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Oral History Interview with Albert Johnson

Voices of Crown Heights oral histories, 2016.027.1.25

Interview conducted by Svetlana Kitto at the narrator's home on October 6, 2017 in Fort Greene, Brooklyn

KITTO: Today is October 6th, 2017. I am Svetlana Kitto from the Brooklyn Historical Society. And I'm here with Albert Johnson, one-time bartender of the Starlite Lounge, at his apartment on South Oxford Street in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. This interview is for the Voices of Crown Heights Oral History Project at the Brooklyn Historical Society. And we are going to begin. So, could you just start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

JOHNSON: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, [date redacted for privacy], 1946. And, I went to public schools there. And I graduated Glenville High School in January of 1965. My first job, getting close to being a bartender, was at a restaurant on Cleveland's west side called the Beef and Bottle Restaurant. It was a very posh, upscale place. And I was the busboy. But I always -- sometimes I would have to clean up behind the bar. And I enjoyed washing -- because that's when bartenders had to wear the white coats and the whole thing. It was amazing to watch these people behind the bar at that particular time.

KITTO: When was that?

JOHNSON: That was 1966.

KITTO: So, when you were like -- how old were you?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I was about 19.

KITTO: 19, yeah.

JOHNSON: Yeah, and I was going to be 20. Yeah, so that was my first experience that way, because it was, like, my second job out of high school. My first job out of high school was I worked for a drapery company, had no idea that later on -- working at the drapery company, installing draperies and this kind of stuff, was going to play in my life later

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on when I'm in my 50s, yes. And the same thing happened with being around the bartenders. I had no idea that that was going to happen to me when I got to my 50s.

KITTO: So, what kind of restaurant was it?

JOHNSON: It was a very upscale restaurant at that particular time. And it was steaks and, you know, it's not like the five-star restaurants that we have now. But if you were to equate the two, that's what it would have been. That's what it would have been.

KITTO: Yeah, like their version of it at that time.

JOHNSON: Yes, at that particular time. The chefs were probably well known and this kind of thing. But it was a large restaurant. I remember my first catastrophe. I spilled a tray of food on this woman's white fur coat.

KITTO: Oh, God.

JOHNSON: Yes. I was coming through the door, and the waiter was coming out the door. And, when we had the two trays we should have missed each other. But I'm a righty, and he was a lefty. And we ended up colliding. And when we did, my food -- his food went over my shoulder out onto the floor. And that's how it got all over this woman's white fur coat. She was not a happy person. She was not happy at all.

KITTO: Did you get in trouble?

JOHNSON: Well, the restaurant apologized and the whole thing. We didn't get fired because it was, it was one of those things that when the doors -- there's a brief second when those two doors, when they closed, you couldn't see who was on the other side. And so, by the time they opened up -- you know, there was those swinging doors. Well, by the time it opened up, that's when we finally saw each other. And we were literally within inches of each other, hitting each other face to face. So, the food went over one shoulder, because mine went into the kitchen. And his went out onto the floor -- actually, into the dining room. So, it was not pleasant.

KITTO: Yeah. But that's funny that it came back around, that work.

JOHNSON: Yes, it came back around. It came back around. Then I started doing—assisting parties and stuff we would have and mixing cocktails. I did a couple of them. I did not work for a catering service. But at that time when we had the little house

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parties and stuff, we had to just— martinis were the thing. Martinis, Manhattans, the old classic things was at that particular time. So, that's when I -- when I went to the Starlite, I decided -- Butch came out, and he asked me. He says, "We've got some glasses back there. Do you think you can use them?" I said, "You've got cocktail glasses back there and nobody to—?" He said, "Yeah, I've got a whole office full of them." And so we pulled them out, and I started doing it.

KITTO: Wow. It had never been done there before or just not when Butchy was there?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think it ever had been done because they were still using plastic cups. It was, it was like a shot bar. It was a shot and a, and a side. That was it. So, when we started out -- and then I started just doing the martinis. Then the apple martinis became very popular. And then there were several versions of that. Long Island iced teas, which was not the -- I mean, if you really make a Long Island iced tea, it tastes like iced tea. It should not taste like booze. Now, you get drunk.

KITTO: It's so boozy, though.

JOHNSON: People do that because it's a, it's an illusion. You want to get somebody drunk, start mixing a Long Island iced tea in front of them, just grabbing the bottles of liquor and just pouring a shot. If you pour one correctly, it's no more than a double of liquor in that glass, even though you're mixing the vodka, the gin, the rum and the rest of it, and the tequila. It's only a half a shot of each one of those. So, but— when— psychologically you're thinking that this is going to get me really drunk. I'm going, no. It's the kind of drink it is. Because the glass is narrow, and it's tall, you're thinking you're getting a whole lot of liquor in there. But actually it's no more than a double.

KITTO: So, let's go back a little bit -- I'll remember that -- to your younger life in Cleveland. What was your, what were your interests as a kid?

