

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:  
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0561  
Amos and Ajamu Dillahunt  
December 3, 2008**

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## FIELD NOTES- Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt  
 Interviewer: Bridgette Burge  
 Interview Date: December 3, 2008  
 Locations: Ajamu's home, Raleigh, NC

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Ajamu Dillahunt joined the Justice Center in April of 2004 as the Outreach Coordinator for the Budget and Tax Center. Ajamu has been a tireless advocate for working families in North Carolina for over twenty-five years. For the 18 years, Ajamu served as President of the Raleigh Area Local of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). He was Director of Research and Education for the North Carolina Council of the APWU during that period. Ajamu was a Labor Educator and Arbitration Advocate as well. He has done community organizing and training in various communities in N.C. He has a Masters Degree in African Studies and maintains an active interest in the African Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree

in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW:** December 3, 2008, Today is cold, clear and beautiful. I brought nasty Dunkin' Donuts' bagels and assorted donuts this morning. I asked Ajamu last night what he wanted for breakfast, but there's no Brugger's Bagels between my place and his. Alas, no pumpernickel bagel as requested. I felt bad also because I know he's working hard to eat well since his prostate cancer diagnosis. He settled on a multigrain bagel with cream cheese. I had a blueberry bagel and his dad, Amos Dillahunt – 89 will several ailments he seemed ready to talk about – had a pumpkin donut. Ajamu served us coffee and bottled water. Pepper, their old, sweet little dog piddled on the kitchen table chairs as I greeted him. Ajamu said something about women makes him do that. Once he settled down, Ajamu went down the hall to see if "Pop" had finished shaving. I called Ajamu this morning on the drive over to ask if he and his father would enjoy his dad being in on the recording while we talk some about his family history. They were both up for it. Mr. Dillahunt is charming, witty and seemed to enjoy sharing stories. He made his way into the kitchen with the help of a beautiful handmade cane that Francis had brought back from Africa as a gift. He announced himself to me by calling out to me, "Don't be afraid! It's just me!" I said, "Alright I won't. What a treat it is for me to get to meet you." "Oh, I hear that a lot," he replies. Ajamu helped him settle into his chair at the table and we chitchatted while we ate. They gave me permission to take a few photos. I used my husband's Nikon 65, and Mr. Dillahunt reminisced about being something of a photographer himself years ago. We were planning to record in the basement to avoid Pepper's greeting passersby, but decided to stay in the kitchen since Mr. Dillahunt has trouble getting down stairs due to his age and even more because of his back surgery this past June. We recorded for about an hour with Mr. Dillahunt. He went to take a nap and Ajamu and I recorded another 1.5 hours or so. It was a rich session.

**TRANSCRIPT: AJAMU DILLAHUNT**

Interviewee: Amos and Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: December 3, 2008

Location: Home of Ajamu Dillahunt, Raleigh, NC

Interview length: 1 disc, approximately 109 minutes

**START OF INTERVIEW**

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: This is a digital Marantz. I have an analog Marantz, which is, can't use it anymore. Well, I guess we could use it.

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Yep, this is the new fangled thing. So I'm going to get about thirty seconds or so of just the background noise and then I'll--. I can hear a TV or radio or something.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: In the back.

BB: Do you think you could grab that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That's my fix.

BB: Is that your fix? [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: CNN.

BB: CNN.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: All day.

BB: You can get addicted to that.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah, god. My urologist tells me--. He's better than a

urologist. We're good friends, real friends. He says, "Amos, do me a favor." I said, "What, Fred?" He says, "Stop watching that station."

BB: Why's that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: He said, "It's driving you crazy." He said, "In turn, you're driving me crazy." [Laughter] The relationship between him and I is very good.

BB: That's nice when you can befriend your doctors who are taking care of your body. That's nice.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

BB: They're more than just--. Because you're more to them than just a body and then, you know--. All right, let me listen now for a second here. This is an interview with Ajamu Dakarai Dillahunt.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Dakarai.

BB: Dakarai.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Dakarai.

BB: Dakarai. You even have trouble saying it, [Laughter] Dillahunt. And for today's part of the interview, a special guest, Mr. Amos Dillahunt, Ajamu's father, with Bridgette Burge as the interviewer. This is part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, oral histories of North Carolina social justice activists. Today is Wednesday, December 3, 2008. This is the first interview in the series with Ajamu. We're sitting around Ajamu's kitchen table. It's a pretty but really cold day outside. And we just loaded up on some carbohydrates and Ajamu was--. Tell us what you had, Ajamu, for breakfast this morning because you were more well behaved than Mr. Dillahunt and I. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh, I had a whole-grain bagel with cream cheese and some

coffee. I resisted the Dunkin' Donuts.

BB: I wasn't a very good ally in your health food, bringing Dunkin' Donuts.

[Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT AD: That's okay. It worked out

BB: All right. And as a sound test, Mr. Dillahunt, what did you have for breakfast this morning?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I had mini-bagels. Was that right?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Mini-muffins.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Mini-muffins.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And? [Laughter] What was that, that...

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Coffee.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, and then the blueberry muffin, which turned out to be what?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: What was that?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Pumpkin.

BB: Pumpkin, I lied.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: So you lied, huh? [Laughter] It was good. It was good. I enjoyed it, yeah.

BB: All right, this sounds good. Okay, well thanks so much both of you for doing this. I really appreciate your time and I can imagine it's not easy, at first at least, to have somebody ask you to, "Let's start with your birth and lay out your story on tape for the world to hear." So it's very generous of you. So Ajamu, would you start by saying your full name and today's date?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well today I believe is December the 3rd. Right, is that right?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Of 2008. And I'm Ajamu Dakarai Dillahunt, born Gordon Jeffrey Dillahunt, but the African name was something that my children gave me in 1989. So it's a name I'm very fond of and proud of because it was a process of people who loved me and knew me pretty well selecting it.

BB: And how about you Mr. Dillahunt? Will you say today's date and your full name?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Amos H. Dillahunt. DOB?

BB: DOB.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: November the 9th, 1919.

BB: Okay, that's good. The next question was, "Is there a story to your name?" So that's nice. You started to tell it, but what was the decision to change your name and your children? Tell me more about that story.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well we were going to take African names back in the 1960s, probably around '69 or '70. And we were selecting different names, my wife and I, Rukiya. I'm trying to--. Oh, what happened, she had selected a name for herself, which was Kemba, and she was pregnant at the time. Before we got around to actually changing the names, our daughter was born, and we hadn't selected a name, and so we chose Kemba and kind of delayed changing our names. My first daughter, first born, who was born in 1969, had an African name. We were able to give her an African name. So we'd already started the family tradition at that time, but just things happened where we just didn't get around to it until many years later. And in 1989, we decided that we were going to do it. And we asked our

children and some of their friends to kind of consult and think of names that they thought would be appropriate for us because in the African tradition, people are named based on traits that they exhibit as a child or what the conditions are in the community or even in the world at the time of the birth. So we at least asked them to think about how they knew us and what kind of people we were and to pick names based on that. So that's how we ended up with the names. We didn't change them legally because we were pretty much down the line in terms of documents and Social Security and retirement benefits and all of those kinds of things. So we decided not to change them legally, but to use them certainly in our personal lives and to a large extent in our professional lives as well.

BB: What are the meanings of some of those names? What are the traits?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, Ajamu is--.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: Let's hang on just a second and let Pepper finish. What do you see buddy? Oh and Pepper, I meant to introduce Pepper the dog who likes to greet passersby. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: [Laughter] Yeah, from the window.

BB: So we'll pause when Pepper's getting spicy. All right, okay, so Ajamu means?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: He who fights for what he wants. It's a Yoruba name from Nigeria. I guess the children felt like that was appropriate for me, so I'm kind of embarrassed by it, but I guess it's okay.

BB: You're embarrassed by it?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, you know, to say, I mean I guess when other people say that about you, that's okay, but you certainly don't want to say that about yourself, sounds



a little egotistic or whatever, but I mean, no one's ever said that [Laughter] about me, so I guess it's okay.

BB: What does Rukiya mean?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Rukiya means pure, I think, and her middle name Kareema is, like, "she rises", no I'm sorry - Rukiya is pure, is generous and Kareema is "she rises on high." I think I got that right. [Interviewee correction: Kareema is "generous" and Rukiya is "she rises on high."]

