Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Dr. John Elliott Churchville
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Location:	Dr. Churchville's home, suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Interviewer:	Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer:	John Bishop
Length:	2:32:47
Special notes:	Mrs. Nancy Churchville, Dr. Churchville's wife, was also present.

John Bishop: Okay, this is room tone for about twenty seconds. [Pause] Okay.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Friday, July 15, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

We're delighted to be in Philadelphia today with Dr. John Churchville. Thank you, Dr. Churchville, for inviting us to come by and spend some time with you. It's an honor and a privilege. Thank you.

John Churchville: Well, you're more than welcome.

JM: Thank you. Um, I thought I'd start today just, um, talking a little bit about, um, about your childhood –

JC: Okay.

JM: And your family, coming up in Philadelphia.

JC: Okay. Uh, all right, where should I start? I was born at a very early age. [Laughter] I think that's a good way to begin. Um, um, I guess, uh, I can think of a couple of incidents, uh, that were life-changing, so I'll talk about those.

Um, when I was in about the fifth – first of all, I was, um, I was born with, um, a very extreme case of myopia. So, um, I went to a sight-saving school. Back in those days, they had a sight-saving program. And when I was in about the fifth grade, um, I experienced my first, um, set of, of, uh, circumstances where I faced discrimination. And it's interesting, because I wasn't discriminated against because I was black, but because I was a sight-saver. [Laughs]

Um, in that school, we had, um – it was in a regular school. In fact, it was in T. M. Pierce School, which is a school in North Philadelphia. I believe it's at 23rd and Cambria, if I remember it correctly. And at that school, which was a, quote, "regular" school, um, they had a sight-saving program. And, of course, what sight saving was, is that our – we had larger print. You know, we would print larger – bigger lines.

And, uh, we had a safety patrol. But there was segregation in the school. The regular students were where they were. The sight-savers had their own lunchroom; sight-savers had their own safety patrol. I was on that safety patrol. Um, the, the problems of, um, of segregation, if you will, and discrimination, was that a regular safety could tell any student, sight-saver or regular, to do whatever they needed to do. But sight-saving safeties, and I was one of those, could only talk to sight-savers.

So, when I was in the fifth grade, I got very upset about it, talked to one of my teachers, and she suggested that I run for, um, student council and raise the issue there. So, an interesting thing occurred. I did run for student council, got on the student council. And, in fact, um, kind of ended up being president of student council and forgot completely about the issue that sent me there.

So, I took that as a learning experience, as I reflect back, um, that, um, the error that I made in fifth grade was to think that – to forget my identity. And my identity at that point was a sight-saver, and my role was to make sure that I fought for the best interests of sight-savers. Well, I got caught up in the fun of, uh, being accepted by the regulars, as the school president, and lost that focus. And so, that lesson, which of course I didn't learn in fifth grade, but [laughing] I certainly learned it afterwards, helped me to focus as an, as an older person, um, when I got – by the time I got to high school, I'd figured out where I had screwed up.

Uh, another, um, event when I was in seventh grade, um, that could have changed my life forever was, uh, being bullied. And people talk about bullying today – gee whiz, was I bullied! There was this guy – uh, I won't mention his name, may he rest in peace, but, um, he used to, uh, beat me up every day. And my first way of handling it [05:00] was to try to run away from him. Every time I'd try to get away from him, he would beat me and make it worse, because I avoided him. The next thing I tried was to fight him back. *That* was futile! [Laughs] He was bigger, badder, and better than me! [Laughs] And so, he would beat me worse.

In deep frustration, I talked to some student friends of mine. And I said, "Hey," I talked to my friend, um, and said, "Look, what am I going to do?" He – my friend referred me to a young man, um, who was of Ukrainian descent, who told me that he'd take care of it. Now, I've got to tell you about this guy. I'm not going to mention his name, but I've got to tell you about

my Ukrainian friend. He was, um, a Nazi. He, um, he, um, could just about quote verbatim *Mein Kampf*. He loved the ground Hitler walked on; he talked about him all the time. But there were some weird things about this young man.

JM: This was in high school?

JC: This is in – yeah!

JM: Yeah?

JC: The weird thing about him was, one, he wasn't blond-haired and blue-eyed. He was brown-haired and brown-eyed. And he wasn't a German; he was a Ukrainian. The second thing is his favorite teacher was Jewish and not the German teacher we had on staff, who was a rabid chauvinist. And, to show you how she felt about the black students in her class, she told us all we had to do was fly airplanes while she taught the white kids on the other side of the room. [Laughs] And Russell couldn't stand her. His best friend – oh, I shouldn't have mentioned his name, but it's okay! His best friend was not a German, but an African American. [Laughs] Uh, and, of course, he didn't come to the United States because he benefited from Nazism. So, I – he was kind of an anomaly, his whole – interests and everything.

But, anyway, what he did was, um, he told me he'd help me out. So, the next day he brought me a zip gun and he brought me some .22 caliber bullets. And he had made the gun for me for free and gave me the bullets for free. And that day I went home and determined how I would end the life of my torturer, uh, without so much as thinking about it. I mean I put the gun in my pocket and went to school the next day. And *this* day, I looked for my tormentor! And I found him in the schoolyard and asked him, "Why do you –" you know, "Why are you always messing with me? Why are you trying to make my life miserable?"

And he knew that I was too bold for [laughing] my recent behavior. So, he said, "Oh, you must have a gun! You must think you're going to hurt me!" And I hesitated. I was going to pull the gun out, and at that very moment, as he was coming toward me, I, for the first time, thought, "If I do this, I'm going to jail. And the *worst* thing that can happen, worse than jail, is I would disappoint my mother." And so, I didn't pull it.

He beat that day, but he beat me – I've described it as – the way he beat me was like a person who does their due diligence. It's like, "Because you did this, I have to – to save face, I have to do something to you." But it was not at the level that he usually would beat me. It was sort of like a show. He beat me – it wasn't hard; it didn't hurt. And he walked away and he never bothered me again. But six months later, he was dead. He was, um, he was member of a gang and he got killed.

So, what I learned from that was that I could have taken an action that would have ruined the rest of my life. And until the moment it hit me, I didn't even consider all those things that I considered on the day that it happened. So, those two – I would say that those two childhood memories, aside from the fact that those were the memories, those were memories that really shaped the way I think, helped shape the way, um, I deal with problems, uh, looking for solutions other than killing people.

Um, and the other person who was really strong in my life was, of course, my mother, um, who –

JM: Before – may I interrupt for just one quick sec?

JC: Sure.

JM: To follow-up on that, I have one question before you talk about your mom. Um, was that bully white or black?

JC: He was black.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. So, um, and, of course, in those days – the only notion I had about race in that time was the way my third grade teacher talked to me. Because one day, um – and, by the way, the guy who gave me the gun, we had gone to school – we stayed in sight-saving from second grade through eighth grade, [10:00] before people go to junior high school.

But in third grade, um, this German teacher said, um, said – looked at me and said, um, "How's your mammy?" And I felt funny about it. So, when I went home and told my mother that the teacher said, "How's my mammy," and there was something about the sound and the tone that wasn't cool, and my mother said, "Well, go back to school tomorrow and ask her how's *her* mammy." [Laughing] So, I mean, that's – but I knew there was something up. But, um, it was a mixed group of kids. I mean, we had black and white students, so I didn't have a sense – except for that teacher.

And the other thing, something else that we had to deal with in school when I was going to school, was our teachers and counselors. Except for the, um – I had two teachers that I remember, Mrs. Mains and Mrs. Korn – these were teachers who were very supportive, always encouraging us to go do whatever we needed to do. But there were counselors and other people who would constantly tell us, um, "Don't – you need to go to trade school. You need to go to – you know, don't try to go to college. You'll never be able to get anything. You'll never be able to go anywhere."

And there was one guy, um, when I was in the ninth grade – I remember him very specifically – one teacher, our social studies teacher, and I give him credit. He had his ideas about, you know, "Don't even think about –" he would just tell us straight up, "Don't even think

about –" you know, "Go to college if you want to, but don't think about getting a job or being able to do anything." "What I will teach you –" he didn't teach us social studies, but what he taught us was, and I give him credit to this day, he made us get newspapers and he taught us about the stock market. He said, you know, "Practice. Buy some stocks." You know, this was all, um, theoretical. And he would make us follow those stocks every single day. So, when we got out of his class, even though we knew no social studies, we knew how to invest in stocks. [Laughs]

So, I give him credit for at least giving us a skill that we could – and he was very clear about, you know, "The way money is made in the United State is – nobody gets rich from working a nine-to-five job. So, the way you're going to be able to do well is to get into the stock market. Start small and just keep doing it as a side thing. Keep doing it. Keep doing it, and you'll end up – if you believe what other people tell you, and you go after a job, and think you're going to work for twenty-five years, and you'll live on whatever they give you, the watch [i.e., a gold retirement watch] and whatever –" so, I give him credit for instilling in us, uh, uh – he gave us more social studies than the curriculum called for, but, uh, but I really appreciate that. That was a lesson that was really helpful.

Um, so I was going to go in and talk about the other major influence, um, on my life, which came up in that moment when I decided I'd better not use this gun. [Laughs] I absolutely love my mother! And I know every kid loves his mother. But because we were – we developed a friendship. Um, she was, uh – she was, she only had gone to high school, but she was well read. She was – she loved music. She was a musician. And we could get into these deep conversations about different things, um, and she was very open. She was very, um – she looked like a traditional person, but her mind was nontraditional. She was open to new ideas. She was

open to – she never made excuses for injustices, wherever they were. She was just a – you know, she was a person who, you know, read *Readers Digest*, you know, [laughs] read, you know, did this kind of stuff.

And so, she, she, um, she was a tremendous positive influence on my life. And she always – one of the things that she taught me so well was, "Always examine your motives. Whenever you think about doing anything, think about why you're doing it. You need to know why you're doing whatever it is you're doing. It may look like it's good to somebody else, but you need to know what your motives are. And examine those motives and make sure that they're in line with what's right." So, uh, she was, uh – uh, she was my best friend.

JM: Let's pause there just one sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're running again. [15:00]

JM: Okay. We're back on after a short break. Dr. Churchville, uh, you mentioned your mother was a musician, and I know that music would be very important for you as well. Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about her music, and how you came to –?

JC: Okay.

JM: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. She was, um – she, um, went to Temple [University] to take, um, music courses because she was, she was a singer. And, um, she had an opportunity as a singer – I don't know who the impresario was, but there was somebody who heard about her and offered her an opportunity to do whatever operatic people do. And she turned it down on the basis that she wanted to raise her children and she wanted to, you know, just do that.

But, in the meantime, she had a choir called the Village Concert Choir. And we lived in the heart of North Philadelphia, and on summer nights you could hear this choir of maybe ten to fifteen people singing Bach or Mozart or some other thing, um, Negro spirituals as well. I mean, it was a fully rounded thing, and so, there was a sense in which she brought, if you will, culture to the neighborhood. And people would just come outside and just listen, um, as, you know, as the group was rehearsing and singing.

She also had – you know, did individual piano lessons and voice lessons. And I kind of learned – uh, there was a time when she got ill and there were students coming, and I kind of figured out how I could fake [laughs], uh, fake doing the teaching. And it was easy because I was around a lot, um, and I would hear, you know, Saturday after Saturday, people coming, making the same mistakes, and so, what I would do – uh, when they were doing their piano. So, I would kind of – I got in the habit of knowing what the right chords were, [laughing] what the right changes were, what the right notes were, so that when I had to sit in for her, the student had no clue that I couldn't play. [Laughs] But I could say, "No, that's E-sharp. You keep – you know." I'm sorry, "That's E-flat. You keep playing E natural, and that's why it doesn't work out. You've got to play E-flat. That's better." So, I would sit there, and the student would think, "Oh, this guy knows – you know, he's young but he knows what he's doing."

Well, her music, um, influenced me. I was very interested in music when I was in high school. But the time I had gotten to be a senior in high school, um, I was in the Simon Gratz High School choir. I used to direct it when Joy Goins Smith, who was our directress – um, she was notoriously, uh, may she rest in peace, but she was notoriously late whenever we had our concerts and recitals. And so, uh, gee whiz, I would, um, be the one who would conduct the choir on those occasions when she was a half-hour late, and we needed to go on [laughing] and

do what we were doing. Um, so, um I got very interested. I, um – in fact, I won a music scholarship to Temple University.

Um, and we had this group of teenagers who would sing, um – you know, we did pieces. In fact, one summer we put together, uh, the, uh, operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*. And we just kind of put it together and went up there in Germantown at, uh – I was still living in North Philly, but there was a Germantown Women's Club or something. There was a place where there was a stage, and we could – we just did the whole thing with the costumes and got people to come. It was a kind of fun, [clock begins chiming] it was a kind of fun thing. Um, so that's one of my happy music memories. The other thing, too, is I started playing –

JM: Let's just wait – excuse me, let's wait just a sec for the bells, chimes, on the hour here?

