

## TRANSCRIPT—MELVIN BETHEL

Interviewee: MELVIN BETHEL  
Interviewer: David Cline  
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### START OF CD

DC: Ill just start by saying that this is David Cline in Louisville, Kentucky. It is May 17, 2006 and I'm making this recording for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project. If you could just introduce yourself.

MB: Yes, my name is Melvin Bethel and I live in Louisville, 4436 Lockwood Avenue. I'm currently retired. I'm president of the Yearlings Club which is a men's social and civic organization.

DC: You did not grow up in Louisville yourself, is that correct?

MB: No, I grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, came out to Kentucky to go to school at Kentucky State, graduated from Kentucky State, got drafted in the army, was in the army during the Vietnam era, spent thirteen months overseas in Paris, France, and returned in Louisville in 1967. I've been here ever since.

DC: Did you go to work right away in '67?

MB: Yes, my first job here was with Camp Aderbury Job Corp center which is in Edinburg, Indiana and I taught two years up there, teaching, I guess you might say, drop outs from public schools. Basically they were sent there. They had two choices,

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three choices-the military, prison, or the job corps. A lot of them chose the job corps. Most of them were below their grade level in reading and math and social studies.

Primarily I taught from a programmed type of situation. I stayed there two years. Then I came back and worked at Park Duvalle, a community social service center.

DC: Can you tell me about that program?

MB: That program basically was providing assistance to people who were impoverished, who were having problems just living on a day to day basis, needing assistance with rent, food, clothing -- because we had a clothing pantry -- and medical assistance. Under the [war on] poverty program we had a budget to provide assistance and we were governed by a board made of low income residents from the neighborhood. They set the policy other than what was set in federal policy in terms of how we should assist residents of the area, how often they could receive assistance, and the amount of assistance that they could receive.

DC: Did they see you as an outsider because you weren't from that neighborhood or was it--?

MB: No, primarily I was a supervisor, the intake supervisor because at that time I was one of the few employees besides my supervisor who had a degree. My contact with the residents was minimal. The staff that I had, which was made up of nineteen women and one male, were all older than me maybe except three employees. Therefore they knew, the employees, knew the people in the community. At first I encountered some resistance when I first took the job. I sort of won them over with my personality and the role and job that we were going to play and helping the people in the neighborhood. It wasn't long after that that we began to mesh as a unit.

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DC: When you first got there, what were the most pressing needs?

MB: The most pressing needs in that community at that particular time had to do with providing assistance for rent as well as providing assistance for food. Though a lot of them were getting food stamps they still needed assistance. Could we stop for one minute?

DC: Sure.

[Interruption]

DC: So you were saying really it was rent and food?

MB: Rent and food were two of the most pressing needs. Adjacent to the service center was a health center. The health center was stocked with doctors and dentists and nurses. They provided all the health care services. We basically provided the social services. Most were on some form of public assistance. Most did not work. In our building there was a job training program. When you're on public assistance and you have small children it's difficult for you to work, even though some of them took classes to try to either get a GED or to try to take courses that would prepare them to go into the world of work. Most of them had never worked or had never held a job. They had probably come right out of high school, gotten pregnant, had children and were receiving public assistance, no man in the house. It was very difficult. We were basically providing assistance in term of rent and assistance in terms of food. Those were the two pressing needs that they had.

DC: Can you just sort of describe the Park Duvalle area?

MB: The Park Duvalle area at that particular time was probably made up of 95% black or African-American, probably 60% female head of household; poverty level

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probably 80%; and poverty with maybe only 15%-20% working mothers or father and mother; very dismal situation. It was made up primarily of two public housing projects. One was named Cotter Homes to the east and to the west was Southwick, Southwick being the larger. It escapes me now but I don't remember how many families but it was quite a few. Those that were legitimately enrolled in public housing and those who were living with. If you get an opportunity and go by there now you'll see that it's changed completely.

DC: I was there yesterday.

MB: Oh were you? It had to change.

DC: Tell me how it's changed.

MB: It is changed in that: one, they relocated all the residents. Good for *those* residents, not good for *these* residents because they came to these neighborhoods, to *our* neighborhood. They were not prepared to live in the average neighborhood.

DC: People who were displaced?

MB: Displaced, who were relocated.

DC: And ended up--.

MB: In our neighborhoods. We've seen an increase in crime, increase in robbery, increase in violence, increase in black-on-black crime, youth killing each other. We've also seen an increase in the community being dirty with paper, just dirty from people not having had to do that before. Now all of sudden, they're in the larger community and they don't do it. You see paper, trash, stuff all over, especially Broadway where you work. That used to be the beautifullest place there was. There were apartments on Broadway that I never knew existed prior to them relocating people from

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Park Duvalle and Southwick. I never knew they existed because the people who occupied them prior to those relocatees lived in them as if they were their own personal homes. You didn't see the papers. You didn't see the trash. They cut their grass. People didn't hang out on the steps. You didn't see the doors open all the time especially in the winter. It changed the landscape and the people in these neighborhoods where they relocated them began to complain to city officials.

