

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Dr. Freeman Hrabowski III
Interview Date: July 14, 2011
Location: University of Maryland-Baltimore County campus, conference room adjacent to his office as President
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:17:59

Freeman Hrabowski: One question: Should I repeat the question? Will your question be on tape or not?

Joe Mosnier: It will.

FH: Okay, good.

JM: It will.

FH: So, that's fine.

JM: Yep.

John Bishop: But it's not bad, you know, to talk –

FH: Sure.

JM: Thank you. That's a good question.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Thanks. [Pause]

JB: Okay.

JM: Uh, today is Thursday, July 14, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer John Bishop, and we are here at the campus of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County to do an interview with Dr. Freeman Hrabowski.

JB: Okay, wait a second. I'll – I'm going to have to do something different with the lights because –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

FH: Okay.

JB: Okay, we're back on.

JM: Okay. This is – today is Thursday, July 14, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer John Bishop on the campus of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County to do an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. And today we're with Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, and I must say it's a real privilege and honor. So, thank you so much for sitting down.

FH: Thank you.

JM: Uh, let me have you start, if you would, just with a description of, um, family, community, in Birmingham, coming up as a child.

FH: Sure.

JM: You were born in August of 1950?

FH: Sure. I honestly believe I was as fortunate as a child could be, a child of color could be, born in the 1950s. I had parents who were educated, who were older, and who had been married ten years. Uh, and so, they were really looking for me. [Laughs] Fine Christian people, very hardworking, and we lived in a neighborhood, a middle class neighborhood, um, with similar families. Uh, the emphasis was on education, on our faith, on values, and on building strong community among the people in that area.

That was my background in Birmingham. Church was at the center of everything.

JM: Which church?

FH: Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, the sister church to the one that was bombed, actually, in Birmingham.

JM: Um-hmm. Tell me a little bit more, if you would, about your mother and your father, and kind of your family's history going back.

FH: Um-hmm. Sure, sure. My mother and father grew up in rural areas. And, as was the case with so many people in the big city, they had come off of farms. Uh, Mother was born in 1916, and my father was born in 1910. And, um, they had actually met in college. My dad had been away, teaching – because you could teach after two years – had come back, and it was in 1938. My mother was, uh – had transferred from Alabama A&M, where she had gotten the first two years, because that was as far as they went at that time, and she wanted to continue on to get the Bachelor's. And so, they met in Montgomery at Alabama State a few blocks from the capitol there, uh, and they were married in 1940.

JM: Um-hm.

FH: And one had come from Wetumpka, Alabama, which is outside of Montgomery, and my father had come from, um, Sardis, Alabama, Lowndes County, outside of Selma, in fact.

And my father, um, had lived on land that was a part of a larger plantation, which had been a part of his family. And it was my father, Freeman II, uh, whose, uh, grandfather was the son of the plantation owner.

JM: Yeah.

FH: Right? And, uh, my grandfather, Freeman the first, was the first one born after slavery.

JM: Yeah.

FH: And, if you think about it, it literally was from the 1870s to my dad in 1910, and then he was forty when I was born, and it's right there, so you have that period very quickly.

JM: Sure, sure. And your father's employment in Birmingham when you were born was – and coming up?

FH: He was – my father had been a teacher, but you couldn't make a lot of money as a man of color teaching. And so, he left it to work in the steel mill, because you could make much more money over time. But Dad had special skills. He was really good in reading and mathematics. And so, not only did he work in the steel mill, but he did the reading and writing for his white supervisor, who did not have a high school education. Behind the scenes, he did that work and got paid for it. Uh, and then he worked for the railroad and he also did some of the reading and writing for a supervisor there. And then, he worked in a – with the families who were grieving in a funeral home. So, my dad worked three jobs.

My mother worked three jobs. She taught in the day and later on taught also G.E.D. in the evenings, math and English. And she sold insurance. [5:00] And she tutored kids and sold Snowballs in the summertime. [Laughs] So, they were very entrepreneurial. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah. Which mill, the steel mill that your father –?

FH: Stockham Valve & Fittings. Stockham Valve & Fittings. And my mother was at a school very close, Shields Elementary. But we grew up in one of the two middle class neighborhoods of Birmingham. We grew up in Titusville, T-I-T-U-S-V-I-L-L-E. The other neighborhood, of course, was Smithfield. And, uh, it was a very special place.

JM: Siblings later, or no?

FH: I had a cousin, who my parents adopted, uh, who grew up with me.

JM: Um-hmm. Tell me a little bit more about, um, about the rhythm and culture of middle class black life in Birmingham in the '50s, um, especially around church and neighbors and extended family.

FH: We seemed to always be in church. [Laughs] And children really didn't want to be there. [Laughs] But we were very involved in all kinds of activities, the Youth Fellowship, the Baptist Training Unit, you know, uh, the choir, going on trips and camps, Bible School, uh, and it was just a part of home, but it was not necessarily what we would have wanted to be doing but it was what was expected. So, you just did it. You did it in the summer, during the year.

Uh, but I would also say we were in and out of other homes. And others were essentially parents, too, and we were learning much about our values and, uh, expectations, as much from other parents as from our own.

JM: Yeah. Who was your pastor?

FH: Reverend John T. Porter. Now, [clears throat] he came when I was twelve. Before him, it was Reverend Goodgame. And, uh, but at age twelve, he came back from Detroit. But he was a favorite son; he had grown up in that church. He had gone, gone to Alabama State himself, and had the Morehouse [College] experience, and was, uh, an incredible man. He was –

he came back – he was thirty-two, and I was twelve. And he was an incredible pastor. I think my speaking skills come from listening to him all the time.

JM: Um-hmm.

FH: And he was amazingly accessible. He spent a lot of time with the teenagers, with the kids, talking about *everything* in ways that even our parents wouldn't talk about them. And it just made us very close to him.

JM: Yeah.

FH: He and his wife, in fact. She had graduate degrees in music and voice from NYU. And so, our church was very cultured, as we would say in the South, you know. We grew up with piano lessons, and, and, uh, you'd hear Bach in church. And so, it was different from what the larger society may have thought always happened. It really shows the diversity within the black community.

JM: Indeed, and I wanted to ask, did, um – [clears throat] a couple of things. One is, um, looking back, did your family have a wide array of neighbors, family, persons through the church, who had a wide class background? Or was –

FH: It's a fascinating question.

JM: Was it a more, sort of, isolated – a more narrowly defined middle class?

FH: It was *very* middle class, very middle class. *But* understand something: The middle class had people with graduate degrees and, uh, the few lawyers and physicians, but the middle class also included people who were, uh, who worked for very wealthy whites. It was very interesting when I think back. So, if someone was not educated, that person was still very polished, because they had been around the best of whites. And so, they might travel to Europe

with their employers, and, uh, they were the beneficiaries of the exposure that wealthy whites were getting.

And so, they had their own contribution to the community in very interesting ways. So, I mean, so, we had a combination. Most were teachers, teachers and – the women were teachers. And in some cases the men were teachers, but sadly, if you wanted to make more money, unless you were a principal and then you made a bit more money, and we had principals in the neighborhood.