JC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back after a short break for the chiming of the clock. Uh, Dr. Churchville, you were talking about, uh, the performance and moving towards Temple.

JC: Okay. I, uh, won a music scholarship to Temple University on two grounds, I think, more so than my musical ability. Uh, because of my eyes, I didn't really see the notes on the paper very well. I'm extremely, was extremely nearsighted. But I had a great ear, [20:00] and if you played it, or I heard it, I could get it. Um, and I never formally, even though my mother tried to teach me, I learned how to read music by following the notes. I mean, it was [laughs] – if there was a jump, I jumped. I mean, [laughs] and once I knew I was in the key, and if it wasn't, you know, if it wasn't, um, um, a flat that should be natural or a, you know, a note that

should be sharp, I mean, I could pretty much, if I, if you gave me a piece of music and you started it, I could pretty much do it. And it appeared to people as if I could read extremely well, but I was just using, using my head. Um, and in fact, maybe reading music is just that [laughs], but anyway, um.

JM: Was that fall of '59 that you started at Temple?

JC: Yeah, fall of '59.

JM: Yeah.

JC: So, I went to Temple and, uh, stayed there for about a year and a half, uh, moved, left – I use the word "quit-uated." I "quit-uated" from Temple University and, um had an opportunity to just move to New York and get away. I was about nineteen at the time, and it was time for me to leave Philly. I mean, what's a nineteen-year-old still living in his mother's house for? That didn't make any sense to me, so I moved out, um, and moved to New York, um, 318 East 4th Street. I remember that address. Lived in the East Village – ah, it's called East Village now. It was Lower East Side when I was there [laughs] and really, um, really loved it.

It was, um, it was a whole new education. I mean, I ran into people who were Marxists and poets and musicians and artists and black nationalists, and just a whole range of people. I mean, I met French people and, you know, just a whole, uh, group of people, um, who were very different than the people I grew up with, and it was just absolutely wonderful. I was just enamored. I was, um – you know, I'd go to the Pink Pussycat and, [laughs] in the Village, and listen to poetry and, you know, go through the whole – it was just – it was heaven on earth. What can I tell you? [Laughs] Uh, and I met, met musicians. And I used to do, while I was in New York, I did some playing. I was a jazz pianist and, uh, did some playing, but mostly I was listening and just kind of learning and kind of enjoying the thing.

JM: Um-hmm. Would you – I'm sorry.

JC: Go ahead.

JM: Would you have said – before your arrival in New York, were you, had you – was your household a political household? Were you someone of – kind of a political kid, young man?

JC: No, not really. I was the, sort of the radical – um, I used to have these little discussions with my mother about the church, for example, as being gutless and irrelevant and, um – and she was, you know, her thing was, "Hey, I love Jesus!" Um, you know? "You got any problems with him? You know, I agree with you one hundred percent. The church *is* –" so, I mean, I couldn't do much arguing. [Laughs] "You got any problems with Jesus personally?" "No, not really, but what Christians have –!" "Yeah, I agree. Yeah, the Crusades were horrible, you know, I mean. He would not have sanctioned that." So, that was the thing.

And before I left – I guess I should say this – on the religious side, um, when I was about seventeen or eighteen, I became a Muslim, an Ahmadhyia Muslim.

JM: Wow.

JC: And, um, to show you how cool my mom was, her thing was, "Hey, whatever gets you to take a bath and put clean clothes on [laughs], I'm fine with it! So, um, gee whiz, you know, you want to wash five times a day? Please, be my guest!" So, she was, she would let me, she would do some of the recipes that I had learned, you know, get, and she would cook them for me and enjoyed it. She was so comfortable in her own skin and in her own beliefs that her thing was, "Explore! Do what you need to do! And if – *and* if you can tell me Islam is better than Jesus, I'll switch." [Laughs] I mean, that was her line.

JM: What had drawn you towards Islam?

JC: Um, I met a guy who was, um, really sharp. [25:00] He was young, maybe a year older than me. And he'd come around and he would talk about black history and he would talk about, um, Islam and Islamic history and stuff that went on. And, you know, it was like, "Wow! You mean the Moors that I've read about were black people, and they created the culture that is in Spain today? When I look at all those beautiful things out of Spain, that black people –? You mean to tell me the stuff I read in my textbooks that blacks have not made any contribution, uh, to culture and the world, uh, except for their dances, uh, and minstrel shows – wow!" So, I mean, that was the catalyst.

And it was, it was a different identity. It was, it was fun! He was young. I was young. And, by the way, my Muslim name is Yahia Abdul Hamid. Um, and um, so, that was who I was for a period. Um, I'm very much John Elliott Churchville these days, but I, I, I always give people credit for what they bring to my life and how they enrich my life. You'll find I'm very eclectic, uh, in my learnings and my appreciation for stuff. Anyway, um, so I did that and then I moved to New York.

And through all of this, and it's one of the reasons why I love my mother so much, she was so open. She was never threatened by anything, um, that I came up with. She was just very supportive of me. And after I, um – when I had been in New York for a while, I had this opportunity to go south. This is where the SNCC story starts.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JC: I had this opportunity. Um, I was working as a janitor at, um, at uh, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in Harlem. And, um, there was this bus that needed to go down to, um, somewhere in Georgia, but it wasn't Atlanta. I don't – there was a – SNCC was having some kind of retreat, and the bus was supposed to be delivered to them. And, um, I kind of lost

my job. And there were people living in my – one of the negative sides of running into all these wonderful people that I met is people were always looking for a place to crash. They never paid rent. [Laughing] They just came, ate my food, stayed in the spot, brought their friends, and I was at a point where, you know, there were like five people in my apartment, um, that I was responsible for the rent for. And, um, it was rent control – I think it was something like fifty bucks a month. It was ridiculous.

But anyway, um, I decided, "I don't have anything to do. I'm not working. I'm not planning to go back to school now. I mean, sure, I'll get on the bus and take a ride." I mean, it was purely a matter of taking a ride. So, I went with some other guys, and we went down. And when we got to, um, Georgia, I was really impressed by the young people that I met, who were my age and white and black, and they're like all college students, and they're talking about freedom, justice and equality. And I'm like, "Okay, I can buy this."

So, I, um, I hooked up with Reverend Charles Sherrod, who, uh, ran the Albany Project. In fact, I just heard or read that, uh – I believe that he's still in Albany.

JM: He is.

JC: Yeah. I haven't seen him in many years. But, uh, I was under his tutelage and under his wing. I know I was a mess. But anyway, [laughs] at the time I went and I went to Albany, we would – and I was assigned to Lee County and Terrell County. And later, I also worked in – and I don't remember what county it's in. I don't remember whether it's Lee or Terrell or some other county, but I worked in – oh, it must be, maybe it's Sumter County – Americus.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Is that in Sumter County?

JM: I'm not certain, but I think that's true.

JC: Okay.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Okay. Um, I had – well, some interesting things had happened when I was with SNCC. First of all –

JM: Yeah, please. Please take some time and lay out the character of all this.

JC: Okay, um, interesting things. Charles Sherrod was an interesting guy, to begin with, um, and he was just a die-hard integrationist, I mean, he just – the whole notion of black and white together. So, it was interesting.

With my experiences, when I had been in New York – what I didn't mention is when I was, while I was in New York, and I had this Ahmadhyia Muslim background, and then when I got to New York, I would spend, um, days and evenings up at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue [30:00] in front of Micheaux's Bookstore and listen to the Nationalists give their speeches, and I met Malcolm X, and I went to Temple No. 7 and stayed. And I was just so impressed. This guy was so brilliant. And, uh, that's another thing, I mean: I like smart people. I just – [laughs] I love smart people!

Anyway, after the service was over, I went up to him and I said, "Minister Malcolm, tell me about your life." And he said something that really – he said, "My life is irrelevant. Where I've come from and where I am now is irrelevant. What matters is that we as a people get our act together and forge ahead and do something, you know, for ourselves and stop waiting on other people to do things for us." And that just – the humility, the – and he was hot stuff, in terms of the press; I mean, everybody was vilifying him, but he was hot stuff. I mean, everybody was, you know, "Malcolm! Malcolm!"

And his whole demeanor was, "I don't matter. Getting *your* head straight matters; [laughing] getting the rest of our heads together matters." And that just stuck; it just rang in my head. So, when I went down to SNCC – I was a black nationalist by the time I went down to SNCC.

JM: And Sherrod understood you that way?

JC: He understood me that way.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. I *think* he understood me that way. Yeah, he had to, because I had a white partner. And when I went out with my white partner to register people to vote, the black people that we dealt with would always look to the white partner, because they were dealing with the power symbol. And from a purely, um, egocentric point of view, it was bad enough to be in the North and ignored by white folk. And it was just intolerable to be ignored by my own folk! [Laughs] It just – I couldn't take it.

So, I went back to Charles Sherrod. I said, "Look, man, I need a black partner. I don't want to do this with a white partner." And I, and I, and I had no problems – this was not personal. It was business. I mean, I loved every person that I met in SNCC. Um, it wasn't that. It was that I needed to work with a black partner and I had a way – I believed that I had a way of getting more young black people to register to vote. And so, Sherrod came up with this deal, "If you can get more people – I'll give, I'll let you do that, but if you can't register more people than you can with the partner that I gave you, you've got to go back." I said, "Fine! I'll do that."

So, um, I got a black partner, and that's when we started working in, um, Americus. And at the time – this is really fun stuff here. At, [laughs] at the time, there was, if you can believe

this, there was a gang war going on in Americus, Georgia. I mean, we're trying to register people to vote, and in the black community you've got these two teenage black gangs at war.

And I just went in the middle of a gang fight and started screaming and hollering, "You dumb [makes noise to imply insult]!" And they just stopped. I said, "This is what white folks want you to do! Why are you doing this?! We're here to help you to register so you can get some power for real and stop fighting each other."

They stopped gang warring. We were able to recruit them to first [laughs] register themselves, and then to negotiate a peace treaty and help us go out and recruit, um, people to register and vote. If I had tried that in North Philly, I'd have been dead today. [Laughs] But anyway, so that was kind of a fun thing.

JM: Did that feel like a success, that you were really making some difference?

JC: Oh, man! That was, that was, um – and it was the black talk, it was the black rap, it was the reason – the rationale for voting is not to integrate. The rationale for voting is to build a power base so you can elect people who look like you to office, who will do for you what people who don't look like you will do. And that's – so that was – for, for me that was the beginning of what I call Black Power.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And that was not looked on, um, lightly or nicely by the SNCC folks, um, but they tolerated me. And I give – I give, um, Charlie Sherrod, uh, a great deal of, uh, of respect for, for putting up with me, given his own, his own views. And I think that, uh – and he was always, you know, he was always, you know, "You're rebelling! You're rebelling! [Laughs] Churchville, you're always rebelling! You're rebelling!" [Laughter] [35:00] But, uh, but he allowed me to be who I was.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And, uh, so that was, um, you know, that was a success.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Um, I stayed with SNCC – then there was – the summer came up, where, where, um – Schwerner – uh, you know what I'm trying to say.

JM: Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner [Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael "Mickey" Schwerner]?

JC: There you go.

JM: '64.

JC: '64. No, that was '63. It had to – or maybe it was earlier. Was it earlier? I think it was – it wasn't '63?

JM: No, it was '64, for those three. Freedom Summer, yeah?

JC: Yeah. Because that's – because I believe – well, I must have come up after that. Anyway, I was in Mississippi during – when did, um, [Viola] Liuzzo, um –?

JM: That was a little later. That was '65, because that was on the way back from Montgomery after the Selma-Montgomery March.

JC: Okay, well, I wasn't there. I know I – my sense is that I left SNCC in '63. But anyway, I was in Mississippi –

JM: That's what your – that's what your printed resume says, yeah.

JC: Yeah. Well, you know, I mean, I may have the years – but I know that I was in Philly by the summer of '64.

JM: Right.

JC: I know that.

JM: Right, right.

JC: I know that I was in Mississippi at the COFO [Council of Federated Organizations], uh, Freedom School –

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JC: Teaching, um, literacy.

JM: In Greenwood.

JC: In Greenwood, Mississippi. I know I was there. And I think the reason that we were sent there was because there was an assault, and I'm thinking it was the three civil rights workers that caused us to move in, because we were moving in, I thought, after that. But, you know, my, my –

JM: There was plenty of other violence, unfortunately.

JC: Yeah. Well, anyway, there was stuff that went on –

JM: May I interrupt? Before you, before we shift to Greenwood, because I want to spend a lot of time on that, too, tell me a little bit more. I want to ask – southwest Georgia was mean and nasty and hard.

JC: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

JM: And you guys were in the thick of a lot of difficult stuff.

JC: Yes.

JM: Terrible violence.

JC: Absolutely.

JM: How did you manage through that? How did you –?

JC: Um.

JM: What did you tell yourself to get up in the morning, and how did it feel?

