

James Armstrong
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JAMES ARMSTRONG: We were living in the Southtown Housing Authority. I met Dr. King during that same year. He had a talk with all the black men. Black men take charge of your home. I was living in the projects over there, and my wife was spending from five to six and sometimes seven hundred dollars a year for Christmas. I've got three boys and a girl. She had to have a, I've got it in the scrapbook back there now. She had to buy them a Roy Rogers suit for the boys. A Dale Evans suit for the girl. Every year we were spending that kind of money for Christmas and bicycles. When Dr. King got through talking about black man take charge of your home, then I started thinking. I said now I'm spending five, six or seven hundred dollars every Christmas. I'm here living in the projects. [chuckles] It just came to me just like that. All of a sudden and I found out. I said now my wife is not asking my kids what they want from Santa Claus. She's buying what she wants them to have. There's a difference in there. So I started asking my children, "What do you want from Santa Claus this year?" "Daddy, all I want is a pair of skates," and everybody followed suit. The boys, my daughter, I bought them all, I gave them all five dollars each to get some skates. The skates cost three dollars and twenty-nine cents. So I spent twenty dollars for Christmas, four children with five dollars each because I asked them. See my wife never asked them. She just goes and buy what she wanted and buy a whole lot of stuff. So and that tells me something then.

It told me, I said now in one year and a half time, I started house hunting. That guy was telling me that the houses you see up in good areas for sale, nothing lived up here but white folks. No blacks lived up here. Only blacks in this area—he was out there cutting grass for some white folk or raking leaves. So I said well, I'll go to College Hill. College Hill is tied in with Smithfield, but this is the white folk at Center Street down there. That's the dividing line. Any time a black moves on this side of Center Street, that's two blocks down, his house gets bombed. So I said, I thought I'd come up here. So when I moved up here a white folk living there; a white folk was living there; white folks living over there. Everything. So they said, "Why do you want to live around the white folks?" I said I'm living in my house and they live in theirs. Now back to when I found this house and the lady that sold it to me, she said she'd take twelve thousand five hundred. I talked with a black, what do you call sell the houses, salesmanship. Salesman. A real estate man. He was my real estate so they take five hundred dollars down. That's the way I bought it. I said, now I'm going to me a home. Now I'm leaving these projects. My children didn't want to come up here. My wife didn't want to come up here. You won't go. I said, well, you stay here. I'm going over

there. So I came on up then and everybody else was leaving, and later on the man next door, his wife was friendly with us until we applied to integrate the schools at the next year. That school where, you saw that school. You did come that way didn't you? Right around the corner.

KIMBERLY HILL: I saw Parker.

JA: Parker's down here. But the Graymont is around the corner.

KH: No, I didn't see that.

JA: So we went to school, applied to integrate the school because Reverend Shuttlesworth had already tested the '54 decision at Phillips High School. That's down on the other side of city hall. He got beaten real bad. So we have a mass meeting going, and he called for volunteers. Everything we do is for volunteers do it. They asked us, even integrating lunch counters, whatever it was. He volunteered or he asked for volunteers. Then they teach us how to be non-violent. All these things happened during the struggle. So I moved up here, and when I filed to integrate the schools, me and seven other families, seven families filed. We all filed together. But their job put pressure on them, fired every one of them. So that left me by myself. My job was my own job because I ran my own shop.

So the man when I filed, the man next door asked if he could find somebody to buy his house. I told him I wasn't selling houses. I said, now I don't know anybody that wants to buy it because I don't sell houses here. I said you need to talk with the real estate folks for that. So he quit speaking to me. He either would come out, go to work after I leave home or he'd get out and go to work before I came out. But his wife, she always would speak and talk. But after he's gone, she stopped coming to the fence and talking there. So all these things happen, but I'm still here. Then black folks started to move in over there on the corner. The preacher of the church bought this house here next door as a parsonage for the pastor. That's how that got started. You know anything, black folks were moving all these rest of these houses. It was a rough year for a lot of us, but we stuck together and watched out for each other. That's what we had to do. Because some folks who lived in that house, the man was light but the wife was dark. They looked like white folks themselves. Even the grandchildren look just like the grandmama and granddad.

We got us, went to court, oh I guess, for six years. Of course I filed a case with my daughter and my oldest son. But through the long process in the court they ended up going into high school. This is an elementary school down here. That's when I put my two younger boys on the case at the elementary