JOHNSON: I had a whole bunch of them. But primarily, when I was in the fourth grade, Cleveland's version of Carnegie Hall is a place called Severance Hall. Severance Hall -- and the Cleveland Orchestra was conducted by George Szell at that time. Well I, we would go there. We started in the 4th grade. They would have those concerts. And we would— the public schools were allowed to go in the early part of the fall and the latter

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part of the spring so we got the full effect of it. I walked into that auditorium, and I sat there. And I said I'm going to play on that stage one day. And I did. Later on, when I was in junior high school, my music interest piqued up. And I got— joined the band. I played in the woodwind section. I played the flute and the piccolo only because they were small and I could get away with not having to carry something really heavy. That was the— Most people who play the flute, that's the reason why they do it, so they don't have to worry about it. I actually enjoyed it. I went from -- from there, when I got to senior high school, it was a whole different thing. I became the drum major for my high school. That was weird. Most people to this day don't realize. They always say, "Where was the guy in the yellow suit?" And everybody goes -- people in the band say, "There he is sitting right there." We go back for reunions and stuff, and they still don't remember me. But that's okay.

KITTO: Why? What do you mean?

JOHNSON: Oh, it was fun. It was fun because I would lead the whole band out. And, at that time, to have a marching band -- and we had the band directors -- well, my high school, there were two brothers, the Turner brothers. And they were all music teachers. So, our rival schools as far as sports were concerned, and then our marching bands were rivals. So, it was great to have those little similarities going on. It was fun. It was absolute fun. I could get out of classes.

KITTO: So, it was playing the drum?

JOHNSON: No, no, the drum major was the guy that led the band.

KITTO: Oh, I see. Okay, sorry.

JOHNSON: He was the one that was in the front. Wait a minute. He was the one that was in the front that could walk out and start and get everything going. I blew the whistle, and people would start to move. The band couldn't go anywhere unless I started that whole calamity. And it was fun having that much power.

KITTO: Are you going to show me yourself, too? Is that your yearbook from high school?

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: Oh, wow.

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JOHNSON: I'm going to find it for you.

KITTO: Please do.

JOHNSON: There I am.

KITTO: Oh my gosh, amazing -- champion drum major. How sweet -- love that.

JOHNSON: Yep, so that was me.

KITTO: So, you were, like, getting the party started, kind of?

JOHNSON: Yeah, from the time the flag raising would come up, we'd go out, and we'd get in our formations at the end of the football field. And then, on a cue from the band director, I'd blow this whistle, and you'd hear drums starting. And people would start coming out in files and from different sides. And we'd make our way onto the football field. And then we'd march up to a certain point, and we would play our national anthem. And, after the national anthem the alma maters were being played. The other band would come out, and they would do the same thing for their side. It was a whole big production. In fact, we actually enjoyed that big production, learning how to march in file and form these patterns. The only thing was, when we formed the pattern, we weren't up high enough for people to see what we were actually doing. So, it just looked like a bunch of people just running into each other half the time. But we knew what we were doing.

KITTO: So, you were in high school in the '60s?

JOHNSON: '60s, yes.

KITTO: So, what was, like, the kind of climate at that time in Cleveland politically and socially?

JOHNSON: Okay, growing up my grandmother taught people to read so they could go vote. She was from Oklahoma. And one of the things that we were, she made sure that people in the neighborhood and stuff like that knew about politics. She wanted to be a councilperson. But she couldn't, they— She lost the election; not because she wasn't capable, but because she had children. And they figured she would be taking time away from the children in order to keep her councilman's duties up, in which we would hurt her. So, that's how we got her out. But, I remember when Rosa Parks sat at the --

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said she wasn't getting up from that seat. My grandmother counted the women who came home from work that day to make sure that everybody was home. She just stood out there on the porch. And she just was greeting. "Well, hi, how are you doing? How are you feeling?" This, that and the other. She didn't want them to know that she was really concerned, because when they had that riot in Tulsa, she was -- she saw that. And it stuck in her head. And she was always very conscious of stuff like that.

KITTO: Wow. So, she was an activist?

JOHNSON: Quietly, but she was, quietly but she was. The closest thing I could describe to you growing up, there's a movie called *Lackawanna Blues*. It's produced by HBO. When I saw that, out of all the movies that there had ever been, that was as close to something as I can relate to. I saw people dance like that. I saw women who were built that way. I saw guys who dressed that way. This was when I'm about nine years old which, at that time, would stick with me. When I see *Lackawanna Blues*, that is what I grew up in and knew about. And that woman who's the star of the show, that was what my grandmother was like. Now, my grandfather was there and the whole business. So, it was not like the movie. But the surroundings -- you know, frying chicken in the kitchen and fish on Fridays, the fish fries, and sometimes it was able -- that's how you paid your rent, you know, that kind of stuff. So it was, it was— That to me was my life.

KITTO: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about your -- like, what are some of the examples from your life that were like the movie so I can see it? Because I haven't seen the movie, so I need you to tell me.