BB: And say your children's names and what they mean.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: My oldest is Dara Monifa, and Dara, is-- I don't believe I'm blanking on this, is beautiful and Monifa means, "I have my luck." And those are both Yoruba names. And Kemba is also beautiful [Interviewee correction: "faithful"] and it's a Kikongo, I believe, of central Africa. And her middle name is Maia, which is Swahili, and I think it's princess if I'm not mistaken. And then our youngest is Safiya Malaika and that's a beautiful princess [Interviewee correction: "angel"], I think. [Interviewee correction: Safiya is pure and clear minded.]

BB: So you thought your girls were beautiful. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BB: And Mr. Dillahunt, I noticed that your name is Amos and your father's name is Moses, right? Those are some good biblical names.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Amos is a book. It's one of the books. And I don't know how to relate to that but the name, I think, is beautiful. That's all right, there.

BB: Yeah, it is all right.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Nobody never tried to change my name.

BB: Is there a story to your name? Do you know why your parents named you that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No, I have no idea. My family's records, keeping of records, it was not--. Because we tried to get some for Mable. We had a source that we thought was going to be able to try to hook us up, but it never materialized because we couldn't keep up with her. So I just think of it as a good old name, yeah.

BB: Will you say your parents' names for me?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: My mother--. What's your grandmother's name?

[Laughter] This is terrible. Annie Oxley, O-X-L-E-Y.

BB: And her maiden name?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That's her maiden name.

BB: Oh, Annie Oxley. And then--?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: She married my father.

BB: Where does the Reeves come in? I have that written down.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Well, my father died. She married John Reeves. No, she married John Reeves before somewhere because I have two sisters, four sisters, we call them stepsisters. And they, Ella, Susan, Peggy, and Alice. Those are my sisters by my father's first marriage, and one boy, John. That was at five members from that family. That's about all I can remember. They kid me about it. I don't know why.

BB: What were you in the birth order?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Okay, let me see. This is going to take some thought. See there was John Reeves, my two sisters Alberta and Sara [Carrington], that was the, there was two girls, John Reeves, and then that was--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Uncle Buddy [Dillahunt]. Uncle Buddy.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Buddy and my brother. That was a biological of mine. Buddy, Sara, no Buddy and Reeby, Rebecca, and me. That was that group of my father Moses, yeah. What else was that--?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And then after that Grandma had Uncle Cip, Ciprian.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, right.

BB: Uncle Cip?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, he was born in the basement of the Episcopal Church because there was a fire. The whole area was covered with fire and they--. The hospital was full and they used the basement of the Episcopal Church, St. Ciprian's Episcopal Church for an emergency. So they gave him that name, Ciprian. We cut it to Cip, C-I-P. So it was Ciprian.

BB: That's a good story.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, yes, it was. The fire was raving the town.

BB: Where was this?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: New Bern, North Carolina.

BB: What year about was that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Hm, will it come back to me now? [Laughter] My mind is short.

BB: That's all right.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: So Uncle Cip was probably, what, seven, eight years younger than you?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, something in that area, yeah. He was the last of the--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Maybe 1926 or somewhere in there.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I got all that stuff in the Bible, but I--.

BB: Oh good. How about your grandparents' names? Do you remember them?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don't remember my grandfather. My grandmother, I have a slight memory of her, Nancy.

BB: Nancy. Is this your maternal or paternal?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That was my paternal grandmother.

BB: Okay.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Nancy Green.

BB: Green, okay. And where were you born?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In New Bern.

BB: And you were born in New Bern, too.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: How'd you get to Brooklyn?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh, let's see. Because my great-grandson was quizzing me about this, too, you know. I think my two sisters left, migrated first. And my brother, both of them, my two sisters, three sisters, rather, they migrated, and my younger brother, he migrated before I did. And I was left with some family members and they after a fashion I went, I followed them. And who was it that was responsible for me? I don't know. But my mother left me with these people and my brother, my maternal brother? No, it was a half-brother, I think he was, John, yeah. Is there anything else you can pull out of me?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And then where did you work at before you went to New York?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I was a member of the C--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: CCC.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: CCC. Civilian Corporation Corps.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Conservation.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Conservation. I did a stretch of six months there.

BB: The what Conservation?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Civilian Conservation Corps.

BB: Civilian Conservation.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was roadwork and stuff. It was just something to get kids, get them off the streets or something like that. They were pretty good at that.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: It was a New Deal program under FDR [President Franklin Delano Roosevelt].

BB: I was going to ask about that.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was under the, I think it was a Roosevelt deal. But that was a long time ago.

BB: I'll say, yeah, it was a long time ago. We're stretching you. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, pressuring me. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: You told me you made enough money to buy a watch.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I was in the Civilian, CCC. I didn't get any money. I had what they called PX [military store], is what it was. And then you could go to it and charge stuff. In that corps there was a place where you could go and charge stuff. We got thirty dollars for the month. That's what you were getting, thirty dollars a month. And I think I had charged like five dollars that month. I had enough money left to buy a watch. I always wanted--. For some reason, I was fascinated by the watch, pocket watch. Yeah, I

was fascinated by that. And I bought that and I take it and here I am today.

BB: You still have that watch?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Is that right?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No, wait a minute. No, I don't think I have that one. I have another watch I bought from Best. That's in Virginia.

BB: Best?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Best Company.

BB: B-E-S-T?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Mmm hmm.

BB: Okay, that's a good story. I'm going to move this crinkled paper a little bit because it's-- You can hear it crinkle. Do you remember when Ajamu was born? Do you remember any stories about his birth?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Do I? [Laughter] Let's see. We were-- He was born in—what's the name of that hospital?—Wade Hospital in Brooklyn, New York.

BB: Ways?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Wade, W-A-D-E. Wade Hospital, that was in Brooklyn, New York. And we were living at that time with my sister-in-law, Amelia and Irvin Kidney, and we got word to come to the hospital. And he was born during that period where we were-- I ran over to the hospital with her, with my sister-in-law, and of course, his mother was there with him. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Aunt Mimi was pregnant, too.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, she was pregnant. And she said, "You're dragging

me.” I was going across--. It must’ve been about ten blocks from Madison Street. They lived on Madison Street. Didn’t they live on Madison?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I think so.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Madison. And this is on the other side of Lexington. The hospital was on--. I can’t remember the street. Lexington, I think it was on the corner of Lexington, but anyway that was fun. [Laughter]

BB: They didn’t let you in the room back then, right, to watch the baby be born?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh no.

BB: You waited outside.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah. That was a no-no.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That wasn’t a big public hospital. What kind of hospital was it?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was a private hospital. It was private.

BB: What was that decision about, being in a private hospital?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don’t know, to tell you the truth.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: It was a small hospital.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was small, yeah. It was a very small hospital.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Served the Black community?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, a brownstone, they had an operating room and stuff set up in that place. It was a small building.

BB: Were the OBs Black, the doctors and nurses?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, the staff and everything, yeah. That was during that time, my doctor was doctor--. What was his name?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Dr. Stitt?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Dr. Stitt was his name.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Family doc?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Was a family doctor and he also delivered him.

BB: And you're the oldest, Ajamu? Richard is--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Richard is younger. I only have two boys.

BB: Two boys.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: And what's Richard's full name?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Richard Carl.

BB: K-A-R?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: C.

BB: C-A-R-L. And does Richard have family?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, Richard has three daughters and two sons. Three stepchildren his wife had from a previous marriage, James and Lisa and Melissa [Baldwin]. And then he and his wife Delma have two children, Richard Jr. and his daughter Zakia [Dillahunt].

BB: And later on I'll get last names for all these to fill them in. How did you meet Ms. Carrie, Ajamu's mom?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: [Laughter]

BB: Do you remember that story?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yes. I was always, as I grew, I liked parties. I don't know



why I liked parties, but a friend of mine that lived at the apartment house around the corner from us. So I asked him, "Could I have a party there?" Yeah, so we had a--. I don't know what the food was. I don't remember anything. But a friend of mine, which was from New Bern, Ernie Spindell, him and Carrie were boyfriend and girlfriend. And he was right from my hometown, too, Ernie Spindell. And then, you know, oh. [Laughter] We clicked and that's how it was. I didn't feel bad about it because it was his loss, my gain. [Laughter] That's what it was. And we had a--. It lasted a long time until she died, yes, we were together for a real long time. Richard was born in Brooklyn, New York, in a Jewish hospital, that's the hospital he was born in, on Clarson Avenue and Park Place, Brooklyn Jewish hospital. And they stayed the usual time in the hospital.