school. That was in '56, no, '57 through the six year process that's to '63. Yeah. So that's when the court ordered us to go to school, my two younger boys. We got and went to school on the 9th day of September, '63. But we got down to the school that morning. We left here. My top lawyer stayed here at the house, had breakfast with my wife and the other lawyers walked down there with us. We got down to the school. The governor had the doors blocked. That's the 9th day of September. The governor had the doors blocked, and we had to turn around and come back and get another court order and get the state troopers out of the door, got in the school the next day, September the 10th. Well, September the 10th then all the white folks got mad in Birmingham because schools were integrated. Governor was saying, of course I blame him for that because he said before integration comes in this city, this state, blood will run in the streets. That's what the governor said. So blood did because five days later, September 15th all that march and heckling these white folks were doing down into the school, "Two, four, six, eight we ain't going to integrate." That's the way it was hollering and carrying on. They had to rope off the school and keep those there were about two or three hundred down there carried signs, and my two little black boys, one nine and one eleven, and that went on for a long time. Eventually on the 5th day of, five days after we got in school that's when they bombed that church that killed the four girls because everybody was mad because the school was integrated. The first year down there my boys were treated pretty rough because they would hit them behind the head at the water fountain. They'd go and drink the water. Another big boy, white boy would hit you behind the head. That kind of bruised the lips or teeth or wherever, it's bleeding. That's what they would tell me when I go to pick them up. That happened for a year. I didn't allow them to fight. When they are out on recess, the old boys out there were playing ball. My boys played ball. They'd turn the bat loose at them if they were standing near close. I had to teach them how to stand behind the white children until their time to come up to the bat. They learned to get along for some reason because one year after my boys were down there, Dwight--that's that picture you see up there; picture over there by the clock; they made him the captain of the ball team his second year they were down there. The girls write to the boys "be my valentine." Things just changed within one year because I didn't allow them to fight.

When we finished down there, of course I'm skipping a lot of things, when we finished down there, my oldest son was going to Parker. He went to Boston, Massachusetts on a French program from Parker High School, and he met a white family out in Lincoln, Massachusetts. That's about eight or ten

miles on the other side of Boston, but he met them in Boston. He got in a conversation, and he told them those are his brothers in Birmingham integrating the schools. So that family got in touch with me and asked me would I let those boys come to Boston and live with them because we stood up in Alabama. Something told me to let them go. So when they went to Boston, they went to high school. When they finished high school, lived with that family, they went to college. Dwight finished Tufts University lived with that family. Floyd finished Boston College, lived with that family. So it's one of the dearest things I've seen in my life people being so nice to my children and came out of this storm down here, and folks threatened down here and folks up there helping us. It was a beautiful sight. I never shall forget it. I went up there. I visited, looking and they treated my boys just like they were part of their own family. Never will forget that. I used to drive to Boston, me and my wife. We'd go and stay over night. They didn't let, we didn't have to go in a hotel or anything. We stayed in their home with my children there. My boys were being taught from us of how to take care of their rooms and how to keep their bathrooms clean when you use it, leave it for the other person. Those children learned that from my children. My children learned some things from their children because white folks read a lot. They'd be eight or ten there in the house and seemed like nobody's there. Everybody's sitting in a corner somewhere or downstairs in the basement with a book. So that started my children reading. We learned from each other. That was beautiful.

KH: Why do you think that they wanted to do that?

JA: Why would I think who wanted?

KH: Why do you think the Roche family wanted to help your sons?

JA: Well, I guess I don't know. They're some kind of a people. Everybody, all white folks aren't low-down and ornery. Some folks love this country. They like the things they see in people as human, not as color. That's the way it appeared to me because the man who is head of the house he was a principal of an elementary school in Lincoln, Massachusetts. See Lincoln is a suburb outside of Boston, just eight or ten miles difference just like here and Pritchard and Ensley. They were just nice folks. I guess they believed in practicing what they preached, Christianity. I think they say they were -- what do they call it? -- that they were Quakers. They just do things. They don't see colors. They open the doors and open their hearts. Eventually one of their, two of their kids came down here spending a couple of nights with me. I took them down south to Mobile and let them see the south before they went back to Boston. We were just

that close. I don't know. I never will forget it when my boys finished, before they finished school when they got into college, when they came home for Christmas, their Christmas gift was a round trip ticket on Eastern Airlines to come to Birmingham for Christmas and go back to Boston. They did that until they finished college. When they finished college, then they started marrying and the whole family came to each wedding. All that happened, it was just like a family. We have lunch together wherever we were, motels, just a family white and blacks sitting together. Just like family. So we lost them about three or four years ago. Both of them past away within a year and a half or two years apart, man and wife. So nobody is up there now but the children, and I think my boys still hear from them because I ask them all the time do you hear from the Roche children. I can't think of the names right now. But he'll send them a card, and they'll send a Christmas card and things like that. It was a great meeting and joyful getting along. So that's what erased me thinking that white folks were mean and low down. All white folks are not. No, I can't see them all mean and low down. I'll tell anybody that. I've seen so much nicer than them that I don't even get mad [at] George Wallace or Bull Connor anymore. You've heard about them, didn't you?

KH: Yeah.

JA: I don't get mad with them anymore. I said they just didn't know any better. I said because I praise them now when they were giving us hell then because if they weren't what like they were, maybe we wouldn't have anything today. People like that just make you get up and do something. I said tell them all the time, Wallace made a man out of a lot of us black men, standing up like men. Bull Connor made Christians out of the rest of us. Yes sir.

KH: Is that because—

JA: I say I still love Birmingham. They caused a lot of hell to love it but I love it. Martin always say you've got to love the hell out of folks. I'll never forget that word. Beat them with kindness.

KH: That's how Bull Connor made a Christian out of people by—

JA: Oh yeah.

KH: Using so much violence.

