

## TAPE INDEX

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[Cassette 1 of 1, Side A – Tape No. 3.7.2001]

001     Announcement: This is Elizabeth Hamilton interviewing John Davis on March 7, 2001 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina about his life and his experience as a student during integration.

ELIZABETH HAMILTON: I'd like to start the interview just with some of your experiences growing up, your childhood. How about, when were you born?

JOHN DAVIS: I was born in Chatham County in 1939 on a farm, ( ) farm, and I stayed there until I was six years old. Then my father bought a farm and we stayed there until I was nine. Went to Horton High School in Pittsboro. We left there and moved to Chapel Hill on Merritt Mill Road. I started going to Lincoln High School in the seventh grade and that's where I went to school until I finished high school.

EH: So, just going back to a little bit of your childhood. You were first living on a farm in Chatham County and then your father bought a farm when you were six?

JD: Yes, six years old.

025     Clearing up where the farm was and how long they lived there.

034     EH: What were your parents names?

JD: My mother's name was Clora Jeniva Davis and my father's name was Druemiller Davis.

EH: And your father was a farmer?

JD: He was a farmer. My father did a lot of things. He was a very talented man. He farmed plus he used to work at a sawmill. He used to be a mechanic. He was a very talented--he could do quite a few things. Actually my father was one of the first black men that had a baseball team. He was one of the first to have an opportunity to go

to college. He didn't but he had the opportunity.

- 045 Davis talked about his father playing baseball and his father meeting his mother being the reason he did not go to college.
- 063 About working for his father in the mill and building houses and quitting school for a time to work, went back to school at Horton High because working life was too hard.
- 075 Nine siblings and he was the first to graduate from high school, moved to Chapel Hill when he was 13 and he entered Lincoln High School, he could walk to school, his mother worked at the University Laundry.
- 105 They went to church at First Baptist where he's been a member for 50 years, Dr. Manly was and still is pastor, church location has changed, parents were busy and had to work a lot to provide for the family, very close family and siblings.
- 138 Went to elementary school in Chatham County, he excelled in school, good at math, smart siblings, his sister Ann started a business.
- 167 Rode the bus to school, good story about getting cold hands on the way to school, school wasn't too hard, farm kids didn't go to school for the first three months of school because that was harvest time, parents needed the kids to help though they did encourage them to go to school, sharecropping made it even harder because you had to work twice as hard, very difficult to get ahead.
- 219 Entered Lincoln in 1947, contrast for him living in city amongst city kids who had more cash and had experienced more, trying to fit in and funny story about school lunches and trading homemade biscuits for peanut butter crackers, city life was educational and provided more opportunity than living in country, go to church more often, read and play sports after school, job at The Colonial Store cleaning meat counter and he could take the left over meat home to family.
- 276 EH: Did you have organized sports at school?
- JD: We had a football team that was the state champ for three years in a row.
- EH: And you played football?
- JD: Actually, my senior year I got my knee broke and that kind of ended my sports career. I didn't want to play sports anymore--I got a compound fracture in my knee. I also played basketball and I was the center on the basketball team. We were always the runner up in basketball. We could not beat Burlington, ( ) Burlington in

basketball and they couldn't beat us in football.

EH: They were your rivalry?

JD: Basically, yeah. Them and Henderson but we'd always win in football. We won three championships.

EH: So what year did you graduate?

JD: 1958.

EH: So you were playing all these sports and the black high schools had a league and the white high schools had a league?

JD: Yes we had a separate league from the white high school. I'm always a little prejudice, we had a better team naturally. The team we had in high school--we had basically three hundred or less in high school--it was eighty kids, boys in the upper class. And every boy in our class was basically good enough to go somewhere if he had had the opportunity and--to play football or basketball or something. I mean, the athletes were just that good and you had to cut them down to basketball--cut them down to fifteen. In football with eighty kids--we had eighty kids on the football team. Our football team was just as big as the ones you see now because that's what kids did, everybody played.

EH: Yeah, they included everyone, anyone who tried out?

JD: From the ninth grade on--I mean if they were good enough to make the team. He'd cut you if you weren't good enough to make the team but most of them were good enough to make the team.

EH: Who was your coach?