BB: What are some of the ways Ajamu and Richard's personalities are different?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Well, there was five years, almost five years difference in age. See, 'cause Ajamu, when we were living in Queens--. We moved to Queens in '54, and he went to the last wooden school in New York, Ajamu did.

BB: The last what?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Wooden school building. He was part of that contingent. Richard was--. You know, I tell Ajamu if he goes to a party or see him doing those things, you're monitored. The family will know your family and where it is and that stuff. And I'd tell, I'd say, "I'm coming to get you at twelve o'clock." I'd go to ring the bell and the mother of the house or the father, they'd go to the basement door, say, "Gordon, your daddy's here." So that broke the party up. I wound up having to drive those kids home. "Richard, if you go to a party, I'll be there to pick you up." "I don't want to go." He wouldn't go because he didn't like that.

BB: Just more of an introvert or--?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don't know what, but he just didn't like me to come and pick him up.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I don't want my father coming to pick me up.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I mean everybody, "Amos, so-and-so, Richard, your father's here to pick you up." That's a drag, you know. But anyway, they grew up. They'd run away. They came back. Richard was a long time getting married. And Ajamu and Rukiya, they got married earlier on. When she got out of college, they got married. And then Richard later got married in Queens. Where--?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Um mm, Richmond. Well, he got married at your house actually.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yes, he did.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: At your wedding center.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: [Laughter] Oh yeah, yeah. My house down in Virginia was called, because my wife, she died two years after we moved down there. And we named it The Wedding Center. We've got two acres, you know, nothing but a lawn and a garage and a building. And all of that, I had godchildren get married there. Delma and Richard got married there. Lottie got married there. Dara got married, my first-born granddaughter.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Kemba.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Kemba. They call it The Wedding Place. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Melissa.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Melissa, yeah. It turned out, it was--. I closed it down because I couldn't handle it anymore, but it was fun. It was really a joy. I enjoy, you know I

like these first-borns will talk to me every day, still do it, every day, probably every night. She wrote a, sort of a, something about only I could pull it off, the wedding, you know, everything with it, tents. We had big tents in the yard and I had a friend that was a caterer. She'd set the food up for me for each one of these kids at the house, and all of them were good, very good, yeah.

BB: How'd you make a living, you and Ms. Carrie, when the boys were coming up?  
How'd you make a living?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I was working for the federal government. She worked for the city government.

BB: Are you a veteran?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: You are.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: DAV, yeah.

BB: Where'd you serve?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In the Medicorps, yeah.

BB: What were some of your responsibilities?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In charge of a group of guys that would take care of patients. I was a sergeant and another sergeant worked with me. We split. He worked nights. I worked days. And I would work days and he'd work nights.

BB: You're a doctor?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Me a doctor? A Dr. Jive. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: [Laughter] Dr. Jive?

BB: What'd he say? Dr. Jive?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, yeah, there's a DJ in New York called Dr. Jive.

BB: [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: But the federal government, he worked for the postal service.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I worked for the postal service, yeah. I had thirty-one years there. And also, I worked a second job from twenty-seven out of the thirty-one. It was a good job.

BB: Did you serve in the war?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I was in the station base, base medical unit, bases that were wounded and stuff, we brought them to Fort Bragg and we were in charge of that unit.

BB: And then, so Ajamu was a --. You were a baby boomer born in '45, right? August 16, 1945.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Mmm hmm.

BB: What would you say, how would you describe your class background coming up?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, I mean definitely working class. I mean both my parents were civil servants, except my mom I think worked for, at a point there, worked for the phone company, but that's our background. We lived in public housing for maybe five years in the Marcy Houses, known now around the world because the hip hop artist Jay-Z is from the Marcy Houses. And then we moved to Queens in 1954, like Pop said. But I mean I would say kind of solid working class. And our community in Queens was a kind of mixed community class-wise. You had folks like Pop who were public servants, who worked for the post office or for the city government in transit or housing. You had some folks, truck drivers,

and then you had social workers and one of our neighbors who lived two doors down, Mr. Williams worked for the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration]. And so you had a variety of people. You had a couple of ministers on the block. So it was a mixed neighborhood in terms of economic status and class background.

BB: And just to get your maternal grandparents' names, so Ms. Carrie, your mom's parents' names.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, my mother's mom was Carrie Harris also. I think there was a dispute that my mother's actual name on the birth certificate was Caroline. Is that right that they said Caroline? But they called her Carrie and most of her documents were Carrie Harris, but that was my maternal grandmother, Carrie Harris. And her husband was James. I never met him. He had passed by the time that I was born. And so that's why I'm always telling my grandchildren how fortunate they are to have their grandparents that are such an integral part of their lives. We see them all the time and are part of their upbringing. And even in this case, to even have a great-grandfather. I didn't know my maternal grandfather or my paternal grandfather, neither one. They were both deceased by the time I was born.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO PHONE RINGING.]

BB: We'll let that ring, for a second until it's done.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: See I meant to take the phone off the hook, too.

BB: Okay.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: In the back because I really don't--. [leaves to take the phone off the hook]

BB: Oh no, you can say something as soon as the phone stops ringing so we don't miss it.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That's it, that's it. I guess he got it now.

BB: Yeah. Were you going to say something?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I space out sometimes.

BB: Yep, they call it derailed. [Laughter] That's a phrase--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah. I think I do pretty good, Bridgette.

BB: Yeah, you seem pretty sharp.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Eighty-nine.

BB: Nothing to sneeze at.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah. My problem began--. This is not being recorded?

BB: It is.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Okay, it's just that I did alright until 1990. I started going down hill. Yeah, and that's when I started having my problem with the automobile accident in 1990. Okay, had a lumbar stretched out. Right now I'm getting pain in that.

BB: In your back?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Do you need to walk around or lie down?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No, no.

BB: No.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Starting to hurt, but I had that--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Had a spasm?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, spasm I had. I'll make it. I'm a tough hombre.

BB: A tough hombre. Get Pepper to give you a back massage. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

BB: Although Pepper's a little lightweight. I don't know if that would do you any good.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don't think so.

BB: Well just let us know if you need to shift and move.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: What's that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I'm trying to get the phone off the hook.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: It is.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh, okay. It'll--.

BB: It'll stop doing it.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: You can hear that, though?

BB: Yeah, a little bit, that's a good ear, good hearing. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: All I can hear is the ringing in my ears. I have ringing in my ears.

BB: Like tinnitus? What's that about?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Had it for forty years.

BB: All that loud music.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, no. It was from the loud noise from machine fire during basic training. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: He didn't know. That's part of it. I think that music had a part of it because the three of us, we love jazz.

BB: Is that right? What kind of jazz were you into when you were growing up, Ajamu, in your early years?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Upfront, upfront jazz.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I mean I was introduced to swing through Pop, you know the big bands of the thirties and forties, Count Basie and Duke Ellington and the soloist Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster. Pop was a big fan, had--. How many seventy-eight records? What was the collection? How many?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Twelve hundred.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Twelve hundred. In fact, we still have them.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: He's only broken one.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I just broke one that was--. And he may even remember which one it was, right? You did tell me one time, not too long ago, what it was. Do you remember?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Lester Young, "Back Home in Indiana".

BB: That's quite a memory.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

BB: You must have been not too happy at all. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh, I wasn't, but then I look back and I say geez, twelve hundred records. He had access to all of them, but he only broke that one.

BB: That's a good record.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Wow, that's quite a collection. That's something.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: They're still in the barn outside. I've got them in cardboard boxes. You couldn't even get a toothpick between them.

BB: Wow.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: And they were in there tight so they certainly wouldn't warp.



The one guy said it would cost too much money to put them on tape.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, we thought about transferring them. Although when we first inquired, the technology was limited to technicians that had pretty elaborate set-ups, but now the technology's available that we could actually do it, it would just take a long time because you have to do it in real time. But with a turntable and a digital set-up through a computer, you could actually transfer then even kind of manipulate the sound quality to take out some of the pops and scratches and all that, but we just haven't done that. But the music has always been part of the whole family.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: My mother and her family, they loved it and so I came up on it. I mean by the time I was in junior high school, we were like jazz fans, actually, listening to music, buying music.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh he was very good at that. A matter of fact, I think for graduation when the bandmaster was sick--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That was in junior high school that the band director was sick or couldn't make it in, and they asked me to lead the band.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: For graduation.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That wasn't graduation, Pop. It was an assembly, an assembly.

