP and Panthers? Around other civil rights organizations in Omaha?

Generations from slavery?

what did women do?

Gary Hines

Here for 1968 urban rebellion in Saint Paul?

Macalester College 1969-1973 (Expanded Education Opportunity program) + involved in any Black student groups at Macalester + Elder Mahmoud

campus takeover? what year?

BPP introduction + food programs?

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

What were the race and class demographics/dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

CUb Scouts

Mack Williams
HQB- 10/14/2025

Interview Protocol for 10/16 interview with Elder Yusef Mgeni

- Born Charlie Anderson in 1948
- Great-uncle Frederick McGhee
- Parents and grandparents remember a lynching in Saint Paul
- Cross burning in front of house in Saint Paul
- North Central Voters League, Inner City Youth League?
- Selby-Dale uprising 1968? Impact of riots in the 1960s?
- People teaching Black history/Black Studies?

Excise family story

Sharif Willis?

[redacted]

SM - Francis Scott Key

Interview questions for Elder Yusef Mgeni-

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

What were the race and class demographics/ dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

Mack Williams
Hallie Q. Brown 10/28/2025

Debbie Montgomery interview on 10/30

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood? Gilbreath (maiden)

What were the race and class demographics/dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

Using Hand in Hand/MNHS interview as background source

Born 1946, 17 year old member of NAACP national board, went down South for Civil Rights,

Morrill Hall takeover

10/30 interview

Outside support

+ NAACP youth chapter?

Radical at national conference

Red caps + matrons

'63 2. Selma → Montgomery
MOW
'65

Rondo → North Minneapolis Connection

Selly riots?

'68 – '71 UMN part 2

Radical at → Honeywell

Masters from Humphrey

Community perception of police

[redacted] cast not

11/25/25 Steve Winfield questions

Could you briefly introduce yourself, say your birthplace and date, and describe your connection to the Rondo neighborhood?

-Allison family

Raised by single mom, brother Dave one year younger

Arline w/ Allison- became winfield

What were the race and class demographics/dynamics of Rondo during your childhood?

How were you introduced to Black political organizing and political movements?

Formed the Central High School BSU with Russel Balenger, is it true that Russel had the only afro at Central?

UMN Afro-American Action Committee– Tension with baseball team, only Black player

In Morrill Hall–

'68 selby riot – Minneapolis uprisings

- Community relationship

How were the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements felt in Rondo?

Plymouth?

Brother Dave Winfield, wife Robin Hickman-Winfield

Using "Steve Winfield- Voices Podcast, Ujamaa Place" as source

Patty Hickman, The Loft Teen Center

11:55 BPP vs BSU

Sheriff

Tyrone Terrell

- Kemet Imhotep

Men of Mardi.

Rev. Spence

New Hope

Steve [redacted] com