JD: I started out with [laughter]--the first coach I played for in the eighth grade was a guy from Durham and I don't really want to talk about him but he never won a

game. We had--he tied one game and run the rest of the football players off. Then we got a coach in my ninth grade year name Willy Perman. He went to NCCU and I mean he was a fair coach but he had good talent. We won and everything. We started winning that particular year and we didn't win the championship that year because that was the first year we were getting started. We were nine and one. We got beat the first year but second year we were undefeated. We scored as high as ninety-eight points in a game--in a football game and in the tenth ( ) eleventh grade we were undefeated. And then Perman left and we had another coach come in by the name of Willy Bradshaw and the team didn't change. The only thing that changed was the coach's name and we had kids that won championships from them on. I graduated that particular year but we could've played anybody then. See, my eighth grade year, when I was playing, we'd have kids that would come back from Nam. They didn't have an age limit of anything on it, and the guy would just put people in and play them because they were older not necessarily better players. They were older guys--twenty, twenty-one and twenty-two--and here I am fifteen trying to play against a guy, you know, your scared to death and you really don't know what its all about and he was a real jerk, as I used to call them as a coach. When he left, it started pulling it self together and it went from there.

EH: That sounds like a kind of a unifying--sports was a pretty unifying thing to do. Everyone came to the games?

JD: We used to have to push people back to throw the basketball in with so many people at the basketball game. At the football game, we'd have people in the end zone throwing dollar bills at the players when the crossed the end zone. I mean that's just how-- and we'd have the stadium packed. I mean it wasn't like it is now. When we

played football the stadium was packed, it was the biggest thing in town on Friday nights.

EH: Where was the stadium?

JD: Out in Carrboro, Carrboro Lions Park.

EH: And the gym, where would you play your basketball games?

JD: Lincoln High.

EH: In the High School?

JD: Yes

EH: And the band, did the band play?

JD: We had the best band in the state. They were rated as the best band in the state. They used to win all kinds of trophies, marching trophies and stuff. See, the same people that played football played in the band, they played baseball. Whatever we did, everybody had to participate.

EH: Cheerleaders?

JD: Cheerleaders, yeah.

EH: Did you have a homecoming?

JD: Homecoming and all. You probably heard about Doug Clarke and the Hot Nuts. He was the band major.

EH: That's right. Isn't Rebecca Clarke his mother?

JD: We used to go up to Doug's and play basketball, walk up there in the evening.

So I grew up with Doug.

EH: So, he was your--you played with him?

JD: Played with him yeah. Doug was a little ahead of me but I played with him

yeah.

EH: I bet that was a lot of fun.

JD: Plus he was probably the best drum major around.

EH: Did white people come to the games too?

JD: White--all kinds of people came to our football games.

EH: Really, just because they were the best games to watch?

JD: We had the best games to watch.

EH: Yeah, I bet they were. And you traveled around? Did you have a bus?

JD: Had a bus, used a school bus, activity bus.

EH: Did you have any--I guess math was the subject that you--

JD: Yes, I was crazy about math. I never saw a problem I couldn't work.

EH: And you had a good math teacher?

JD: Bell was the best math teacher I ever had.

EH: What was his name?

JD: Mr. Bell. I'm sorry Mr. Lorry. Mr. Lorry was my math teacher. Mr. Bell was my band teacher.

EH: Oh, okay. What did you play?

JD: What in the band? The trumpet, just messed around a little bit.

EH: Did your siblings--were they all in school with you too?

JD: My younger siblings, not the older ones. They had already finished or quit. I was the first one to ever graduate from high school in my family.

EH: And you just decided you wanted to finish?

JD: Decided I wanted to finish, I wanted to go back and finish. I enjoyed it.

EH: So Lincoln was seventh through twelfth? It was all of those grades.

JD: Yes, I had the largest class to graduate from Lincoln, to enter--we had forty-eight people in our class when we went in as freshmen, but really when we went in at seventh grade. Forty graduated and up till today we have a--Saturday we're having a class meeting. We still have class meetings and stuff. We had a class meeting out here in February, the second week in February. So we go from house to house having class meetings.

EH: Just, get together?

JD: Stay together yes, have functions once a year.

EH: What do you talk about?

JD: Just the old classmates and stuff and what people are doing, seeing how their getting along.

EH: Did a lot of them stay in the area?

JD: Some of them, its about fifteen or twenty still in the area but they come from Connecticut and New York when we have functions and join in.