The next time you do this you need to prepare those people to live in the larger community. If you know anything about public housing it's basically their own little city so to speak. While law officials may go into those projects it was usually for a domestic dispute or a shooting or something like that. Basically, they set their own rules and do their own thing because they are in a closed community. It has changed for the good of that neighborhood because now they have new single family housing; they have new apartments; they have senior citizen housing; they have a health center. It appears to be well managed. I think what happened with public housing, because my background is in housing, is that it was management and management got a little too lax. Therefore, I think the residents just controlled what was, you know, public housing. A lot of people lived in public housing in fear. What happened was those same people who were notorious, when they came to the larger community they tried to do the same thing; push their weight around in terms of the kind of behavior that they had exhibited in public housing. What you will find out is that it has caused a lot of problems for the larger community. If you just go back and do some research you will see that right after they began to relocate the people from Park Duvalle and Southwick, you saw a lot of killings, murders, shootings, car thefts, break-ins, in areas like River Park, 38th, 39th, 40th, 41st,

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Broadway, Cecil, places where there were vacant structures where they relocated them.

It got really, really bad. People were beginning to question, why so many murders? Why so much violence? It was basically the people who had been relocated.

DC: You said your own background is in housing?

MB: Yes, I worked for US Department of Housing and Urban Development from 1972 until '92. Then I worked with Catholic Charities, their Immigration and Migration Division for a year and half, directing their English as a Second Language school. Then I went back and worked, well, not back but went back into housing and I worked for the Louisville Metro Housing Department. I did that for nine years. Now I'm retired.

DC: How long were you with the War on Poverty program?

MB: I was with them for two years. For two years and then I went to graduate school at the Kent School of Social Work and got my masters, MSSW, Masters of Science and Social Work, sixty-two hours. Now you can do it in thirty. It was sixty-two hours you had to go, two years, couldn't hold a job. They found you a job in the summer. You worked at a placement after three. Basically it was two years of classroom work and field work. I did that after I left the War on Poverty. I was there two years from '68 to '70.

DC: Had you always wanted to do that kind of work?

MB: Well, I did and I thought I would remain doing that kind of work. That's why I went into social work because I saw that need. Fortunately, while I was working a placement in a building, a friend of mine that I met, that was also from Virginia, got a job with HUD. He was looking for somebody. He knew me. He asked me, would I come

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and work with him? So I did. In housing I was doing some similar things. I was working with the population in public housing. I was working with populations that was getting subsidized housing. I handled complaints. I investigated complaints and things of that nature. It was just one of those things. I never really did what you would consider social work again like I had done at Park Duvalle. I enjoyed those two years that I was there because of some of the real good contacts I made and the people that I worked with.

DC: Before the War on Poverty programs came to do that, what was being done in that area as far as providing services or organizing people?

MB: Before it came, David, I really don't know. I had the feeling that nothing was being done. That was primarily the reason that that area was targeted because of the high incidence, high rate of poverty, unemployment. They also had a high rate of alcoholism too. I think because of that particular high incidence of poverty statistics that area was chosen. I don't know exactly what was being done prior to moving into that arena. I would caution to say that probably not a whole lot. In the office where I was working they had also placed a food stamp office because prior to that all of the residents had to go downtown. When they put an office there then they could just walk over there which made it convenient. I don't think much was being done. [Pause] The area, to me, was really bad prior to that. Because we had social workers and we worked to work out a plan to help people you could see things getting better. We were assisting a lot of the residents and helping them get a job. Some were successful. Not a whole lot, but some were because a lot of them had not graduated from high school nor did they have their GED. If you're old enough to know about '67, '68, '69, it wasn't a whole lot of fastfood places around at that time. You couldn't do like you can today, send a person to fastfood.

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Most was manufacturing, GE, International Hollister, Ford, different places like that. Some were able to go to GE and some were able to go to Ford and different places like that. We often got requests for people to come, that they were needing workers. We were able to assist some in that way.

DC: In terms of job placement?

MB: Right, job placement.

DC: You said the staff was nineteen women and one man. Those are the organizers or that was the entire staff?

MB: That was the entire staff for the social service department. They had a social services. In that building they had a food stamp office, social services, state unemployment office; they had an office in there. We would often send people down the hall to council with them just to see if something was available. Let me see, there was another program for young males that had dropped out. It was sort of a job training program for them, also to work with them to get their GED. It was a very successful program because quite a few of them got their GED and quite a few of them went on to work in jobs at Ford and GE and places like that.

DC: It sounds like education was always a part of this.