But, so, you had that kind of – now, I will say, um, my parents were constantly helping people who were not educated. We were constantly working with, uh, kids to get them into college. My mother would fill out the financial aid forms all the time and work with them on applications and essays. But even more than that, because Mother worked on the GED, she was working with *parents* of kids [10:00] and pushing families to send their kids to college, and not just relatives, but people in general.

And, um, and my father was very good at advising men. Women would always say, “You need to go talk to –” and in Birmingham, the name was pronounced “HraBUSski.” You see, I say “HraBOWski” [laughing] because a Polish professor said, “Your name is not HraBUSski, with the spelling.” [Laughs] But there, you know, often my parents served as advisors or counselors to married couples when they were having problems. So, they were everything from marriage counselors to helping people get into college.

JM: Um-hmm. Did your dad have a title in the church?

FH: He was a deacon.

JM: Yeah.

FH: He was a deacon. And I'll tell you what was significant about Sixth Avenue. When they were building this really big church, when we were moving from Sixth Avenue and 16th Street South to, uh, out to the Titusville area, more so, in a modern church, because UAB was going to be taking over all that area, um, a number of the families were asked to put up their mortgages for the church. And there is a *wall* in the church with those families' names. This is how closely connected the church and the families were.

And one of the great prides of Birmingham was that the *Birmingham* – I guess the paper, the *Birmingham News*, is the big white paper – had published an article on the front page of the paper, which was very unusual. The *Birmingham World* was the black paper, so we were accustomed to being there. But the *Birmingham News* published a piece, I mean front-page story at the top there, that at one point late in the late '50s and early '60s, before the Civil Rights Movement as we think about it, in the early '60s, uh, that we had more Negroes who owned their homes than any city in the country. Now, owning their homes meant they were buying their homes. They had the mortgages, right? But they were not renting, and it was because of this robust economy involving the steel mills and the teachers. And so, that was the greatest pride of any family, to own a home. And a home with two or three bedrooms – big deal! You know, and as we, as the time went on, you know, the two and three-bedroom homes added on a room – the extra den, you know! [Laughs] Middle class America! Uh, and – but the homes were the symbol of the status.

JM: Yeah. And, of course, this is before – all of the economy, the industrial economy, is evolving.

FH: Right.

JM: It's still very robust and healthy in these years.

FH: Yes, yes.

JM: Yeah.

FH: Yes, yes.

JM: Um, in that kind of urban context would you have had white acquaintances coming up?

FH: Oh, absolutely not. I had, I had never met anyone white. I simply knew that white children were considered smarter than black children. We were told that in so many ways, in subtle ways. The first time I realized just how distinct the two groups were, and distinctly hierarchical, was – um, I was peeling back the brown paper sack bag cover of the book I'd been given in the second grade. We had been told to leave it alone. And I peeled it back and I saw the name of the white school. And I went up and I asked the teacher, "Why did they give us the secondhand books?" Because that was such a message to us, you see.

Of course, my teacher first said, "We told you not to peel the paper back," [laughs] so I was in trouble. But what she said was the same thing my parents always said, and I've said this so many times. She said, "You don't have time to be a victim. Get over it! You don't have time to be a victim. The book may be second-rate. You are first-rate. You are a child of God. Get the knowledge and keep moving."

JM: Hmm.

FH: Powerful, powerful message, which I didn't want to hear because I wanted – I was upset, right? And while it may seem that she was being harsh, she was preparing me for life, absolutely preparing me for life. Focus on the real things, the things that you can change.

JB: We should stop for a second.

JM: Let's stop for just a sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after a very short break.

FH: Yes, um-hmm.

JM: Um, Dr. Hrabowski, I wanted to ask – um, you were just mentioning schools.

FH: Yes.

JM: But before we do that, you were also mentioning sort of this, this **political** –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: I don't know if that's quite the right word –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: But this message that a teacher gives to you about –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: “We're in this circumstance, but we're going to forge ahead with this kind of –”

FH: Yeah, sure.

JM: “Assertive – in an assertive mode of practice.”

FH: Yes, um-hmm.

JM: Um, was your house, were your parents, was your church community sort of actively political, say, through the racial questions of the '50s?

FH: [Clears throat]

JM: Was that something that was around your dinner table? Did you hear it from the pulpit or?

FH: Right. We heard about political issues and race matters all the time. My parents enjoyed being race people. I think [15:00] my mother was probably most proud, was proudest of

the fact that she had been fired in another school system because she tried to organize teachers in the late '40s to protest, uh, or to demand equalization of teachers' salaries.

JM: Where was that?

FH: This was outside of Birmingham, one of the systems right outside of Birmingham. And, um, people were appalled that she would do that. But, as she says, she was just foolish enough to try and [laughs], and, uh, she was indeed fired. But she was such a good teacher that within a short period – and this was right before 1950, and I know it because she wasn't teaching long – she got a job in Birmingham city, which was really the plum place, right?

And, uh, the then – we called him the Negro Superintendent; he was the Director of Colored Schools, but we – Dr. Carol Hayes hired her. He liked my mother because she was very smart, very smart and very comfortable with herself. And, um, he hired her.

JM: Um-hmm.

FH: And she worked there until she retired in Birmingham.

JM: Yeah. Well, late '40s was the time when those equalization efforts were underway –

FH: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: Because obviously states were trying to see if they could somehow fend off desegregation.

FH: Yes, yes, yes.

JM: Um, interesting. That's very interesting, though. How about your father in relation to political questions?

FH: My father did several things. He was working with the men in the, in the steel mill to get them to get their GEDs. So, he tutored them, uh, particularly in math. Dad was always

very good in math and he *always* loved teaching. So, he was constantly working with these guys.

And he wrote the Negro section of the bulletin. I actually still have copies, uh, and they were lessons about life. But there was a, there was this bulletin from the company every, whatever, week or two weeks, and there was a Negro section. And so, Daddy was one of the few literate people, and he wrote this section, advice to the men. And so, he was doing that. And, while he couldn't say openly in that bulletin, "We know people are not fair here," he focused on what the men needed to do to support their families, the need for the hard work, for being your best.

And I think the message that they both were saying to me was the same message that so many black children heard, particularly in the Deep South: "The world is not fair. We know that. So, the question is, 'What do we do about it?' You must be twice as good." You will hear that over and over again, that, "Don't expect fairness, but be twice as good, and perhaps you will be selected." That was just the way of the world.

Now, the good part about that is you learn to work really hard and to focus on, um, self-empowerment. You weren't expecting anybody to give you anything, which may sound old-fashioned, but I quite frankly use that same philosophy with students today – not so much about twice as good, just working to be the very best. But I say is twice as good is the sense that Americans need to learn to work much harder than people from other parts of the world.

[Laughs] So, it's the same thing for my white students as anybody else, or my women students – everybody! It's a great philosophy. [Laughs]

JM: Um-hmm. Were your parents members of the NAACP?

FH: Oh, yeah, very much so – NAACP, Alabama Christian Movement, oh yeah, very much so, very proud members.

JM: Your father's college degree was in what field?

FH: Probably – this was – it would be something in education – education. Mother always had – it was education, too, but she was always with a focus in English.