EH: So you graduated in 1958? I was sort of thinking about--wondering about your reaction, or your family's reaction, or even people in your community or friends to Brown vs. the Board in 1954. That happened--did it change the way you felt about anything? Or did you just kind of--?

JD: Didn't change that much. Chapel Hill--when you grew up in Chapel Hill--it was a little different. Now, Chapel Hill is not the most liberal place. Its not Asheville, Asheville is not liberal. Chapel Hill is a liberal place as long as you do [pause] what--things and stay in your community and don't raise too much hell. Things just continue to



move along just as smooth as ever. You'd never know if you were white or black.

EH: As long as you stayed--.

JD: As long as you stayed--when I used to stay on West Franklin Street, you'd go down on East Franklin Street you could always shop and buy what you wanted and people would greet you. You couldn't go to the movie though. There weren't too many seats you were going to get if you went to a Carolina football game. You'd get the end zone seats. You could sell sodas and things but always could go. I played basketball at Tin Can. I used to play basketball against Rosenblue, Quiggs, and Brennan Cunningham. When Frank McGuire was here, a guy asked--Rufus Minor--asked him, "Coach, would you give him a scholarship?". And Coach said, "No, he's too skinny. He couldn't play on my team." You know, but at that particular time in high school, I thought I was better than Rosenblue then. I mean, you know, you have--you always build yourself up a little bit better than you are but at that particular time I kind of figured I was better than he was. I was kind of a--I could out jump him. Plus, you know, I was much quicker and you just come along once every now and then. I could score on him. He couldn't score on me but he was bigger. Quiggs was bigger, Brennan, and McGuire liked big guys but that didn't stop us from playing with them. They'd always let us go down there and play in Tin Can. Tin Can is gone now but they had place called Tin Can and we'd spend all day Saturday and Sunday down there playing basketball. And you'd play against whites and they didn't send you away. Chapel Hill high had a place called Tin Can and we'd go up there and play.

EH: Against the students?

JD: Against the white schools. But that didn't mean you were going to school



down there. It didn't mean you were going to get the same type of chairs they were going to have. Any chairs that was--they would send you the older chairs and they'd take the knew ones. You know, I got--if I'm in charge of the equipment that comes in, I don't think you're going to get that. New equipment, I'm going to stop it at my school and then send what I want to to your school but that didn't stop us from learning and participating and doing what we needed to do. Because, I guess Lincoln High probably put out a lot of great talents, not only in football and basketball, but got a lot of people that did a lot of things and accomplished a lot in this particular world.

EH: I agree. So it sounds kind of like you--so when that happened you just sort of--your family decided to just keep sending their kids to Lincoln and--

JD: Well, there wasn't any use in being bitter. My wife's best friend's cousin was the first black that went to Chapel Hill and they stay over on Shady ( ) now and he's--

EH: What's hers name? His name?

JD: His name is Junior Hines. He played end for them at Chapel Hill High and he was the first black athlete to go, to leave Chapel Hill [meant Lincoln] and go there. So, I didn't care much

for going to Chapel Hill High. We just--

EH: You had your own school.

JD: Yeah and at that particular time, I loved my school.

EH: You had a great football team.

JD: A great football team, plus they didn't want to play us.

EH: To scared [laughter].

JD: Well, I don't know if they were scared or not but I don't know if they could've

won. I don't think anybody feel like they could've beat us.

EH: So, I guess they were some--were there some kids that were starting to go to Chapel Hill?

JD: Not at that particular time. That started about--in sixty.

EH: So you had already graduated.

JD: Yeah I left Chapel Hill and started doing what I wanted to do.

EH: Did you go to college?