MB: Yes, it is. The thing that was really funny to me was that when I applied for the job the staff was already in place. The guy that hired me told me that I had to supervise these nineteen women and this one man. He said, "the women are older than you and at first they are not going to listen to him, so listen to you, so somehow you going to have to--"

DC: Establish authority?



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MB: Yeah, right. Even as I took reign and had been there for a year it was almost like they listened but they didn't listen. They knew the residents and they would say, "Mr. Bethel, this person really needs some food." I said, "But, we helped them out two months ago. Our budget is getting--." "Well, Mr. Bethel, you just don't understand. They ain't got nothing in the refrigerator, blah, blah, blah." I said, "Well, I just can't see it. I'm looking at this budget and we just don't." They go on and do it anyway. Two or three days I ask them what happened. "Well, Mr. Bethel, you know I couldn't let those children starve and blah, blah." Unlike a lot of programs that were hit with fraud we never had that problem. Primarily because we ran a very tight ship in terms of the budget but also any food or clothing was dispensed, none of our workers took it for themselves. They distributed it to the people who really needed it. That was one of the reasons I really enjoy working there. I never had to worry about any of that. We had vouchers at different stores that they could go and get stuff. Whenever they did that they'd give me a report and show me a copy of it. I was satisfied with that.

DC: Who was your supervisor there? Who was over you?

MB: His name was Sterling Neil.

DC: I met Mr. Neil yesterday.

MB: Did you? Okay. He was sort of like a mentor to me. You know Sterling is probably a genius in terms of his memory. He has several degrees. He has a degree in public health from the University of Chicago. He has a MBA and a law degree from Indiana. He studied a Ph.D. at Michigan. The only reason he didn't get it was because his family was here. He came back. Michigan is quite a ways from here and once you come back, you know, he got caught up in some other things here. He just stayed here.

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When he left the next time he went to IU. He took his whole family and educated all of them, his two daughters, his son, and his wife and himself. Him and I go way back because we were at Kentucky State together. That's where we knew each other. That's where I first met him. While we were friends we didn't socialize a lot because he was married and I wasn't. He knew of me and knew what I had been doing, teaching up at Aderbury. He felt that having worked with those young men I could come and work in this program. I applied for the job and got it.

DC: He was very concerned about drugs at that time, right?

MB: Yes. In fact, Sterling, Henry Owens, and myself started the program Stop Dope Now. Did he talk about that?

DC: Yes, he did.

MB: Right. Well, we started that program, the three of us. We traveled all over the South and Michigan looking at programs and looking at some of the things some of the other people were trying to do to combat drug addiction. We were fortunate enough to get a grant from the National Institute of Health for a million dollars.

DC: Wow. He didn't mention that.

MB: He didn't?

DC: No.

MB: We started the program. We, in fact, began to hire staff and everything. It was interesting because that was in the '70s and I guess twenty some years later I met two or three young ladies who said to me that we had given them their first job. They thanked me and thanked us for having done what we done because they were now

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working for the city. They said if we had not gotten that exposure or that experience working with Stop Dope Now they wouldn't be in the job they in now.

We got the money. We did quite a bit. We were young and inexperienced. We didn't misuse the money but we got misused in the process because the National Institute of Mental Health wouldn't give it to us directly. They let the Urban League be the conduit. We had to get the money from them. They got a percentage for being the conduit. [laughing] Yeah, right. Being the age we were in our late twenties, we were prone to mistakes. They were not mistakes connected with fraud or misuse of funds or anything like that. Every quarter we had to file a report. We did so. There was never a problem there.

DC: Was that part of your job or were you doing that as a volunteer?

MB: We did that as volunteers. We did that on our own. What happened was that the program that dealt with the young black males that were drop outs, that particular program where Henry Owens was working, he discovered that quite a few of them were strung out on drugs. He came to us and said well, we got to do something. They tried to deal with drugs with a couple of them in Henry's apartment because he was a bachelor just like I was. They just took a couple of them, corralled them and wouldn't let them go out and did it like that. Later on, once we got the program up and running and we got a doctor involved, then we started dispensing Methadone. We were probably the first Methadone program in the Southeast. We learned quite a bit about drugs. Heroin was the drug of choice for most of them. From that, the program was set up and we established our own board of directors. We developed different kinds of programs within Stop Dope Now to help other segments of the community. We would have also a job

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counseling because we knew that that was one of the biggest things that the community was facing, not enough young people were working, not enough grown people were working. We did that. We would have summer job programs where we would have young high school kids going into neighborhoods and cleaning up the streets and different things like that, picking the trash up. We would pay them with some of those funds that we had. Let me see, what else did we do? We had a clothes closet. We had counseling center for young men to get them ready to interview for jobs.

DC: Did you ever have staff or did you do this all of your own?

MB: Yes, we had staff. That's what I was talking about with those two young ladies. We had about six employees as well as a main secretary.

DC: You had offices?

MB: We primarily were staffed in Park Duvalle. They let us use some offices. After we got the money they let us use some offices.