JM: Yeah.

FH: Yeah.

JM: Um, at the mill – we're about to move on from – into some more of the active events of the '50s, but last question. Your father's age, would that have put him just beyond that period when there was active and, for a while, interracial efforts to do union work inside the mills in Birmingham?

FH: That would not – no, he would not have been a part of – no, no. No, he would not have been a part of that, um-um.

JM: Tell me about, and you, having been born in the '50s, I mean, it would have taken a while for some of these things sort of to come to your attention.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: But, um, did – what stands out in your mind as some of the first impressions of open social questions about race, maybe towards the late, mid to late '50s? Of course, you're a young child.

FH: Um-hmm. Well, keep in mind that, other than our going to separate schools and seeing those books, um, when I think back, we were very protected in many ways for a long time. That was the significance of the black middle class [20:00] community. People worked to give us as many experiences as possible to make us feel as special as possible.

It was only when we realized there was Kiddieland – you will hear even my friend Condi [former US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, also a Birmingham native] talking about this. Um, all of us were aware that Kiddieland was this great place with the big ferris wheel and all the lights and all the children. And we'd all have to pass that when you went to a certain part of Birmingham. And imagine a child seeing all these kids in there having fun, and we couldn't go! That was devastating! We always – and finally there was a small, uh, third-rate little place where you could go and have a party or something. But it was nothing, really was not. That was bothersome.

And as we got older and wanted to go to the movies, to the whatever-we-called-it, movie house, movie theater, or whatever, uh, we had, of course, to sit in the balcony, certain places to sit. And then, as we wanted to go to, began to go to restaurants or places, we had to go in a side door, or we couldn't go in, or we could go in and get a to-go, but not order and sit. And then, when we went to stores to buy things, we could be doing something, and if somebody white came up, we were to wait. And so, more and more, my parents decided that they would just keep us from doing those things, after they realized the impact.

So we, even, I mean, the worst part was when you had to go to the restroom, and there was none. Or you were thirsty, and there was a wonderful white-only that looked really nice and a dirty, filthy little thing lower and awful that we couldn't drink out of. Uh, those were the kinds of things that said, in subtle and yet not-so-subtle ways, we were a caste system. We were not equal.

JM: Tell me a little bit more about, um, your experience as an elementary school student.

FH: Uh!

JM: Were you precocious from the get-go?

FH: Yeah, I was very fortunate. I think it was because I had old parents. [Laughs] My dad was forty when I was born! There are a lot of advantages. Uh, they knew – they wanted me. They put all of their attention on me. I was reading at a very young age and actually going to school at a very young age, very young age.

And I ended up, uh, uh, finishing the first grade, just about finishing the first grade, when I was four. And the Negro Superintendant was in the school. And I noticed that every time they had this big VIP, I would be taken out of the class and, um, taken to the girls' [laughs] restroom to hide. And the reason was that this VIP, Dr. Hayes, as he was – Dr. Hayes was my godfather [laughs] all the way back to when he hired my mother.

And I should tell you Mother hid the pregnancy, uh, a long time, because if a woman was pregnant – didn't matter that she was married – she could not continue to teach. And Mother was thin at that time, and she kept – she *hid*, she *hid* the pregnancy, she *hid* me, uh, with loose-fitting things up until almost April or May! I was born in August. And she loved – the big joke was – she always loved saying, “He was almost born in the classroom. He was born to teach.” She did not want me to be a principal. She did not want me in administration. She said, “He was born to teach.” That's what – to her, that was the most noble thing you could do.

And, uh, one day when I was hiding in that bathroom, really frustrated, embarrassed to be in the girls' – I ran out. I got away from the kid, the big girl who was holding me in there, and ran right into Dr. Hayes. And he said, “Why are you in school, Freeman?” And I said, “I'm in the first grade! I'm about to graduate!” And that was not good, not good. They took me out and made me go back to a little kindergarten, but I already knew the work.

They brought me back the next year and hid me again, because you're still in first grade – five. So, I spent my five, when I was five, teaching other kids. I always got a couple of slow

kids and working with them on words and things to keep me busy. It was great. So, it was great enrichment. It really was. I was very fortunate. And I always say this: Was I that smart? No, I just had *great* parents, who were educated, attentive, knew how to teach, they emphasized reading and math, ideas, talking. They allowed me to discuss issues. Any child who gets that background can move fast. Yeah.

JM: Um, shifting – um, did you have a sense as a child about, um, legal authority in the city? Did you have a sense of the white government? Did you have a sense of – maybe what it measured, if at all, as a child, in some measure of wariness or apprehension? Did you have a sense of the capacity of the police to do violence?

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Were those things apparent to you?

FH: Well, we had studied government in maybe the seventh grade. We knew [24:54] and we knew [Eugene] “Bull” Connor, the police chief. We understood something about relationships [25:00] between city government and managers and police. We also knew that police were not fair either. We had been stopped at different points, and they were not nice.

Um, my father looked international, much more so. I always say, “He married a beautiful chocolate woman, and here I am,” but Daddy could pass for other things. He was more olive color but rather straight and curly hair. And he talked really fast, and so when the police would stop him – and he always drove much too fast. He talked much too fast. And, um, they would stop him and they would say, “Mr. Hrabowski [pronounces ra-BUS-ski], you’ve got to slow down. Next time we’re going to have to give you a ticket.”

And then, they’d look over and see me, looking like him but obviously knowing what I was, from the kinky hair and everything else. Then, they’d look back at him and then at his

license and see the “C.” And all of a sudden, it would go from “Mr. Hrabowski” [pronounces ra-BUS-ski], to “Freeman, you’re a colored boy,” as they began to write the ticket. You know? So, the big joke. He always said I was the best liability he ever had. [Laughs]

JM: [Laughs] Did you, um – did you and the family take note, conversationally and otherwise, about, um, the explosion of sit-ins in February of 1960? Was that something that really –?

FH: Very frightening.

JM: Yeah.

FH: Because people knew each other. Families knew each other. Reverend Shuttlesworth, Attorney [Arthur] Shores, these are – families knew each other, and we really did care about each other. And, if it could happen to the most privileged people, it could happen to anyone. And there on “Bomb Hill” in Birmingham – that’s the other, that’s Smithfield, the other middle class neighborhood, where people who, some of whom went to our church. Um, sisters and brothers of people lived on both sides, and our mother was close to all of these people. And there were, there were, um, I mean, literally – you know, even in the church, uh, there was a Northside group and a Southside group, and they were, again, the two middle class groups.

And so, it’s hard to explain just how close the groups were. So, when there’s a bomb, you immediately think it’s right next door, because these are people you know. It’s very frightening, very frightening.

JM: Yeah.

FH: And we knew from – we knew from decades about lynchings, about violence. We all knew. And it was very frightening.

JM: Yeah, sure.

FH: Yeah, very much so.

JM: Tell me, if you would, do you recall May of '61 and the arrival of the Freedom Rider buses into Birmingham and all of that violence and chaos?