JD: No, no more than just walk through it. I went up to A & T and--I thought I was going to Maryland Eastern Shore. I didn't want to play anymore football or anything because I got my knee broke and it was still not as flexible as it was. The doctor told me I wouldn't ever walk no more and I was seventeen at the time. I told myself, "you've got to be crazy". When I got it broke, I fell off the bed that night and they had to put me in another cast, and they had me cast from the neck down. The only thing out was my right shoulder and my right leg. I lay flat on my back for six months. (C...), the first coach I played for, won a particular scholarship to A & T. I just didn't want to play no more football. So I decided I wouldn't. At that particular time, I decided I'd join the army. Army wouldn't have me, they told me my leg was messed up. So, I come back that day and I decided--I'd been going with my wife ever since we was in the seventh grade. So I decided you know "I'm going to do something with my life other than just walk up and down the street." You know, I was a mischievous boy. So I decided I'd go take up trade. So I decided I'd be a plasterer and I started working towards accomplishing a trade and then the army called me, three years later. Low and behold, I passed. I had to get a deferment from the guy that I was working for to finish my trade

and when I finished, I was working on the fire station, up town. John Kennedy was the president, and he said that all married men whose wives are expecting don't have to go in the army. I had a six month deferment. Well, I called--my wife was doing her intern at Cook County in Chicago. So that's when my oldest son was conceived. We went to Chicago and when we come back I got Dr. Hooker to write me a letter saying that my wife was pregnant. Sent it in and didn't have to go. Guess what the next week--he come out--all married men, all men that's married don't have to come to the army. So, it worked out.

EH: So you didn't really want to be in the army at that point?

JD: At that particular time, I had tried to join the army I wanted to go, they wouldn't take me. My brother, both my brothers went in the army and--if I had gone into the army I would've made a career out of it. I just decided I'd do something when I got older I wouldn't really have to look back and wonder "what am I going to do with my life?".

EH: So you stayed in Chapel Hill?

JD: Yes, all my life. This is the only home I've ever known.

EH: So after you--did you keep working this trade?

JD: I worked for Smith and Sons then for ten years. I got to be a foreman. He sent me to school at Durham Tech to learn labor relations, blue print reading and things like that.

EH: When was that?

JD: Its been so long ago. That's thirty--I want to make sure--thirty-five years ago. How long has that been? I got it over there. I got it in the date book somewhere.

EH: Is that sixty-five?

JD: That's when it was about, sixty-five.

EH: So that's when you went to Durham Tech?

JD: That's when I--Asheville Tech. It was about--it wasn't sixty-five--about sixty-three. I picked up all that and then older guys, at that particular time, if you were young and on the job, didn't want you to be the boss. They'd say, "Listen man, you don't want to be the boss." I'd say, "Yeah, I want to get as close to the top as I can because the less people tell me what to do the better off I am." So I worked my way through, made it to the top. After I learned how to plaster, I said, "I'm not spending four years anymore on any particular trade." So I went and bought me some brick, some sand, and some lime and got in the back yard and learned how to lay brick. I wanted to make sure I knew how to build a corner and what you needed to do to make a living. At that particular time, I was more interested in making a living than I was in just doing other things--knowing how to make a living. I had a son and my wife was in school and she was doing an intern. She was getting out so I learned how to make a living and learned how to run jobs. I was down at East Carolina doing the library. Well, before I went to East Carolina I did the church on Henderson Street. The cornicing-- all the cornicing stuff you see on the church on Henderson Street--I was the foreman. I did all that work in there, well I was in charge of it. Then, you probably weren't here, the First Baptist Church out in Carrboro, where now is the Carrboro Town Hall, that had a lot of cornice work in there. I was doing that--that's when my oldest son was born. So, when I finished that church he was born and ( ) working. He sent me to Greensboro to learn how to put on travesdine and granilux and different type stuff, to make molds and do cornicing stuff. So at that

particular time I was probably one of the few blacks around that could actually lay it out. One of the few people around that could lay it out and do with it what I wanted to. So I was in East Carolina, working on the library. Work was kind of getting scarce, like it is now, and I'd come home--and at that particular time they were giving me a dollar and a quarter a day for room and board. That's all it cost to eat out of town. They told me, they'd say, "We're not going to pay your room and board no more." I said, "I'm not going to work anymore." So I resigned that day and two weeks later from that day he come back and offered me ten dollars an hour to do a job. Well, when I left his job that Friday evening, Kutz Reality was on Franklin Street. I walked down Franklin Street, and walked in his office and said, "I need a job." And he said, "( ) I got a job." I said, "I need one." I said, "I can do anything." He said, "Well, how much would you work for." I said, "I'll work for you for three dollars an hour." And he said, "Come in Monday morning" and that's when I started doing general maintenance. I'd do anything from putting on light switches to floors, painting, and I stayed with him for three years. Left there and went with the state and the state--Walter Hamilton--

EH: What year did you start working for the state?