JC: Well, it was easy to get up in the morning. Fear will get you up. [Laughs] I was never – I have never been so scared. In fact, I blame my high blood pressure on my experiences in southwest Georgia. Um, it was scary, but at the same time – here's what's so awesome. When you are with people, who are committed to something that's good, and you're not the only one who is afraid – everybody is scared – you start singing. I mean, from the time I was there, Jesus was the man! You understand? [Laughs] I was a Muslim, but I did not pray to Allah when I was in southwest Georgia! I prayed to Jesus!

[Laughs] I had no – in fact, I had the nerve at one, um, at one, um, church meeting, a deacon prayed some nonsense. And I stood up and I said, "You know, we're in this real situation, and you are – you don't believe what you're talking about." You know, [laughs] I just kind of castigated this guy – I mean, young arrogant kids will do that to you all the time. But anyway, I kind of castigated him, um, for, you know, and offered instead a real prayer based on fear and, "Look, God, *help* us!" The Klan was outside. They're talking about burning the church down. We don't need the old [speaking in deep voice] "Father, God, in whom the world" – no, we need HELP! You know, get it real! [Laughing] Get to the point! God knows what's happening!

So, that was interesting. That was an interesting experience. But, yeah, um, the whole crew – I always separated my ideological concerns about blacks and whites from my personal stuff. It was never personal for me. Um, I love people, you know, and – but anyway, go ahead.

JM: In this time, did you develop a sense of and an opinion about SCLC and Reverend King?

JC: Oh, God, yes!

JM: Yeah, tell me about that.

JC: Well, I mean, as – part of it because of youth and part of it because – I mean, as far as *I* was concerned, Martin was, uh – you know, he was too easy, he was too light, he was not on point. Part of my anger, which I picked up from SNCC folks, was here we are in Albany, trying to clean up after his mess. He wouldn't even *stay* because it wasn't working. SNCC stayed, and, and, and continued to try to work when the cameras weren't there. [40:00]

And so, that was a source of, uh – in fact, it was – in fact, I have to admit that it was only at his death that I was wondering why I was mourning so much, because I always held it against him. I always had issues with him about the Mississippi Democratic Party and the role that he played in trying to get them to line up to the Democratic Party and not let them do what they needed to do. [Sighs] So –

JM: Yeah.

JC: Um, so I had real issues. It was only at his death that I said, "Oh, God, this was my brother! And I may disagree with his tactics, but – you know." Unfortunately, I got to respect him after his demise, uh, but had very little respect for him prior to it."

JM: Yeah. Were you ever – oh, you want to take a little break? Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: Okay, we're back after a short break. Um, can you tell me a little bit more about, um, some of the things that stand out in your memory about the people you met in southwest Georgia and the communities you went into and –?

JC: Yeah. I think the communities that most affected me – well, first of all, I fell in love with the people in Albany. I remember our mass meetings on Monday nights, if I'm not mistaken. Again – but it was one regular night every week. And there was one time when a

preacher came to the meeting. And, um, he started talking about the fact that the governor had given him a letter that allows him to travel anywhere in Georgia on the roads and not be molested. He can give it to the, you know, Georgia state police if something happens.

And somebody in the crowd, and I think it was Charlie Sherrod, said, [speaks in loud whisper] "Watch him!" And then he started talking some more, and then you heard another, "Watch him!" And it was sort of like knowing that this is a plant. Here's a guy that's trying to tell us, "Cease and desist." And so, different people would say different things at different times as he's talking, um, so that it's more and more clear that this guy is on the other side. He's just sitting in here to try to keep us from doing – and then we just started singing. And we sang whatever the song was and just drowned him out, the whole church, [sings] "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round," and we went right into that [laughs]. And, uh, that's still a favorite song of mine. Um, and, um, he just went and sat down. So, that, that was a thing.

The other thing, in terms of community, um, you would think that the people who made the change and who had the guts in those communities were the young people. It is not so. It was the older folks who were determined that they would not have their children and grandchildren live the life that they lived. And it used to make me angry that the kids didn't want to hear what we were talking about, by and large, except for Americus. Americus was a special case. But the kids, um, in the communities that we went to didn't want to be bothered. But the older, the grandmothers, um, would listen to us and would want the best for their kids and their grandkids, and they were the ones who were taking the risks.

I remember one incident that really upset me. I've never really gotten over it. We were in one community in southwest Georgia, and I don't even remember whether it was Lee County, Terrell County, somewhere. And we were called out to this, um, house where the mother told us

that the sheriff, um, who was notorious, Dunaway. He was just a notorious, horrendous guy. He had grabbed her son, who worked in a white store, doing something. And the, um, the baker – a bakery truck driver had raped the boy's sister. All right? The sheriff – and I guess the boy tried [45:00] to tell the sheriff or tried to tell – the sheriff pulled out a gun, put it to the boy's head, and said, "If you open your mouth about this, I'll blow your head off, *and* I will tell the guy you're working for that you molested his daughter."

And I was livid! And the feeling of not being able to do anything – that the *law*, the person who represents the *law* – you just, you – how can you go to the sheriff who says, "I'll kill you," and the other side of it is, "I won't kill you. I'll let the guy who's, uh – you'll be lynched." And I remember feeling that, that pain and that, that angst – that, um, rage. And there was nowhere I could put it. There was nothing we could – we couldn't tell. Um, the other frustrating thing was when the FBI guys would come down they did nothing. You could talk to them; they went back and told the sheriff whatever you said. They weren't trying to protect you. They were – they had no interest.

Um, it was just very frustrating to work in a situation where all you had was your colleagues, the only people who believed in what it was that you believed in – and the people. And again I go back to that thing. One of the things that kept me in – you know, I was scared enough to run the first day. I've always told people that I have back problem, and, um, if you look at it, you'll see a yellow streak all the way up. [Laughs] But I felt – I can leave, but they can't. You know, I can't – at this point, I just can't – I'll be scared with them, because they have a lot more to lose than I do. Uh, but I remember that, and that was *extremely* frustrating, extremely frustrating, and we'd hear about atrocities everyday that, um, never came to the light

of day. And we'd hear about them, and people would tell us about them, some things we'd even see, and there'd be nothing you could do. So, that was the – that was the gripper.

JM: When you moved on to Mississippi from southwest Georgia, did you go in a mood of ambivalence about your prospects? Americus had been something of a success and you'd moved forward, but all this other, this pattern of lawlessness and violence and, um, despair. Um, what was your mood that you took with you to Mississippi, your perspective on this mode, this style of effort to change things?

JC: Well, um, I was really – well, let me just say this to you. There were two strains that were going on in SNCC, um, two camps. There was a direct action camp, which was focused around, um, demonstrations, sit-ins, and then, there was the voter registration camp. I chose the voter registration camp, because I saw that as a way out. I couldn't see demonstrating, um, as a way out. I saw no future in demonstrating. I couldn't see myself getting beat in the head for nothing. If I'm getting beat in the head because I'm trying to get people registered to vote, at least there's something. But to get beat in the head to eat some food that somebody's probably spit in, I couldn't – that just didn't connect.

So, I was happy to be involved. I mean, I was appalled that black folks had to take a Constitutional *test*, and, my God, lawyers can't understand the Constitution! I mean, you know, it's – you can get all – I mean, [laughing] there are experts in Constitutional Law who disagree about what something means. Uh, so, um, but it was a challenge to just work with what I could work with. It's like when you're in an impossible situation – this is another lesson that I learned – when you're in an impossible situation, you just do what's in front of you.

I mean, I couldn't even think about future. I couldn't think about where is this going. It was just, "I'm here right now. These folks are here right now. I'm going to give them the best I

got. I'm going to encourage them. I'm going to help them." I mean, I didn't think through to – even if they know the right answers, the people, when they take the test, they're going to tell them, "You got it wrong." I didn't even go there. It was like, "Give them what you have. Give it all you've got." And, um, just – it's like, "Walk, put one foot in front of the other. Don't think about the outcome. Don't worry about the end of the road. Just take steps."

And that's what was my mindset. And I was quite, um – I had [50:00] consoled myself with this. This was – I was quite – I guess, in a real sense, that was probably one of the – my SNCC experience was probably the first time I was living in the moment. Before then and after then, I've always thought about, "What's next? What, what – where is this going? Where is it leading? What, what's the endgame?" I'm always thinking about that. Right now, I'm thinking about what's the – not for this, [laughs] but for other things that I'm involved in, "Where am I going? And where is the endgame? And how do I make steps to guarantee that I get there?"

But in southwest Georgia and Mississippi, I got the *privilege* – and I can say it now, looking back – the privilege of actually living in the moment. I couldn't go beyond that moment. I had to live every minute of it and was, was, was satisfied to do that.

JM: Yeah. Was Mississippi, in essence, a continuation of the same type of experience, or any substantial shift?

JC: Well, the difference was, of course, that I wasn't doing direct getting people to go down to the polls and vote. I was teaching people literacy. Um, and it was, um – it was just a different, a different mode, and, and one that I quite liked. In fact, that got me, when I came back to Philadelphia, I started a school. [Laughs]

JM: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JC: That was sort of my introduction to, "Hey, you like teaching! Why don't you do it?"

JM: One more question about all that before we move and turn our focus towards Philadelphia. Um, are there folks who stand out? Um, you've mentioned Reverend Sherrod. Are there other folks who stand out? I'm also interested in what were some of the interesting gender and racial dynamics, because you had some white volunteers, you had some women in the mix, and I'm interested in your thoughts when you think back on that.

JC: Yeah, uh, well, Sherrod sticks out. Diane Nash Bevel, um, who was, you know, just the, sort of the sweetheart of the movement. Uh, uh, Bernice [Johnson] Reagon, who was not only singing, um, but brought something, uh, to the movement – um, Bernice sticks out. Uh, Faith Holsart, who was in our camp, um, sticks out. Uh, Bob Mantz, who I worked with, who was – well, he sticks out. And again, you're dealing with a memory. [Laughs] Oh, man, um, fifty years ago! But there are certain people who – and I'm trying to think. When this is all over, and you're gone, I will remember other names.

JM: Yeah.

JC: But those are, those are people who, um, who, um – and then, there were community folks. Eddie, whose last name I don't remember, but I worked with Eddie. Eddie, um, Eddie put up with a lot of mess from me. I teased him a lot, and we – we, um – [sighs] I won't tell that story. But anyway, [laughs] – um, but there were – oh, well, uh, Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner. See, it just comes.

JM: Yeah.

JC: But there were just – there were – oh, and John Lewis! And I'll say this, what I – I disagreed with John Lewis's view, but I respected him, because he – if you awakened John at three o'clock in the morning and asked him what his principles was – were – he would tell you. Whether he was asleep, awake, he would say what he had to say, he would stick by it, and no

matter what criticism he got, he would not come back at you. He would let you do that. And I just – and *to this day*, I respect John. I mean, John Lewis would have to do something absolutely horrendous, I mean, he'd have to do something – he's have to kill fifty thousand people, and the first few people he killed, I'd say, "Well, you know, there's got to be some residual – [laughs]." But he would have to really do something really atrocious for me to say, "That's not the John Lewis I knew." He was, um, a kind of weird inspiration. I disagreed with his views, his view about, you know, us together.

JM: Soul Force? [55:00]

JC: Yeah. No, well, Soul Force, I liked that. It's just the integration. I had issues – I saw a difference between justice and, um – integration was not necessary. Um, I saw justice as necessary, and justice – people can choose to integrate on a personal level, that's fine. And, um, but the economy has to be open to people, and people need to have, you know, opportunities to live their lives without being held out. But that's not integration. That's economic justice. And so, I had – you know, I'm a category person, um, so I had separate categories.

But what I loved about John is that he was *passionate* – I mean, this was stuff – this wasn't, um, a script that he – he didn't say what he said because the cameras were there. This is – this guy talked this stuff when he's sitting alone with you. He said the same thing in front of the cameras. He would not back off, he would say what – and I just *respected* him for that, um, and loved him for that. So, he's a guy that – which shows you can disagree with somebody and really, really respect them.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JC: And he's one I take my hat off to, still.

JM: Yeah. What, um, what collection of factors drew you back towards Philadelphia in '63?

JC: Ah! Here comes the other story! Uh, there was a point that I got in SNCC where it was like, "Look, this is not working for me. This is not." I went back to Atlanta and there I joined the Nation of Islam and became a Black Muslim this time. Um, and I, um, joined the mosque in Atlanta and I was, I was trying to recruit SNCC people [laughing] to the mosque. And Jeremiah X [Jeremiah Shabazz] was the minister there.

And I, um, immediately started trying to do some organizing in Atlanta in a place called Buttermilk Bottom. At the time, Buttermilk Bottom had no paving on that street, in a very poor black community. And my theory was, because I was a true believer in the sense that I felt that the Black Muslims could do, were exactly what black people needed. They needed to focus on developing themselves and stop trying to be nice to white folks. Let's just do what we need to do. And, uh, so, I, I, I was active in trying to organize Buttermilk Bottom.

JM: For the mosque?