JA: Prayed and yes sir, because when Bull got sick and he was over there in the clinic trying to rehab, rehabilitation center and somebody recognized him and said, "Hey, Mr. Connor." He don't respond to speak. He says pray for me please. Pray for me. Same Bull, he wants your prayers. He'll never get it.

KH: Well, I think was thinking about something you told me yesterday you said that you wanted your boys to get a good education so that they could be different from other men in your family.

JA: Yes, that's what I told them. I said go to school and learn as much as you can because we need a new Armstrong now because I came up in a bunch of men in my family and looked like half of them or all of them were whiskey drinkers. We didn't need anymore of that. We've had enough of that. We want a new Armstrong. So I don't know that any of them drink. So that's the way we are today and go to school. Get something in your head can't anybody take from you because black man now has to stand. I said the worst thing you can say is a black man who did nothing. Worst thing you can do is nothing. When I went to school in the country. I was taking up barber, not barbering, but carpentry and brick. I ended up being a barber. That's what I was supposed to have been I guess. Should I have went to school after I came out of the Army, eighteen months that barber course, Uncle Sam paid for it, bought the tools and everything. Now I've been in business fifty-two years. I've been barbering fifty-four years. Now I've been in my own business fifty-two years.

KH: That's great.

JA: I haven't been sick but one day out of the fifty-two years. I said the Lord has blessed me for some reason. I've done something right. He's really blessing me because when I told them at the newspaper that when I go to heaven I'm going to go straight from Birmingham and not stop in Atlanta.

KH: When I was going through the museum and also listening to your story, it seemed like 1963 was the most violent time in Birmingham.

JA: And '63 was the turning point of our struggle. We had a lot of things come to a head in '63. I always think about what Fred Shuttlesworth said about all these cases he was hatching out. You could go there and he took down the signs off of the water fountains and you'd ride the same elevator and whatever, use the same bathroom. He said that's the reason I said never set a hen on one egg. You waste up the hen's time. She can hatch twelve eggs as good as she can hatch one. So that's the way I look at it the same way after he said it. Years ago, don't waste up the hen time sitting on one egg because she can hatch ten eggs just like she can hatch one. That's what happened to us in the struggle.

The housing bill passed. That's how I got up here. The housing bill passed. I know a lot of folks don't know how they got in College Hill. But I know how we got up here. It's the housing bill that man

can live wherever he's got money to buy. That's why it is. Most of, there aren't any white up here. Even the white, I know one white though up here, but he's married to a black lady. I know that because he's my chairman of my neighborhood organization. They called today. They want to go with him at five o'clock, but I already have a board meeting. So I can't be in two places at the same time.

KH: Nope.

JA: When people find out that you will work or you will do it, they worry you to death because they stay on those same folks. Even the church is that way. When you get involved with something they want you involved with everything they've got going.

KH: How do you choose?

JA: Huh?

KH: How do you choose the most important?

JA: First come, first served. That's the way I do it. Yeah, because first Sunday in this month I was down about twenty-five or thirty miles on the other side of Selma that's where I was born and raised, down there presiding over a homecoming. They wanted me down there where I was raised at. This the fourth year they've asked me to come. This is the fourth year. I said I must be telling them something right because I don't bite my tongue. Must be telling them something right. They want me back. I enjoy going back. I enjoy it because you meet your people that you knew all your life. Some you grew up with and some you went to school with, but there aren't many of them living. Those that came up with you, that's I'm afraid to ask sometimes where's so and so. Where's so and so. They're dead. They're dead. They died in Mobile. They died in Pensacola. They died in Cleveland. Just stop right there.

KH: Do you think that there was less violence in Birmingham after '63?

JA: Yes, there was less violence. But now looks like they're coming back with it, us on each other. It looks bad because you've got that younger bunch. They don't understand our plight and what we struggled for. So they're young killing twenty, eighteen and twenty, they don't understand what. They weren't born. They don't know the struggle, what Dr. King taught us, how turn to each other not on each other. They don't understand that word. You've got a lot of children now that are raised by single parents. There is very little the average woman can do with a boy when he gets past fifteen years old. No man in the house. I can see that as a problem. That's why you see them wearing their clothes all kind of ways.

They're doing some things and she's got to work. I don't give that any excuse, but there are some things that I really don't understand and yet I do understand because you put your mind on too many things other than the child. Of course, the court has come in. It doesn't allow you to whip children like you used to. That's child abuse. So all that has a lot to do with it. Everybody stopping. No court is going to stop me from whipping my kid if he needs a whipping. I came up in that environment. My mama will get you. My daddy was Supreme Court. He'd back it up. So I was glad for them, and I'm glad I had a daddy and mama like I have.

KH: Can you tell me more about them?

JA: Yep. Anything my mama told us to do just like or let us go some other boy's house and play ball and don't let the sun go down on you when you're not in this yard. She didn't have to tell me that tomorrow. She told me that today. She didn't have to tell me that next week because she told me that today. You understand. You don't forget that. They don't forget it, and you don't forget it because and then you had more than one mama. The other parents were just like your mama, and they were parents and when you go to somebody's house, you just got to be the same way whenever you're at home.