JOHNSON: Okay. The woman who stars in this thing, my grandmother was built that way, okay? So, to me, watching that, that's the reason why I say it. There was -- the house was built like the houses I would walk into as a kid. And with the garages in the back, you came in side doors. There were wooden frames. There were porches on there. Doors were always open. You could stand in the front of the house and talk through the screen door. And you could see to the back of the house and basically all the rooms in it. But every house as a kid growing up, they were all made like that in Cleveland, you know? You had those wood-frame houses. People didn't live in apartments. There

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were apartments, and there were projects. But most of the people I knew, we lived in houses. And they were primarily two-family houses. So, a two-family house -- this is right after World War II -- would house the whole family. There would be -- the grandparents would be at the bottom. And then, if there's any children there, any married children would be upstairs or wherever it was. So, that's how every house -- so, there was the Pope house. There was the Bakers. That's how you recognized who they were, because that house contained that whole family. So, you were never without a family member. There was always somebody there. Even the two houses that were next door to me, they were little bungalows. They matched each other. But one side was the grandparents, and the other side was the daughter and her children. So, that was what Cleveland was like. And elementary school was walking distance. The one thing about it that was— talking about— politically motivated were my teachers. This is the one thing that most people find hard to understand. Most of my teachers all the way through school were Black. They— some of them had education in the South, but they couldn't teach there. Or whatever it was, they migrated north. And when they came there, those were my teachers. And they were wonderful. I remember—

KITTO: Yeah, tell me about that.

JOHNSON: When I was in the 4th grade— going back to Severance Hall— my music teacher, Ms. Fuester, was a very light-skinned woman. And we were sitting there in Severance Hall. And there were kids throwing spitballs at us. And when she saw what was about to happen, she said to us, "Look at me. You are my babies. Do not turn around. Just look at me." And they were throwing spitballs at us and the whole thing. And I couldn't understand. Why were these people throwing spitballs at me?

KITTO: Were they White kids?

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: Okay, yeah.

JOHNSON: And so, we just stayed focused in on her. And I, we were so close that I was focusing on the stage. But what she did do, when she got back to Quincy Elementary School, she called up the Board of Education, and she explained to her, "My name is

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Marietta Feuster, and I am the music teacher at Quincy Elementary School." And she complained about what happened. They had no idea they were talking to a Black woman because of her last name. And, the next time around, we got free tickets. We don't know what happened to the kids who were throwing the spitballs. But she explained to them where they were. So, since each -- in that auditorium, a school was granted a section. So, they knew approximately who was there and what they had done to us. So, it was not a very pleasant thing. Also, growing up, we— our community was a Black community. And there was church. There was the YMCA. There was all these things in there. And it's kind of difficult for people to understand what a small east-side community was like in Cleveland. You had to have lived there. There were several places on Halloween. Our Halloween was just as nice as the suburbs. We were out -- if it's on the weekend, we could be out until 11:30, 12:00 at night because the parents were up, and they knew we were out trick-or-treating. The streets were clean. The most you had to worry about was in the summertime. If it started to rain, are my windows closed on my car, or did I let the -- drop-tops were what they used to call them, the convertibles, the drop-tops, if I had gotten my top up on my car. Were cars stolen? Yeah, they were stolen. Were there gangs? Yeah, there was gangs and the whole thing. But people didn't take any crap either. I had one teacher who was attacked. And those poor kids, whoever attacked her, they were sorry they did. She kicked ass, okay, at that particular point. So, it was -- going to school, you knew what you had to do. They— The dog did not eat your homework. We do not accept that, okay?

KITTO: So, it's rigorous?

JOHNSON: It was rigorous, but you were warned. See, that was the other thing. Any kind of discipline, you were warned ahead of time. I mean, when I say you were warned, you were given examples of what not to do, in every household. I don't care what it was. And, each household, they knew that this was the rule. If you went to another household, you didn't do this. So, my mother worked. And if my grandmother or grandfather, somebody in that house was not there, they knew I was not allowed to have any kids in that house when there was no one there. And, if they did come over

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and a neighbor's child was there, they would go, "Wait a minute. Where are their parents?" You don't go over there until their parents come home. That was it. So, it was— we had rules. And if you broke them, you knew what was going to happen. So, this was not a question of brutality. You knew if you did this that this was going to happen because either an older brother or a sister or a cousin or an aunt or somebody who was experienced, they would tell you, "Don't do that. Whatever you do, don't do that."

KITTO: So, I guess what you're saying, too, is that the sense was that it was firm. But it was coming from people who cared about you.

JOHNSON: And it was fair.

KITTO: And it was fair, yeah.

