

Voices of 1968
Oral History Interview Notes

Interviewee: Jea P. Street
Interviewer: TAHIRA
Notetaker: David Kim
Technical Assistance: Nico Carver

Additional notes: Rebecca Johnson Melvin

November 8, 2018
Audio-recording studio, Morris Library
University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press

- 01:00 Born in St. Francis Hospital, Wilmington. Schools: lower elementary school, Bayard Middle School, Wilmington High School
- 01:47 Question about awareness of King's legacy. Street was "an awful child." The kind that nobody wanted to babysit. Father would send him off with mother when she went to NAACP meetings. She was active in NAACP so he tagged along for many meetings. As a child he recognized the seriousness of what they were talking about. Got to observe the adults arguing, strategizing. This really was the genesis of his career. Got to be in the strategy room. Saw Lou [Louis] Redding, Rev. [Maurice] Moyer, Lit [Littleton] Mitchell, his uncle Luther Porter. So had early involvement with civil rights but for the wrong reason. Saw the efforts it took to be a leader.
- 03:50 At what age did he understand? Around age 12 or 13. Had a disagreement with his father about some clothes that he didn't want to wear; father told him to go buy his own clothes, so he got a wagon and delivered groceries to make money. Paid for his own NAACP membership at age 12.
- 5:00 Remembers very well the 1963 March on Washington. The whole family went, everyone older than 12. He was left with his cousin in Baltimore while the rest of the family got to go; he watched on television at his cousin's. Not a question of going but only a choice of when. Uncle Luther [Porter] was also involved in NAACP, went to national conventions.
- 6:55 The march was important and he understood why. He had been called the N word by a teacher when he was in 6th grade. His mother, a social worker, was president of the Wilmington Home School Community Council. His father was a mailman. There was a meeting about the school incident and they were discussing whether to fire the teacher. Father said the teacher was wrong, but also understood that his son "could make Jesus cuss."

8:15 Both parents had government jobs. They took kids on vacations but on some of these trips you could not stay everywhere. Civil Rights Act had passed. Remembered a trip to Staunton, Virginia, back through West Virginia, and stopped near Baltimore at a gas station because his sister had to use the restroom. She was not allowed to use the restroom and his father was furious. Told the owner that ESSO would hear from him. Owner didn't care. A car with Hawai'ian family pulled up and they were allowed to use the restroom. Back in Delaware, there was an NAACP meeting. His uncle, Dr. Porter, and others were there. A black representative from ESSO was there. Ten ESSO credit cards were thrown on the floor. Shortly after, the Baltimore ESSO station was closed.

10:52 Doesn't remember where he was when MLK was killed. Remembers the day or two days later when they go home about 8 or 9 pm. They lived across the street from Bayard School and the National Guard had taken it over.

Remembers the planned peaceful walk – students from P.S. DuPont, Wilmington, and Howard high schools were all planning to walk to a rally in Rodney Square.

12:30 Remembers being in the demonstration march. Was there with his then-girlfriend, now his wife. They were around 4th and Market Streets when someone threw a brick through the window of L&A Sporting Goods store. All hell broke loose. Remembers seeing people coming down the street with a rack of clothes. Had to get girlfriend home to 3d and Cleveland Avenue. Got her home and then went back to corner of 3d and Clayton.

13:24 There was a lot of liquor on the corner. "Solved all the problems of the world." Some guys left to go "burn down Little Italy." He always had an affinity for the wisdom of older people, so he stayed on the corner and listened to older brothers on the corner who said, "they'll be back and it won't be long." The guys did come back and said there were old men on the rooftops with machine guns, so nothing was going to happen in Little Italy.

14:50 Didn't remember other details of the Little Italy story.

15:50 Remembers being stopped for no reason by state police, then the National Guard. His birthday is in November so he had gotten his license that fall, age 15. Remembers being stopped. Told elders, they complained, nothing happened.

17:25 As for strategies to get rid of Gov. [Charles] Terry, they registered to vote, made complaints, were confrontational. Attended meetings. Leader was Roosevelt Franklin, who was good about letting people know by inference.

18:29 Was not there but father told him a story: Mr. Franklin was in a meeting with the mayor (John Babiarz). Mr. Franklin said Wilmington was sitting on a powder keg. The Mayor said "let her flicker."

19:15 Louis Redding and others were less confrontational. If Louis Redding were there, they knew there was potential for litigation.

19:38 Residents wrote letters to Gov. Terry.

20:00 Believes now that Gov. Terry didn't care about the African American community or the unfairness. Only cared about the business owners and the downtown community. The red-green-black wearers were targets. Not many people were involved in the riots. The original intent was peaceful.

21:00 Didn't have a curfew pass or know how to get one. Father took his license and car keys at night.

22:50 Blackie Blacks were an active, aggressive group. Was not personally active with them but played softball for them. Blackie Blacks played critical role with Hicks [William "Hicks"] Anderson and other adult leaders in finding resolutions. Helen Chambers another leader. The William Hicks Anderson Center, the Helen Chambers Park, and the West Center Day Care Center on Madison Street would not be here if not for Blackie Blacks, if not for WYEAC.

Current mayor says he wants to revitalize West Center City but this is still a fight to keep what's there for the community. William Hicks Anderson was a mentor in this work in the early 1970s. Problem: revitalization is "not for us, it's for the white folks." Aware of this now as an elected official.

24:33 Blackie Blacks were advocates for people but were aggressive and assertive. Time for pleading was over. Time to make demands. Perceived by the system, by the elders, to be out of control. Difference of the young and the old.