I remember I carried my slingshot to school. The lady saw me with the slingshot. My mama knew about it when I got from school that I carried a slingshot to school. The lady didn't have any cellphone either. But the purpose I had the slingshot was because bad dogs on our way to school would run at us, and I hit one with a rock, slingshot, and that's it. He hollered and that turned the rest of them around. Go down the road by the, a block further, a bad looking bull out there with some cows. He acted like he wanted to run. Well, I would hit him with a rock, and he'd turn around. I hid the slingshot under the church almost just two blocks from the school. I couldn't tell my mama I didn't carry any slingshot to school. I would be calling Miss Annie a liar. But Miss Annie was lying. But I couldn't say that.

KH: You couldn't defend yourself.

JA: I didn't carry my slingshot to school. Well, that would call the woman a liar. But they're going to believe what the lady says. So we were just that close in the country. But I got my whipping for taking it out of the house I guess. I know I couldn't go back into that. I know my mama and they believe what each other says. This is the kind of raising we had in the country, but we don't get anything like that now. When I first opened up my shop here in Birmingham, I used to go out in the street and stop fights

down there by Lincoln School. I don't do it now. It's dangerous. I see a fight, I lock up my door and act like I don't see and go in the back. Let them go out there and fight for themselves. It's dangerous. You may end up getting hurt. Those boys now carry guns, knife anything. So I hated that, but we have that now.

I watch them go to school. I ask one of the woman teachers does Parker allow kids to wear their britches and clothes like that. Nobody's been able to give me an answer. But when I was going to school, my mother inspected us before we walked out the door. I had to, she let us know what a button on the shirt was for. What strings in a shoe are for. We couldn't do that. Me, my brother and my three sisters would leave there together. We came back together. We couldn't walk off and leave our sisters and they couldn't hang around and not keep up with us either. We walked in the house and everybody spoke good English at the same time. That's just the way we were raised. A lot of children are raised that way. That's not just us. And at school, we had no fights at school because the principal would make you stay there and clean up the latrine, pick up all the paper, wipe the blackboards, all this kind of thing here and whip you too. Yeah. I'd go home and somebody said Mommy, he got a whipping today. The principal whipped, I went to the principal's office and got a whipping. My mama whip me for getting a whipping. That was that.

KH: Yeah, I know about that.

JA: Yes, I did, whip you for getting a whipping because you know better. All these things happened. You can't use, you can't put this time with that time, but I don't see why it would be any difference. We just have to come together and black folk always raised their children. Black folk always, this is something new for us. I just don't see it.

KH: Did Parker have that kind of discipline when your son and daughter were there?

JA: Yeah, Parker was pretty good because you've got to get permission to do things. As years go by things change. Things change because when we were marching and we'd know we were going to have a march tomorrow or day after tomorrow I always kept my kids at home. We'd go from my house to the march. A lot of children got over the gate at Parker went to the march. You had to keep the court from expelling a lot of kids from school because they slipped off without permission. We had to fight for that to get the crimes off their role for them climbing over the fence. A lot of them did that. They joined the march, but I didn't do it because I knew better. I let my children go to the march tomorrow. You don't go

to school this morning. Go from home. You didn't have to apologize with nobody for climbing over the fence. That's the way I did it. By me being involved in the struggle I knew. You don't go in and just do anything. You had to have permission to do things. So those are things that happened during the struggle. My boys went to jail, ten, eleven, twelve years old. They didn't put them in jail. They put them in juvenile court. When you're under teenagers, you go to jail. My daughter went to jail. She was thirteen. My daughter in jail. My wife in jail. I was in jail. My boys in juvenile court.

KH: This is all at the same time.

JA: Same time. Nothing at this house but the dog. Yes, I remember that well. Yep. I never will forget those trials. That's why I say I love Birmingham because Birmingham came a long way. It was a low down city. Black folks were in like slavery. But when we started waking up, Fred Shuttlesworth warmed up this town. Dr. King was our national leader. He [Shuttlesworth] was a leader in this city. He was the man that led the marches, got jail beaten and everything. Fred Shuttlesworth. I never will forget that. I don't know nobody I could put ahead of him. Yeah, yes indeed. His house was bombed several times. Bomb knocked the springs out of the bed.

KH: Wow.

JA: Man standing there with a robe on out there talking to the policeman. The bomb knocked, we found the springs somewhere else, Fred standing up on his feet. How it happened, it's a miracle. Yes, indeed.

KH: How did you talk to your children about desegregating the schools?

JA: Mostly I talked -- because I knew my boys -- nonviolent. That's why we took it and won because if they had fought back with those who hit them behind the head at a water fountain, they would've been expelled from school. They always expelled the wrong person. You did nothing; the boys did it to you. But you don't fight them back because I was in a situation where I integrated the lunch counters. About five or six of us sat at the lunch counter, ordered hamburgers, whatever we ordered. People act like they don't see us. Here comes a white boy, take a cigarette out of his mouth and stick his fire to your neck while he's sitting up at the counter. That's cause for a fight right there.

KH: Yeah.