JC: For the mosque, yeah. Well, actually it was – when I say, "For the mosque –" yeah, I guess it was. And Jeremiah was very open to my ideas, because my thing was, "Look, man, we don't need to have everybody being Black Muslims. That's not – shouldn't be our goal, to recruit everybody. We need communities in Atlanta who will stand up for us, so that when you make a pronouncement, and the press starts messing with you, you've got community people who say, 'Hey, we think he's a great guy and we support what he has to say,' and that will make them back off." And so, he said, "Okay." He let me do that.

And so, what I tried to do was to develop some kind of small little economic program. I hated selling *Muhammad Speaks* newspapers. I didn't like selling newspapers. That's not – I've

never been a salesman. I tried and failed miserably, uh, both in insurance and something else, [laughs] in securities. But anyway, um, so I tried to organize young people, um, and I had to get permission from the Chicago headquarters. And when I tried to get permission from Chicago, I was turned down.

And that's when I first started feeling funny, because, like, "Hey, wait a minute. Then, you're, you're not what you're advertised to be, because I came on the advertisement that you care about us and you want to see us develop. And we're talking about businesses, and here we have an opportunity where we can give kids, um, um – they can sell papers and make money. I don't need to, you know, I don't need to do that. I can work at something else. I mean, I'm not selling papers to make money. I'm selling papers to get the word out."

So, in the meantime, I met some – I started going to Atlanta University and talking to people and trying to recruit college students for the mosque, because my view was a little bit, uh, um, with, uh, my friend, uh, [W.E.B.] Du Bois, I mean, we had a "Talented Tenth" that we need to tap, you know, I mean, you know. Um, so I was able to work, and we got some other, um, professionals in the mosque, which I thought was a kind of big deal.

So, three of us [1:00:00], three of *them*, and me got together – I mean, I wasn't, I was nowhere near where these guys were. But we had a mathematician. We had an economist, a guy who was working on his Ph.D. in economy, uh, uh, economics. And, uh, uh, there was – I've forgotten right now what the other one was. But, I mean, these are guys who have studied and who are at the University and who are Muslims.

And, you know, they came up with a project to, uh, you know, just be a little bit more proactive. It was like, well, we've got an opportunity here. We've got – we had Jeremiah, so he was – you know, when anything happened in Atlanta, the press would come over, "Jeremiah,

what do you say?" I mean, that was like a big deal in those days. I mean, it was, "We'll listen to these other people, but we want to hear what you have to say." And so, anyway, these guys came up with this proposal and flew it up to – I mean, I expected mine to go down. I mean, who am I? These guys flew it up to Chicago and *it* got shot down.

And at that moment, I continued to be a Muslim. I loved Jeremiah, because he was just a good guy. He had – um, he was very personable. I mean, I'd hear him preach and say certain things, and then we would talk privately. And he was just, he was just a – he was a good guy. Uh, so, at that point, I was losing interest in the Black Muslim movement and, uh, ready to come back to Philly. And it just so happened – and it was just sort of happenstance – that he got transferred. They wanted somebody else, who he didn't like, to take over Atlanta, after he had built it up. [Laughs] We doubled the size of the mosque. Uh, and he got sent to Philadelphia.

And it was just natural. He said, "Hey, John, come with me back to Philly. I'll make you –" because I was secretary of the mosque down there – "I'll make you secretary of the mosque. You'll be okay." I came, come back to Philly with that in mind. And what happened politically, there was somebody else who was the secretary here. And then, the politics – Jeremiah had to tell, and I know he didn't just tell me that, because he was really straight with me. He would tell me, "Look, man."

I remember one time I got very emotional about the Messenger and I was talking about how wonderful – and he said, he said, "John, get a grip." [Laughs] "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is just a guy, man." You know. "Don't tell anybody I told you that. [Laughs] Don't get carried away." And now, he would *tell* me that. You know, I just appreciated his honesty.

So, I knew when he told me, "You'll be secretary," he meant – when he got back, he was like, came to my – I was at my mother's, back at my mother's. And he said, "John, I, I can't make you secretary. The Messenger wants the guy that's there to stay. It's out of my hands." So, I said, "Okay."

And immediately – I think I was back in town maybe a week or two, and I hooked up with the Northern Student Movement. I mean, I had to be – and I went to North Philly and I, you know, was familiar with North Philly. And I went over to an area of North Philly that I hadn't been in before, around Ridge Avenue, uh, Ridge and Jefferson, and there was a building available.

And I said, "Hey, we need to come up with a project in the Northern Student Movement that, um, is a library" – we called it the Freedom Library, NSM Freedom Library – "which will be, which will have books by and about black people." Because my argument was the reason that black people are not functioning the way they should is because they have low self-esteem, they don't know their history, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. And at this point I had completely discounted the whole notion of racism. I mean, I didn't address it that way. I mean, you know, just – all my meetings with my Communist colleagues didn't help me with that. I was busy dealing with other issues, but anyway, um, so, um, I, I put in a proposal. I went to the Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation and asked for a grant.

That same summer there was a riot in North Philadelphia. And, um, every store on our, on Ridge Avenue got broken into except Freedom Library, um, because it was a storefront, and we had the globe with hands around it, and it just said "NSM Freedom Library." And it wasn't attacked, which was just kind of interesting, because they got the barbershop next door. Why are you going to hit the barbershop? But, anyway, um, so after the riots, Dolfinger-McMahon came

through with a twelve-hundred-dollar grant. [1:05:00] I guess it was a lot of money in those days. [Laughs] I don't remember.

Uh, and then, um, what was that? That was like '64. So, when I left the Nation of – I was still in the mosque, uh, but I was not active. I mean, I would go on Sundays. I supported, uh, Minister Jeremiah, because he was a friend. He was a really good guy. And then the stuff happened, and I'm kind of fuzzy about the dates. But Malcolm left, either had left or left.

JM: Had left – spring of '64.

JC: Okay. And so, I went up to New York. I met with him.

JM: Met with Malcolm X?

JC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And, um, you know, it was like, "Okay, let me help hook up the Philly chapter." And the guys – [sighs] anyway. The people I met in Philly who were supposed to be part of this thing were, were, uh – I don't know who they were. I don't know. I'm not going to say they were agents. I'm not going to say. They were the shakiest people I had ever met.

JM: These folks were supposed to be associated with –?

JC: Malcolm.

JM: With Malcolm.

JC: Yeah. And, um, so anyway, I joined the, uh, the Organization of African American Unity and put a picture of Malcolm in the window. Well, when I did that, and word got back to Jeremiah, he went to my mother and he said, "Please tell your son –" I mean, that was the time when if you got out of the Nation of Islam and followed Malcolm, you were writing a death sentence for yourself. You were going to get yourself hurt.

Well, I'm glad that Jeremiah was my friend, because he told the people at the Fruit of Islam, "Don't touch him." And he begged my mother, "Please talk to John! Don't let him continue with this stuff. He could get hurt." And he was pacing up and down. She told me, when I, uh, talked to her about it later, he was pacing up and down the floor. You know, "I can't be there to protect him every step of the way," you know.

So, um, um, they, um – the mosque had lent me chairs – had given me chairs and tables for the Freedom Library, and they just came and took them, took them back. But they didn't touch the building. They didn't touch me. They followed orders, which I – so, to this day, even though Minister Jeremiah has passed away, he's another guy who I absolutely love, respect. I've got to tell you one other incident with him that comes up later.

JM: Please, please, yeah.

JC: There was a time when I converted to Christianity.

JM: In this midst?

JC: Um, it was around '66.

JM: Okay.

JC: Yes, it's within that timeframe.

JM: All right.

JC: But two years later, uh, because that was '64. In'66, I converted, but this was like a personal conversion type thing where I had an encounter, um, where I realized that, "Hey, Jesus is real!" I mean, it was really – I wasn't in church. I mean, this was, you know, in a house, in my house. But, um, it came a time when I had to debate Jeremiah X. [Laughs] And it was the funniest debate that you'd ever want to see, because I stood up there and talked about how wonderful, all the good things I learned from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, how great

Jeremiah X was, what a friend he was. And, I mean, I just told the truth. I learned so much from them. I mean, every encounter – I mean, I don't leave an organization and then trash it, because there was good stuff that I learned. I learned about myself. I learned, uh, about possibilities for us that, that I would never have gotten any other place, never would have gotten it from church, for heaven's sake.

And so, at that debate, I just talked about – I just preached Jesus, basically, and said, "Hey, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad is good. When I was a Muslim, I believed in Allah with all my heart and soul. But, um, I didn't have an internal, uh, witness or knowledge that God was with me." And so, when Jeremiah got up –

JM: This is a public scenario?

JC: This is a public scenario. And the Fruit of Islam is standing around, wanting to hurt me, because how dare I debate with – and I don't know who set the debate up. I didn't! And Jeremiah stood up and he said – he said two things. One – I should tell you this before.

Before we had the debate, I called Jeremiah when I had – because he knew I was out of the Nation at this point. And I called him up and told him about my Jesus experience. And he said – you know what he said to me? He said, "John," because I'm a friend, he said, "John, if I knew Jesus was what you [1:10:00] told me he is now, I never would have trashed him the way I did." I mean, that's just the level of respect between us. He knew I wasn't playing and, um.

So, anyway, when we had the debate, the major argument he made was, he said, "This is the first time we have had a Muslim, uh, to, uh, to, uh, convert to Christianity. Most Muslims are converts from Christianity." I mean, who [unintelligible word at 1:10:30]. And he said – and the worst thing he said was, "And you can tell by looking at John, we won't have anybody else who does that." [Laughs] And people laughed.

But that was, um – we maintained a friendship. Um, I didn't talk to him that much afterwards, but, um – and that's why to this day, I mean, I have warm fuzzy memories of Minister, uh, Jeremiah Shabazz. He was just, uh, he was just a good guy. He was just a good guy, caught in a situation where he was – because he was goodhearted, I think he was pushed around, uh, by the Nation. They like coldblooded people who could get it done.

And that's why they got rid of Malcolm. He was trying to protect – hey, look, he was too sincere, too honest, too real, too, um – it's like people who go into an organization and they look at the mission statement and say, "Wow! That's a wonderful mission," and they go do it. And the people in the organization say, "Well, we don't really want to *do* that. We just *say* we want to do that. You're going to cause problems if you really do that." So, that's where that was.

JM: Can you say – maybe you have more to say about your reaction to his killing in early '65.

JC: Who? Malcolm?

JM: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my goodness, I was devastated. Um, I was devastated. Um, um, one of the things I learned from Malcolm, and one of the sad things about what people were expecting from leaders in those days. People came to you, and if you were supposed to be a leader, you were supposed to have answers. And so, nobody comes to you and says, "How can I help?" They come with criticisms of what you're trying to say. Okay.

You know, I'm the kind of guy, if I see you're trying to do something, I'm going to say, "All right, this is what you need. Okay, we need to have a – we need to talk about policy. If you're going to do this particular thing, then we need to talk about policy or you need to talk about whatever it is that's going on. And, okay, I can handle this segment here. I'll do this for

you, Malcolm. I'll do this. I can handle this." And then, you're expecting other people in the room to say, "Well, I'll handle this," and they're all like, "What you going do, Malcolm? What you going do about that?" [Laughs] Nobody is taking any responsibility!

So, um, I was pretty devastated at his, um, at his death and, um, you know, again put his picture in the window and, and uh, uh, you know, it's just one of those things. But one of the things I learned is that, and what upset me the most, was the people who said – I remember being a Black Muslim and talking to people about the Nation when I was all gung-ho, and their thing was, "Yeah, we love Malcolm. If he wasn't with the Nation of Islam, we would follow him."

So, I took note of those people and when he left the Nation of Islam, I said, "Okay, he's out now. He's got this, um, community organization that we're trying to organize, dealing with issues that affect people's lives. You know, this isn't rhetoric anymore. It's about now trying to – you know, he's had his epiphany and he's seeing that, uh, you know, it's not going to be based on race. He's trying to, you know, still help the people who need the most help." "Oh, well, you know –" and so, the same people who wouldn't take a risk then wouldn't take a risk afterwards.

And so, I learned a lot about human nature. Um, and I'm clear that people who aren't willing to be afraid with you are no help to you at all, because whenever you're trying to make a change, I don't care what the issue is, there's always this scary part where, yes, you could fail. Whatever the object is, you could fail, you could be made a laughingstock.

But if you feel it's the right thing, um, even though you're afraid, there's something about taking that step, um, in spite of how you feel, you do it, and there is vindication in it, win or lose. I've been in fights that I've lost. And I don't mean physical fights, because I lost all [1:15:00] of them. [Laughs] But I mean, uh, you know, struggles, community struggles that have really not worked out well. But what has made me feel good is I was in it to win it. I took a principled,

what I believed to be a principled position, and went on record with that position. And if I lost, or we didn't get what we wanted, I can still sleep well at night because I was on the right side – from my point of view, I was on the right side of the issue.

And the way history works is eventually it comes back around, and people decide to do the right thing at some point later on. Um, and, when they go back and check the history, they say, "Oh, yeah, well, he was for this ten years ago when it wasn't popular." So, I don't make a big deal when it goes over. I just say, "Yeah, well, that really vindicates my position."