JOHNSON: Yes. And it wasn't anything that didn't stop -- it carried all the way through. There were people who had -- like, they were bus drivers. If you got on the buses, I guarantee you— if it was a Black bus driver, male or female— somehow or other they knew who your parents were because they could tell where you were coming from and where you were going to. So, you didn't really just did not behave. And it wasn't, it wasn't that hard. It really wasn't that hard. Did we have fun? Hell yeah, we had a lot of fun. Did we do some stuff wrong? Mm-hmm. We would hope we didn't get caught. And sometimes it would, it would be that way. I mean, I admitted something to my mother when I was 65 years old; what I did when I was about 13. And what happened was a friend of mine, her mother died. And I could not conceive of -- think of -- a person my age who does not have a mother. She came home from -- she and her sister came home from school, and her mother had passed, had dropped dead, sitting there in the chair watching her soap operas. They became their own parents by the time they were 13. So, when she had her 16th birthday party, it was done at my mom's house. She was at work. And my friends helped me set the party up. When we partied for about an hour, hour and a half, my mom came home at 6:00. By the time she walked in the door, they didn't have a clue that there was a party had ever been in that house. They helped me clean up, the whole business.

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KITTO: Was that your biggest—?

JOHNSON: No, that was one of those I didn't get caught, okay? That was one of those.

KITTO: It's not too bad, that one.

JOHNSON: But, I mean, we took a risk. But it was one of those that, where -- like I said, you knew where your place was. Every kid that was in there, we were latchkey kids. We knew what it was like. So, it wasn't a question where we had to scream, "Get out of here!" We figured that by four o'c—

KITTO: You'd known when, you knew when they were coming home, yeah.

JOHNSON: So, between -- we got out of school around 3:20. So, about 20 minutes to 4:00 until about 5:00 we partied. There was music and everything else. That music came off at 5:00. I had friends help me clean up and get all that stuff out the way. The dinner was put on the table. They had no— My mother had no clue. She said, "You actually did that?" I went, "Yeah." I was 65 years old when I confessed it to her. And the woman who -- she came to my birthday party that night. And she told my mother what, about what it was. And she said, "He didn't tell you about that?" She said, "No, this is the first I've ever heard of it." And then when I told her, she asked me why not. She said, "I never could understand." She said, "That was a nice thing to do. It was dangerous because if I had caught you, I wouldn't have understood." She said, "But it was really a nice thing to do." And we're still friends to this day. It's kind of nice when she— I tell my grandchildren about that party when I was 16. So, growing up in Cleveland was -- it was kind of unique. Every Saturday, like I said, there were -- we had things that were ours. And there was a place called the Pla-Mor Ballroom, which you could go roller skating. On Saturday afternoon from 10:00 in the morning until 5:00, you knew where every Black kid in the world was on the east side. They were at the Pla-Mor, because you had two sections, two sessions. One started from 10:00 until 12:00. Then it was shut down. And the other one went from 2:00 to 5:00. After the skating was over at 5:00, the DJ from the Black radio station would come in, and you'd have a live broadcast from that, because we would take off our skates. We'd have on our shoes. And we'd dance and have dance contests and the whole thing. Yes, we

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didn't want to go to the white one, which was three blocks away. And, we didn't want them coming in there. In fact, they had no clue what was going on inside of the Pla-Mor Ballroom. Yes, that's what it was called. But it, it was a skating rink. And we had a wonderful time in there. But every season -- like, this would be a peak season, this time of the year. I would be getting my skates polished up, having my fox tails off tied around them and the whole thing, so I could go roller skating on a Saturday afternoon. All our chores were done and everything, so we could make sure that we could do that.

KITTO: You had siblings?

JOHNSON: Yes. From an extended famil— I mean, there was a total of five of us. My sister passed away ten years ago. And so, now I have three half-brothers. And, yeah, we get along great. Yeah, we get along great. In fact, it's kind of amazing that the parents didn't get along, and we weren't brought up around each other except for my youngest brother. And, but by the time he was -- there's 17 years' difference between our ages. So, by the time he was a teenager I was well out of -- I was in my 30s, almost 40 by the time he got a— he was around. So, we didn't really grow up together. But we have a great relationship, all of my brothers. We find certain things that we're similar with, but we don't try to crowd it. I have a different relationship when my father was alive than my other two brothers. And I have a different relationship with my mother and— compared to my youngest brother. So, it's kind of a weird situation being the oldest.

KITTO: You're the oldest?

JOHNSON: Yes. Yeah, that was it. But it w— it wasn't as bad as it sounds. It was just a unique experience. It was definitely a unique experience. Like I said, growing up in a two-family house and in a neighborhood; I guarantee you, within the next block there were cousins of the people that you knew on that block. We may have even gone to different elementary schools or junior high schools or something. But there was always a relative that we went to school with. And some of us, we looked so much alike, the teachers looked at us. And they would go, "You're part of that Polk family, aren't you?" I went, "Yes." And she said, "You're related to—" And I told her my aunt and uncle's name. And they would go, "Okay, now I know who you are." But that was a

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good thing and a bad thing because they knew where to find you. They knew where to find you so you couldn't get away with anything. But that was my earliest -- especially in elementary school. Senior high school was a little bit different. Like I said, if you looked in this book; I want you to look at the teachers so you can see what I'm saying.

KITTO: Oh, I see. So, these were all the teachers?

JOHNSON: Yes. And, like I told you, look at the number of Black people I had who were teaching me.

KITTO: What was your experience with the White teachers there?