BB: What'd you play?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I played saxophone, tenor and baritone in high school, and then played drums just a little bit for awhile, always wanted to play drums and used to beg the bandmaster to play when other people were out. But mainly the saxophone, and the clarinet

of course I played that, too.

BB: Do you still play anything?

(37:35) AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, Rukiya and I always laughed. That was our joke between us that one of these days I'm going to go for a loaf of bread or a container of milk and then come runaway and join a band.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: So I haven't played in--. I mean I haven't actually played anything maybe since 1967, '68. I keep, I've got a book to get back into it. And I put the horn in the shop to get it fixed, still there, but maybe in the next year or so we'll get something done. I actually still have the saxophone that Pop bought when he was taking lessons.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Before he was born, so you know how long I had it.

BB: That's a family treasure.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, still got it. It's been in that pawnshop how many times? [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: [Laughter] Maybe two or three times.

BB: When times get a little tough?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: You weren't supposed to know that.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I wasn't supposed to know that but I got it from the grapevine. Yeah, that was part of college life, I guess, it was. I could understand and I was glad that he experienced that.

BB: Did y'all ever meet any famous musicians?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I mean I hung out with them.

BB: Who?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Coleman Hawkins, but these guys, you know you going into a place--. New York had a place called 52nd Street. That was the jazz mecca, 52nd Street, between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue and Broadway, and you had nightclubs there. And I used to go there on Sunday afternoons for jam sessions. I don't think you ever got to that state.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, it was over.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: By the time he came around it, it had broken, you know, broke up. And it was an experience for me. Like I said, that saxophone was bought before he was born.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I'd say you were a groupie.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I was a groupie. [Laughter] Now I'm still a groupie. That's what I am now. I'm a groupie.

BB: Did music have any political resonance for you before college? Was it just about loving the music?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yes, I think that's what it was.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, it was about--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, real into the music. That's what I was into and that's what he was into. Richard tried, but I stymied him.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Richard played clarinet for a little bit.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: And I may have embarrassed him. And the music (0:40:07) teacher wanted to know from me who am I to say he's not playing good enough? So go in the room, close the door. That's the problem we had. It was a good life, darlin. It's been a good life and it's still a good life.

BB: That's nice. What about religion or spirituality when you were growing up? Was that a part of y'all, did y'all practice a specific tradition, belong to a specific--?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: We're not going to talk about religion. Well, I mean we could talk, yeah, I mean that part of it growing up.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I'll let you talk now.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: You go, go ahead.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No, I mean, I'm not a zealot but I believe. And I tried to get them to go to classes after school. And every week they would go to Wednesday, a half day. The school permitted them to have that and they went to the church, the Lutheran Church.

BB: Lutheran Church?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, let me say a story about the Lutheran Church, though, which is kind of interesting I think. New York City, I don't know if they still have it, but they had this release time, like Pop said, on Wednesdays for, not a half-day. I think you got out at one o'clock, I think. And you could go to release time for any religious institution of your choice, so the churches, the synagogues, they all offered these classes or religious instruction. So when we moved to Queens, the school, the wooden schoolhouse that he talked about, I kind of remember the first week or two I was there, on Wednesday everybody clears out. Where are they going? [Laughter] Well they're going to release time. And I inquired and they were all going to this church that was literally, I don't know, maybe a quarter of a mile, maybe a half a mile away from the school, back through the lot. It was behind P.S. 110, then it was vacant lot, like sandlot. And you'd go through the lot and on the other side was this church, Trinity Lutheran Church. So I went there of course for religious instruction and then they invited your family to come to the church. And Pop and Mom did, and kind of interesting

because neither one of them had a Lutheran background. You had come up within the Episcopal Church?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Episcopal. Baptized.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And my mother was A.M.E. But I think, Pop, you could speak for yourself on this, but I think one of the things that attracted him about the Lutheran Church was the one-hour service. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Right?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yep, one hour, gone. You like that! I did anyway.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And for my mother, the A.M.E. had a tradition of a longer service, two hours sometimes or longer maybe, right? Or maybe two hours, right?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: At the most.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, and of course the worship was a lot different in terms of the music. The music was a lot more European oriented and reserved, whereas in the A.M.E. Church was a lot more spirited and more in the tradition of Black churches. But the church actually, the Lutheran Church was in transition as we moved there between a white congregation--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In that particular neighborhood.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, the whole neighborhood was in--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In transition, yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: So the pastor at that time, Pastor Brewer, right, a white pastor?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: He probably left two, three years into our membership in the church, then Pastor Thompson.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, it was good. We enjoyed the transition. I did at least, because, well still our people came to that church that was not accustomed to that type of religion, service and whatnot. See I was baptized in the Episcopal Church, which was very closely related to that, the Lutheran Church. I guess you know how that came about. Yeah. Martin Luther broke away from Pope Peter when he permitted for them to get money to build the Sistine Chapel. And he rebelled. He walked across Europe in a winter snowstorm to complain to Peter because he was given the people, parish leadership absolution for a buck, you know. That was it. And Peter had him house arrested. He was arrested in the chapel of the castle, and he could not come out. So he wrote his thesis in 1542 from the chapel of the castle where he was confined. And he got out there and posted it, which has later been transferred, made into protest. It was a protest, and he wrote that and he posted it on the steps on the door of that church at Wartenburg. And it was a protest, and from the word protest came Protestant. It's how it evolved down, you know.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Hm, this is amazing.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: He was amazing.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I guess I learned that in confirmation, when I got confirmed, but I mean only a small part of that I would have been able to really repeat, I mean Protestant and protest and all that, but you remember the year and you remember the reason, the absolution.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was interesting, yeah. St. Peter at the church in Wartenburg.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: When did you learn this?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: During my early years there, we had to, before we could join, before your mom and I could join, we would have classes with the pastor. We had classes with him before we could join. It was very interesting.

BB: Stuck with you.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Church born out of protest, that's pretty interesting.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, it was. A whole lot of people, young people, don't know what it's all about, Black and White kids, younger people, your age, I'm assuming your age.

BB: Thirty-five.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, well that's--. There was a young white boy who was in the post office, that was during the Christmas time. And I worked the floor in the morning, would go into the office. And I was asking him, I said, "What's your knowledge of your church?" And I was telling him about, told him a joke. Teacher gave this young student an assignment. "I want you to bring me an assignment of three biblical people." So after some time the boy came, brought it in. And he showed it to the teacher, was three people in an airplane. So the teacher asks him, "Who is that?" "Oh, that's Mary." "Who's that middle person?" "That middle person is Joseph, the baby." "Well who is that person over there?" Say, "That's Pontius the Pilot." This boy didn't know you who Pontius Pilate was. The Bible tells us, the book tells us, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, but he didn't know it. And I felt good. I really did.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Why, that you could tell him that?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Uh huh.

BB: That you knew.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: And see they've got a new minister now. I think he was surprised. He first went to school, Ajamu. He was a young kid, like you know, and he just lasted four years, I mean, six weeks maybe, six months at the most. He came to give me a visit and he was surprised at my knowledge. He was. He was very surprised at my knowledge about the Lutheran Church, how Christ went across Europe and went to, all that stuff. I could see his eyes was opened, but maybe I shouldn't talk too much about this, I know Ajamu...

BB: [Laughter] Maybe sometime y'all should record that, like what you remember about the history of the church. That'd be interesting.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, it was. I was proud. And I had several young kids, Black and White, about who was Pontius the Pilate, not Pontius--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Pontius Pilate.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Who was Pontius Pilate. They didn't know. You'd be surprised. They didn't know who it was.

BB: Well can I jump ahead some to like the '50s and see, do you remember family conversations about what was happening in the earlier civil rights movement in the '50s? Did y'all talk about it?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Well he did. He was at the forefront of that. He was in the forefront, Ajamu was.

BB: Well in the '50s, you were just ten years old, fifteen years old.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah, no, I mean what I remember from the '50s, of



course, is, well, Emmett Till, that everybody kind of was struck by that, the killing of a young African American guy from Chicago visiting family in Mississippi, kind of like captured everybody, probably, well through the Black press, mainly, through Jet magazine and Ebony magazine on the Black radio stations. I don't remember too much about the TV coverage of that. I don't know. Pop, you may remember it, but--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Wasn't, not covered. And that's when the movement started, in Greenville, North Carolina, lunch counters.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh, Greensboro, Greensboro. But I mean in the '50s, I just remember traveling with Pops' mom to New Bern. One summer we went to New Bern and Wilmington.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Wilmington, yeah.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: For, I don't know, two, three weeks, whatever. And we rode the bus and remember having to change seats in D.C. to move to the back of the bus.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: You don't probably know anything about that, do you?