JM: Let me ask one more thing, and then we'll take a break and maybe have a little drink and relax for a minute or two and come back and talk more about all the work you've done in Philadelphia. But one more thing: '63, '64, say, through SNCC, through the Nation, coming up to Philadelphia, did you at that point – you mentioned, in meeting some of the folks who were purported to be Malcolm's representatives, that you had a sense that maybe these guys were not who they said they were. More generally, in that broad context, were you – did you have an active sense even then that you might have become yourself a person kind of who, you know, FBI and Hoover and those guys were watching?

JC: Oh! Oh, my God! They came *to* me! [Laughs]

JM: Oh? It was not very subtle then?

JC: No. In fact, I've never asked for, I've never made a request for my file, which I guess I should do at some point.

JM: It'd be interesting, yeah.

JC: But the FBI came to my – when I started the Freedom Library, I'm sitting there, and they're coming to me about James Forman. "You know, there's this, uh, move to get white churches to give money for reparations," whatever it was at the time. And I just said, "You see

that I'm here trying to start a school for kids. Um, I haven't broken any laws. And you think that [clock begins chiming] I'm going to give you information to deal with James Forman? First of all, I don't have any such information. And secondly, you know, you guys can't – you know, when we called you when people were being lynched, and you said you couldn't do anything, but you have time now to try to pin something on a guy who hasn't broken any laws yet? But you want to build a case? What is this?" So, they huffed out.

And I knew at that point, the fact that they came – and there was another thing that let me know. When I came back to Philly, I was trying to get a job somewhere, and the guy said, "You're on the pink list. Um, you're on the pink list." Because they had me as both a Muslim and a Communist and a radical, or some kind of stuff they had me. And I, you know, so yeah, I have known. [Laughs]

And another thing, too, I went back to visit. I forgot what year it was. I went down South to visit either in '66 or '67. I don't even remember when. And people told me that the FBI had been in touch with them and said that I was coming, and probably coming to foment violence. I mean, it was just –

JM: In '66, '67?

JC: I think. Again –

JM: Yeah.

JC: You know, my – I cannot be accurate about my years. I mean, I try to be as accurate as I could be in that, but some of these events I can't tell you really what year it was, but I know it was after I had been back in Philly and decided to go back to visit. And folk from there said the FBI told them, "Watch out, he's coming. He's –" you know. It was just ludicrous. It was just, um, um – and it tickles me, because I've never had a gun, never owned a gun, never

advocated that anybody have a gun. I was not – I never advocated nonviolence, in the sense that John, um, Lewis did and does. But I never advocated violence.

Um, it was the kind of thing – I always would think about, "What would I do if somebody attacked my mother?" Forget me! What would I do if somebody attacked my mother, and I'm in the room? I'm going to sit there and pray for them? You better not think that! Or my kids – what am I going to do if somebody comes in here and attacks my kids? So, rather than take a position, pro-violence, anti-violence, I said nothing on the issue. [Laughs] Rather, I talked about creative violence versus destructive violence. But anyway, that's –

JM: Let's take a little pause.

JC: Okay.

JM: Thank you. We'll come back.

JC: Yeah. I told you I can go far a–

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back on after a short break. [1:20:00] Dr. Churchville, I wanted to pick up with, um, with your vision and, um, the perspective and goals that you had when you opened the Freedom Library.

JC: Okay. I wanted to do a couple of things. One is my experience in SNCC and with the Black Muslim movement in Atlanta, particularly, uh, made me see that black history was something that not only energized me, but energized people that I met who had no sense of, of their history, who were just thinking they were stuck in a rut. And it – I saw people change, change their behavior. I saw people begin to have hope for the future and to begin to plan for that hope.

And so, I thought that a library, um, of books by and about black people, right on Ridge Avenue in the heart of North Philadelphia, two blocks away from projects, uh, high-rise projects, uh, next door to a bar, [laughs] would be the perfect place to, uh, begin to have people feel better about themselves. And so, I looked at it from purely a – um, it was a faulty analysis, but nonetheless it was an analysis that the, you know, the problem with black people was we didn't know our history, and if we knew our history, we'd be better off. Of course, that is the most fallacious, uh, proposition one could have, but, hey, I was young. I was what? Still twenty, twenty-one, I forgot. I was in my early twenties.

JM: Twenty-three, about.

JC: Okay.

JM: Yeah.

JC: So, uh, I, uh, that was my rationale. And, um, the school-type thing, uh, when we started – before I talk about the school – when we started, we were just collecting books by and about black people and, um, beginning to put them up in the library. And then, we had Wednesday night history classes, and we'd have adults. And Wednesday nights were fun, because we would get people from the bar next door. And what was wonderful is I began to look at people differently. All my life, people who hung out – in my mind, people who hung out in the bars were drunkards, whatever. Um, and this is, of course, before, um – I believe it was before, um, "Cheers" was on the air. So, I learned before "Cheers" came on that people really like bars because "everybody knows their name." [Laughs]

And so, when we had our black history, um, lectures, people from the bar would come over and would share their knowledge. I mean, you can't tell based on – who knows what. And so, sometimes I would have done my homework and my research and I'd begin to hold forth.

And a guy from the bar next door would say, "No, no, no, no, no. That didn't happen until 1875. This is what happened." Bang! And he starts talking. And then, the other people would chime in, "Oh, yes. Well, that was, uh – have you read such-and-such, John?" "No, I haven't." "Well, I'm going to bring it to you next week. Before you talk to us again about this, you need to read it." [Laughs]

And so, it was a wonderful, um – it was both humbling and exciting, because it helped me early on to realize you're not here to solve a problem. You're here to learn and elicit from people what they know and empower them to do what they need to do. And so, your job is to provide an opportunity and take that same opportunity yourself to learn, to learn where people's heads are, to, uh, to appreciate them, to encourage them. And so, I learned so much from those early sessions, which were really booked as "I'm Going to Teach You Black History." [Laughing] That's how I started, and it got to be "Let's Talk about Black History and Let's Hope I Can Learn Some Along the Way." And it was just wonderful.

Then there was a situation where there were some kids who needed some tutoring. So, we started – I wasn't doing any tutoring. I just let – you know, people wanted to tutor. And there was one day there were a bunch of kids in there, and the tutor didn't show up, and I got stuck. I couldn't let them go home. I started tutoring. And then, the next day the person didn't show, and then I was tutoring. And then, in tutoring the kids, I'm discovering I'm trying to help them with work that they don't understand, and they can't understand it because three steps back [1:25:00] they didn't get that.

So, if I'm going to help them as a tutor, I've got to go back those three steps and build them up to where they are. And forget about what their homework is and go back and give them the fundamentals that they need, uh, so that they can catch up. And I started doing it. And, of

course, that sort of lent itself to – I'm doing this with kids who are in school and not having a great deal of success because it's hard. It's hard to be in sixth grade with a third grade or a fourth grade understanding and not getting it. And I'm trying to bring you up to snuff in a short period of time.

So, the idea came, "Let me start with some preschool kids who haven't been to school yet and haven't been corrupted by the terrible and egregious education system." And so, I didn't know anything about teaching preschoolers, so there was a teacher that I knew, and I asked her to come through and teach. She said, "Fine." And she was using the look-say method and she was working with the kids. And I'm watching; I'm sitting there. And all of a sudden she can't do it anymore. She's like, you know, "I can't do this anymore. Um, I've got to work. You know, I can't do this."

Um, so I started with the look-say method. And I said, "You know, there's something, there's a way – wait a minute. How did I learn to read?" And I remember standing up at the blackboard with Mrs. Fried [laughs] in first grade talking about, you know, going through the phonetics of the alphabet and then putting an "a" in front of it and an "e" and all. I went – how that came back to my memory, I don't know. I started working with the kids on phonetics and then I discovered, um, the Lippincott book series.

There's a series – there was, in those days, books put out by Lippincott, which would have, um – which, if you used their system, had kids reading two years above whatever anybody else was reading, I mean, just wonderful. I bought the series, started with – and I started working with kids and getting excited about the fact that kids could start with phonics, and you could move them into reading. And I used – my kids were my own. I had kids. My own kids were guinea pigs for this, and they were reading – um, gee whiz, my youngest son, David, was reading

at about a year and a half, and, uh, my other kids, you know, were also. And it's, it's, what I loved about the Lippincott books was that they would hit you with new stuff all the time and they would teach you how to deal with the "a-u." What is that sound, you know? And, you know, it was just, um – it's like I found a miracle.

And so, then, we started talking about, "Okay, let me set this up." So, we started, uh, teaching, uh, four days a week, two hours a day. And what I did in starting the school was just go in the neighborhood, like the Pied Piper, and I would go to people that I had worked with on trying to get them to do rent strikes and history, who lived in the neighborhood, and say, "Hey, I want your kids! You got little kids, between two and a half – you know, as long as they don't pee on themselves, I got them, I can work with them." No diapers, you know, two and a half to five, I'll take, and just started teaching those kids every day, four days a week, for two hours, and focusing on reading and focusing on math.

And after I did that for about two years, um, I just, you know, incorporated. Um, you know, got my friend who was a lawyer to incorporate Freedom Library Day School, Inc., and, um, started having kids come. And I remember when the school opened, I had ten, fifteen, twenty kids that I would do for free. And when I said, "Okay, it's now ten dollars a week," and I knew that ten dollars a week even then was cheaper than any babysitter. "And for ten bucks a week, I'll feed your kids lunch. It's five days a week. I'll feed them lunch. You know, all you've got to do is bring them and pick them up, and I'll take care of them for the whole week."

And I had three students. And I worked on those students. I remember distinctly sitting in the Freedom Library, praying, "God, if you will give me ten students, [laughs] I might be able to make a living at this." And He never gave me ten. It was three, three, three, and then [1:30:00] it was fourteen. Then it moved to something like twenty-something. And when it got

up to – I think I was teaching up to thirty-five or forty kids in a single classroom, um, and then I grabbed my mother, who always wanted to teach. And she took the older kids; I took the younger kids.

One of the wonderful experiences that I had in teaching the kids is I would use, uh, what's called the individual prescriptive method of teaching. So, without knowing what that was, I would – if I was working with George over here, and George could read faster and understand what was going on than the seven or eight kids in his group, I let George go. And, um, give him work to make sure that he, you know, and check him out and listen to him, and then I'd work on the other kids.

And it ended up that most of the kids were operating on their own, sort of like it was – it was hard for me to group them, because there were some kids who were – who, um – let's say that George was up to page 45 and begging for more, and this guy next to him was on page 14 but plodding along. Um, somebody might be on page 25, and so what I would do is just kind of spend time with each person, encourage the kids, and it got to be where I finally – I had to – it was so many kids I had to group them, but I allowed them to push each other. So, I would have George read, if he read very well, and the other kids would want to read as well as George read. I'm making up George. I don't think I ever had a George, [laughter] but that's okay.

Um, but the fun thing in all of this was I learned about teaching, um, which was counter to everything that I had ever heard about, um, teacher education. I mean, the teachers that I met were telling me that my methods were just horrendous, they were not working. My kids were reading! They were doing new math! They understood what a set was, and, uh, they knew what a subset was. And, uh, so it was, um, it was really – I was experimenting but I was, I was energized.

And at the same time, I hated it. I never – this is what is weird. I enjoyed the interaction with the kids, seeing them learn. But I hated teaching, because it was hard work. I'm up at night, after the kids are gone. They all have written homework that I give them, and I've got to go through forty-five books and give each person separate – I can't give one sheet and say, "Do that," because everybody's at a different level. The kids who were doing math were at different levels. Somebody had just started long division. Somebody was still on addition or subtraction. And I had to look and just progressively stay with each kid and make sure that they were being built up in a systematic way.

So, that meant I had to sit there with these homework books, um, and get them ready for the next day, because when they came to school the next day and I'd give them the corrected – whatever they did the night before – I had to give them the next book, uh, you know, their homework book. Because they – I didn't care that you were two and a half years old, you had homework. And it was writing, if it was – you know, making your "A" within the lines, down, down, across, [laughs] whatever it was.

So, it was, it was um, it was both exciting and exhilarating, and it was, um – if you asked me then – I enjoy it in retrospect, because I'm thinking about it. But I remember distinctly hating it, but I had to do it. I couldn't quit. And I did it for fourteen years.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And then quit. I was burned out at the end.

JM: Yeah. Did it feel like, [clears throat] did it feel like a radical project to do that?

JC: No. No, it was, um, it was, um, it was what was necessary. It was what they needed. I wanted to give them not only – during this period, I ran into other nationalists who had schools. And their emphasis was on – in my view – on rhetoric. And so, they had all of the black stuff

and they had the drums and they had this. I had none of those things. My thing was, um, you've got to have skills and you've got to know about your blackness. So, it was history. It was, um, you know, you need to be strong in character, and I always pushed those character traits, you know, honesty, integrity, [1:35:00] you know, hard work, you know, all the stuff. And smart work, not necessarily [laughs] hard work, but *smart* work. So, those were the things, um, that I pushed.