25:00 Street finished University [of Delaware] in May 1974. By December 1974 was involved with the Wilmington Home School Community Council and preparing for city desegregation of schools. There was strategy planning between the young and the old. Remembers meetings with screaming and yelling, with pre-planned screaming and yelling on both sides of the room.

27:00 Hicks Anderson then said, "Shut up. Mr. Redding and Leonard [Williams] can get everything we want from them now after this much hell has been raised ... Let's go." Hicks didn't plan by himself. This was indicative of young and old leadership together for a common cause.

27:45 Biggest result was the community center and day care center.

- 29:10 Other groups: WYEAC. Wilmington Youth Emergency Action Center. Not familiar with other groups. The Hill was his territory. Personal environment was limited until he started working.
- 29:20 Gov. Terry eventually lifted city curfews but wouldn't remove the National Guard. Russ Peterson campaigned on "law and order, with justice." Terry campaign was "law and order, period."
- 30:10 Wilmington residents didn't feel protected. The Wilmington mayor [John Babiarz] was pre-requisite to Philadelphia's Mayor Frank Rizzo. "Same church, different pew; same thought, same view."
- 31:30 Doesn't remember any particular community pressure on Russ Peterson about removing the National Guard. Street was in his senior year of high school. He does remember his mother discussing NAACP at home and family was "sick of the whole mess."
- 31:50 In high school [Wilmington High School], they formed an African American fraternity, Omega Psi Delta, even against the advice of their sponsor, an African American principal. Had clean-up projects to do, started a boys track team that is still running today. This is part of legacy of the 1960s. Fraternity was seen as a gang in the eyes of some people.
- 34:16 There was a riot at Wilmington High School in 1969. Came out of a difference of opinion about music for a school dance, black students wanted better music. Blacks were not allowed to have a meeting. There was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration but fighting broke out. Saw white kids and teachers getting beat, blood. County police showed up and took over lobby of building. Remembers seeing blood of people he cared about. Saw this as being the start of his career.
- 36:15 In 1974, he was executive director of the Wilmington Home School Community Council, working on desegregation. Didn't like it but wanted to make it work, especially after having seen what happened at high school. Was determined to see to it that everything he could do, he would do, to make it work. So that what happened before would not happen again.
- 37:45 Question about Martin Luther King's definition of riot [what America has not heard is economic plight of the black people]. Question about Ella Baker and what happens at the riot level. Can he reference this to the music dispute at Wilmington High School.
- 38:30 Street: philosophically, that may be correct, but still thinks the violence was wrong, rotten, absolutely uncalled for, outrageous. Some people got arrested at the high school. He didn't feel sorry for them then, or now, because what they did was wrong, beating up innocent little girls.

- 39:05 In 50 years, what would he want his granddaughter to know about her grandfather? That he was committed to fairness, equality, justice and equally committed to doing it in a non-violent fashion. Biggest fear: that 50 years from now, it may not be much different for her.
- 40:00 Afraid that progress of the 1960s and 1970s will be taken apart by the Bush, Trump courts and that all the work will have to be done all over again.
- 40:45 Has spent 44 years in education as a student advocate and now has pending litigation regarding school funding. Segregation has been and is the problem and will be for a long time.
- 41:15 Need the leadership of those who are independent, not accountable to the system: lawyers, doctors, ministers, morticians. Need their leadership to continue confrontation, litigation, demonstration.
- 41:40 Glad that this [the oral histories] is being done and glad to come to down to University of Delaware. Is a proud alumnus of UD. Came here after dad said any fool can go to college.
- 42:40 Was told that he couldn't make it at UD; that was the only reason he chose UD, to prove that he could. Having been here, all that he learned as a child carried over. Was a member of the Black Student Union.
- 43:18 BSU fought for and got: a Minority Affairs Board, a Black History Department, a Black Culture Center, a black homecoming king and queen. Proudly was on charter of first black fraternity [Omega Psi Phi, Psi Zeta Chapter]. What has been done since he left? Saw African American students on campus, but most students – black and white – are not from here [Delaware]. 70% are out-of-state students.
- 44:25 Something is wrong in higher education institutions. Our students are locked out, financially and academically. This needs to change.
- 44:50 If not for Louis Redding's work to desegregate the University, for Dick Wilson [unofficial "Dean of Black Students"] being in place, Street wouldn't have been able to come to UD. His [Wilmington City] Council seat would not have existed, the majority/minority of City Council wouldn't have existed.

Important to know the gains we have are off the backs of those who made sacrifices in the 1960s. Too many people don't understand whose shoulders they walk on and the causes that outspoken people had to endure. Street feels he is a beneficiary and feels responsibility to give back what was given to him.

Too many people who benefitted aren't giving back until they get up in the boardroom and they face discrimination, then they come running to folks like us.

- 47:15 This year, it was not happenstance that Street formed a new organization and brought forward funding litigation. Might be his last bite of the big apple. Has a responsibility to work with young people to prepare them to replace roles and functions. Young need to be willing to speak up and he wants to encourage them. This is why he supported Nnamdi [Chukwuocha], Tizzy [S. Elizabeth "Tizzy"] Lockman, and Sherry Dorsey [Dorsey Walker] in recent elections. Regression is our fault. Younger people need to clean up problems.
- 49:08 Those independent people he mentioned are important. Will be retiring after 37 years from the Hilltop Lutheran Center. Started there in 1981. Has had the latitude and freedom to be independent and speak out. Wants his granddaughter and son and family to understand ... can't be threatened ... much is required.