JOHNSON: They were about the same. I mean, they were -- these teachers did one thing. And I finally got the foundation of what they were doing. They wanted to make sure that you had a foundation where you would never, ever feel less than. I am equal to, if not more than. That was the whole thing. So, we had a -- and if you look through there, you will see the activities from marching band to French clubs to chess clubs. There were Latin clubs. There's a -- that was my -- the officers of my, of my class.

KITTO: It's so formal.

JOHNSON: Yes. That was the other thing. We were -- like I said, there were rules. There were rules as far as—

KITTO: Everyone's so dressed up.

JOHNSON: That was the rules. That was part of it, you— Now, those were our class pictures. Class pictures are one thing. But when you saw us in our regular things, we— there were things that we just weren't allowed to do. And we knew it, so it was never a big question where you had to -- what do you call it? -- stand out.

KITTO: Where are you? I don't see you.

JOHNSON: Well, a lot of people aren't in this, in this. So, that was -- the pictures I showed you from the marching band were the only ones that was there. Because there's a lot of people in this class. I think there's at least half of those people are missing. And, they didn't take the pictures with it. You can find them in other places. But I want to show you the activities. When you see the—

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KITTO: So, the experience of most of these students, including you, would be that their entire school experience, they've been with other Black students.

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: And that there weren't White students there.

JOHNSON: We had— There were some in my class.

KITTO: There were some, yeah.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yeah. But there were things in there that we did that was comparable to other schools, suburban schools. We had a, a chorus; the Glenville High School Chorus, that actually sang on the Ed Sullivan show in 1966, I think it was, the spring of 1966. And William Appling was a concert pianist who taught the choral portions, the music part of school. And, Mr. Turner was the one who had the instrumental part of school. I wanted to sing in the chorus. I had absolutely no voice whatsoever. I could speak well but didn't have a voice to sing with. But I was— always felt good when I was part of the woodwind ensembles that had to accompany the chorus. My high school chorus sang in foreign languages. We used to blow people's minds, and a cappella. Mr. Appling taught these kids how to sing in foreign languages in a cappella. And there was— you couldn't— it's amazing to have heard what we sounded like at that particular time. And it was a pride to be in that, in that group. And it's not only Glenville had one. East Tech -- there was, let's see, East Tech, Glenville. There was Collinwood, John Adams. There were all these high schools. And they took pride in themselves. That's part of the extracurricular activity. And, when I left Glenville, when I graduated from there, two years later they did a performance of *The King and I*. And they actually had a costume made exactly like the one Deborah Kerr wore in the movie. The mothers got together, and they made the costumes for the kids to wear in *The King and I*. They had a red carpet set up that night when the opening came around. I didn't realize it, but later on -- and you can go on YouTube -- Martin Luther King did his "I Have a Dream" speech at my high school, yes. Everybody thinks that when you hear it on -- when he was -- no, he had done that speech several times. So, if you go on YouTube, and you look up Glenville High School and the Martin Luther King speech,

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you will hear him actually give that speech at my high school. I had been out of school by three years by that time. But, just the idea that that's where I came from—

KITTO: Yeah. Did you say your mom worked for a newspaper?

JOHNSON: Yes. She worked for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. She retired there.

KITTO: What did she do?

JOHNSON: She actually started out working when she was about 14. And she worked for Dr. V.O. Beck. She was like his assistant and everything else. She started off answering phones. She graduated from John Hay High School, which was a business school. So, she managed the books and everything else. And she stayed with him until, literally, until he died. And so, she was with him for 26 years. She said she always thinks— thanks LBJ because there was a training program. And, she got— she went into this training program, and she got her job at the Plain Dealer. And she stayed there at the Plain Dealer until she retired in 1993, I think, is when she retired from there. So, that's how she worked for -- that's her experience is there. My dad worked for Ford for about maybe 40 years or more until he retired. Yeah, it was kind of weird.

KITTO: Yeah, so stable.

JOHNSON: Yeah, it was kind of stable. But it was a lot of fun. When the building that my mother worked in housed a whole new set of people that I would come in contact with as a kid, and two of them were the Stokes brothers. They— Their office was down the hall on the second floor at 55th and Woodland, that office building. And they were on the second floor. My mom's -- Dr. Beck's office was on the second floor. So, sometimes when I'd have to go meet her after work and stuff, I would go down there. And if she had to -- wasn't there, I could go down to their office because I like the secretaries down there. And they knew I was coming. And I could sit there and wait. The reason why I liked Louis Stokes, because he and Dr. Beck both smoked cigars. And they had the loudest laugh you ever want to hear in your life. So, I saw -- once again I saw Black people in charge. I didn't know sometimes -- like I say, I go down there. And I'm, like, seven, eight years old. And I didn't know fully, exactly what was happening. But I just saw these people. There was an insurance company. There were bails bonds. They