And, in dealing with other educators who were working with kids – and I had, um, um, real issues with, uh, Amiri Baraka, who, um, and his mentor out in California, um. Why am I forgetting his name, because I have read him and did some doctoral work related to some of his ideas? Um, Karenga, Ron Karenga! Um, I was very concerned that kids, uh, be – that skill sets be built, as well as an ideological base. And I just thought that they spent too much time on an ideological base without giving the kids the skills. And so, if a kid can tell you by rote whatever it is that he tells you, I'd rather that the kid tell you by rote his time tables and, you know, [laughs] stuff that he can use when he's, when he's navigating in the world.

And, um, I got together with some other people and we formed the, um, the CIBI, the Council of Independent Black Institutions, and that was in the '70s. I can't tell you exactly when, it was '70, maybe '71, '72. For two years, I set up a teacher training institute, just using stuff that I did. Got them to come to Philly at the Freedom Library Day School, and from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. [intends p.m.] at night, we had a two-week training course for teachers who were in independent black schools. And they had to learn how to, um, how to teach. And stuff that they had to do was how to make a blackboard, so that, you know, you can start from scratch. You don't have any money to be equipped like a regular school would be, but how do you get the blackboard paint and how do you – you know. And so, we would make the blackboards, we

would, um – and we used the church around the corner, um – and you make room dividers, you know, [laughs] physically make room dividers.

JM: Wow.

JC: You would have to go out in the neighborhood and recruit kids, and we would do it in the summertime. Um, you go out in the neighborhood, you recruit, you talk to parents, you recruit the kids, you tell them we're doing this Freedom School. It's going to be for one week. I think we did the school for one week, but they had a one-week training before that and then they had training while they were doing the one week.

JM: Hmm, hmm.

JC: And the object in the end was so that, when they walked away, they had a real sense of what does it take to start a school. What do you need to do? How do you work with the kids? How do you work with the problems that they present to you? It was – there was very little, um, theoretical – I mean, there was some theory. Um, I tried to give them an overview of what they could expect, but, you know, um, and that the things that you are to expect, you've got to figure out. You've got a week to overcome them. You've got a week to overcome, um, a situation with a child who comes in who everybody says is learning disabled, and you cannot treat him or her as if they're learning disabled. You have to treat that child as if – and you must *demand* from that child the same thing you demand from the kid next to him, who is not learning disabled.

And what I've discovered, uh, what I did discover in those days, and I had a number of children who came to my school like that, every one of those children who came like that left – I'm not going to tell you they were A students, but they were C students. They could hang in

anybody's elementary school and do C work. And as long as they could C their way through, they'd be fine. [Laughs]

JM: Um-hmm, yeah.

JC: So, it was – lots of things came out in that.

JM: Yeah. It's really good to have you talk about that, because I can see the investment and all the work that you did across those years. Let me pull you back to '64, '65, '66 –

JC: Okay.

JM: Because, while you're starting the schoolwork, the Library is also becoming, as I understand it – and I need you to tell me if this is correct or not – something of a real kind of locus for lots of folks with lots of interesting ideas who were thinking hard about strategies for moving forward, and those are people across the spectrum of black nationalism, separatism, uh. And it will – some of that effort will build towards, in February of '66, the creation of the Black People's Unity Movement.

JC: Oh, yes! Yes, I forgot all about that, yes. [1:40:00]

JM: Yeah. And so, I'd love to have you talk a little bit about how the momentum gathered to lead to the creation of the Black People's Unity Movement. I think Julian Bond is your keynoter at the rally that kicks it off.

JC: Yeah, that's right. That's right.

JM: Um, and just have you kind of tell that story.

JC: Okay. Um, in – part of, um – in – and this is good. Um, during this period when we're doing that, we've been working with gangs. We've been working with, um – in our work with gangs, um, I got to know, uh, Father Paul Washington of the Church of the Advocate, who, who, uh, who has a history of his own [clears throat] here in Philadelphia. He's deceased at this

point but he was – he was the guy in North Philly as a priest who, um, let us have room to voice our nationalism. And that was unique because most churches – I mean, there wasn't anybody else who was about to have us even meet. We were tainted. I mean, just to – and he was, he was open. He had his own views, um, but he, um, he really worked hard at being open and seeing, you know, positive progressive.

So, in my work with the gangs, there was a friend of his who offered to give me a salary to do that. Well, I'm like, you know, I've got kids, I've got a wife – I, I, I needed it. So, I, I took the funding. It was a little bit, but I could, I could – hey, man, you give me twenty-five bucks, I can do a lot with it. [Laughs] So, there was – that happened.

And, as I was working with the gangs, the, um – the donor wanted one thing, and as I was working with the gangs, I'm seeing something else. I'm seeing I can develop these guys into real leaders, who can do some positive things in their community. They can – you know, uh, the violence thing is just a piece of it. I remember having a conversation with one gang member, and I'm passionately trying to tell him about, um, um, "Help me get this treaty with this other gang." He looked at me and he said, "John, gang warring is my life. That's all if have. That's what I live for. You take away gang warring from me, I have nothing."

And I couldn't answer him. I couldn't tell him, [speaking in deep voice] "Well, if you prepare yourself," you know, "you could do this." He was giving me his gut. And I was silent. I couldn't answer him. And so, that made me go back to the drawing table and say, "Okay. What lies beyond peace?" If I don't want him to gang war, what do I have to offer this guy that can be part of his life that makes sense to him?

And so, um, my first thing is: Okay, we need, we need people who will protect people in the community. You can use your skills. We need old ladies protected and, and, and not

molested or bothered or robbed. And they got interested in that, I mean, it was a roll! It was like: We need our own police. It was getting to that level.

JM: Especially in Philadelphia.

JC: Yeah, getting to that level. And it's like, you know – and, um, I remember this guy bought into it. It was – well, when the guy who was funding the program saw that, he said, "Oh, no. This is not, this is not what I'm paying you to do." And I said, "Wait a minute. You paid me because I was doing work with the gangs that I thought was necessary. I am not going to do what you want me to do that is not in the best interests of these kids I'm working with." And so, he cut the money.

And, um, and he sent Paul Washington to tell me in a nice way, you know, either shape up or – and I told Paul – I mean, that's when I had a confrontation with Paul about, "Man, you better figure out what side you're on. You can't be a go-between. You have to take sides. You're either with the community or you're with your church and with the people who are oppressing this community. You've got to make up your mind where you are." And I knew by having that conversation that that could mean I can't use his church anymore, but, I mean, I just, it was, this is, this is [laughs] what we had.

And, um, he thought about it. He controlled himself. I know he wanted to say, "Man, I – do you know what I've done for you?" But he didn't go there. He listened to me. He was thoughtful. Um, and he just said, "Okay, well, you know that I'm not in charge of the money. You know, [1:45:00] you know you've just blown that." I said, "Fine. I've done that but I still need a place to meet and –" and, um, he said, "Okay, fine. You can still use the Advocate." And so, I just kept doing what I was doing.

And in that process, we talked about, um, um, a black unity movement. And what we wanted to do was we wanted a movement that could include gang members, that could include old ladies, young people, professionals, people who were aspiring for politics – we wanted to have people who were musicians or dancers. The thing that made the, um, um, BPUM, the Black People's Unity Movement, um, different from every other movement that I've known about is that we tried to make it inclusive.

So, we had Arthur Hall, um, who was a famous African dance, uh – he had a famous African dance troupe. We had John, um – the guy who started Freedom Theater here in Philadelphia, John Allen. We had his group. So, we had artists. We had musicians. We had, um, um – we had people who were aspiring for political – one of the guys who actually, who ended up running for political office and becoming the state senator, state rep, um, in this area, um, Richardson, David P. Richardson, was one of the young guys at the time who was part of this. And we, we had lawyers. We had doctors. I mean, [laughs] we really had – and we tried to get people to see what is it that – how can we look at each other and not alienate each other, you know, be alien from one another, and yet represent the interests of the group we represent here?

JM: Right.

JC: So, if I'm a doctor, you know, don't tell me to sing "Kumbaya." That's not what [laughs] I'm here for, I mean.

JM: How much, how much room was in there for ideological diversity? How much, how much range of –?

JC: Oh, there was lots of –

JM: Yeah.

JC: Because what I was interested in at that point was getting people together.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And one of the things that I learned about getting people together is you get, I mean, you get seven people in a room you're going to have fourteen points of view.

JM: Yeah.

JC: So, if you're not ready to tolerate fourteen points of view – and what I was always interested in is: What's the bottom line? What can we find that we all agree on? We never tried to take a position, as the Black People's Unity Movement, that was so radical that people who were in it couldn't buy it.

JM: Yeah.

JC: So, what we were really pushing, um, was just: How do we work together? What kinds of, uh, programs or things that we can come up with that we can all say, "Hey, that's a good idea," you know. I mean, you know, if there are real estate people who say, "Hey, we need to educate black folks about buying property," well, nobody's going to argue with that. Let's do that. Let's have a seminar on that.

JM: Right.

JC: And, um, so that kind of thing.

JM: Yeah. Let me – I'm going to ask about that year of '66, which has a whole lot of very, um – a lot happens in '66 around this effort. Um, but to kind of set the stage for that, I have read that, um, that the Black People's Unity Movement was organized around two founding principles. And I think they really, you know, illustrate the strength of feeling and perspective about the nature of U.S. culture and society at the time and what one possible avenue forward would be for black Americans. One, one, um, principle was that white supremacy and racial inequality were constitutive of U.S. culture, that they were a part of the culture that the nation

carried forward, and that had to be acknowledged and confronted. And, related to that, was the fact that therefore progress for African Americans depended in large part on *intra*racial unity.

JC: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: And, of course, this has echoes of your earlier conversation about John Lewis.

JC: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: Um, and just as the movement really starts to move forward, February of '66, it's not many months later before there's a massive police raid in – coming right after that movement and its close affiliates.

JC: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: And so, I'm very interested in having you talk a little bit about how you felt you were reaching forward and then that raid and its implications.

JC: Well, the, uh – you're talking about the, uh, the infamous SNCC dynamite case?

JM: Yeah.

JC: Um, it's very interesting. One of the things that had happened while we were doing the school was there was a guy who came who was called Kazamiro Pereira. We discovered, uh, [1:50:00] from one of our informants that he was a police plant. But we didn't know this before. He came and he wanted to set up a thing where he would have martial arts for the young people. Well, I wasn't opposed to that. I was – that's okay.

But then he started talking about, "Well, I've got some M-16s that I want to bring." I said, "Oh, no, my man. No, we don't need rifles. We don't even need fake rifles, much less real rifles." And I kind of watched him. And, um, other people who were around kind of watched him, and it just – somebody saw him sitting up in the police, uh, [laughs] having conversations,

and they got it back to me. And I never said anything to him that I knew that he was a police informant.

But there were always attempts during that period – people would float in and try to instigate some kind of stupid something to try to get you hung up. And there were lots of situations where people would buy it. In fact, um, I believe – now I don't know this for a fact, but I believe that the guy that got arrested on the dynamite case, somebody posing as a construction worker went to him and said, "Look, I've got this dynamite." And the guy said, "Oh, my God! You can't have that!" "Well, would you hold it for me?" "Yeah, I don't know what to do –" and then that's when – and then they stuck it on him.

The raid was, um – this guy talked to me, and I'm telling him, "Man, don't have nothing, don't have nothing to do with nobody's dynamite. You leave it where you found it. Let the police know that it's there. It's probably a setup to put you in trouble." "Oh, man, I can't call the cops, man, because the guy –" and I think, in that case, the guy was a police informant who set him up.

But, anyway, in the meantime, the police used that. [Frank] Rizzo, uh, was the police chief at the time, before he got to be mayor. And he came to the Freedom Library in '66, yeah, about February, uh, yeah, because my wife at the time was very pregnant. And, uh, they just, about one o'clock in the morning, uh, broke down the door.

JM: Because you lived in an apartment above the library?

JC: Absolutely, right upstairs. And they just broke down the door, came up the steps, bulletproof vests and sawed-off shotguns. And I happened to be up. I don't know why I was up at one o'clock in the morning. My God, it would have been a mess if I had been asleep and awakened by this. And up in our face! And I was concerned about my wife, and my wife was

just horrified by it. And she was angry and she started, you know, fussing. And I'm like, "Look, guys, we'll talk about this in a minute. If you've got to search, will you search the bedroom so I can put my wife there?"

And I'm thinking, "I don't want to die tonight! Because if she says something and you guys hit her, I can't live with her if I don't do something!" [Laughs] You know what I mean? It's just one of those things. And so, um, I just kept talking quietly and calmly. Um, and I guess I was in shock. You know, when you're in shock, you don't really feel. You're just trying to solve a problem. And that's where my mind was. It's like, "Okay, let me cooperate with you. You need to search." I didn't even ask them what they were searching for. Uh, I just said, "Would you search the bedroom first? Let me put my wife in there and close the door. Then you can do whatever you need to do." So, finally, they let that happen.