DC: In the neighborhood?

MB: In the neighborhood. Right.

DC: In the neighborhood center?

MB: In the neighborhood center, yes.

DC: Even after you left there to work for HUD you were still coming back?

MB: Right, Yes. I was in graduate school and I was coming back. I was president of the board.

DC: How did you do that?

MB: Well, they elected me. What Sterling basically said was, "I don't have time to do it. Why don't you set up the board and let's see if we can get these people on

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the board?" We had an Alderman who represented this neighborhood. He was a dentist, still is a dentist. He was on the board. We had a couple of school teachers. We had a banker. We basically had people who had a feel for the community and understood what was going on in the community and didn't look down on the community. The board would set policy in terms of what direction Stop Dope Now would go and what they should be doing with the money, besides what the federal guidelines said that we should be doing. They made sure we stayed within those guidelines.

DC: How important was it to have people like that, allies and advocates like that?

MB: Oh, it was very important, unless you have that then you're going to have a lot of bickering and a lot of mistrust. The thing that was so important and so good about this whole process was that the money was already there when we crafted the board. It wasn't a thing of: we got the money and since we got the money we ought to be able to say what it's going to go for. No, it wasn't like that. We already had the money. The three of us had gotten a grant, had written a grant. We received the funding. The money was already there. When the people came on the board they saw exactly what the money was for, what it was going to be spent for, what the salaries were and all of that. We paid them a stipend to come to board meetings, \$25.00 a meeting. We only met once a month. When you were doing things primarily in drug rehabilitation you're buying methadone and stuff like that and you're getting a doctor who is contributing his time, then a lot of money is not spent for material things per se. We maybe bought a couple of typewriters, paper, pencils, things like that. For the most part we didn't have to buy

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desks or chairs or nothing like that because it was already at the center. We could stretch that money quite a bit. We just had to be careful that we didn't misuse it.

DC: How long were you able to keep that program running?

MB: That program went about five years. It went about five years. I think after about three years I resigned from the board. I was being overwhelmed in my new job because it required a lot of travel. I had to go all over the state to investigate complaints. I didn't have the time. I relinquished my responsibility as chairman of the board and somebody else took over. All I wanted Sterling and them to do, and they did it, was to make sure that they accounted for the money and did not misuse it. My name was on the thing too, that we signed. [laughing] You understand what I'm saying. It worked out well. It really worked out well. It's something that I probably want to do now. Sterling and I have had some conversations with Henry Owens. We're looking at something we can do to help young black males because of the fact that they are dropping out of school in large numbers. Then they are not doing a lot of things that I think they are capable of doing if they have the right assistance in terms of somebody guiding them.

DC: Some mentors.

MB: Yeah, some mentors, right. That's something that we are looking at coming back together and probably trying to write another grant. The money's out there. We just have to do the research. We traveled to Florida. We traveled to Washington, DC, Baltimore, Michigan just doing the research finding out who had received grants and what they were doing with the money and how they were doing. That's what we basically crafted our program after.

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DC: What do you see as the main issues now? As you sort of think about what a new organization might look like now, besides dropping out?.

MB: The main issues now -- the lack of understanding by young African Americans of the importance of education. It's a mindset. My wife teaches school. She tells me they don't teach this no more, they don't teach that, you know different other things. Just the idea that, irregardless of what they are teaching, you can probably relate to some of the stuff they taught you in English literature that you thought you were never going to use and some other things that they taught. The importance of the whole educational process is you learn whatever they are teaching and put it to good use and to further yourself by going on beyond high school.

The other issue I see is the violence of young African American male against other African American males, the fact that they can't seem to coexist for some reason. The least little thing seems to irritate them and upset them to the point that they feel that they have to kill in order to justify the means to an end. Finally, they need to understand that there's nothing wrong with education and that everybody's not going to be a basketball or a football or a rap star and that it is okay to be a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, or minister or whatever profession you choose, besides being in the lime light. For some reason, if someone told me one in one thousand make it to the pro ranks I don't know whether my head would be big enough to think that I would be that one. [laughs] You understand what I'm saying. I'd be saying, my God, look at so and so, and look how big he is -- I'd better go and do something else. Either they are not listening or no one's telling them or they have a false sense of superiority. It's really disheartening to think that when you know your chances are very, very limited, and I mean very limited. I

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would choose another course. Let me just give you an example. I had a cousin who was a terrific track star. I went over to my aunt's house and looked at his trophies and I said, "Who?" She said, "That's Tony's." I said, "I didn't know Tony runs." She said, "Yeah, he's very good at it." I said, "Where is Tony?" When Tony came out, I said, "Tony, man I'm proud of you." He said, "Oh yeah, that's nothing." I said, "So you want to go to college and run track?" He said, "No." I said, "You don't?" He said, "No, if I can't go and play basketball I don't want to go." I said, "So what are you going to do if you--." He said, "I'm going to go in the Navy." I said, "Oh, you mean to tell me rather than go and run track and--." I couldn't convince him otherwise.