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were the Richie family. They were the dentist. Dr. Beck was a general practitioner, more or less. So, there was other doctors that were there in the building. And it was amazing that on that floor, all of that stuff there -- and at the Christmas parties we would go down there. Like I said, I was a little kid between the ages of about six and maybe ten. Because after that, these people became very, very busy. And I didn't go in and sit in their offices like I used to as a little kid because I didn't have to. But that's what I'm saying I grew up seeing, not grasping all of what it was until later on. When you -- my greatest memory of seeing Louis Stokes was the day when Barack Obama was inaugurated. And there was a look on that man's face. I can't believe we finally did it. He didn't say anything. They caught the picture of him going in a door. And, in that picture there was this actual -- when you see it on -- when I saw it on television, I saw that look. And that was a look of amazement that everybody had. So, politically I've seen things that have frightened me and frightened other people; riots, shootings. I was almost shot by police in this building. I had got off from work, and I stopped— I was going to stop at the Chinese restaurant on the corner. I said no, let me go upstairs. I came upstairs, and then I realized I don't have anything in my refrigerator. So let me go back to the Chinese store. I'm coming down the stairs. You know the entrance you came in? I had my garbage in one hand because I'm going to put it in the garbage can right by those stairs. My hand was in my pocket. I looked up, and there were five police cars pulled up, about three or four of them, and then later on, other ones. And they had guns drawn on me. I'm standing there, and I almost pissed in my pants because I had my hands in my pocket, and I had something in my hand. And my neighbor -- she moved away -- she got out of the car and she started screaming, "Don't shoot him. Don't shoot him. Don't shoot him. The man lives there. I know who he is." And in that brief period of time, I was frozen. And I just said, "Can I put the garbage down? What do you want me to do?" That was absolute hell for those five minutes. And what had happened was somebody had gotten robbed in the subway station, the train that I just got off from. And to show you how frightening life can be.

KITTO: When was that?

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JOHNSON: This was 1986 or '87 when that happened.

KITTO: You said seeing riots. What were you talking about?

JOHNSON: Yeah, the Glenville riots --

KITTO: Oh, okay. Can you tell me about that?

JOHNSON: -- and, and the Hough riots.

KITTO: I don't know that.

JOHNSON: Okay. The Hough riots started out. I think that was the first one, 1966. There was a bar on the corner of 79th and Hough. Hough was a -- that bar was White-owned. And somebody wanted to use the phone or something inside of the bar. There was a confrontation and a fight of some sort. And then the thing escalated. And before you realized, within a matter of hours a full riot had exploded. Well, the night that that -- when this thing was all taking place, I was in the movie house, the Alhambra Theater, watching *The Night of the Living Dead*. By the time I got out, I saw tanks coming down the street, Euclid Avenue, trying to stop the riots. And, I mean, that was weird, seeing tanks coming down the street. I made it. We got quarantined. I had to stay at a friend's house. I couldn't get through the barriers the next day because I didn't have my ID on me. But I did find a way to go through some back streets. And, and I made it home. Then the next one was the Glenville Riots. That happened two years later, about a year and a half, yeah about a year and a half later. A friend of mine I went to high school with got killed. They don't know who exactly shot him. But he was bringing milk home from— for his baby and got killed. And he was a twin. I saw the twin at Riverside Church about 20 years ago. We were standing next to each other. But that was, that was -- yeah, I've seen enough violence as far as that's concerned.

KITTO: What ignited the Glenville riots?

JOHNSON: I've forgotten. Some of it, I knew it primarily escalated in the fact that there were promises made. That's one of those things. If I were you, go on to YouTube because— I'm trying to think of wh— There was a lot of stuff that, that started out. There was a battle between police and a suspect. And, in this battle between the two of them, it gets kind of fuzzy. But I do know that that happened because there was police

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involved. And that escalated. That was another case of being quarantined. You couldn't go certain places. And my sister, who's -- the same people that we're trying to protect is the National Guard -- was attacked by one of those National Guards and tried to kill her, because she was going to the store. She was, at that time, I think about 13 or 14 years old. And she was going to the store. And this guy reached out and grabbed her and pulled her into a narrow stairway. And, the kids down the street started screaming. The, the guardsman, he grabbed a woman and pulled her into the hallway. And the whole block came up to get her out of there. It was a mess. It was a mess.

KITTO: How did your parents, like, talk about politics in your house or talk about race?

JOHNSON: It wasn't really discussed so much because even when -- how can I put this? You did not participate in grown-up conversations. You had your own. When grownups talked, you went other places. Even when we were in elementary school, I remember one teacher. You should have seen what those text— those racist textbooks looked like at that particular time.

KITTO: Oh, God.

JOHNSON: When we got to -- one teacher had had enough. I mean, it got to this point about slavery. And, we opened up the book. And in the book was this— You know, they used to have these watercolor-like paintings of, of— in textbooks?

KITTO: Yeah, of, like, war scenes and stuff like that?

JOHNSON: No, these were watercolor. But this was depicting— what the picture depicted was this: You had a plantation. You had White people sitting on the porch. There was kids in the front playing. And in the back you saw a coach coming up the driveway with a Black person on the front guiding the coach. And I remember when we got to it, she had had enough. She had had enough. She said, "Listen, close this book up. The Board of Education says that I have to teach you this, and so I will. But this is not the truth. I can't tell you what the truth is, so I can tell you this. Go to the library. They can tell you. Go home and ask your grandparents. They can really tell you. But I can't." So, it was a question of where you were taught to go and investigate. Find out what this really is.