JD: It's been so long ago. I'd have to count back. Let's see twenty seven--thirty five years ago I started working for the state. Walter Hamilton was the director of the physical plant. Edward Billingsly was the assistant director. They gave me a job and at that particular time, I told them--we was working towards me being over charge of all the grounds down at UNC. They had a guy named Parker, he was in charge of it. When he retired, I was going to get that particular job. He retired. I had been working there for about six or seven years. They had this thing going around saying, "You are in the lower

one-third of your department. You can't get a raise." I said, "Look, I'm the best employee you got. You can't put this in my record." So we talked about it for a little while and I said, "You can't put this in there. Although I can't get a raise and I understand that because I'm at the top of my salary but I don't want this in my record." I had to go all the way over to Steele Building.

EH: What was it that you didn't want in your record?

JD: I didn't want them to put a--at that particular time they'd write a memo to you, give everybody a memo. They'd give two-thirds of the people raises and one-third wouldn't get a raise. Those that didn't get a raise it would say, "You're in the lower one-third of your department. You can't get a raise." I said, "You shouldn't give everybody a letter like that." You should tell a person, "We can't give you raise and this is the reason why." So, at that particular time I left there, left Walter Hamilton's, and went over to Steel Building. ( ) and told them, and I resigned. I applied then for a job with the Housing Authority. I was the first person that used to do estimates and we had--in Chapel Hill, for the Housing Authority, for the government--

EH: State government?

JD: No, feds. They used to have a federal program. They called it the Neighborhood Development Program. So I worked there for three, three and a half years. I was on the job one day and they had a town manager--they were changing governments down at town hall and the town manager was Merrill Levine, she was a lady. She called me, her and Shirley Marshall, and asked me if I'd take a job with the town hall as a building inspector. I said, "I don't know. Let me think about it." So they said, "Take the weekend to think about it and we'll call you back." They called me back and I took



the job. That was twenty-seven years ago and I worked there until I retired this year. That's where I started my career as a building inspector and ended it up but it's been a great one for me. I'm just talking in general, you probably want to ask me some more questions.

EH: This is great, no this is great. Getting an overview.

JD: But what happened when I first got to be a building inspector for the town of Chapel Hill--my younger son, my older son was six years old--and the first meeting we had was in Asheville--

EH: What year was that?

JD: Twenty-seven years ago. [laughter] It was twenty seven years ago, up until--seventy-seven I think.

EH: Your son was six years old?

JD: No it was seventy-three.

EH: And your son was six.

JD: Yeah, my son was six. I have to think back on the dates. This was in seventy-five. We went to a meeting in Asheville my wife, my son and myself. We were walking down the street--they had a pig pickin', they used to have pig pickin's like that--and I told my wife, at that particular time--I said, "You know, I'm going to be president of this organization." I was young and energetic and she looked at me and she said you know, "You're crazy as hell. You wouldn't ever be president of this organization. Have you seen the people that's in it?" Out of five hundred people, I was the only black. I was the first black director--[tape recorder is turned off for phone].



EH: So we were talking about--oh your--in Asheville. President of the Building Inspectors Association.

JD: So she said, "Your crazy" and I said, "No, I plan to be president." At that particular time, there was five hundred of us in the organization and I was the only black. I was the only black director in the state of North Carolina. So, I started that particular day--I'm not a politician. I didn't politick, I just worked. Some people go to meetings to have a lot of fun. I went to meetings to work. I had to try and win confidence. So I started--they'd appoint me to a committee. I'd do a job. They'd appoint me to another committee. I'd do--then I got nominated for the board of directors. So, I went on the board of directors. I stayed on the board of directors for about twelve years. Then, I was nominated for president. So, I pulled my turn as president after--I was in there for seventeen years before I made it to president. I have been one of the elected members for co-co, secretary, treasury, was supposed to president. The reason I wasn't president was because they needed a--I was already treasury, handling all the money and we planned a meeting for Southern. They needed somebody to take care of all the hotels and stuff so I had to stay as secretary that particular year and eventually I just went off the board because I was tired of serving. I was the first black elected to the national association, Southern Building Code Congress. That was the largest building organization we had. Now, Southern has joined the International Building Code so we only have one. But I was elected to the Housing Code Board. I was the first chairman and I stayed on as chairman for two years. Eventually, after you stay on something so long you kind of wear yourself out. I just decided I'd resign and not stay on there anymore. But I've had

a great career in the field that I chose and I don't know how I could've done any better or any worse. Just being the first a lot of times really helps.