BB: Just from stories.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: So that was a memory.

BB: D.C. was the line between North and South.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Mason-Dixon line.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, well, the Mason-Dixon line.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That's what it was called.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And I mean of course at that time didn't understand the Mason-Dixon line and all that, but understood that this is the way White folks treated you in the South and these requirements. And then I just have this memory of the bus station in New

Bern and the contrast between one side, which was reserved for colored and the other side for Whites and just the Black one was like barren, nothing in it. I just remember being kind of dark and dingy. And the other side that you could see seemed to be more --.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: A little bit more cleaner.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Cleaner and painted and all that. And I've got this memory of flies on the New Bern side. [Laughter] I mean in the colored side in New Bern. I mean that's not to say that there weren't flies on the other side, but I just kind of remember that as part of the trip. And of course the rest of the time we spent at my aunt's house, I guess, or

AMOS DILLAHUNT: In Wilmington with my brother, Uncle Eddie.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, and that was in Wilmington, right?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Did y'all talk about it?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, no.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That wasn't the conversation.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: We didn't, no discussion. That was 19--. I believe, well was that 1954? It was before '54. They might have been '53, I think, because I don't think we had moved yet to Queens.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No.

BB: You were eight.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I might have been eight years old or so.

BB: But that really stuck with you.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, but--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: But certain things stick.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, that, I remember that. But I mean I can't recall any conversations that were questioning what this was or any rage or anything like that. I just can't recall that, but I do distinctly remember that there was this segregation and this requirement to move to the back of the bus and the separate facilities.

BB: And you don't recall any of that in New York?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, no. I mean at that time--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: De facto.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I mean Pop could probably tell you all those stories.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: That was de facto.

BB: What do you mean by de facto?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh, you go into the restaurant, White something, on 5th Avenue between 23rd and 24th Street. Okay, you weren't prohibited from going in there, but this guy and I worked in this place together and we just decided we were going to go there and sit and get service. We sat there for half an hour, kept passing us, the waitress, kept passing us, but she never stopped. That's the de facto.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Not by law.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That's the meaning of that, right. De jure, by law. De facto, just circumstances.

BB: How it is, is--.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, well we came in, it didn't stop us from coming in, but like up in Oswego. You remember in Oswego? We stood there, six of us. Was it six, three

adults, your mother and...

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: No, no.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: We went to visit Oswego and...

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Okay.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: We went up there, went to visit Oswego. And we stayed in Oswego and the maitre d' kept passing us by and never said a word to us. So we just said, "Okay, the hell with you." We walked out and we went to this restaurant and this man, he just fell all over you with service. Yeah, show you what difference in that people.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I remember though, I don't know if it was that vacation, but one where we stayed at Richard's guesthouse, but that was a Black-owned--?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Black-owned place, back by the railroad tracks.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, you had to stay in, even in upstate New York.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, we encountered that, but it was, it was--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And I have a digital story that I did. I don't know if I--. I never shared that with you, did I? But about, Pop, what you might be interested in seeing. But the story, you know, this could be the last one if you want, but the story about the sailor on the subway.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh, yeah. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: If you don't mind telling it.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No, not at all. It's no hidden secret. She'll probably laugh. Go ahead and tell her what it was.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, go ahead.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Subway was, you know, the doors, they got one door here,

one door here, one door there, equal sides. And you get out of the station on this side. And this guy had been harassing me, so when I got to the station--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: But tell me who was he.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don't know who he was.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I mean not who--?

BB: A White guy.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: A White guy.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Was he a sailor or was he a--?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: I don't know what, I can't remember whether he was a sailor or what he was, but I know when we got to the station, I got up, stood by the door for it to open, and I knocked the shit out of him and ran out of there. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: You hit him with a cane.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I hit him with this cane!

BB: What was he saying to you?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: He was just being uncivilized.

BB: Racist?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, yeah.

BB: Calling you names?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: You pummeled him.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: And I think he'll remember that. [Laughter]

BB: I'll bet he does.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: But it was--. That stuff is there, you know. It didn't bother me. It made me a better person to understand, you know.

BB: Did you beat up anybody else?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: No. We were in upstate New York. We didn't encounter anything, but we encountered in Oswego, in Syra--. Not Syracuse, but Oswego. And the river across the--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Niagara Falls.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Niagara Falls, we encountered it in Niagara Falls, but it was something we just didn't make an issue of it, not going to make an issue of it. We got up and we walked out. That was it.

BB: But that guy got to you.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah.

BB: [Laughter] He went a little too far.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, he went over the line and I gave it to him good. My fists still hurt. [Laughter]

BB: [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: [Laughter]

BB: You gave it to him good.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah. And by the time I hit him, the door was coming, too, you know. And there's no way that he could get up and get out in time. So I just, fix you buddy, boom, yeah.

BB: That's a good story.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, a good story, yeah. That's my story.

BB: Thank you for sharing that.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: It was interesting.

BB: What a treat. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Yeah, and all his children, my great-grands and my great-great-grands, and they all love me. They love Pop. They love me. I love them. It's a family and I cherish it, have a relationship with them, a relationship with the people in my home in Virginia, the town. When Ajamu came for my seventy-fifth birthday, he got up and there were two hundred and eighty-three people.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: They threw a party.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: For my birthday, seventy-fifth birthday party, two hundred and eighty-three people. And there was a couple of incidents I remembered when you were speaking. He used to say that, know, he worried about his father, but now he don't have to worry because I see the love around you from these people. I don't have to worry about it. And this lady, she says, "I could see the love flowing from him to you." It made me feel good, you know, the turnout, two hundred and eighty-three people. That was a huge turnout, but someone who had been living there all his life said he's never been to a party like that. And that made me feel good because I had a relationship with the people in the community. (BEGIN TRACK TWO) They had respect for me and in turn, I have respect for them. It was a relationship like that.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: So you think when we do the ninetieth, you'll get that many people?

AMOS DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah. I don't know. Maybe a lot of them will be dead.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: [Laughter] Well, the ones that have survived and the new

friends you've made since then.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: The new friends.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: We'll shoot for two eighty-three.

AMOS DILLAHUNT: We'll try. We've got ninety--. We've got another year because it's eighty-nine, eighty-nine. I'll be here. We'll do an interview again after that, all right?

BB: All right. It's a deal. I'm going to hold you to it. [Laughter]

AMOS DILLAHUNT: All right. [Laughter]

BB: Okay, sure, I'll pause--.

[RECORDER IS TURNED OFF AND THEN BACK ON]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: ..or have you? [any photos of yourself]

BB: No, and don't you be bringing it up. All right, yeah, we've got one of me. Jake [Jacob Burge, interviewer's son] was taking some pictures of me during Bryan [Bryan Proffitt, one of the Heirs interviewed for this project] and we had the little microphone attached to a little kitty cat of Ella's [Ella June Burge-Walz, interviewer's daughter], a little stuffed cat in between. [Laughter] Because we still don't have enough money for a good one, but the internal mic does a good job. Well, we're back about ten minutes later and Mr. Dillahunt just went to lay down. But that was--. I had a good time. What a man.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, I'm glad you enjoyed it.

BB: Yeah, I did.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I enjoyed it, too, actually. You hear little stories. I mean his description about the development of Lutheranism just fascinated me, that he had such a good grasp of it. I didn't know that he did. So that was fun and there were one or two other



things he might have said that I'm like, hmm, I didn't remember that one.

BB: Good, I'm glad. Well thanks for doing that and him, too.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: So I take it y'all have religious differences? Is that what the not wanting to talk about it with your dad was?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, I mean I wouldn't even call them differences. I'm not a believer of a particular belief. On my Facebook page I have it now, in terms of, I think the thing says "religion." I think my last entry was "grandchild worship." And you know, Unitarian, Quaker, Buddhist, Earthseed, which is the religious belief that Octavia Butler developed in her books. I don't know which, was Parable of the Sower or Parable of the Talents, one of them, but that's just this kind of belief and whatnot. And then it goes on to say agnostic and atheist and whatnot. I mean I think I'm a spiritual person, probably, in terms of some sense of goodness and a kind of life force that moves through us and through the universe, but in terms of it being defined as a superior being or whatever, I don't relate to it that way in general.