As soon as that was calm, here comes the captain up the steps, and he starts all over again. And he's pushing me around, trying to get me to do something stupid, well, not really stupid – they just want me to say something, um, and they'll call it resisting arrest. Um, and I'm like, you know, "What is it that you have to do? Just do what you need to do. I'm not resisting anything. I'm – you know, I'm here. I don't even know what this is about." I didn't fuss. I didn't complain. I didn't say anything. Then they started tearing, um, ceiling down and, um, turning things over. And I found out later they were looking for dynamite. Um, so eventually, they left. Um, they couldn't get a rise out of me.

Now, I'm going to tell you, I didn't feel the terror until they walked down the stairs. I couldn't sleep for nights on end because every sound that came in the street, I'm like this. Um, I called my lawyer. And I say "my lawyer" because he was a friend and he was in the Black People's Unity Movement, um, William Lee Akers. And, um, [1:55:00] last I heard, he was a

federal magistrate in California somewhere. But, um, William Lee Akers, I've always trusted him. He was just a straight shooter, a good lawyer, a tough guy. Um, and he, um – I called him up and told him about everything. And he said, "John, they had a warrant. There's nothing we can do."

And when he told me that, I just said, "Okay." That was a big moment for me, because I was enraged, I was, uh, traumatized, uh, and my feelings were hurt! [Laughs] It was like, "How have I behaved in this neighborhood? I've never had a gun. I've never talked – in all of my militant speeches, you'll never hear me talk about, 'Rise up and kill the crackers!'" You know, that wasn't my rhetoric! It was never on that – at that level. So, I mean, so, it was a lot of feelings going on.

And I, to flip back to the night of the thing, when the cops left, there was a big group of people outside who were ready to confront the cops. And I calmly, even though I was upset, said, "Look, we're going to handle this in a legal way. Please go home. They want you to do something. They're prepared for you to do something, um, so that they can, you know, mow you down, basically." And so, they, they dispersed and went home.

And when my lawyer told me there was nothing I could do, I had to make a decision. And the decision I made was I'm not going to let my hurt feelings, I'm not going to let my pride and all the things – you know, I was violated. I can't let that mess with me, because there is nothing that I can do. You know, I can make noise. I can fuss about it. But it's wasted energy, and I will be getting off track from what I need to be doing to help people. This is something that happened to *you*, John, and, you know, you can't get it confused with what you're trying to do for people. And so, I sucked it up, basically. Um, and I was wise to do so. [Phone rings]

JM: Yeah. Let's take a break for just one sec. [Phone rings]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: Let me just – we're back after a short break. I want to say just so it's in the record that that raid, it was August 13 of '66, um, FBI and police, um, in the city of Philadelphia, um, the SNCC office, the Freedom Library, two apartments, um. There was eighty armed, you know, kind of riot-gear-clad law enforcement officers and a thousand uniforms behind them. I mean, this was really a massive show of law enforcement authority by the white police establishment here in the city.

JC: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, is there a connection between – well, let me ask you sort of to take us forward from that summer of '66 towards, um – you know, it's the spring when, um, James Tate is reelected. No, sorry, he'll be reelected in the fall of '67. In the spring of '67, he makes Rizzo the police commissioner. So, that happens. Uh, and in the summer of '67, that's when David Richardson asks BPUM to help organize high school students. And I don't know if you had a lot of direct engagement in that issue or not.

JC: No, I didn't. No, I didn't.

JM: Yeah.

JC: But you know the story about what happened to those kids?

JM: I know a little bit, and it comes to a certain echo and culmination, so maybe you could tell that story.

JC: No, I – I can't, because I wasn't really, um – I tend to – I have learned, for good or ill, to function with blinders. And it's like I determine where my territory is, and there are lots of things that happen, there are a lot of issues that come up, and I have, I have disciplined myself to

stay focused on, on – to stay in my lane and just focus. I heard about what was happening with the kids. Uh, it was just a – it was like a massacre that went on. But I did not get involved in it. There were some kids who came to the Library and talked about it, and I kind of dealt with those individual kids and, uh, you know, talked to them. But I did not try to, um, um, get into that.

JM: Yeah.

JC: One of the things that goes back to my mother's always asking me to examine my motives, I always question why I would take an action. So, I was never running to get in the paper or running to be quoted. [2:00:00] Uh, there were times when I was quoted or, you know, but those were things I did not run toward, because I couldn't trust my motives if I were doing that. And it would be like, uh, my attitude about certain movement people who sort of looked like they were running around to get press. I'm not going to name any names but, uh, particularly right after Dr. Martin Luther King died, there was a certain gentleman who seemed to be in the limelight all the time and had a different, um, story about history than the other people who were there.

So, [laughs] but anyway, I always questioned. And so, I wouldn't get involved in something, even though I might care about it or it might affect me, if it was not in the scope of work that I had set out to do, and if I couldn't answer the question of, "What's your motive? Are you doing that because it's hot now?" And I couldn't, I couldn't do that.

JM: How did you, um, how did you push forward after '66, '67?

JC: Uh, continued doing what I was doing, basically. I continued the school until 1978. I, um, um, was the head of BPUM for a while.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And, um, then we had a moment, I think – in ’66 is when I had this, um, Jesus encounter.

JM: Yeah.

JC: And so, there was a meeting, um, of BPUM, at which I just kind of shared with everybody that, um, “Hey, this is where I am. And as long as I’m chairman, uh, we’re going to use Jesus’ leadership principles.” And somebody in the audience said, “Well, how do we get rid of you?” And I said, “It’s as simple as voting me out,” and they did. And I felt very good about that. I mean, I took that Pauline approach: “I have – you know, for the cross of Christ, I have been evicted.” [Laughs] I was quite pleased with myself.

Um, and so, there was a period right after that [microphone noise] when it appeared that I lost all credibility. People were calling me, you know, “He’s crazy. He’s a Jesus freak. What’s happened to John? He’s not radical anymore.” And it is precisely at – that is the beginning of my real, I think, [laughs] radical development, because I saw Jesus as a revolutionary. And I saw him, and still see him, as, as one who calls me to account for everything and requires that I make whatever bold moves I need to make for the benefit of folk. And, in fact, uh – uh, and to have the strength to do it by myself if need be, and if other people come along, know how to treat them and enjoy them, but to stay the course.

So, it was an interesting period, um, because after that, that’s when people who had been friends kind of dropped off. And, uh, I changed the history nights to Bible study nights, and people were like, “Ah, this man has lost his mind.” Uh, and that just happened for a while. And as life would have it, I just continued being who I was and, um, over time, the – I’m still dealing with issues, still dealing with community concerns, and I’m not doing it in even in a religious vein. People expected at that point, “Oh, he’ll probably start preaching.” No way. I wasn’t even

going to church. It was a while afterwards that I, that I started going to church, um, and found that very frustrating. Um, so it was a kind of commitment, I'll say that, um, where I, um, have some similarity to, um, John Lewis. I mean, I just stayed the course. I mean, people were opposed, and I just, "Hey, this is what I have to do. I'm not angry with you because you can't do it or you don't want to do it. I'm not an evangelist. I'm not trying to get you saved. I'm just doing what I've got to do." [Laughs]

JM: Right. Did you participate through, um, through, uh, your networks of contacts, did you participate in the effort that was underway late '60s, early '70s to contest – to try to reorganize Democratic Party politics to elect more African Americans in the city? Was that part of your –?

JC: No. I had a real bad – I was very anti-politics. And, and, and the reason I was is because I had a fresh sense from, from SNCC [2:05:00] – I want to see people empowered. And what happened – it happened in the "poverty pimp" movement, I'll call it [laughs]. People came up who called themselves community leaders, who might have been, and they got caught in the money. It was all about, "Let's get the funding." Everybody was talking about funding. And it just drove me to, "Well, I'm going to do this stuff without funding. I'm not asking anybody for money. I'm going to do what I've got to do." And it was amazing that we could get stuff done without funding, and other people who were being funded were just being funded.

JM: Yeah. For the record, I think, and you can tell me if I'm right, you're alluding to the whole War on Poverty and Model Cities funding streams that began to come out of the Johnson administration –

JC: Um-hmm.

JM: And the way folks were contesting for participation.

JC: People – and I just – if it was a valid something, you know, that had to deal with, do with connecting directly with people, I don't care who you were, if you were doing something valid with people, I could support that. I could, you know, do whatever I could, training or whatever you wanted me to do, but I wasn't going after any of the money and I wasn't going to support this camp against that camp. I just had – look, as we say in the black community, "Y'all got that!" [Laughs] I had nothing to do with that at all.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, Rizzo will become mayor in '71.

JC: Um-hmm.

JM: Of course, Richard Nixon is elected in '68.

JC: Um-hmm.

JM: So, at the federal level – you kind of then see here in Philadelphia and Rizzo, in some ways, being a candidate who made some of the arguments on the stump that had carried Nixon forward.

JC: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, how did you feel about, kind of, the community and Philadelphia and North Philadelphia moving forward into the '70s?

JC: Well, in the '70s, from – I was very active. What I would do, when things got frustrating for me at the local level, I would do national stuff. And so, the, the, uh, CIBI, the, uh, Council of Independent Black Institutions, I got very involved in developing the curriculum, and planning for those two years of the trainings, and, you know, meeting with people and talking about that.

Um, and around – and at the same time, the CBS documentary had been done in '68, and I think they aired it in '69, so I had some follow-up from that. People would, um – I got a

chance to speak at different colleges. I had a chance to do work with kids in Chicago, um, where I actually did some demonstration things, which were fun. I mean, just meeting kids I didn't know and trying to do – and would tell them, you know, "Don't let anybody come and tell you how to teach kids who isn't teaching kids and letting you watch. I don't know any of these kids. I don't even want to talk to you if you don't have kids for me to work with. And then, you can critique me or whatever you want to do, but you shouldn't listen to anybody who's talking about teaching kids who doesn't teach kids." [Laughs] So, I had a good time in Chicago. I was trying to be mean to the kids. They just laughed at me. They didn't take me seriously. I mean, they knew where I was coming from.

JM: And this was the Bill Cosby program, hosted by Cosby?

JC: This was post-Bill Cosby.

JM: Yes, yes, right, but you had alluded to the TV program and that was –?

JC: Yeah.

JM: Yeah, right.

JC: So, during that period, it's sort of like I had a focus outside of Philly. I mean, I could go here, I could go there, I could work on these, these larger projects that would have, um, I thought, national impact, and so, those were things that I was interested in. And I, I – and that was a strong period of the struggle between, um, what I would call revolutionary nationalism and the, and, um, cultural nationalism. And the people out of California and Newark were talking about cultural nationalism, and so people were supposed to wear certain garb and be African and do this.

And I'm talking about revolutionary nationalism. What we need to do is to develop politically, but we need to develop not within the system, the corrupt political system, because

we can see that it's based on something that isn't cool. We've got to, we've got to test people. We've got to train people. We've got to have people who the, whom the community trusts. And then, we've got to get the community then to elect them to office outside of the machine. Well, you know, that's a, that doesn't happen in some of the best communities in this country. [Laughs] You just can't beat the machine, uh, and it's not just Chicago. It's Philly, it's New York, it's Atlanta, it's wherever you are.

JM: This was a tough machine in Philadelphia. [2:10:00]

JC: Very. And it still is.

JM: Yeah.

JC: It still is. It still is. Um, so, uh, during that period, the national work was what kept me, um. And I tend to have that, that view, that whenever I run into – if I'm working on a project and I run into a snare or a stumbling – there's a place where I can't go anywhere, I let it sit for a minute and go do something else. [Clock begins chiming] And by the time I get finished doing the something else, I come back to the other project and I can go with it. So, that's one of the ways that I keep myself from being discouraged. You know, there's always something to do, and it's just a matter of focusing on that one thing or two things and doing it, and when you get into something that you can't go any further, you go back to the first thing and you can move that forward. So, that's pretty much what I did in those years.

JM: Yeah. John, can you pause for just a sec? And then we'll – thank you for hanging in. I know it's been a long –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: Dr. Churchill, um, thank you for such generous contribution of thought and time and perspective. I really appreciate it. I want to, um, I want to spend some time, um, as you would like, as much as you would like here at the end, talking about – you have been, really forged a career of remarkable commitment to the community and been involved in so many efforts to carry the community forward, and I'd love to hear about some of the things that have been occupying most of your energies and efforts for some time now.

JC: Okay. Thanks for the opportunity.

JM: Yeah.

JC: Um, right now – or when I say right now, between 2006 and now, there's been a – I've been very, um, interested in – well, maybe I should start before that. In, uh – there was a, there was a period in my life, in about 1995 I was in a serious car accident. And, um, it – um, I was supposed to die, but I didn't. And, um, it really, uh – by this time, I was practicing law. You know, I had gotten a law degree. I, you know, was practicing law. And it really helped me kind of refocus again on what was, what really mattered in life, what are the points. And after that experience, um, I got interested in taking, uh, theology to another level. So, it was not a, uh, a change in my commitment, but it was, "Okay, I think it's time for you, John, to kind of do some study of theology, kind of go to seminary, kind of get that together, not necessarily to be a preacher, but just for your own, uh, philosophical, theological development."