FH: And all of that would have been discussed in church in different ways, and both in allusions in the sermon, but in Youth Fellowship. Now, one of the great things about my church was that we discussed ideas and books. And I mentioned Condi before. Her father, who was a Presbyterian minister, still worked, though, with Sixth Avenue, and so he would help us with the Youth Fellowship at Sixth Avenue even. And he was my high school counselor.

And we discussed all those matters. That's the one thing that was really – we were developing critical thinking skills as we thought about the good and the bad and the ugly. What if things were different? Um, what are the consequences of these actions? And all of that was, uh, in many ways, elevating. These things were not discussed as if it was just for today. Uh, it was about what should a human being expect out of life? What does American democracy mean? Alright?

I'll never forget when I had, uh, [clears throat], um, a talk with my principal in high school after the demonstration, and he was being forced to put the kids out of school. Uh, and I'll never forget his having some of us read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." It was just – I mean, it was amazing the way people got around all the bureaucracy when he was being told that he should be looking down on us when he was saying to us, "Got to put you out of school."

He did something that was very special. Instead of making it something that was embarrassing, he called the entire school together as one community, and he conducted that session in exactly the way he had conducted the Honor Society induction. And it literally – it

brings tears, because he was absolutely brilliant. He was determined that those of us being suspended would know it was a badge of courage.

JM: So, tell me the story of the [30:00] spring of '63.

FH: [Clears throat] Uhm!

JM: You're just twelve and a half years old.

FH: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: And, uh, all of this just torrent of protest –

FH: Um-hmm, sure.

JM: Would unfold in a couple of months there in April and May.

FH: Sure, sure.

JM: How did that history find you there in the city in those months?

FH: I think I told you we were always in church. [Laughs] And I make students laugh sometimes because I say, "I am not going to paint that as a picture where we were so happy to be there all the time." And I did not want to go listen to these different people from outside talk, I mean, and I'm sitting in the back of the room. And the way my parents could placate me was to let me read just my book or do my math. I loved math. And so, I'd sit in the back of the church, because you had to be there, and I'd listen to a bit, and you learned to sing the songs, and the songs were good.

But amazingly, when I heard this man say that what he was proposing – and that is involving children in the march – could lead to children being able to go to any, to the best schools in our city, now that got my attention, because I wanted to see just how smart these white kids were. [Laughs] I didn't think anybody was smarter than I was. And to me, though, smart was not about what you're born with. Smart had to do with how hard you were willing to work.

My parents had to sometimes punish me for not going to sleep. I mean, I just wanted to keep working, and they were worried that I was working too hard. And to me, that was smart – when you work really hard and you achieve a lot and you make As, not because you want the grades, but because you want to, you *dare to know*, alright? And, uh – but when he said that, I said, “Now, that’s worth listening to.”

JM: Do you remember who that was?

FH: And I said, “What’s the guy’s name? What’s this – what’s this minister’s name?” They said, “King, King.” That was my first time – I’ll never forget. I said, “King? What a name, King.” “No, Reverend King, Reverend Martin Luther King.” It was very, very – it was amazing. And, uh – and then I began to listen to him and others and I realized how well spoken they were.

Now, as it turns out, my pastor was also very polished as a speaker. He read a lot. We read books together. So, we were accustomed to polished speakers, but this man was talking about, um, the next level, what it would take to change things. Because what we don’t remember is that, while we knew things were not fair, we tended to think, “This is the way of the world.” I suppose it’s the way my descendants [note: Dr. Hrabowski intended ancestors] felt in slavery. It just is this way. It’s awful, but this is the way of the world.

And before that King message, that message from Dr. King, the thought was, “Since this is the way of the world, you’ve got to be really good to get a chance at all.” He was changing the model, the vision, and saying, “It doesn’t have to be this way,” that we could be empowered to change it. Very different message! And did I believe him? I *wanted* to. Was I convinced it was going to happen? Absolutely not! If you’ve seen the world one way all of your life, even if it’s

just twelve years, it is the way it is. The best you can do is have hope and try, and that's what happened.

And so, uh, and – you know, I mentioned that we have this exhibition right now at the Smithsonian, “For All the World To See,” done by one of my colleagues, Maurice Berger, here at UMBC. And a part of the message of that exhibition is that the visual culture of the time had a greater impact than people realize. For the first time, people could see, through TV, exactly what was happening. For the first time, America saw the fire hoses, the dogs, the children, children being absolutely abused.

And I'll never forget that first day that I saw that, after hearing Dr. King, I said, “Mama, Dad, I've got to go!” And they said, “Absolutely not! [Laughs] No way!” And I did something you just did not do. I said, “You guys are hypocrites.” Well, you see, that may not sound like a big deal today, but at that time you did not say disrespectful things to your parents. My dad could not believe I had said that. He said, “Go to your room. And stay there.”

And it was the next morning that they had been up all night – after being up all night, they came in and said I could go. Now, I tell my students all the time, by this point, while I thought my parents were unfair, because my point was you make me go to all these meetings. I hear all this stuff. You tell me to think for myself. I'm thinking for myself. I want to do the right thing. I want to do what Dr. King, somebody you say [35:00] you admire, wants me to do. And yet, you're saying no.

And they came in to explain. It wasn't that they didn't trust me. They did not trust me to be in that jail with those white people who didn't care about our children, about black children. And they said, “You are our treasure. We don't trust you to them.” And I understand that now. I often ask myself, “Would I have allowed my child to go?” I'm not sure I would have. But

somehow, they came in. They had been praying, and literally their eyes were red. And we prayed together and we cried.

Now, I was crying because I was worried about them worrying about me. But quite frankly, all of a sudden, I got really frightened. I said, “Oh, my God!” [Laughs] And my cousin, who was in the other bed, was laughing, because he said, “No way am I letting those dogs bite me! I am not going!” [Laughs] He was two years older and he said, “Freeman can be stupid if he wants to!” Uh, so it wasn’t that I was that courageous. I did believe in the cause, I had said I was going to go, and I couldn’t back out. Let’s just be honest about it, you know. I wanted to go, but I was frightened. And this is what happens to people so often, right?

And because I was in a higher grade, and kids below fourteen went to the juvenile place, they chose me – and because I was asking a lot of questions in the little training session, they chose me to lead a group of kids. [Someone coughs] And I learned what that meant. You’re singing the songs, you’re leading people in singing the songs, and you’re keeping the kids from focusing on the police officers, because the police officers were trained to try to upset us.

And if you ask any black kid, probably the white kid, too, “What is – who is the one person, uh, that you really don’t want anyone talking about?” Your mother! And what were they doing? Oh, yeah. Ohhh, yeah! They were just trying to upset us, because if they could show that we were throwing rocks or doing something violent, then they’d be justified in using the club or whatever. But if we were just walking along, it’s very hard to justify the violence.

JM: Let’s pause for just one sec.

FH: Um-hmm.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We’re back on after a short break.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Uh, President Hrabowski –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Let me ask you to – to even shift to a level of deeper detail, if you will –

FH: Um-hmm, sure, sure, sure.

JM: And that story of – I'm so interested in that story about that night at your home –

FH: [Coughs]

JM: With your parents –

FH: Yeah.

JM: And that very difficult deliberation they faced –

FH: Uh! Um-hmm.