I mean I love the memories of the church services, some of them, particularly. It's kind of interesting because my first recollection of churches and religious services was in the A.M.E. Church where my mom went, and I mean the music was just fantastic. It really helped me to develop appreciation for the music and I ended up singing in the choir later on in another church, really started to understand the traditions and whatnot. And then we made the transition to the Lutheran Church, which was so laidback and conservative and whatnot, but I did join the choir. And we kind of got the choir director, an older German woman, I guess Rose Durstoff was her name. She was very much into anthems and those kinds of musical

selections, but we kind of pushed her to develop some other things. I mean we never ended up doing gospel. [Laughter] But we ended up introducing some spirituals. And this was a little bit ahead of the kind of revolution in church music, where they started printing Black hymnals that a number of denominations use. They hadn't done that yet. So the Lutheran hymnal was pretty standard, but she'd get other music and introduce that.

BB: Was it an all-Black church still?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well it became, the Lutheran Church, it became all Black, but--.

BB: But when you were singing with Rose, I mean during those years.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh, by that time it was Black. By that time it was Black. She stayed, I want to say she stayed there maybe fifteen years or so into our membership. I mean at least, I think she was still the choir director when I graduated from high school and went on off to college, I think Ms. Durstoff was still there. So she kind of stayed with it. And I mean she lived not too far away, so she was kind of like in the neighborhood. I don't think that it was, "I'll stay here just for the job." I think she had made a decision to--. "This is where I live. I like it. I'm going to stay here and whatever the changes in the demographics of the neighborhood and the church, they weren't enough to make her actually move. She loved the folks and related very well to them, but musically she couldn't take us as far as we wanted to go. [Laughter] Again, in the Lutheran tradition, the second minister, Edwin Thompson, was a Black minister, wasn't a kind of traditional preacher in the Baptist, A.M.E., Pentecostal style. He was much more reserved in his sermons. I remember services where somebody who was visiting might say amen or something and people kind of looked around, certainly no shouting and any of the other things that you find in many Black churches.

That's what made it interesting. But like I said, I still appreciate that and I always tell, when I visit some of the White churches like the Unitarian Church here, for example, I've said to people, they worry about they don't have enough Black members. And I'm saying, "Well, don't worry about it. It's going to be kind of hard because you've got the theology that's really important, but the culture, the music is just lacking and so it's going to be hard." And I think a lot of Black people who are in tune with the theology of the Unitarian Church for example, or even the Quaker Church or whatever, just find because of their own history, they find that the services leave a little hole in their kind of spiritual self. I don't know what to--. I mean Pop would like you to be going to church every week and all that, so he doesn't push it, but I don't want to create any uneasiness on his part at this time. But it was never a battle about religious ideas.

And then as I talking about Pastor Thompson, I do want to mention, though, his connection to and influence to my later life in terms of civil rights activity. Pastor Thompson, I believe, was from Baton Rouge, from Louisiana, so he had those Southern traditions. I'm not sure where his assignment prior to coming to Trinity Lutheran was. I don't know if he came directly from Baton Rouge or whatever, but he got involved in some civil rights protests in the community. There was a construction project not too far from the church, a pretty significant one, Rochdale Village, which is a cooperative in Queens. And this would have been probably, I think in 1963, '64, seemed like it was two, three-year construction project, and I might've been away in school for part of it, but it was a cooperative that was being constructed on the former, the site of the Jamaica Race Track. So it was a pretty large development. And like many other cities in the country, one of the sites of civil rights struggle was in construction. And so the notion was if you're going to build any building, but

particularly buildings that were being erected in African-American communities, you had to have Black construction workers. And so he was involved in a protest, blocking the building until they made some changes in the composition of the crew. And again, I think I was away. I don't think he necessarily consulted the congregation about it, nor did he ask, as I recall, any members to be a part of it. If I'm not mistaken, it was pretty much the clergy, a group of clergymen actually participating in it. But my recollection was that the congregation was fine with it. It was good. So I always thought that was kind of important.

Then of course the other influence he had, he married Rukiya and I and we had a kind of quick--. Typically before you get married, you're supposed to take these counseling classes or whatever. I don't know. I don't know what the standard is, how long it is, but we only had like two or three hours before the wedding to actually do it. [Laughter] Because we got married in a kind of spontaneous way. We decided we wanted to get married on a particular weekend maybe two weeks before the wedding. And Rukiya was not living in town and so the only time she could come in for this meeting with the pastor who was going to do it was that day of the wedding. But one of the things that he emphasized was the question of money and resources. He was saying that that's the critical thing in a relationship, how to manage your money, making sure that money does not come between the two of you, that financial decisions need to be made collectively. And in fact, I don't know if he said it quite this way, but the essence of what it was is that your resources should be collective. They should be shared. And I guess that some couples then and probably even today have this sense of, "Well, this is mine and this is yours. If you earn a salary, then that's yours, and the other partner earns a salary, that's theirs." And maybe you both chip in, so to speak, to pay bills, but if there's anything left, then that belongs to you. And his notion was that you share

all your resources. And actually we've done that. I think it's really contributed to the healthy relationship that we've had over time. And particularly when one spouse is making more than the other or one spouse is not working and the other is and other situations where it's important for people to feel like the resources that are available belong to you equally. And there's no control over them and the kind of difficulties that some couples get into in terms of apportioning resources, it's never been a problem. So I kind of attribute that in a lot of ways to Pastor Thompson. His religious influence was fine, was okay, but in terms of his civil rights, and then just his relationship counseling, I kind of remember that and cherish that.

BB: Sociologists talk about, or they did back in college, I don't know if it's still true, but that the three biggest struggles that most couples have in Western culture, United States culture is money, household chores, and sex. And if the first two are handled really well, the third usually ends up working out all right, too. [Laughter]

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That's interesting, yeah.

BB: So that kind of ties into what you're saying. That's neat that that stuck with you.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well on the second one, the chores, that's been pretty much a cooperative relationship over time, one just on practical grounds, but the others I think, politically and philosophically, to share them. That in order to make things work, we've got to share the load. The question of the kitchen, Rukiya was not raised up to learn how to cook, and so it wasn't an important thing for her mother to make her learn how to cook. And so we got married, she really didn't have that much experience in cooking. And my mother helped her along, but I never had this view that that was her role to be able to cook and whatnot. I mean I was glad that she learned, but I also tried to chip in, and so we've always done that. And then as you begin to develop politically and understanding this question of domestic work

and women's wages and all that, you really make a conscious effort to really break things down so that there's a serious division of labor or sharing of tasks. And in order for our house, I mean we had three children, at one point we had four children living here. We had full-time jobs and a very active political life and community life and so you had to really share responsibilities. And so I don't think we ever have run into those kinds of conflicts, maybe here and there, like, "Damn, you didn't take the garbage out." Or, "Are you going to wash the dishes before this or that?" But I mean never any real conflicts. It's always been a sharing kind of a relationship as far as those things are concerned.

BB: When was there a fourth child here?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Moriah lived with us pretty much, I guess from her third grade through high school. Moriah was the daughter of a friend who passed and she was also being cared for by our friend Jim Grant. And so she was very friendly with our daughters and as an elementary school student would fall asleep here and we'd let her stay. And so we just kind of evolved into her staying with us, and so she was part of our family for quite a few years.

BB: So when was the beginning of your political awakening other than just taking in things and being a product of your times, but about how old were you?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, I think, I remember just a couple of key places along the way that I paid attention to politics.

BB: Wait, hang on just a second. I'm sorry. I can hear that some. Can you either turn it down a little or shut the door?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Is that better?

BB: Yep, okay, thanks. And it's just about noon, too. So as a time check, should this be the last couple questions?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah.

BB: Or do you need to really--?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: We spent more time--. Well I need to be in there by one for sure.

BB: Okay, where is "there?"

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Down at the office. [NC Justice Center]

BB: Okay. Well, let's go ten minutes or so. And then I knew I just had a strong feeling that it'd be several times for us to record.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Right, well especially with Pop and whatnot.

BB: So we don't have to hurry, we got--.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Okay. Well, I know you wanted to finish it before December, though.

BB: Well, you know, ideally, but we're going to keep doing these. So we've got years. [Laughter] I don't want to drag--. There's some continuity, though, to keeping them pretty close together. Okay, so you were talking about a few kind of defining moments that stand out.