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KITTO: What did she mean she couldn't tell you?

JOHNSON: In other words—

KITTO: Like, she wasn't allowed to?

JOHNSON: Mm-hmm.

KITTO: Like, she would get in trouble?

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: By who? Like, someone would complain?

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: Like a student?

JOHNSON: If somebody were to have complained or overheard her, or— we could have been in the hallway and, "Oh, she taught us this, that and the other." And if somebody overheard her -- I don't think they would have because, like I said, what you saw, the numbers of people who taught me in senior high school was even the same in my junior high school and my elementary school. Teaching was a profession that was very, very looked upon -- it was great.

KITTO: Respected?

JOHNSON: Respected, highly respected. They would give us information. But they would tell us -- I don't know where they got this from, but she just literally had had enough that day. She said, "I can't tell you." She said, "This is not true." She said, "I cannot teach you this, but I can tell you what you can do. Go to the library. There are books." Now, in the 1950s there weren't that many books. But there at least were some. She said, "But go home, and you ask your grandparents." That's where you got the education from. And you went home and you asked. There were people in the chur—

KITTO: So, did you ask your grandparents?

JOHNSON: Yes. Now, I have -- my grandparents came from two different parts of the world or two different parts of the United States. My grandfather was from Georgia. My grandmother was from Oklahoma. So now, these two met in Ohio. And meeting in Ohio, they came with a certain thing that was instilled in them, and they knew about it. My grandmother had a 10th grade education. My grandfather had a 3rd grade

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education. But, the two of them shared things. She taught him how to perfect his reading. And his one thing that it was, was his handwriting. My grandfather did not want to sign his name with an X. He did not want to not be able to read his handwriting and not have anybody else not be able to read his handwriting. So, she taught him how to read and to write. She was -- like I said, she had a 10th grade education at that time. So, that meant she was almost like a college student. So, when he opened up his own business, she was his bookkeeper. And her books, when she would take it down to the lawyer or accountant, he would marvel on how neat and everything it was. So, we came up with a whole different thing about taking pride in what you do and how you present yourself to it. Did we have—? Now, my grandparents were my protectorates. When White folks would come to the house, and if they did not act right, they'd tell us, "Don't argue with them. Come get me." They didn't care who it -- police or otherwise, you come get me. And that's how that whole situation worked. There were other things that was on there. But some of it, I didn't really get the actual effect of until I was an adult. And that was a shocker to me, especially once I got to New York. I knew there were certain things I just did not do. And the only reason why I didn't make a big issue out of it, because I really didn't care. When I say "didn't care," I know you had that look on your face.

KITTO: Well, I don't even -- didn't care about what?

JOHNSON: Okay. There were two -- remember I told you about -- there were two skating rinks. One was a white one. One was a black one. I had fun at the black one, all right? My friends were there. It was neat. It was clean. It was everything else. The music was absolutely great. The fact that we had a, a bandstand afterwards, my neighborhood was clean. It was great as far as I was concerned. Were we poor? Yeah, but we weren't dirty. We had pride about ourselves. There were— People worked in factories and this kind of stuff. There were women on there that did day work. But it was not frowned upon because we— they were making a living to bring these children up. There were— And so, when I'm thinking, like I said, my teachers taught us that we are as good -- we are your equal. So, when there were, were things that we learned.

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People asked me, "Where did you learn that from?" I said in high school. Didn't they teach you that? Some said yes, and some said no. So, I was really shocked at the fact that I thought that I couldn't do certain things because I'm feeling I don't know enough. And then I found these people didn't know as much. They knew less than I did. I'm going, whoa, thank you. I pat that teacher on the back. Sciences were great for me. Math was great for me. Was I proficient in it? No, but when I became an adult, and I had to actually use it, that became a whole other issue. So, that training, my foundation was absolutely wonderful. Now, I was not part of the church group. I went to a church. Primarily I went to church to do one thing, so I could go to the movies on Sunday afternoon. That was the criteria as far as my grandparents were concerned.

KITTO: You go to church. Then you go to the movies?

JOHNSON: Yes. That was the only way you could go to the movies was that you had to go to church. So, I found a church that did not stay there all day long. And right on the corner was a place called St. Philip's Lutheran Church. And I would go there because in 45 minutes I was done. I could be the first one in line to go to the movies.

KITTO: It's so boring, right?