JM: And quite understandable.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, you mentioned that you would be drawn in as a leader of a student-training
group –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Of the nonviolent training.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Can you stay at kind of that level of detail –?

FH: Right.

JM: And walk me through –

FH: Sure.

JM: How you entered and what you'd already seen in the streets.

FH: Right.

JM: What was happening?

FH: Right.

JM: Where you had these meetings?

FH: Yes. The training meetings were at Sixth Avenue Baptist, my church, which was the sister church. And we'd be bused over to the other place. And the – and different people were telling us things to expect, that some of the younger kids would get upset and become homesick. We had to work to keep them quiet and calm. Um, we practiced the songs. [Sings] "Ain't going let nobody turn me around." And it's amazing how singing those songs elevates you and gives you a higher purpose. [Coughs] And I can still hear all of these children singing these songs, and [sings] "Keep on a'walking, keep on a'talking, marching on to Freedom Land." And, amazingly, it gave you the strength to keep going, just to keep going. You didn't listen to the police. You weren't looking at cameras. You're just focused.

And I was to get there and, if allowed, I was to kneel with the kids and pray, pray for the right to be a first-class American citizen, that's all. That's all we were asking. And, uh, I cannot tell you how much my knees were shaking. [Laughs] But the songs really helped. And we did a lot of praying, and it was very strong. I mean, it was saying, just, "God help me," keep moving. And we did, and we made it up to the steps. Whew!

And that's when this guy with this really red face, looking so angry, looked down at me and said, "What do you want, little Nigra?" Oh, God! I was so scared! And I looked up at him and I said, "Suh –" not "sir," but "suh." Uh, "We want to kneel and pray." And he was so angry he spat on me [makes honking sound]. I'll never forget it. He *spat* in my face. Picked me up and threw me – and they came and got the kids and they just threw us into the paddy wagon.

JM: You were on the steps of –

FH: City Hall!

JM: Yeah.

FH: Right – 16th Street, right there.

JM: Yeah.

FH: And, uh, it was just awful. It was awful! I was in a daze, [40:00] just in a daze.

JM: Where did they take you, to the fairgrounds?

FH: To, to the – no.

JM: No?

FH: No, there was another juvenile place with, uh, bars and a big wire fence, and they put us in with the bad boys, you know, and, uh, it was awful – for a week. I stayed five days.

JM: As a twelve-year-old.

FH: It was awful. But I was helping eight- and nine-year-olds. And a lot of the kids were not from middle class homes.

JM: Hmm.

FH: Keep that thought, that what we were doing was not universally accepted as the right thing to do. There were many of my teachers and others and neighbors who felt kids should be in school. Now, who could argue with that? So, this was an experiment.

And when people say, “Were you bothered that others were not agreeing,” no! No, my parents understood. In fact, teachers had been told, subtly, through the Board of Education, that the children of teachers – if children of teachers went to jail, those teachers would lose their jobs. My mother had lost a job before, and she always believed, “God will provide.” [Laughs]

But, uh, so they – and we – and they'd been told, people with mortgages, that banks might, you know, call the note. It was amazing, in that we might lose homes, and you just didn't know! So, you could understand people who had something already invested not wanting to give that up for an experiment.

And so, there were a few of us from the middle class neighborhood who went, but not many. Most of the kids were from the projects, understandably. What is it their families have to lose? Understandable! But I think the advantage of that middle class situation was we had just a bit more exposure and could be supportive of other kids.

JM: In those five days, did you see your parents?

FH: No!

JM: No?

FH: Could not. They would not allow parents to see – no. No. There were, uh – I remember there were, somehow there were Bibles there, though, and when – and I was not the kind of kid who could protect kids physically. I really was a fat math nerd, not – chubby little kid, loving blueberry pie and math, alright? That was my life. I mean heaven for me was eating some pie and doing math problems. And, uh, bad boys – and they were being encouraged to harass and beat up kids. And the way I kept my little kids – they would always be with me – trying to keep them from crying.

But there were times when the bad boys would come in our direction, and I'd start reading aloud from the Bible, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And it always scared the hell out of them! [Laughs] And they would move back. It was powerful! It was great! And I would just say, "Thank you so much, Lord!" [Laughs] Because I couldn't – I didn't know how to *fight*. That was not my life. It just wasn't, right?

But – and, fortunately, there was a bad boy in there who had been in my mother’s class. And he was also very supportive of me when he realized what my name was. I’ll never forget that. It really did help, yeah. And that was that experience. What the experience taught me was that even children can make decisions that can have an impact on the rest of their lives, and that children know the difference between right and wrong, you know, and that children can suffer and be better for the suffering.

It was an awful experience. It was so depressing. It was – we were in the dark. They let us out for an hour or two a day, but it was just – it was gloomy. These guards were always trying to make us feel worse. And you’d hear them in there, um – and you’d hear kids hollering. You never knew what was going on. It was, it was awful, when I think back on it.

But one of those days, when – maybe after three days or so, and families wanted to get their kids out, and Dr. King was saying, “Wait” – he came with the parents, and they were all outside. And we were looking through the bars, and they were singing the songs. And he spoke and he said, “What you do this day will have an impact – [speaks with emotion] umh – on children yet unborn.” I’ll never forget that. I didn’t even understand it, but I knew it was powerful, powerful, very powerful. And there are nerves that are still raw, just from looking at the faces of the children, trying to understand, “What does that mean?” Powerful, very powerful.

JM: What happens when you come out on the fifth day?

FH: [Clears throat] Agh! Oh, God! To see your parents! Wow! To be in the bright sun! You realize how much we take freedom for granted! We all do! [45:00] Just being able to go outside and walk around. You really get to see what prisoners go through. Oh, my goodness! Oh! Just the freedom to do whatever you want to do, to go to the store – it was amazing! It really was.

And I wanted to get back to school. I was an A student. I wanted to be in school. And I'll never forget that as soon as we got back to school – well, I'll never forget. We got back to school. Within a day, we were back there. And, um, and that's when the notice came: We had to be suspended. Ugh! And suspension was like an embarrassment. And that's why I say what the principal did made such a difference.

JM: And you were at what school?

FH: Ullman High School.

JM: And the principal was –?

FH: The principal was George C. Bell, the reason, the person who is most responsible for my becoming a mathematician. He was a mathematician. He was a brilliant guy of small stature and a big booming voice. And when George Bell, Mr. Bell, spoke, everybody listened. And when a kid was not doing the right thing and he would boom down the hall, that kid, I don't care how big, would straighten up immediately. But he was absolutely brilliant.

Now, it just so happens that George Bell is the uncle of Alma Vivian Powell [wife of former US Secretary of State Colin Powell]. And my high school counselor, Reverend Rice, was, of course, the father of Condi Rice. And so, it was an amazing school with very smart teachers and a lot kids who were very high achievers.

JM: Hmm.

FH: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: What was your, um – as those next few weeks through the end of May –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Middle of May, unfolded –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Um – I mean, it gets pretty hot in the middle of the month.

FH: [Exhales loudly]

JM: Finally federal troops come into the city after a very hot period of a day, day and a half.