DILLAHUNT: Yeah, and I don't know if they would be called "aha moments" or could be described as an epiphany. I just remember things that were political in nature that I think may have shaped me. So one, we talked earlier about Emmett Till and that kind of stuff. And I just remember in Black communities people talking about White folks not doing this or White folks doing that or civil rights and the Montgomery bus boycott and all of those things. There were kind of out there, but--.

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: Gonna let you do your thing, Pepper.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Okay? They were kind of like the background, that it's always there, paying attention to it, and probably conversations in the family, with my mom, in particular. She was pretty intolerant of racism and just disrespectful White people and those kinds of things. So you'd remember hearing, you'd hear comments with families, with family members in different gatherings, but what I do remember, I remember in high school, there was a human rights, a human relations club and I gravitated towards that. I really don't remember why. I mean it was just a thing to do and some friends were in it, and it was integrated. And I just remember a White student, Elliot Linser, I think his name was. And he was kind of a curly haired White guy at that time, with horned rim glasses, not horned rim glasses. What do you call the small glasses? I don't know how you describe them.

BB: I call them John Lennon glasses.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, round glasses. And was very bright. He may have even gone to my junior high school, but this is about high school, but he described himself as a socialist. And I just always remembered that. So he's a socialist and he's in this human relations club that's talking about equality and rights and those kinds of things. I wasn't a long-term active member of that club, but I attended the meetings.

And then the other moment, which was more profound, was the television program that CBS produced [in 1959 by Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax] on the Nation of Islam and it was called "The Hate That Hate Produced." And it was a critical program. I think as you research it, you'll find that that was a kind of seminal moment in the Black experience in this country because for the first time, a national audience got to learn about Black nationalism as it was being played out across the country in many cities, New York and Detroit, Chicago. But



through the Nation of Islam and primarily through both Elijah Muhammad, who was the founder and leader and his national spokesmen Malcolm X. When you think back, I try to construct how it is I came to watch that program. Was it that I watched that program--? You know, it was a CBS Sunday special. So was I a regular viewer or did I know it was coming on and was interested enough or excited enough to watch it? I just can't remember those details, but we watched it. I remember being very, very impressed by seeing Malcolm X in this way and the work of the Nation of Islam. So that was an important piece.

BB: What year was that, do you think?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, we'll research that.

BB: But you were in high school for sure.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah, yeah. It's got to be, I'm thinking '60, 1960, '61, somewhere in there.

BB: Because you graduated from Andrew Jackson High School in Cambria Heights in '63 in New York.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: In '63, 1963, yeah. So it was definitely before that. But I think it was that program that then led to writing a paper for history class, probably senior year, but maybe junior year on Black Nationalism and civil rights. And that was, I remember that being a kind of an interesting and enlightening experience. So that was, all of this stuff is taking shape and I graduated in June of 1963 and was headed for college. And of course that summer was the March on Washington in August. And I wanted to go. I mean I wasn't connected to any organizations or anything, to the NAACP Youth or, of course, I hadn't joined the Nation of Islam, wasn't having those kind of contacts, but I mean just listening to the news and the excitement that was swirling in the community, I really wanted to go, but I was

working. I had a summer job at the--.

I worked for the New York City Housing Authority at the Albany Houses. I mean it was kind of an interesting job for me that summer, because my cousin had lived in the Albany Houses and I used to visit him and stay there. And so here I was working in the Albany Houses where we had played on the grounds, well, and now I'm responsible for cleaning the grounds and keeping them beautified or cleaned in many cases and emptying trash and keeping the incinerator clean and all those things. So it was kind of a fun job. It wasn't my first job. Well, I think I was probably making more money that summer than I had before, and it was critical because I needed money to go off to school. So I never really pursued going. I believe if someone had really said to me, invited me personally, like, "You need to go to this." Or, "I'm going to help you go. I'm going to pay your way." I probably would've been convinced to go, but I didn't. But that was something that certainly resonated with me, the March on Washington and the excitement and how profound a moment it is. And I just remember our family being really tuned into what was going on, just the immensity of it and the possibilities that it presented for folks and understanding--.

I mean again, Pop kind of laid out the kind of Northern version of segregation, the unspoken values that you found and the institutional racism that you would find in employment and even in housing and almost all areas, education, et cetera. But everybody had a profound understanding of what it was like in the South and how much more oppressive it was and how much more of a need there was for change for civil rights legislation for protection and so on from lynchings. Because I mean the lynching, the Emmett Till piece was like the very prominent expression of it, but I mean it was a known fact that Black people were regularly lynched in the South or disappeared in the South. And so this was part of it. And

I'm just thinking of the disappearance--.

A little digression here, my grandmother's brother, this is Carrie Harris, my mother's mother, they were from Charleston [SC] and actually from John's Island originally. And the family story was that he had some money that was buried out on John's Island that he'd hidden out there somewhere near where they had lived previously. The family had moved into Charleston, into the city and he went to get his money and he never came back. He disappeared. And so the story was that some White men knew that he had this money, had followed him and killed him and buried him somewhere and he was never seen again. And who knows, I mean we just don't know about that story. We'll never know about it. But that was part of this understanding. So there's the general thing. There's the big story about Emmett Till and of course later on there's the bombings in Birmingham and the death of the schoolchildren, the schoolgirls there, but even my own family lore had this thing about White terror and oppression and how it affected people, even if it at the end of the day was not a real story. At that time, of course it was absolutely true that this had happened. So all of this is going on.

BB: What's your great-uncle's name? Do you remember?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Um, you know, I'm thinking Sancho, but I'm not entirely sure. And we had kind of researched it. I believe it's Sancho because when we were doing a little research, and of course this is many years later, in Charleston looking at birth certificates and death records and a lot of deaths were by consumption. That's what they called it, consumption, which was cancer, I guess, but at that time that's what the terminology was. But I believe his name was Sancho.

BB: And before we--. I don't want to get to the college years today, so before we do

that, are there any other seminal political moments you think in your high school years?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, just a memory that things could change. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a moment that I remember and at the high school that I went to, although it was an integrated high school, it received students from various surrounding communities. And the communities were both Black and White, segregated communities for the most part. So it was kind of like on the border between a Black community and White community and students were fed into this school. And so in classes it was very much integrated, was integrated for sure, and in athletic teams and so on, but in terms of social interaction, for the most part still very much segregated, in the lunchroom just like it is today, there was that. I mean there were inter-racial relationships and parties in certain groups. Of course, it was a very small group.

And one side of the school, the entrance was called Boot Hill and that was the Black entrance. That's where the Black kids hung out for the most part. And it was understood that White kids don't enter through that way. And earlier, I guess this was, I attended the school for the tenth through twelfth grade. So I guess we started there in 1960, but I believe in maybe 1958, '56, '57, somewhere in there, there was some pretty pitched battles between Black students and White students, you know, not just Black and White gangs, which did exist, but just Black and White students trying to protect territory or trying to kind of mark off territory in the school. So I think during that time, these entrances and exits became identified with particular groups. And I'm even thinking now in a geographical way, that side was designated for Black students was closer to the community that they were coming from, so particularly if they were walking to school or whatever. If you got off the bus, the buses might take you to other side of the school, but a lot of students made it their business to walk around

to that entrance, kind of unspoken rule. But I remember people hanging out there during the crisis and people saying, "Well, there may be war and I'm not going. If there's some war and this is some crazy stuff. And what are the Cubans doing?" So it was a focus on international politics and some thought about resistance maybe, in just a kind of a basic way, not with a lot of analysis. And I can't even remember the guy's name, though, but he was one of the earlier wearers of naturals. He had a natural--. This is 1960, didn't have a lot of people wearing Afros at that time. And maybe his name will occur to me later on or I'll have to consult some of my high school buddies whose memories are also fleeting like mine. [Laughter] So anyway I remember him essentially being one of the people talking about the Cuban missile crisis. So those were some of the things that helped to shape us. The inter-racial relationships, a lot of those people were kind of engaged in that human relations club that I told you about.