DC: So it's like these are the only choices?

MB: Right: "If I can't play basketball I don't want to go to college. I'm going in the Navy." I could not convince him otherwise and it was like beating your head against that brick wall. It was just sad. That is the prevailing thought process of so many young African American males that unless they can play basketball they don't want to go to college. I think part of that problem is an educational process to get them to understand that there are more choices than just that one or two.

DC: Very important.

MB: Yes.

DC: Through the years, I was thinking after Stop Dope Now and you went to graduate school, working at HUD how did you sort of act on your social convictions? Were you involved in other social organizations or find other ways to stay involved?

MC: I've always been a person that's always tried to help other people. Right now, I'm a member of the Eritrea Development Foundation. That's the country right



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next to Ethiopia. We have a board of about eight people. We are in the process--. In fact last year we raised over \$8,000. I was supposed to go but I didn't. Two of our board members went to Eritrea. We gave the money to the Catholic Church over there. They are building a dam. We provide the funds for a foundation to do a small dam in Eritrea. It's something I'm doing now. Over the years I've been involved in demonstrations, assisting people, the homeless. I've worked in shelters on volunteer time. Of course when I work with Catholic charities I, on occasion, me and my wife would take a family and they would live somewhere but we would provide them with different things like clothing, bedding, and we would pick them up once or twice a week and take them to the store, take them and show them how to catch the bus and how they do different things like that. Even after I left Catholic charities I volunteered and taught three courses in the evenings because a lot of the immigrants, refugees come back in the evening because they are working during the day. I continued to do that, I probably stopped working in '97. I'm thinking about going back and doing something with that, mending the immigration thing. The last wave of immigrants we got were Cubans.

DC: They came to Louisville?

MB: Yeah, right. They came to Louisville when I was there with them.

Previous to that it had been the Vietnamese, then Iraqis, then the Bosnians, then the Cubans, and then the Sudanese.

DC: Was there a Somali population?

MB: Yes, sure is. Some of the "lost boys" are here. I'm thinking about doing that. Some of the things that I continue to try to do is to council young people and mentor them on a individual basis within the neighborhood. One or two of the things that

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have really made me feel like I have done something worthwhile is that the kids in the neighborhood when we first moved here thirty-three years ago--I've been here thirty-three years. One of the reasons that I am still here is because most of the people who are professionals moved out into suburbia. That's part of the problem that we're facing with kids not having the role models. When I first came to this neighborhood there were at least eight to ten young boys and girls in the neighborhood who had never witnessed a young man going to work on a daily basis in a shirt and tie. They questioned me about who was it and what did I do. They were already in the neighborhood when we moved here. I told them they had three guesses. At first they said I was insurance man. I told them, "No, I didn't sell insurance." Then they told me that I was a manager in a department store. I told them no I wasn't manager in the department store. They said, "Well, we give." I told them exactly what I did because I was working at HUD at the time. Most importantly what has happened is three of the young men have graduated from college, two of them from Kentucky State, one female from Kentucky State, one is a manager for Target in Chicago, female is in Atlanta. I don't know what she's doing but she's doing well. They have come back to me and my wife and said repeatedly if it wasn't for you all telling us that we could go to college and that we could make it, they said that they wouldn't be where they are today. That is to bring tears to my eyes because it was so little that I did, encouraging them, sending them money when we could, asking them about their grades. It's quite an impact when you have young adults coming back and telling you if it wasn't for you I wouldn't be where I am today because I never even thought about college. You told us we could go. That has been my primary [joy]. Just the other day there's a young lady, she used to live up here, she has four sons. For

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some reason they gravitated to this house. What happened was they would come and they were always hungry. We would feed them. We would talk to them and everything. One of them's name was Charlie. I told Charlie, I said, "Charlie, one thing I will not do, I will not let you come around me unless you tie your shoes." Charlie says, "But, I don't know how." Charlie was like five years old. I said, "You don't know how?" He said, "No." I said, "Oh, okay." I said, "Well, I'm going to show you." I showed Charlie one time. He tied them right then and there. Charlie has gone on--. He's eleven now. His brother Deante is at my wife's school. He got in some trouble the other day. They brought him to my wife and she said, "I know he's not doing that." Yesterday he was over because school's out. He was over yesterday. We had a heart to heart talk. I said, "Where is your brother Charlie?" He said, "Charlie is in Kennedy." Well, Kennedy is the school for all the bad kids. I said, "You mean Charlie's in Kennedy?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, when you go home you tell Charlie he'd better come and see me." He said, "Okay, Mr. Melvin. I'm going to tell him." I said, "And don't let me hear that you've been into anymore trouble at school." He said, "I won't." My wife said, "That was just his first time. That was just his first time." I said, "When you in school you have to do what the teachers tell you to do." I said, "There's no reason." He said, "Yes, sir, I know, I know. I'm not going to get into anymore trouble." Those are the kinds of things that I continue to do or try to do just based on the fact that I feel like I'm here to help people, to help somebody. I continue to do that. Next year I hope to go to Africa to Eritrea though I'm kind of fearing for my age to travel to that part of Africa because I don't want to catch any diseases. That's what I'm most fearful of. My two friends that went that's on the board -- one of them worked with me at HUD, he's also retired -- he

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said that he had gone to the U of L [University of Louisville] clinic and gotten some medications, but he said if it wasn't for those diarrhea pills that he had he said he'd be in terrible...