And so, that experience did more than anything to help me realize that, you know, the practice of law was not fun. I was not having fun. And in the practice of law, I was – I did some very interesting things. One, I started out as a farm worker attorney. [Laughing] So, there you go. I started out as a farm worker attorney in New Jersey. And *that* reminded me of being in Mississippi and in Georgia, because in the early '90s, South Jersey, Cumberland County and,

um, Salem County were – to be out at night and to be a lawyer representing the, um, farm workers was like asking for somebody to shoot you.

JM: In the ’90s?

JC: In the ’90s. So, after a year of this, I couldn’t take it, [laughs] just the fear factor. I mean, just honestly the fear factor. Let me come to Philadelphia and practice law in Philly. Let me start a practice that deals with the elderly and, you know, estate planning, which was really what I wanted to do. So, when I came here to do that, um, then I got involved in criminal law, which I hadn’t planned to do. So, I’m working with a lot of young people who are being charged. And I’m, um, getting interested in the kids. I’m taking their cases. I’m fussing with them. I’m trying to get them to come to the office. I’m trying to figure out how I can, you know, “When I get you past this case, I need – you know I need you [laughs] to come and work with me, I need you to –” you know, and it becomes very frustrating. And so, by the time I had this accident in ’95, um, [2:15:00] it was like, “You know what? I need to do something different. I really need to move in another direction.”

I didn’t know what to do. And so, the accident sort of slowed me down enough that I at least had a chance to think about it. And so, I began to, um, develop what’s called the Churchville Leadership Institute. I started talking about leadership training and I got involved in, “Okay, let me take these – I’ve got to take these Biblical principles that Jesus taught and that Moses taught and that the prophets taught and all the, you know, all the good guys, you know, the wisdom books. How do I translate this stuff so it isn’t religious, but it’s just practical, sound advice that people can use? I don’t even have to call it what it is. I can just say, you know, teach it from that.”

So, I started getting interested in that. Still wanted to do this whole thing about, uh, uh, black education, in terms of, you know, kids and what's happening in our schools. And, you know, just trying to figure out how to work that in. And, uh, so I was on this sort of, uh, development.

And by the time the – so, I went to Lutheran Theological Seminary and, while I was there, um, I got disturbed by fellow students, [laughs] because I'm not trying to get, um, looked at by a bishop. They are. And I just didn't have much patience with, um, folks who could not see their role as leaders of a community and that it was – that the bishop – I'm not saying be, be bad to your bishop. I'm just saying that there ought to be a calling that is people-centered and that allows you to have a commitment to the people in your congregation and to serve as a leader of that congregation to help people do the kinds of things they need to do in their communities.

So, while I was there, um, I had an opportunity to, uh, think more deeply about getting heavier in theology. And, of course, I had a couple of good professors, I, I, but I wanted to do something – you know, after I had my courses and my basic reading that I had done on my own, and try to raise these issues in class. You can raise them, but students didn't want to discuss it, because it's like, "That's – you know, I just want to get my piece of paper and get out of here." [Laughs] You know, this is a graduate level thing.

So, I went to, um, um, Union – not Union – um, Cincinnati, the school in, um – Union Institute and University and started, uh, study in, in, in black, um, in African and African American studies. At the same time I took online courses at, um – why am I, um, blanking – um [laughs] at another university. Um –

JM: We have your CV in the record, so –

JC: Okay, so –

JM: It'll be good, yeah.

JC: And so, I was doing the theological courses and the, um, and the black history stuff. And I began to develop, um, wanted to talk about and think about, um, an issue that was interesting to me, which is the relationship of religious thought to whether people are, um, quiescent or active, whether they're self-liberative. And so, I did my, um, thesis on that, which was quite interesting. There were – you could find cases on both sides where, um, there were folks who used – as we did in SNCC, I would say – who used the gospel to empower them to fight. And then there were other cases, and terrible cases, particularly in mining towns, where that was used to keep them, to keep the miners from really revolting and keep them down – so, um, that kind of thing.

I ended up, I had a chance to teach at, at, um, Lutheran Theological Seminary for a year. It was a very discouraging [laughs] process. Uh, they didn't like me, and I didn't like them. But it, it was a good experience, and I learned from other colleagues [2:20:00] who were teaching in other places, when they told the truth, yeah, nobody really wants to learn. I mean, you really – it's a mill. And people are going in and they're coming out, and they're just trying to get their piece of paper. And so, don't be frustrated.

But I was frustrated, because I'm one of those people who – I'm not quite a purist, but it's like if you're in a theological institution [laughs], it seems to me that you really ought to be committed to knowing as much as you can know, having as many tools in your hand as possible, because you can't solve a problem anyway. None of us by ourselves can solve any problem. We can have the greatest ideas in the world, but we need each other to put in our best thought to the thing to do it. And if you're not going to give it any effort, my God, and you're a leader, what is happening?

So, um, anyway, to move forward, in 2006, um, actually, in 2005 I started a little church called Liberation Fellowship Church of Jesus. And it was a nonreligious church, in the sense that, yes, there is Word. I have a sermon every Sunday, and it is taken from the Bible, but it is related to practical leadership terms. I always talk about it in terms of leadership lessons. So, we've have – in our first services, we had Muslims, we had atheists, we had all kinds of folks who would just come because it was – it was kind of different. We had it right here in this place where people just – you know, it's not just a sermon. Um, after the sermon, we have a question and answer period. People are able to express themselves.

And then we have Bible study. And the Bible study is not "this is this." You know, it's not like: This is what you ought to get out of this. It is: What do you see? What does this say to you? How does this speak to you? What do you get from it? How does that relate to your life? Um, and it seemed like people were kind of energized by that and kind of could look at things a little deeper than the regular religious labels.

And out of that, the early congregation said, "Hey, why don't we put together a community development corporation? We're here in Germantown. Why don't we do that?" And so, the whole – all of us, all five of us, [laughs] or six – I think our biggest number was seven. We all pitched in, and everybody had to write a piece of it. Everybody had to, um – it was a collective document at the end, so that everybody got the experience of putting together, um, a CDC and finding out – of course, I helped people with, "it has to be this, it has to be that," but you're going to help put it in. And so, we filed and we got our 501(c)(3) thing, and people felt really good. I mean, hey, they were involved in the process.

And so, the next thing was, "Now, what are we going do with this thing?" And we started, um – I remember – in fact, I was just talking to Nancy [Churchville] about this, uh – was

it yesterday, sweetheart? One day, just talking about, gee, I remember one New Year's Eve, um, talking about, with my wife, "What are we going to do? We've got this 501(c)(3) thing and we said we were going to do these things," um, and we just had this long conversation and we started the next day, [laughs] New Year's Day, um, planning how to really get that done.

So, what we've been doing since then is we have a, we have an HIV/AIDS, uh, program – and I call it a program, but it's community education. We, Nancy and I, both went to take our little courses to be certified as testers and as counselors, HIV/AIDS counselors. So, we, um – in fact, just back in June we had a, we had a, uh, health fair in Vernon Park a couple of blocks from here. And we tested people. And we had folks come through and, you know, we had somebody testing for ear, hearing. We had a dental truck out there. We had people testing for hepatitis. You know, just kind of – um, so, that's one of the thrusts that we do that.

Another thing is we started the Greater Germantown Business Association, and I'm the – I keep calling myself the interim president. There's a guy that says, "Just get rid of the 'interim,' Churchville. You know that you're the president." My theory is that one day, um, we will really have elections and, um, you know, folk from the community will take hold. But as it is now, it's, I'm, I'm, you know, [laughs] I'm just doing it. We're doing it. But we have a good group of people.

We have um, um, um – the history of that, [2:25:00] there used to be a Germantown Business Association years ago. And it deteriorated, because they were – most of the people were real estate people who were trying to control property. So, they would have arguments at meetings, and any little guys coming in would get caught in the crossfire. They disbanded. And when we were talking about community development here – economic, sustainable economic development, in Germantown – it was like, "Wait a minute. We can't, as a CDC, talk about that

unless there is a partner who – you know, we've got to have the business community involved in this." And so, we looked around to see who was around and there's nothing – nothing was going on.

And so, we started the Greater Germantown Business Association. And my wife and I went store to store to try to get people interested. And when we went out there, people looked at us like we were nuts. [Laughs] It's no different than in the '60s. When you first go out, people look at you like you're a nut. And you just keep going back, you keep going back. You give them literature. "This is what you need to do. We're having our first meeting here. These are the things we're going to be talking about."

And so, at our first meeting, we had like forty-three businesses show up. We said, "Oh, this is great!" And we talked about people signing up and, you know, paying their annual dues. And at the next meeting, we had – what – three people, four people. [Laughs] But since we started, we have never not had our monthly meeting, except for July or August. The organization is growing. We've got some good strong businesses in it.

One of the things that we're concerned about is having in Germantown an inclusive, diverse business association that reflects all the cultures we've got. We've got Arabs, we've got Muslims, we've got Africans, we've got Asians, we've got – specifically, we've got a good Korean business community. They don't live here in the area, but they're here. And our job is to try to make everybody feel at home, because this is a – this is a very diverse neighborhood. Um, so that's our goal with that. So, we've been, we've been pushing that, and it's been growing.

In fact, now, one of our biggest projects, the thing that I'm most excited about now, is that the Liberation Fellowship Community Development Corporation has taken on the task of

redeveloping a place called Town Hall. It's here in Germantown at 5928 Germantown Avenue. It is – it is the oldest town hall in the state. Quakers founded – Quakers and Mennonites founded Germantown. Yeah, they were Quakers and Mennonites, who founded Germantown in – I'm going to get the year wrong, but I think it's 1681. It's one of those. Within seven years of its founding, the *birthplace* of the antislavery movement was right here in Germantown, before Philly was a city. And then it got incorporated into Philadelphia, and it had a town hall.

So, that building has been here – not that same building, but on that spot, there was a town hall from the seventeenth century. And, um, what happened is that the city – it was a Civil War hospital, I mean, it still was a town hall, but the only battle we had in Germantown, there was the hospital [laughs] at Town Hall, taking care of people on both sides of the, of the aisle. So, it has a lot of, um, there's a lot of history. And it has been lying in disrepair since 1994 or '95, and we have developed a project to acquire the building.

And when we first mentioned this in 2008 or 2009 is when we came up with the idea, and our Councilwoman laughed us to scorn. "You are out of your mind! You got, you know, thirty-five million dollars?" Um, and, um, I just felt impelled – my wife went along with me, but she was like, [laughs] "I think you've been smoking something when I wasn't looking, John." So, I mean, but, I mean, I had this vision. It had to happen. And so, there was this whole lull.

Now, in 2011, when I go to people with the idea – we've got a team of people. We've got architects on the team. Um, I just had a meeting last week with the director of the mayor's Office of Sustainability here in Philly. Um, she wants more information, but there is not a "You're crazy." It is a, "Hey, have you thought about this?" "Yes, we've thought about that." "Have you thought about that?" "Oh, no, we didn't! That's a good idea." And she's going to put us in touch with some other people. [2:30:00] So, it is – that's where I am now.

And let me tell you what it's for. We want to develop the building, um, as a state-of-the-art building, using geothermal and solar, uh. It's going to be a green building. It will, um, it will also be a place for, uh, a dual education level. One will be, um, um, STEM subjects, you know, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. And that is for – in my brain I see a rival to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] right here in Germantown in this neighborhood. At the time and in the same place, I want to see, um, um, green-collar job training – training in just, you know, plumbing, heating, electricity, um, welding – all the kinds of green things that, uh, allow people to earn income at a living wage.

And one of the things that is critical is it's right across the street from Germantown High School, which is one of the poorest performing high schools. And the current district attorney, um, has suggested that Town Hall should be developed as a justice, criminal justice center, which is basically a court or a place to house people. And our argument is it ought to be a place when the kids look across the street that they can say, "When I leave here, if I'm not going to college, and I can take college courses over there, I can at least get some basic skills so that I can be employable." So, that's two things.

And then, the third thing we want to do in that building is to have a green, um, business incubator. So, we want this to be state-of-the-art and, uh – that's the other thing. The other avenues that we're involved in – well, that's the project. But it incorporates our interest in environmental, um, education and in – so, we have that as part of what we do. When the, um, 2011 Brownfields Conference came to Philadelphia, we were one of its sponsors here.

And, uh, so that just gives you an idea of some of the things that we're interested in. And, uh, so my life is still full. I'm very busy. [Laughs]

JM: I was about to say, it's so apparent from this interview that you have never been someone to sit around and watch the world go by.

JC: No.

JM: So, um, it's been a real honor and a privilege, and I'm very, very grateful. Thank you on behalf of the Museum and the Library, and it's just been a great privilege to be with you. Thank you.

JC: All right, and thank you. It's been fun.

JM: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 2:32:47]

END OF INTERVIEW