All of this is kind of going on at a particular time, but had not gravitated towards any particular organizations or anything, but I was reading. And I've always been a vociferous reader, just love libraries and hung out in them a lot and read everything I could get my hands on. So I'm reading from library books about Black Nationalism, the popular Black press, Ebony, Jet magazine. In New York, we had the Amsterdam News, the Chicago Tribune, which historically played an important role in terms of chronicling Black affairs in the South and chronicled the migration of Blacks from the South to the North, wasn't available to us. I mean I imagine you could find copies in New York somewhere, but that wasn't the press. The Chicago Tribune, the Pittsburgh Courier, those are the kind of two papers of record that participated in that. And I don't even think that the Baltimore Afro-American, which was another paper, you might read references to them in other works, but Jet, Ebony, and the

Amsterdam News were the basic papers. And then I believe just at that period, Muhammed Speaks became a paper. That was the paper of the Nation of Islam that Malcolm X helped to found and that was an important source of information about Black struggle and civil rights, even though they had a slightly different take on civil rights than Dr. King did.

BB: How did you understand what Black Nationalism was in those early years, like from the movie "The Hate That Hate Produced" and maybe Malcolm X's autobiography, you probably read in high school?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, I didn't, not in high school. I read that in college because it came out after his death. And so I would have read that, in fact, it was a summer school of 1966, I believe it was, or '65. I read it in summer school and probably spent more time on that than I did on the course I was taking, which I would later regret. But I think what I got from those, from the television special, from the reading, from the paper is a sense that Black Nationalism meant resistance to White supremacy and racism in many different ways, in kind of a physical sense in one way, a self-defense posture, but also a defense in terms of the creation of institutions in the community that Black people could define, could build, could control, and use for the overall development of the community. And I mean that encompassed notions of Black Nationalism developed by Garvey. Marcus Garvey was important in that, so I understood that. I had learned about that.

And the other piece, again, at that time, understand, was the notion of Black Pride, that is pride in your heritage, the origins in Africa and that you shouldn't be ashamed of that. Not just that we came from an African culture, which people didn't understand at that time and had been reduced to Tarzan movies and primitiveness and backwardness. I mean I was kind of beyond that. At that time I wasn't locked into that, and I would certainly learn more about its

greatness in the development of civilizations and culture and so on, but that we should embrace it, even at the level of our physical appearance, your skin color, the texture of your hair, the shape of your body, all of those things were things to be embraced and appreciated and really projected as being important things, and not pitted against a kind of European notion of beauty in those same areas, in terms of hair, your nose, your lips, all those kinds of things. As you think about it now, you don't hear that kind of discussion going on now, but that was pretty important in terms of people really grasping that at that time. So those were the elements of my understanding of Black Nationalism at that point in time, and of course it would evolve a lot more over time as I learned more and engaged in struggle and movements in later years.

BB: So, last question. The one thing that I didn't get to that we might pick back up on in terms of early years or family history is how far back can you trace your family ancestry?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: That's it. Pop did it.

BB: Okay, that's as far back as you can, your great-grandparents.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well now, no, no, no, no. Let me clarify that. He mentioned we had somebody who's a cousin of his, Mabel, who he had hooked up with after, over some years, and she came to a family reunion. She was on his mother's side and she had done a family tree. I do actually have some information from her. What he's referring to is that we hoped to take it a little further and we lost track of her. She went back to Florida and she passed and we didn't have a--. She didn't have a next of kin or anything, so we really lost that, but she has it pretty good on my grandmother's side. She had Cherokee heritage. And we can trace it. Let me put this right, not verified, but at least told to us going back to a plantation in, I don't know if it was Washington County or another county where the family evolves from through a slave owner and so on and comes down. So I have some of that

information and the names of some of the people, my grandmother's people, the Oxleys and whatnot. I think from Chocowinity is where her folks come from, which is, I don't know if that's in Martin County or whatever, but it's eastern North Carolina. And that's where her roots are.

In terms of my father's father, we just don't know. We never were able to get that. And it's probably easy. There's a large group of Dillahunts in New Bern, in the Craven County area and the surrounding counties. And we're not all related. There are different groups of them, but clearly with a name like that, the relationship probably stems back to a plantation. Somebody may have done that research. We just haven't, so we can't go back really past my father's father. What did he say? Did he say--? His grandfather, he said, which I hadn't heard. That was the other thing. I hadn't heard him say that before, about his grandfather, which is very interesting. So that's on that side. And it's kind of like when I get a chance to do it, I really want to really follow up.

On my mother's side, we also have a similar dilemma, not being able to go on. Her mother was from Charleston and had two sisters. And they all moved to New York, and that brother who disappeared. We can't go beyond that from the Charleston side. That's the best we could do. It may be possible to go a little bit beyond. I think, in fact, I think the preliminary research that I did had an aunt, my grandmother's aunt may be listed. But I mean that's not something that's part of the family--. I can't go to the family Bible and find that. That was through researching government records, census records, and birth certificates and death certificates. On my mother's father's side, my uncle kind of helped us with this, but he's Harris [James] and he's part Irish. Okay, he's part Irish.

BB: Your uncle's--.



AJAMU DILLAHUNT: I mean my grandfather, Harris, is part Irish. And we were never able to really trace that family tree, but he was light skinned and--. [Interviewee comment: "We recently learned that she was Italian and not Irish.]

[INTERRUPTION DUE TO DOG BARKING]

BB: [Laughter] [Directed to dog] Oh, you're so vicious.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Which was always kind of interesting because my grandmother, very dark skinned and whatnot, very African features, very distinct African features. And they came together and had together five children. And only one of them survives now. My one aunt just passed. My oldest aunt just passed three weeks ago in Spartanburg.

BB: What's her name?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Amelia Kidney. And she was eighty, I guess she was eighty-seven, yeah, she was eighty-seven. So my mother's younger sister, Florence, she still lives in New York, and she survives, but that's the last of that family line.

BB: What's Florence's last name?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Barlow.

BB: Barlow. And when they moved to New York from South Carolina, was that part of the migration, the Black migration?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, my grandmother, all of my mother's family, they were all born in New York.

BB: Oh, okay.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: They were all born in New York. My grandmother--.

BB: And her sisters, you said they moved.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Her sisters, they moved. And the timing and who went first and all that, I'm not clear on that.

BB: Or the reasons.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, I mean the reasons, to get better opportunities. And I think somebody, like in many situations, one of the siblings went first and told the others to come on, and then they came and lived with them. Because I remember my grandmother and her sister had an apartment, which seemed like everybody in the family lived there at one time or another, in Brooklyn. But the two of them shared an apartment together. And my great-aunt had two children, but I never knew her husband. I believe he was deceased by the time I was born. I can't remember, but the two of them, and then they had a third sister. So I think my grandmother had three sisters, Anna [White], sister Anna, sister Margaret [White], and Evelyn [White]. So she had four sisters, but they were all--. I mean that was part of the migration north from South Carolina. And my grandmother, she maintained a Charleston accent, wasn't as pronounced as her sister Evelyn, she had a very, very pronounced accent. The kids used to laugh and tease her, but I told Rukiya, I said, "It was just fate that we would end up together," that I had these Charleston roots and I would end up marrying someone who comes from Charleston. We actually visited the street where my grandmother had lived. One year, I think my mother and my mother-in-law visited the street when my mother was alive. And then maybe ten years ago, my aunt, my two aunts came into town into Charleston and we took them to the street where she lived. I mean the house is not there anymore or anything, but they got a chance--.

BB: What's the name of the street?

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: It was on Line Street, I think is the name of it, Line Street,

L-I-N-E.

BB: It'd be so interesting to find that history about how they ended up on John's Island, because there's such history on John's Island, too.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Well, yeah. I mean I think they came from John's Island and whatnot and moved to--.

BB: I meant how they got to John's Island. I mean the family history there.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Oh yeah, to be able to go back there, that's very difficult to do. I think that a lot of the research in terms of that area, all of those sea islands there suggest a pretty strong influence of folks from both Sierra Leone and Gambia, those are at least two of the countries, so maybe that. But then on the other hand, Charleston--. And see that's the other thing about Charleston, it was a major seaport and entry point for the slave trade. It was the major city. And so, at the end of the day, you're going to have people coming in from all of west and central Africa.

BB: And then Barbados.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: And also coming from the Caribbean. The ability to be able to really determine where you're from, it's really difficult. So I don't know, but I always, I've got in the back of my mind that when I retire and I get some time, I'm going to really do that research.

BB: In between playing the sax.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Yeah, well I mean that would be a wonderful life, researching your family's history and playing the saxophone. We'll see. [Laughter] We'll see.

BB: Well, that's a good place to stop, if you feel all right.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Okay.

BB: And we'll just pick up again. And it's about-- Well, we have the timings on there. All right, thanks Ajamu.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Reviewed by Bridgette Burge, November 2009.