DC: Terrible trouble.

MB: Yeah, that's what he said. He said when he left then he took 'em and gave them to his friend that was left.

DC: You should go, though, if you get the chance!

MB: Oh yes, I've been to Senegal. I went there when I was in the military. I got a chance to go all over Europe and Denmark and Senegal because I was in top secret. Got a chance to fly and go different places. The only place I couldn't go was Berlin because the wall was still up. They didn't want us to go. Other than that, hmmm.

DC: It sounds like so much of your work or so much of the way you look at changes, it's person to person.

MB: Person to person but also groups. I've done quite a bit with groups. I thought you were going to ask me about my civil rights [experience] in terms of demonstrations and things. That tone was set when I was at Kentucky State. My English literature teacher, Mrs. Holmes, lived in Frankfurt and there was a restaurant called the White Swan. She said that they needed to integrate and that blacks needed to have that opportunity to go and eat and sit down. She said we're going to start demonstrating next week. She said, "Anyone that's not on that line cannot pass this course."

DC: This was your English Lit teacher?

MB: That was my sophomore year at Kentucky State. She says, "Anybody who is not on that line out there demonstrating can not pass this course."

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DC: This is a black woman or a white woman?

MB: Black woman. This was in 1962. It was in '62. The tone was set for me at that point in time because in reality I had not demonstrated. I had not been out on the front line and was fearful. Once I got out there and nothing happened to me and I was okay then I was like, "Okay you saw me Dr. Holmes. When do we have to go again?"

DC: You were ready to go again?

MB: Yes, I'm ready to go now. It wasn't the nightmare that I thought it was going to be. You got to understand that the demonstration that happened at North Carolina A&T in Greensboro. I had seen that. I said, "Well, it's not so bad." It did get a little rough later on. Then later when I came to Louisville in '67, I participated in the demonstrations here. When they were demonstrating for public accommodations. I basically have been involved in some form of the Civil Rights movement ever since 1962.

DC: Do you see it that the same movement has continued?

MB: No, I don't. It was for a different reason, different purpose back then. Now, the issues are different. When we were demonstrating here for public accommodations it was primarily because blacks were not allowed to go into department stores and try on hats and try on clothes and stuff like that. Nor could they go to some of the restaurants and sit down and eat. When I came here that was basically what the issues were. Now the issues are altogether different. They are much more subtle in the sense that I grew up in Virginia and I grew up where I can remember it was a white only, black only, you know the water fountains and that kind of thing. Those things don't exist anymore, riding in the back of the bus. I'm of that era, that generation where you had to

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go to the back of the bus. I think what's happening now is more economic. It is more a matter of being educated and getting the job based on your education. We're not preparing ourselves to do that. Though that was what we were trying to do when we were demonstrating in the '60s for the people that are now able to do that, to go and get an education. They are not taking advantage of it. That just hurts me so. The demonstrations was quite brutal. I wasn't at Selma during that demonstration but I had some friends that went from here. I know that all of those things have a bearing on what's happening today. I think things have opened up and a few African-Americans have taken advantage of it but a lot more could have had they been prepared. We were prepared for--. We were in all black schools. The teacher said one day it's going to come. You got to be ready. They prepared us and we listened. Probably because opportunities didn't exist we knew that they were going to be limited when they did come. We had to take those opportunities. We had to seize the time. We couldn't go into basketball. Basketball wasn't a big thing. Baseball was probably the biggest thing and quite a few of us went into baseball. I have three brothers. We grew up playing baseball. My father wanted us to play baseball. We were all around. We played football, basketball, ran track, played tennis. I played tennis at Kentucky State. I was in that group of black tennis players that came out of Virginia. I don't know if you ever-- Arthur Ashe and that group. I had been playing tennis ever since I was nine or ten years old. I got an opportunity to play at Kentucky State. The other thing is that while my father wanted us to play baseball we were probably better basketball and football players. And good baseball players, don't get me wrong, but [a] baseball [player] wasn't something that we really wanted to be. It wasn't available as it is now for the kids.

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Basketball, football, track, and tennis and golf is available, all of those sports. Why would you limit yourself to just one?

DC: Did your family really stress education?