FH: Yes. And I should tell you, academically, Mr. Bell had worked quietly with the teachers to find ways to make sure kids could get homework at home. It was very nice. But what I will tell you is it was a very difficult period. And what I remember is, uh, finally having the federal courts, uh, to say, “Put those children back in school.” And you can check this, but I’m almost sure the name – the guy’s name if I’m right, the guy’s name, I believe, was Judge Black [the judge Dr. Hrabowski is recalling is Fifth Circuit Judge John Robert Brown]. And we were in church when the news came, and – agh! Just amazing!

JM: Did it feel like a victory?

FH: Oh, God! Ah! Everybody cried. They cried. They really did. It was just to know that *somebody white* in power knew that we were not wrong and cared about children. Just knowing that there was *decency* among whites made a big difference – it really did. It really did.

JM: Had you seen anything else in those –?

FH: [Clears throat]

JM: In the period – that was the single time you were arrested?

FH: Oh, yeah! Yeah, very much so! [Laughs]

JM: [Laughs] Did you witness other things that remain as – just those flash images that just come to you when you think back on this stuff?

FH: Oh, my God! It was in – it was that fall, in September, when –

JM: Oh, yeah.

FH: Oh, God! Uh, the flashes of the hand and the ring, I mean, when, when one of my friends, when, when – when we were in church in September, and things had begun to have signs of hope, of opening up in Birmingham. Remember all of richness of my community, richness in terms of love and spirituality and hard work and mutual support!

But you'd go downtown – I would go downtown. I never saw one black in a position of power in downtown Birmingham, not even behind a cash register, let alone a policeman or a fireman. Nobody! *Everybody* at any level of power was white. And to have the city fathers deciding to compromise with Dr. King and the group was a *major* victory, and we said, “Things are changing.”

And we're in church that Sunday in September, and all of a sudden the pastor gets a note.

JM: At the pulpit?

FH: At the pulpit. He stops preaching and tells us that the other church, our sister church, where relatives of sons and daughters and fathers and mothers, had been bombed – and didn't know how bad it was. It was just a shock. And he said, “Please. Don't, don't rush out.” [50:00] But it was the first time we'd ever seen church stop in the middle. It had to be bad.

People started driving in that direction. Mother and Father took us home, because we didn't know whether that meant the next church was going to be bombed or whatever. And, um, as it turns out, I thought back to different friends, one of whom was Cynthia [Wesley]. And I'd seen her on Friday, and I've said this before. I remember so well, um, she was always very kind to me, because I was younger than other classmates. She was always very nice to me. So, if I was twelve, she was fourteen. And – and, uh, she said, “Bye, Freeman.” Oh, God. We said, “Bye,” and it seems to me it was she who said, “See you Monday.” See you Monday. Yeah.

And I knew she went to that church. So, all these names – I mean, she was one of them, but I saw her face there at the school. And, uh, when – one of the girls had been given a ring that morning by her father. And they were not able to find her and then found that hand. And we all – everybody knew that hand with that ring. We had nightmares for years. It was like war. It was just awful.

Uh, my parents said to me when I asked if I could go to the funeral that I could. And [clears throat] I'll never forget, uh, I was to leave school, my parents had given me a notice, and my principal saw me. And this is education at its best. He came up to me and he said, "You're representing us today." And he looked at my tie, and it was not dark enough. At that time, you really were supposed to wear dark ties to funerals. And, uh, he took his tie off and took my tie off. He *tied* his tie on me. It was, uh, amazing: the small things people can do to make a child feel special.

And I'll never forget the three coffins, with the niece's, the youngest of the three – I think she was eleven – McNair, in the middle, smaller. I'd never seen a coffin that small, that small. Uhm. It was awful. It was just awful.

And Dr. King said, "What you –" no, he said, "life" – I mean, what you need to know is that people who were the naysayers were saying, "That church was bombed, those girls were in those coffins, because we went to jail. We upset things, and that's what happens. And they tried to tell us how mean-spirited, how awful people can be." These were *blacks* saying that. And here's Dr. King back, taking responsibility, and he looked into the faces of those parents and said, "Life is as hard as steel." As hard as steel. In other words, "I don't know what to say. It is just so hard for all of us." It was just, it was – [inhales] I just remember that. I do. I really do.

And I'll tell you what gave me hope in the midst of the darkness. It was the first time I had seen whites in my church. There were rabbis and priests and Baptist ministers from [pause] – hmm [pause], it was amazing. [Speaks very quietly] And they – and they cried. Um-hmm.

JM: Can you, can you –

FH: [Clears throat and exhales]

JB: You want to take a sec?

FH: Yeah, give me a minute. Ooh. [Sniffs]

JB: That was – I need a second, too.

FH: Yeah.

JM: Do you want to just take a little break here, John?

FH: Yeah, give me a minute just to – uhm.

JM: Yeah.

FH: Uhm.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: Okay, we're back on after a short break. Let me ask –

FH: Yes.

JM: And we've – it's just so difficult to –

FH: Yeah, yeah.

JM: The distance is like a day sometimes, I imagine –

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: Not like these many, many years, but like a day.

FH: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

JM: [Clears throat] Maybe, maybe this is a good time to ask you a question of difficult reflection, and it's this: Can you – and there is no fixed answer, I'm sure, to this question –

FH: Sure.

JM: But can you reflect a little bit on the issue of how [55:00] those kinds of experiences do take their long toll on a person?

FH: Sure, sure.

JM: And how you might gauge their implications in your life?

FH: You know, I'm reading a book right now by David Brooks, *The Social Animal*, and one of the points of the book, he talks about how we develop love and relationships and achievement. One of the points of the book is that we're all products of our childhood experiences, and when we least expect it, things that happened to us as children have an impact on us. And so, while we may think that what we do is the result of rational decision-making, often circumstances and previous experiences come together to push us in one direction or another without our even realizing it.

What my parents worked to do after those difficult situations, what many parents worked to do, was to help us get beyond the bitterness, the anger, and even the hatred, alright? And what they said over and over again is, "Hatred eats on the inside. Hate the action or the act. Don't hate the person." I have to tell you when Bull Connor died, my mother called me and she was crying. And I said, "Mother, why are you crying about this man? This man was awful to us." And she said something that was so powerful. She said, "Freeman, but he was somebody's child. All of what he did came because of how he was raised."

And for me, that was a, that was an amazing moment of enlightenment. He was simply the product of his environment. And it was cathartic for me to just let it go. Let it go. And I

have often thought about that moment. It was my mother's way of giving me her faith in life itself and in humanity. And it was also her way of saying, "Put your own experiences in perspective." And a part of being educated is being able to give context to whatever experiences you've had. And those of us who have been able to do that are much healthier as a result. Uh, I really do believe those words of King that you judge people on the basis of content of character, not on race. You can find good and bad people in any race.

Uh, and I'm here at the university with students from a hundred and fifty countries, and I've really come to understand what's common among human beings from different cultures, different religions, right, and that character – character can transcend all of that, integrity, those kinds of things. And so, I think the reason I'm able to work so comfortably with my students from all kinds of backgrounds is that I really can see beyond the obvious differences, uh, and look for, um, not only what's in somebody's heart, but that person's ability to think. And my whole life is focused on helping people to learn to do just that: to think well and how to act with people and to get beyond, uh, what we sometimes believe are the most important things, alright, how we look, to move to what – how we think and act.