JA: But we don't do anything because we were taught. Take it. As that thing goes and it didn't happen to me because I know I don't even know today what I would've done. Here comes another white boy, drinking coke or whatever he was drinking in his cup with ice. He opened your collar and poured ice down your back. You're sitting there at the counter to be waited on. Never did fight. So we won because I knew that if we had gotten up and hit the boy like he was supposed to have gotten, that we probably would've had six months in jail, a thousand dollar fine, and then folks in business might have added a whole lot to that. They know what and you did this and you did that. You broke my stool or something like that or knocked something off the table fighting. But we did nothing. But we went to court, and the man who owned the place, he has a license to sell to the public and he didn't serve us. That's why the fight got started. I mean it wasn't a fight, just when the guy took the fire to his neck and the cigarette went out. So () knocked that out and then they refused to sell him a license because he wasn't right in selling to the public. That's how a lunch counter is now. You go into the lunch counter now and folk refuse to serve you, you can sue. Just like any white person coming into my shop wanting their haircut. They can sue me if I don't cut their hair. But before then, I would've supposed to go to a white barbershop, I couldn't get a haircut because just get out of there. Police arrest me. But see all that has changed now. So now I tell the kids at the [Birmingham Civil Rights] Institute, you go into a white restaurant now and isn't but one color you've got to worry about, that's the greenback. That's all you've got to worry about. Greenback. So that's why I say I love Birmingham, all those things I put together because I know what it was. We've done a lot of things to make it a better place for all of us to live.

KH: What lessons do you hope that kids today will learn from your struggles for civil rights and desegregation?

JA: Well, I hope they get a lesson out of everything that happened. But I don't see any way they can get it unless we start having mass meetings again because the pulpit is not saying anything about our struggle, and now we're having new preachers in the pulpit, younger preachers don't know anything about the struggle. They can use some secondhand information, but he doesn't know the fine print of it. I have to talk to folks at my church because we've got a young pastor about getting kids registered to vote. This young man has a thing going now so that every Sunday he talks about it. When was the last day to register to vote. These are the things that make things happen. The vote is a powerful weapon. Anybody that

doesn't vote now, they say if you don't vote, don't squawk. If you're living with the system. Same way about work. They don't know anything about anybody that doesn't want to work. They want to hustle, want to beg, want to steal. I tell them all the time. They can come up on this hill. There's a whole lot of single women that live up here, retired from teaching school or whatever their job was, want somebody to rake their leaves or cut their yard. You can make all the money you want. You don't have to go to school to learn how to rake a yard. Cut grass. But it's good to go to school. You know maybe you know how to appreciate things. I never shunned work. I tell my kids all the time, children all the time, work is honest. Don't let your children see you sitting around doing nothing because the worst thing a black man can do is nothing. I came from a working family. I had a good strong granddaddy. I used to follow him around and everybody says I've got his way. I want things done right. Well, what's wrong with that.

KH: I have a question about desegregation in general. How successful do you think it's been?

JA: Well, I'm glad you asked has it been because it looks like it's getting away from us now because they're still back to that young crowd. They don't know how they got this here. You don't know how you got it, then you don't know how to handle it. But it's because your environment that you live in will turn the clock back on us and my shop. If you have a chance tomorrow to come by and I'll show you I've got seven men on my wall who were congressmen back in the 1872. I've got that on my wall for folks to see that because it tells me that we've been here before. When all the folks who were my age and older, died out, who was in the struggle. We lost our sight on our goal. Now anything can happen. These young boys now driving. When they first started selling drugs, they were driving Mercedes Benz, brand new Cadillacs, and when the Internal Revenue got up with them, they took the car because, a forty or fifty thousand dollar car and you don't file any income tax. They'll take your car. So now those same boys out there with that money selling drugs, got a \$250 car, paint it real pretty. That's about all it costs, \$250. The paint job probably cost more than the car did. They've got \$500 worth or rims on them. No work. So they're going the same way, just using different. But I see it every day. The car stops— [he mimics spinning motion with his hand]

KH: Spinning wheels.

JA: Still spinning just like it's moving. That's drug money. Anybody that makes that kind of , no job making that kind of money would buy something like that that expensive if he weren't guilty breaking

the law. So that's back to what I say about single parents. It's going a long way because mama is getting some money she hadn't been getting. She's got the carpets on the floor and big old screen television in the living room and getting what she wants, let the boy--he's bringing it in. All these things are still happening to us. It's just happening in a different way. That's why the boy, I never heard where a black man can kill three police, I haven't heard anything about it much since. They did in Birmingham.

KH: When did that happen?

JA: Two or three months ago.

KH: Oh.

JA: Killed three policemen, shot them, they came in. He was already paying them off. They came. Because the police, according to his neighbors there, the police were coming into his house like three and four times a day. What he was doing was watching that crowd come there and he wanted more money. So the boy refused to give him more money. So he went back and got him two more police, come there, they were going to put him out of business. That boy killed all three of them. Black boy. It was in the paper last week. But you don't hear much about it because the police knew about it for a long time.

You understand, yeah.