MB: Yes, oh yes. Stressed education. We were middle class on the cuffs but not middle class in terms of where a white family would have been middle class. We were middle class black because my father worked for the railroad. He had a good job. Then when he left the railroad he went to Veteran's Administration. He wasn't making what the man, the white that was next to him making but he was making more than the average blacks.

DC: Civil servant?

MB: Yeah, right. Yes, that's right. Education -- unlike a lot of kids today, even though they know they don't have the money to go, my father knew he didn't have the money to send all of us -- from the moment that we were small that's all he talked about, us going to college. We were going to college, somewhere. We were going. He always stressed it doesn't matter where you go as long as you get the degree. I was saying, "Oh, but I want to go to Hampton. I want to go to Howard. I want to. . ." He said, "As long as you get that degree." He said, "And the first thing you do, whatever state or city or where ever you are, try it out in that state. If it's no good in that state then you can't take it no where else." It was stressed. Education was stressed not only in my household but all of the families that grew up with me. In fact, in my graduating class, one hundred sixty some in my graduating class which was all black high school, 85% of them went to college.

DC: Really. In 19--?

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MB: 1959. Eighty-five percent of them went to college. We were ready. They had trained us. Boom. We went.

DC: What town was that?

MB: Roanoke. Roanoke, Virginia.

DC: That's incredible.

MB: Yes. I would garner to say I haven't--I've been back to class reunions and I haven't taken a survey--but I would garner to say at least fifty percent of those eight-five graduated. Most of the people that I see, they're retiring from being a school principal, retiring from being a lawyer, retiring from working for the government. Some retiring from police department, different things like that.

DC: It sounds like it was that community that--.

MB: Right, yes. It was that community. It certainly was. They stressed the education. Education was highly stressed. The teachers at the high school--. There was only one high school, one junior high, four elementary schools. The teachers stressed education. They were well educated because most of them, practically all of them had their masters. A lot of them would come way out here to go to Indiana. That's how I knew about Indiana from talking to some of--. In fact, one of my biology teachers, there were three guys that taught biology. One of my biology teachers had a pharmacy degree from University of Cincinnati. [I asked him, "Now, Mr. Gettins, why aren't you a pharmacist? He said, "Well, you know, Mr. Bethel would you hire me?" I said, "Well, sure I'd hire you." He said, "But do you think that man down there, so and so and so and so would hire me?" Then I thought for a moment and I said, "Well." He said, "Well, does that answer your question?" I said, "Yeah, it answers my question." I was like,



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how was it at the University. He said, “Oh, the University of Cincinnati is nice. Nice school. If you want to go there go. I would encourage it.” Being from Virginia I never thought I’d be out here this close to Cincinnati, this close to Indiana which I visit often and have visited because U of L plays them in sports and everything. It was the kind of thing that they stressed education. They stressed education. They stressed education to the point that they would not let you play sports; I don’t care how good you were, if you didn’t get the assignment and the teacher went into the football coach and told him. Naw, you can’t play tonight or you can’t play this evening, none of that you can do. They would not let you. The emphasis was on education. They encourage you to read. They encourage you do research. They encourage you to do all kinds of different things that would enhance your educational capabilities. We were in a learning environment.

Students who were good students got the scholarships.

DC: That was an all black school?

MB: Right.

DC: Very well educated, qualified black teachers?

MB: Right.

DC: Do you see that when school systems become integrated and you might lose some of those fine black teachers and that environment, do you see that as a negative, potentially?

MB: Well, when we got text books, they had been written in them because we got them from the white schools. They were a year or two behind what the white students were getting. I always favored integration in the public school system because I felt always that as a nation, unless we can fully integrate then it’s going to be like the

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third column which is you got a--. I lived in France, stayed in France thirteen months. I saw it with the Algerians and the French that it's always something with the Algerians and the French. I'm saying unless America fully integrates us into a society then we're going to be like the third column, though we have not ever done that. I just thought that that would be something that people would began to think about. I was always in favor of an integrated society and us being able to, blacks, to go to the schools, the universities and just within the main stream of society. What I think research will show us is that since we have integrated blacks have not done as well educational wise. I don't have any statistics on it but I would be willing to bet you that some of the forerunners of people who have excelled and done great things came from mostly all black schools. It was never a problem. If you do any research, it was never a problem for black athletes to go to school and graduate and play sports. Now, they're just going to school to play sports. When they get out they can hardly read that sentence. They may have taken sixty, eighty hours of credit but not only can they not speak in a good sentence, they don't quite understand what's happening around them. How can you go to school everyday, you go and just sit in there and waste one hour and not assume, take anything in? What we are really producing is an athletic factory, a meal. Before, all the guys that I knew that went to all the schools in Virginia and other places, they came out with a degree. And they played sports. They were not dummies. When they were in school with me or before me or after me, the teachers made them do their work, and made sure that they could read and write a decent sentence, that they could fill out a job application. I can't quite understand that. There are few athletes today graduating four and five years after they come out of college. You haven't heard too many of them graduating within four or five

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years, like Kareem Abdul Jabar did. You don't hear those graduating five years. What's with that? It just doesn't ring with me. It's a disconnect with the student and education when you are supposed to be a student first, then an athlete second. I would think, Dave, that if you did some research you would find that athletes in all black institutions or any institutions where they were in the minority but they come from black school that they did a lot better. It's been instilled in them that you've got to be. For some reason they've been coddled since they were in middle school. I just happened--what's his name? He plays for the Miami Dolphins.