JM: I mean, not to summarize too acutely, but it's probably a fair thing, and I mean this as a sincere compliment, that your professional work has, really has had the form of creating new ways for children to come up in the world.

FH: Hmm, hmm, I appreciate that.

JM: Yeah.

FH: I appreciate that.

JM: The Meyerhoff Scholars Program and –

FH: Yeah. Sure, sure.

JM: These are not small efforts.

FH: I appreciate that. You know, I like the fact that this is a campus that really does talk about these issues of race and ethnicity and works to create a climate in which people can say what they really think. If you don't allow people to say what they really think, then they're simply saying what's convenient. And it doesn't get to the point of values. Uh, and I think this is what we need in American society. We need opportunities for people, whether they are fifty or fifteen, to say what they really think.

We tend to believe what we've seen on TV. If what you see on TV is violence, and you've seen certain groups looking like they're always doing things that are stealing and things that are bad, that's what you believe. My students who are around all kinds of people are far more tolerant. My students who come from areas where everybody looks exactly the same, regardless of what race, will tend to be far more comfortable [1:00:00], um, stereotyping and assuming all people are the same. And I think that's one of the things about education, is to teach people, not just about people in this country, but around the world, that we are the products of our childhood experiences, every one of us has some good in us, we can pull that out – and those are the kinds of things I learned through that experience.

JM: You moved from Birmingham in 1966?

FH: You're good! Yes.

JM: Was that fall of '66 you went away to school?

FH: That's exactly right. Now, I should tell you I spent summers in different places.

JM: Yeah, and I want to ask about that as well.

FH: Yeah, before '66.

JM: How old were you first moved for one of those summer experiences?

FH: I was in Massachusetts and I was thirteen and I was going to the eleventh grade and, uh, this was going to be my first experience in an all-white class in math and literature, chemistry. Um, and it was clear the education was so rich. It was powerful. It was rigorous. It was challenging. It was hard. I loved it. And when other kids would not raise their hands, I would raise my hand to just *try* the answer, and it didn't take me long to realize not one teacher would ever call on me. They would look right through me. They were never mean. They just – I wasn't there. It was amazing. So, I always call it Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

But it was an awful feeling to feel totally unimportant, in contrast to my all-black school, where people were *delighted* that I wanted to try an answer, when they would tease me, they would push me, and they would say, "Go for it!" Right? None of that! Taught me the importance of teachers! Teachers can either elevate us or, even through a look, push us down. And we see both, in all kinds of situations, among all races, depending on where you are.

And what I can say is, I learned a lot. When I came back to chemistry, uh, I was – I was well prepared. I had finished the course that summer, alright? The same thing in math. So I was really well prepared. But that experience also taught my parents that they were not willing to trust me to go to some other predominantly white schools in the East who were interested in my attending. They just didn't know.

And so, uh, I left in 1966 and I went to Hampton [Institute, now Hampton University, in Hampton, Virginia], uh, and, uh, because Booker Washington was a graduate of Hampton. And we respected Mr. Washington, when he came to found Tuskegee [Institute, now Tuskegee University], uh, for generations. And it was an amazing experience, because half my teachers were white at Hampton, particularly in the math and science area, and they were wonderful. It was the first time I had been around whites and they were so caring and decent, and they were

there to help those black kids succeed. And it was then that I came to understand, really, there are a lot of nice white people. [Laughs] Uh, and I was close to mathematicians and philosophers, and it was great, great.

JM: Did you come home those summers to Birmingham?

FH: I came home in the summers, came home at Christmastime, uh, and, uh, and in the latter – and I actually, I actually decided after my freshman year to take a course at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Uh, took the next calculus course just to see what it would be like and to see what education then, because some of my friends had gone to UAB and to Tuscaloosa, and it was an all-white class and, um, to my amazement, what I had found at Hampton became even more understandable. At Hampton I learned that, while I was best in my school, in the top group and an A student, that I was not as well prepared as black children who had gone to either prep schools or to very integrated white schools in the North.

Now, I told you nobody's going to work harder than I do, alright? And my, my – the girl at the time that I liked was getting the top scores. She was the geometry, uh, champion for the state. She had had Latin, which I hadn't had. She was just much better prepared. And so, I said openly one day when she got 100, "I'm going to marry her one day," and I did, by the way, uh, four years later. But, uh, I was not as well prepared. It was clear to me that our education had not been as rigorous. I had had *enough* education, though, that I could work so hard that I could still get all As, but they were not the highest As that first year. I had to work on that.

But I came back to UA and I wanted to see how well prepared those kids were, the white kids. [Laughs] And, uh, this was in the Cal II, Cal III course, [1:05:00] or something, Cal III. And, um, it turned out that the average in the classes was maybe in the 60s, and I always got 98 to 100. And the guy finally came up to me, white professor, and he said, "Well, where, where

are you from?" You know, because I was making, I was making A-pluses. What I came to understand was it wasn't just that the education for black kids was not what it should be – those white kids from Alabama were not well prepared! Years later, as I look at standardized tests, I see exactly that! But I had no idea! I always thought their education was so much better. No! No, it was not the case.

And, interestingly enough, when I think back, we had some really good teachers, some of whom had gotten grad degrees in northern states, because they couldn't get them there. So, we had a solid education. And I had better than most, because of the other experiences from Massachusetts and NSF [National Science Foundation] Program at Tuskegee. My parents were constantly giving me these extra experiences, and we read everything. So, that was really solid. We were reading all the time. When I say I was not as well prepared, I had through pre-calculus, but my top kids at Hampton had had calculus in high school. I hadn't had calculus. You know, so when they took it – I was taking it for the first time, and they had already had all of that, those kinds of experiences.

But my point is we all suffered because of segregation. When you've got to put everything separate, different administrations, you're spending money when it should have been on those kids. And we didn't realize not just black children, but white children were not getting the best either.

JM: Tell me about [clears throat] how you watched Birmingham evolve. I guess, beginning in '66, it will be this kind of pattern –

FH: Yes, yes.

JM: Because you're in college and in graduate school five years after that.

FH: Yes, yes.

JM: So, I guess it's probably a pattern of periodic visits, summer and holiday visits.

FH: Um-hmm, regular.

JM: Over the years.

FH: Sure.

JM: And your parents' lives are moving on.

FH: Sure, sure.

JM: And I'm just interested in how you watched the city change from that kind of lens, that in-and-out lens.

FH: It's interesting. I saw more and more of my friends going to predominantly white schools in Alabama, to UAB, Tuscaloosa, Auburn, and becoming connected to those places while others continued to go to the HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities]. Um, but I think I was most proud – I was really proud of Birmingham when Richard Arrington became the mayor, because how many cities had a Ph.D. in science as a mayor? That said so much about progress we had made. It really did. Um, and I continued to know my city primarily through my church, Sixth Avenue. And more and more people were moving to UAB, doctors, people in med school, and had come often to Sixth Avenue. And I saw this influx of people moving to Birmingham because of the university, the biggest employer, and well-educated people, and I saw those changes.