JOHNSON: No, it wasn't boring. Like I said, it was 45 minutes. I could be bored for 45 minutes knowing that the outcome was that by 12:30, quarter to— quarter to 1:00, I was finished. These— My friends and stuff, they didn't get out of church until, like, 2:30, 3:00 in the afternoon. Then they had to go back again. I went, mm-mm, no, no. Religion was one thing, but faith was a whole different thing. The faith in my family was very great as opposed to being religiously bound. My grandparents -- my grandfather knew the bible inside and out. And, we weren't -- you could read it if you wanted to, but it wasn't really necessary. We could discuss the bible and what we did and did not like about it. We're kind of -- they were very open. Considering the fact -- when I was born, I had young grandparents. My grandmother was 38 when I was born, and my grandfather was 43. So, I had really young grandparents. And then, my aunts and uncles were only a couple of years older than me. So, I was like their youngest brother to them. And, there was stuff in there. They had their own reasons why. And, a

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lot of it came from the fact that they -- and they were growing up, how the preacher could come to the house and have the best of the meal and other little shady deals. So, they weren't too hip on going to church. But, my grandparents met when my grandmother was going into a church and he was coming home from work. That was how they met. Hold on one second.

KITTO: Sure.

[Interview interrupted.]

JOHNSON: These are the people I'm talking about.

KITTO: Oh my gosh.

JOHNSON: Be very careful because they might fall out [inaudible] the back. So, what you see here, that's my grandmother.

KITTO: She's so beautiful.

JOHNSON: That's my aunt. That's my mother. That's my aunt. And that's my grandfather.

KITTO: Very attractive people.

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: Your grandfather is really handsome.

JOHNSON: Yes.

KITTO: Were they really close in age?

JOHNSON: They were about three years apart.

KITTO: How very distinguished.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, this is what I'm saying. When it comes down to relating to people, now that you have a visualization of— when I say I had young grandparents—

KITTO: Yeah, very young.

JOHNSON: Yes. We were the first ones on the block to have a television.

KITTO: Oh yeah?

JOHNSON: Yes. I remember when Sears delivered that Silvertone television to the house, it was 1950 because my sister wasn't born yet. She was born in 1951. And it came, and it was this beautiful mahogany wood and the whole thing. It had these giant doors on it with a 10-inch screen that was kind of oval-shaped -- weird-looking television. All

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these buttons and knobs and stuff was on it. And, I remember the first time we were able to sit around and watch television. We had to sit in, like, the back of the room. There was -- some light was on and some light was off, because we didn't— they didn't want the kids to go blind watching TV. So, it was kind of weird when we were the first ones. But, I remember when I was able to invite my friends over to watch television. And we were sitting there watching television. And out of all things, we were watching "The Three Stooges." My grandfather came in and saw them hitting each other. He turned the television off, and he stood in front of the TV. He says, "Listen, that is entertainment. I don't understand it, why you want to get entertained by somebody hitting each other with hammers and stuff. But don't you do it because if I catch any of you threatening somebody with a hammer I'll use it on you." So, basically that was not real.

KITTO: What was your grandfather's business, that your [inaudible]?

JOHNSON: He had -- okay, he had a trucking company. And the trucking company was this. They were, I don't know what you call it, refuge [*sic*]. He was hauling refuge away. But that was a, that was a big deal back, taking some things. They weren't recycled. But they would take, like, fenders and stuff from wrecking places. And they would deliver them to scrap metal. And they would take the scrap metal and make it into regular steel and that kind of stuff. There was a lot of people had that job; where he wasn't doing towing. In fact, his rival, in a sense, was -- his garage was, like, on the next -- you could look out our back porch into that man's garage. And the two of them never had a conflict. He had his customers and the whole business. So, that was his thing. And, he wasn't trying to make a fortune. He just didn't want to go to work. And he said, "I don't want to go work for another White man." So, he had his own business. And a lot of people had their own businesses because of that one reason. Now, they didn't frown upon the ones who did have a factory job, as long as you had a job. Okay? That was the whole thing. That was the whole thing. He never worked -- he said, "If you can't do all that's necessary in eight hours, something is wrong." And, my grandmother would get up in the morning. She'd cook breakfast, clean up the kitchen.

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The kids were off in school. And that included— by the time I was born, I was part of that group, too. And she could have those dishes washed up. And, by 9:00 in the morning, business was open. She was right there by the phone. The drivers would come in. She'd have routes for them to go out to. She'd have a breakfast for them. She'd say, "Well, listen, nobody's called. They didn't call last night. So, you just have to sit here and wait." She'd have coffee for them, and they would sit there. And then, by the time that phone would start to ring, she would have things to send them out to where they had to go. So, he had two other employees and with his, with his two trucks. So, yeah, he— the small business had it today. But, you've got to remember, those were the 1950s, and it was totally different. But, by the time 4:30 rolled around, that business was done. My grandmother had dinner ready. We were sitting down, because as I said my mom worked. And, by the time -- we were fed and the whole thing. So, it was, it wasn't -- I wouldn't say it was a life of Riley because it wasn't. It was a lot of hard work. But it was organized work. I've had people say, "Well, you don't know what it was like in the South." And I say no, I don't. My grandfather, when he left, he didn't take us down there. He said that's -- they say you never forget where you come from. He said, "I don't. That's why I never go back." Now, as far as -- we had our garden. We raised vegetables and stuff in the garden and flowers and this kind of stuff.

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