KH: I'm just going to switch the tape over.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JA: Yes, ma'am. That happened, it's been over three months ago. Three police are dead and they all were white. When you hear of a black man killing three policemen, [chuckles], yep. That happened about five or six blocks back west from here on Easley St. I was out there until the first meeting. I've been down to the house where he was selling the drugs, looked in it. It's just a house. Empty house and they were using the house. Well, see the other young boys see that and they do the same thing. They're just spreading. They know how to get those cars painted pretty. Yeah, everybody wants to buy my Buick. I've had that out there for twenty years, that red car you see in the driveway. I've had it for twenty years. I bought it from the lady's son that after she passed he sold it to me. I've been having it ever since. Took care of it. Yes, those are, I don't see anything that makes me change from the way I say we're going because it bothers me and looks like all the pulpits want to get you to heaven when you die and no heaven while you live. That's just the way it looks to me. I've got the way to get to heaven and get some golden slippers, and I need some shoes now in Birmingham, uh uh. I can't buy that. I have to go to heaven to get a long white robe when I want a nice suit in Birmingham. That's kind of preaching – when I get to heaven, everything I'm going to get when I get to heaven. I'm going to get a chariot's wheel when I get to heaven. I want a nice car in Birmingham. That's sounds all right, but you can't get any car when you get to heaven. You've got to die to go to heaven. So it bothers me. I don't say that all of them are that way, but that's the way I hear, I see them. This is a new day now.

KH: Do you think that a continued fight for civil rights or desegregation would ever work if the church wasn't involved?

JA: Church has to be involved because we've got to learn to do it the Christian way of doing things. That's why we've named these organizations Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Alabama Christian Civil Rights Movement. You put Christ in everything you do. That's why we have accomplished what we have accomplished, and when I integrated the schools, I had to go before white superintendents, but look what we've got now. Black superintendent. We've had them. This is about the third one or fourth one. Okay. We've had two black mayors in our city. The majority of our council has been black from a long time. The majority of them still are black. Now we've got a black county commissioner, president. Yeah. So that's because we, some of us learned what a vote meant to us. We are seventy

percent of Birmingham is black folk. We will do much better if they understood that power. And now they say our schools are in bad shape, need money but we're taking the money out to Galleria.

KH: Where?

JA: Galleria, that's Hoover because the buses are running out there. All the folks out there, that's taking your tax out of the city. That's our problem. We can be in the right leadership capacity and then don't know what to do. The car dealers are moving out. That takes taxes from the city. Yep. Some of us are starting to move to Hoover, for what? We need to stay together. Our power is better together. Our strength. But I heard a man say once that we live like we think. If we don't think no better, we don't live no better. We live like we think.

KH: And if we don't think we're together, then we won't be together.

JA: We won't be together. We always will be struggling. We always will be struggling, complaining and I'm in my own way. Me. That's the way we are. That's the way it is, isn't it? We are in our own way.

KH: Were there any other black students at Graymont before your sons left?

JA: No. No blacks were there. They were there by themselves. So the spotlight was on them every day. You had people that came here. That's why I had to go down there and see them safe home because news reporters wanted to know what happened today. What did this, this, this. Sometimes they could be Klansmen as a news reporter. So that's why I saw them home and don't answer the door. I slept up here by myself. Slept in that same room, kept my blinds open where I could see because the lights were screwed out. You couldn't turn any lights on. My wife and my children slept in the back. Yes, that's the way that worked. So that happened for two years.

KH: How do you think it might have, your sons' experiences at school might have been different if there had been other black students there?

JA: Might have been but my children were taught because they went to the mass meetings. Black children didn't go to mass meetings much like my kids did. Because there I saw, when I go, when me and my wife go, we had our children because their future had to come on like ours did. They had to learn for themselves, and children can learn because when my boys tell me what happen today and I asked them and they'd tell me with a smile on their face. I'm all puffed up because they took it better than I did. They

were children and I was proud of them doing that. Yeah. Trouble doesn't last always. But look what we accomplished out of that. Some white family opened their doors for us. So that made me feel good. They've been asked a lot of times, if you had to do that over, would you do it? I say I believe I will. I'd do the same thing again. I didn't pawn my children's life. I made it better for them. Now they've got children in college. Dwight's boy up there with the black pants on. His son's in Morehouse in Atlanta. He studied medicine and law. He married his wife in Washington, DC. She was from, her daddy raised her in Mississippi and they went to the same school up there. The other boy married his wife in Pensacola where he was in the Navy down there to finish college. So that's where he lived now down in Pensacola.

KH: Are your grandchildren really committed to education too?

JA: Well, yes and no. The one, the boy in Morehouse is. He's definitely concerned because his mama is a practicing lawyer. His mother's daddy is a doctor in Mississippi. He, that's why he studied medicine and law. He's good at it. He's doing a good job. He soon will come out of school after this last semester. I'm going to Atlanta to when he graduates.

KH: That will be great. Morehouse graduation.

JA: Oh yes. So I'm proud of him and I use him to kind of rouse the rest of them. They are always going to be some showdogs in the family because this other boy's son, I've got to push him to do what he does.

KH: Is he in college?