EH: Did you ever feel like there was resistance to you?

JD: Well, you know, anytime that your black, you have a little resistance but you can't have a small mind and let that effect you. I remember when I was nominated for president. My counterpart over in Raleigh wasn't elected to be on the board and I appointed one of his workers as a --put her on one of the committees. He wouldn't let her serve. Well, you know, that's--it was a lady, I wanted a lady, one of the first people to appoint a lady to a board and he wouldn't let her serve. Well, see, to me that's just nit-picky. You don't let stuff like that worry you, I--because if you start talking about it, it only festers. You just leave it alone. But I was the first president to appoint a lady to any committee and I got some ladies on it. So, I have a pretty good track record and I like to go to Raleigh now sometimes and talk about old times.

595 Still very few blacks in the association, only a few in NC, Davis has voting power town.

609 [End of Side A]

[Cassette 1 of 1, Side B -- Tape No. 3.7.2001]

001 Davis not involved in Civil Rights activism, doesn't consider self "non-violent kind", always supportive, story about neighbor T.T. Foushee and Watts Grill sit-in, would watch but can't take violent treatment, rather speak and say what he wants, "if you won't bother me, I won't bother you"

041 Harold Foster and the Colonial sit-ins, Jim Crow stories, the Rockpile didn't serve blacks on North end of town, Watt's Grill on South end, Colonial on West end. To Davis things went well, Chief Sloan of the police force handled it well.

097 "Older generation" (his generation) didn't fight it, younger generation more militant--from '48 back, his generation would join in but didn't instigate it, used to going in the back door and Jim Crow, things started changing, parents' generation didn't get involved.

- 135 Younger siblings involved in Greensboro, he was still in Chapel Hill, worried about them, no siblings went through integration.
- 155 Most black parents didn't want their kids to go to the white school, black and white kids needed a different kind of "nourishment," white teachers not used to black kids, first black kids that went through integration didn't come out well, he's glad he had his education rather than what they had, talks about his kids, very involved in their education, they were very successful, interesting contrast between sons--one who didn't challenge the system but the other who was more "militant"
- 201 Have to work within the system, can fight within the system, "work hard and continue to fight within the system," made it good for his kids, it's a generational thing, not a non-militant but a militant in other ways.
- 231 Felt sons got better education than he did, feels that black parents aren't responsible for their children's education now and blame too much on teachers, "instead of supporting the teacher, they should support the kid," can't have animosity, that's not just now that was during initial integration too, I talk about my own experience in education.
- 301 Views about power structure, integration should be about ability, priorities.
- 314 Wife works as nutritionist, has lived in same house since got married, talks about neighborhood.
- 378 Back to high school years, interactions with white kids through sports, only real tension was with white working-class kids, never problems in Chapel Hill, but didn't spend a lot of time with the whites, only time you'd see them or be sociable was on street, life was separate in almost every way.
- 417 Lincoln was the community, central to the black community.
- 421 Worked for white employers after high school, dealt with students when worked for Kutz reality, size of Chapel Hill was much smaller then, kids went to Estes Elementary, he was involved in their education, football coach for kids.
- 461 Interesting story about white supervisor Walter Hamilton at UNC, stood up to authority about salary, Hamilton wanted a reference from Davis when he came to work for city and Davis wouldn't give it to him because he didn't think Hamilton was a fair person.
- 489 Doesn't consider self a "great civil rights worker," friends were involved though, brother-in-law is Fred Battle and sister's brother-in-law is Ed Caldwell.

- 505 Rather be "heard not seen," do things through the "proper channels."
- 556 He got award in high school "Most Likely to Succeed," only subject he liked was math, wife was good at most things, story about being in class with wife, they've been together since seventh grade, she was always more prepared then he was for class, she got scholarship to Hampton, they weren't always serious, he was popular kid, more girls than boys at Lincoln, they got married after she graduated from college, she was in the band, kids now don't have the fun we had in high school, teachers made them work hard though, his broken leg experience taught him how to work hard in school.
- 575 [End of side B. End of interview.]