DC: Not Reggie Williams?

MB: No. I don't know no Reggie. But, he's a defensive--. He's about in his eleventh year. When I was working at Economic Development for the City of Louisville, his girlfriend's mother worked with me. One of the stories she told me was that when he signed with Miami his agent told him, "You got a credit card?" He said, "No." "Here's American Express. You got this?" "No." "Here's this. You got this? What do you want?" He said, "Well I want a car for my uncle, for my sister. I want two cars." She said, "He doesn't have clue. They giving him all of this. He's saying it's too much for him to take in." I said, "Yeah, I guess it is. If you haven't taken anything in before now. It's just overwhelming." Not prepared. No. Then she said, "Then they told him you got a bonus, 1.2 million. What do you want to do with that? How you want to--? Said that he really didn't know." She said, "He's got all this money and his agents aren't doing anything, everything." I'm like if you're making the money you ought to be able to control the checkbook. If that's one state of American life I dislike is that state. It's terrible. You make the money but somebody else gives it to you. You have a credit card

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and you spend it. You get so much a month but it goes in the account and the agent--. I have real problem with that. I have a real problem with athletes who are not able to manage their own money. When agents say you don't have it anymore then, what are you going to do? You don't know whether you have anymore.

DC: And you don't know how long your career's going to last.

MB: No, you sure don't. I think education is the key. Dave, as you well know, I don't know whether you eat out a lot or whether you prepare your own meals or not in North Carolina. You going to find out when you get back that the food prices are going up. You know gasoline is going up. The heating prices are going up. Clothing is probably staying at the level that it is at because so many stores are having sales. I am willing to bet you within five years we're going to see a lot more poverty that we seen previously. It's going to come because income is not keeping up with inflation but more importantly everything is going up. You know for yourself if you don't have a job where you make a salary that it's going to be difficult for you to survive because--. I just hear Kennedy say just yesterday, they haven't raised the minimum wage in nine years. We are going to see poverty again like we've seen before. We're going to see homelessness. I really hate homelessness because I work so hard in housing to provide housing for low and moderate income people. Part of the problem is people have different priorities. It's really hard, Dave, when you've been living in public housing and you only pay thirty dollars a month. It's unreal. It's really unreal. Then all of sudden they demolish the public housing, put you in the subsidized housing, put you in some kind of other housing and now you got to pay three or four hundred dollars. Nobody's preparing those people for the reality of life. That's a harsh reality when you go from thirty to forty dollars a

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month to three or four hundred dollars a month. I think we're going to see a lot more of that, a lot more of people in poverty. Unless, someone like the democrats get in to start some programs like that we going to see a lot of people, a lot of things happening to people that we've never seen before. I just don't know what the future holds because of economics.

DC: It's really going to take government intervention.

MB: Definitely government intervention. It's got to be something. The private sector helps, organizations, agencies like Catholic Charities and some of the others. The thing you got understand is that the government has the most money and government has the most resources. They can assist with the problem. I don't think all the time it's money; it's got to be a combination of money and support services. If you don't have those you're going to have problems.

DC: You want to end there?

MB: Unless you got any more questions.

DC: Is there anything that you thought I might ask that I didn't ask?

MB: Well no, I think you've asked a lot of important questions. I think you understand that this city like all major cities, but probably more so this city was based on a factory economy. As long as they had factories things was going great. Now we are moving toward a social service economy and therefore things are not as good as they used to be because we did have International Hollister. We still got Ford. We still got GE. It's just one of those things that when the factories close down or move out of the city or move to Mexico or whatever then it's difficult for people to have sustainable income and to make ends meet when you only have social service jobs. I think today, I

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think was a great day for the city of Louisville because UPS announced that it's going to expand.

DC: Yeah, I saw that.

MB: So that should help quite a bit in terms of jobs. I think that would help because unless Ford does something I think within another year they are going to cut back.

DC: Well, the auto industry is in trouble....

MB: Yeah, right. I think as it stands things are just rolling along if we see any abrupt changes in the economy and the interest rate keeps going up, I think we going to be in for another rough time, more rough times not only in this city but all over the country. The gasoline prices and the heating and oil is affecting everybody. That's all I have.

DC: Thank you so much.

MB: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Karen Meier, August 21, 2006