JA: Well, sometimes he goes and sometimes he doesn't. His daddy is having problems with him. I give his daddy the devil. I said why are you can't raise one child and I raised four of y'all. You allow him too much privilege to drive a car down the street, getting tickets when he ought to be in college. You don't go to college some time. You go to college the whole time you're supposed to be there. So he doesn't get in my way too much because he knows where I'm coming from. I haven't gotten anything good for him when you don't go to school when you're supposed to. I try to scare him back in school because if they start registering him in the Army, he's going to have to register. But if you're in college with good numbers, good what do you call it, your grades are updated then they don't bother you quick. You get the other ones that aren't doing too much. We've got to keep your grades updated if you're in college especially when you're eighteen, nineteen and twenty years old. They'll put you in the Army.

KH: You mean in case there's a draft.

JA: Yeah. If there's a draft.

KH: Yeah.

JA: They're talking about doing it. I know about what they were doing a lot of kids in college weren't making good marks, drop them in the Army.

KH: Are any of your other grandkids in college?

JA: My daughter's daughter, I don't know what college that she is in Norfolk, Virginia. She did tell me one time. I don't remember anything. But the mother called me not too long ago that she's out of college right now because she got behind in her quarterly money. So she's working a little bit. She plans on going back when she catches up on her bills. She took her money and bought a car instead of paying her--. She let her boyfriend tear up the car. Oh gee. I say you'd better let no boyfriend drive your car and you're in school. Yes, that's why some of them are very important. School is very important to some of them and not. They just go because you asked them. But you have to push them. She ought to be able to push them like I pushed them. It's a sacrifice. You get something in your head. I say you aren't going to be lucky as I am, I was. I didn't go to school that much but I did quit school until I got grown. But I was, we were in the country. You had to be late going, starting and first coming up because you had to farm. That's what boys, and girls always got to school but boys didn't. Boys had to come out and help their daddy start the farm before school ended. That's the way I came up. But whatever I learned, I learned it. I felt it was the best thing for me to go for a trade. That's what I've been doing the last fifty-five years, what I learned as a trade. But I saw the need. That's why I pushed them. Black folks in the country then didn't see but one thing to do but educate the girls. The boys wouldn't need it. But he's the head of the family. But me by I guess being involved and traveling around the world saw the need and then I had sense enough to listen to Dr. King and let him teach us some sense. I never will forget that.

KH: Do you and your children talk to your grandkids much about those times?

JA: I do when I get a chance. I don't know what they do to their own children, my boys do, but I talk. That's why I was jumped on this other one by the one that's supposed to be in Tuskegee. You have to talk with kids and show them the needs of education. You don't leave it up to them. They don't know. They're still living in your house, under your roof, buying no groceries, no nothing. But he one day will be

on his own like you are now on your own. I've had a job all my life. [bus noise in background] I haven't cut hair all my life. I've had other jobs. Because I believe in having my own whatever I have. Put it together and survive.

KH: How did they react when you told them—

JA: They just sit and listened.

KH: Okay.

JA: They just listened that's all. They know me. They listened. Hadn't been too long before black folks started education because when I came up all my people went to sixth or seventh grade or about the fifth grade. That's about all they did. But they were real men. They had something about them. They [knew] how to survive. I think about my granddaddy. I never heard him talk about school. But he had fifteen people working with him, paid them, fed them, all that, hog killing time had about a whole week killing hogs, people would be there killing hogs, had plenty of cows and horses. They had food all the time. Never heard him talk about school. I watched that. Had an old car down in the country, never forget it. T Model or A Model Ford. They survived.

KH: Sounds like my granddad.

JA: I was down there the other Sunday, look out across the grass where my granddaddy used to live, farmed all that land, couldn't even see the house, trees had grown up tall. I said golly you act like you're lost down in there now because it didn't look like any wood. There's a field, big field. I didn't know folks sold watermelon until I came to Birmingham. We used to raise plenty of watermelons and things, pile them up under the tree and give them away. All you've got to do is asked for them. I told them one day down there said when I was in the country as a boy I had a horse; my brother had a horse; my daddy had a horse. Those trees are still out there in the yard of the church and I used to ride that Buick down there. I said now here me coming down here with 450 horses, that Buick. Under the same tree where we had our horses hitched to the tree. Now I drive that Buick's got 450 horsepower. I park under the same tree. That's right to keep me coming down there now. Now we're sitting at the church, had a pasteboard fan, the windows up. I don't know if you're fighting roaches or fanning. Fighting horses or fanning. Now you've got air-conditioned and ceiling fans in the church. See how the Lord can bless us. I talk about him late because everybody comes late. I said now it doesn't make any difference if y'all get

offended, but I'm going to say because I was in Chicago to visit my sister the one that passed. I went to that Institute in Chicago and heard a man talk about black folks always late. I was saying I would back up because I wanted to know that because I run into that quite a bit at my shop. They'll come there five minutes before I go to lunch or either five minutes before I come home. Late. I want to know why black folks are always late. He said four hundred years ago black folks didn't have clocks. They worked by the sun. That's true. Four hundred years ago and now we're still acting like we acted four hundred years ago.

KH: I don't know about that.

JA: Everybody laughing at that. I didn't bite my tongue. I said you said Sunday school opened at ten. We're already after ten. It's at twelve. It's at ten. So I said we did better than that when we had to walk to church. That's right. But I let them have it. I guess that's why they keep me coming. I pour it on them. Yes indeed. Well, we don't change fast. They have the same old method. Preacher preaches for an hour what he could've said in fifteen minutes. It's a wonder they don't tell me to go back to Birmingham and stay there. Sing a song and sing all nine verses. But that's the way that I remember that well.