At the same time, I was assuming that the violence I saw in Northern cities was not occurring in places like Birmingham, because it wasn't that level of violence among blacks on blacks, until I got back there and saw – the same thing I saw in cities in this area, I saw there in Birmingham. So, on the one hand, you had the progress, more educated people going to the universities. On the other hand, you've got the underclass killing each other. The same

challenges you face wherever you go in the country, and it was that dichotomy that was and continues to be a major problem.

JM: Yeah. And, of course, Birmingham's demographics shift, because the city boundaries aren't that big.

FH: Um-hmm.

JM: And all the – you know, this is happening in the '60s, when the whites have just shifted a mile or two or three.

FH: Yes, and people have moved – that's exactly right – into the suburban areas. Uh, and, more and more, the Birmingham city schools have become black – and before, Phillips [High School in Birmingham] and other places that were white, and you had a few black kids. Uh, you know, some people have said why didn't I go to integrated schools? And I could have. But it was – I think I was in the tenth grade when they finally, we finally had integration. Uh, and, uh, again, my mother simply didn't trust me to be in a school with teachers who didn't want me there.

And I remember so well when my friends who went to my church integrated Ramsay High School and Phillips. There were all kinds of problems. But in those moments of desegregation, just as was the case with the University of Alabama, very decent whites were there, parents, and they became violent. They threw things at these children! You saw the worst of humanity. And, understandably, my parents did not want me being a part of that, no, even if [1:10:00] the education was supposed to be better. What my parents, who had been teachers, knew was if teachers don't want you there, you don't get the best education. You just don't. Now, there were some decent people there, of course. But how would you know who's willing to get beyond prejudice and just help a child? That was the issue, um-hmm.

JM: Tell me, um, tell me about your effort to create the Meyerhoff Scholars Program –

FH: Oh!

JM: And what that does –

FH: Sure.

JM: And what that vision is.

FH: Sure. I, when I went to the University of Illinois after graduating from Hampton, uh, I noticed that, of course, there were no black faculty. And, uh, there were only several of us in mathematics, and others were not doing well, and people didn't expect me to do well.

Uh, I remember – I tell my students this story all the time – uh, I earned an A-minus on a test in topology, and the professor wrote on my paper, “You did surprisingly well.” Now, remember I said my mother was in English, and so I went up to him after class and I said, “Why the adverb?” [Laughs] And he didn't know what I was talking about at first. And I pointed to the word. He simply turned red, and he said, “Well, it's because you're from a small school.” No!

And it was at that point I remembered that second grade experience. I could decide I'm a victim. The man doesn't expect me to do well. Let me get out of here. And I remembered that same statement: “No time to be a victim! Don't let this man define you!” And by the end of the semester, he was feeling so guilty, not just about the word but about not telling me the truth. The fact was he had never seen a black in a graduate course in mathematics, and everything he knew about blacks would suggest they would not do well. And I got an A in his class, but more important than that, he got to know me as a person, and I got to know him. It wasn't that he was a bad person. We expect from people what we are accustomed to seeing, and that was all it was.

But all of that showed me that we had a problem: You don't have many blacks in math and science. And when I went around the country trying to find one predominantly white university that was educating at least ten people a year, in all of science and engineering, that would go on, who would go on to grad school, I couldn't find one. And fortunately, uh, I had met Bob Meyerhoff, who is not black. He's Jewish and a philanthropist. And we had conversations about black males, and he wanted to make a difference in *that* group.

And, uh, we married the two ideas of black males, underrepresentation in science, and started this program with an eye towards seeing: What *can* we do? Can we create a program that has those elements necessary to ensure that students of color would not only succeed but excel in science and engineering? And we were defining "excelling" as doing so well they could go on and get Ph.D.s from the best universities in the country, and M.D./Ph.D.s, and, uh, it has been an amazing journey since 1989.

And now, we have hundreds and hundreds who have actually earned Ph.D.s and M.D./Ph.D.s. We actually now have students with those degrees on the medical faculties of Harvard and Stanford, Duke, even UAB, Hopkins, you know, Michigan, all over the country. And so, the numbers are growing all the time, so it's a dream fulfilled. It really is. And for many scientists, it's the first time they've seen large numbers of students of color *excelling* in science, not just the exceptional one. That's the idea. We've had the exceptional one since Tuskegee and George Washington Carver. Now, it's time to have many more. And so, working with the national academies, uh, on these issues, I have had a chance to chair the most recent committee and to look at what we're going to need to do to take the numbers to the next level.

And all of that comes as a result of, when you think about it, when I think about it, of the hope I got from those experiences as a child and the notion, again, and I've never said it this way

before, that just because it's this way doesn't mean it has to be this way. Now, when we were doing the Meyerhoff, it never occurred to me to say that, and yet all those experiences from before – if we could move from my not being able to sit in a classroom with whites to my being president of a predominantly white university, from age twelve to age forty, in thirty years, why couldn't we move from having no blacks with Ph.D.s in science to having many? [1:15:00] So, it's amazing how one experience does inform another. It's very interesting, even to me.

[Laughs]

JM: Um-hmm. Let's pause just one quick sec.

FH: That is really –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

FH: Yeah.

JB: Yeah, we're on.

JM: We're back.

FH: Yes, yes.

JM: To finish up today, um, President Hrabowski, thank you for all this generous time.

FH: Sure, sure.

JM: Let me invite you to reflect a little bit here, as we close, on how you kind of take the measure of the history you've lived through and thought so much about, and the work you're doing now, and how you knit those two things together to define your work and your vision as you look ahead.

FH: Sure. You know, in 1963, only about two percent of African Americans had completed college. Today, we're moving towards twenty percent, seventeen or eighteen percent. But you didn't need a college education to get a good job. Today you need more education.

What was the Civil Rights Movement really about? Well, in very basic terms, it was about people wanting to have the opportunities that all other Americans have. But it really is about more than opportunity for this reason. Today people have the opportunity to go to college, and yet a lot don't. So, what's missing here?

It's about having families and communities that focus on education and on values and on dreams, and the connection between hard work and reaching the dreams. This is where we are challenged today. Many families, black and white, don't necessarily know what they need to do to help their children to develop the skills they need, the values, so they can get the education. And without the education, they continue to be in the underclass. And so, for privileged people of any race, all kinds of opportunities are available. So, for those of us in that top group – twenty-five or thirty percent – things are much better. They really are. And if we're not careful, we forget about those at the bottom.

There is the challenge that we face, to not be duped into thinking these things don't matter anymore. I would say race still matters, but I would add on I'm as concerned about poor white children as black children, that in either case unless somebody teaches those children to read well, the future won't be bright. That's the issue we face. And history has taught us that focus on education and values can make all the difference in the world.

JM: Thanks for being [clears throat] so generous to invite us here and –

FH: Sure.

JM: And spend this time with us. It has been a great privilege.

FH: It has been a privilege for me. You are quite good, both of you. Both of you – it's amazing. It's amazing.

JM: Thank you.

FH: Your videographer has such sensitivity, such – I mean I felt him. I –

[Recording ends at 1:17:59]

END OF INTERVIEW