KH: I don't have any more questions for you, but if there's something that you'd like to mention that I didn't ask--.

JA: Well, I've been kind of skipping about and didn't put it together like I should have. But I don't think I, I'll tell you like I told the young man at the [Birmingham Civil Rights] Institute the other day, three things happen to a man when he gets old. It was a security guard we were talking at. I said what are they, three things that happen when you get old. Said, number one he forgets. Two and three you don't know what they are. So I just, things will come to me. Because I've been in so many things and you don't know what, you like to keep it in respective [order], but anything you want to ask just feel free to ask any yourself because I can't go just straight down the line like Reverend Shuttlesworth. He's a man. He can do dates when the things happen. There's a man with a Photostatic mind. He can talk about what something happened on a certain date. Yeah.

KH: That's pretty good.

JA: Like I told a man yesterday—let's see was that yesterday, yeah—when the children, when I'd be speaking to the kids and I opened it up for questions, the first thing they ask me is how old I am. I said, "Which birthday you want? I've got two." "Mr. Armstrong, how do you have two birthdays?" I said,

“Yeah I’ve got two. I have two.” “But tell us how you have two birthdays.” I said, “The first one my mama told me. My first birthday. The second birthday I told her.” I couldn’t get those young folks to understand that for nothing in the world. “When was your second birthday?” I said, “My first birthday was in April. Twenty-seventh day of April, ‘23, that’s my first birthday my mama told me. She brought me in the world.” I said, “My second birthday was in 1938 Wednesday before the third Sunday in August because that’s the birthday that took me around the world.” They finally understood what I was saying. That’s the birthday I was born on. Talking about Christ, religious birthday, Christian birthday. That’s what I was referring to. So they understand that but they had fun out there. Everybody asking when your birthday. Why do you have to have two? I said, Well one takes you around the world and one brought you here.

KH: I know what you mean.

JA: I say I know I was born in August. It was a Wednesday on the third Sunday before I was baptized on the third Sunday. It was on a Wednesday though. What that date was I don’t know. But I know it was on a Wednesday, and that Wednesday was before the third Sunday because we stopped from working and went to church for a one-hour service during the revival week. That’s when I was converted. So he understood what I was saying. That happens for the second birthday. I told her and the first one she told me. I remember that just as good as I know my name.

KH: It was one of the most important days in your life.

JA: Um hmm. Yes sir. I like all those famous three men up there, Martin and Mandela and the Muslim man.

KH: Malcom X.

JA: Malcom X. Yeah, those are my favorite persons. Mandela, he went from prison to a president.

KH: Yeah.

JA: Yes indeed, and he brought that country to the light too. Nelson Mandela. I used to cut Martin’s hair when he would come to Birmingham and need a haircut. He used to come to my shop.

KH: I bet you had some good conversations.

JA: Well, he didn't talk much because sometimes he'd be talking mostly to the folks sitting over there that's waiting on a haircut and sitting over there and talk with him. But as far as me and him we didn't have any because the guys who bring him there they were talking about things while I'm cutting his hair. He always disguised himself when he comes in the shop. He had on shirt and pants, a cap and something like that. Because other than that everybody would be standing at the window looking. They do that some time now when I have a white customer in the chair. I've got about six white customers. I cut their hair. They see a white man in the chair the school children stand and look. He's cutting a white man's hair. I say, "What?" I'd rather be sued. I said I'd rather be put in jail for not cutting than to be sued for not cutting because you've got a business that's open for the public, don't ask for what color they are. How do you want your haircut? That's all. It's no problem to me. I've got a young man coming in here. He's working at the hospital over there, the children's hospital, the Cooper Green hospital. He brings his wife and his kids. I was the first one to give one of his boys a haircut. Still comes to get his haircut. Pay more than black folks do. Pay more than black folks do.

KH: Do most of your customers know how active you are?

JA: Yeah, everybody knows it because it's on my wall. I've got pictures on my wall about a lot of things I was involved in. Just like the pictures about the Pettis Bridge. You've heard about that, Selma. I've got that on my wall because I was in, I've walked from Selma to Montgomery four times. I was at Bloody Sunday at Pettis in Selma. They just came in there, but a lot of times buses come here from out of town to the Institute and some folks driving the buses come around there and they want to see the man who integrated the schools. They'll bring them to my barbershop, twenty-five to fifty folks coming. That's what they did. They'll be snapping pictures of the wall. I have all that happen but doing now.

KH: Well, sir.

JA: They're coming down there just like they're coming to a museum. They want to see everything down here. I have plenty of stuff in the scrapbooks I put together.

KH: Well, thank you very much for the interview.

JA: Well, thank you for coming. No problem. If anything you think of, you can call back and ask a question if you want to while you're here.

KH: If you don't mind, maybe next time I'm in town I can see your scrapbook.

JAMES ARMSTRONG
OCTOBER 18, 2004

JA: Okay, okay. I'll do that.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, December 2, 2004