



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Delvin Jalon Reed

Interviewer: *Nora Malone*

Narrator: *Delvin Jalon Reed*

Location of Interview:

Alexandria City High School, Blackbox Theater, 3330 King St, Alexandria, VA 22302

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Transcriber: *Kerry James Reed*

Summary:

Delvin Jalon Reed reflects on his experiences while on the Alexandria City Remembrance Programs pilgrimage to Mobile, Alabama, to honor Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas

Notes:

This interview was conducted by a student from Alexandria City High School, Nora Malone. This interview was part of Student Experience Week in the Spring of 2023, where a select group of students served as interns for the Office of Historic Alexandria for 2 weeks. Students from Alexandria City High School were trained in oral history practices and then conducted their own interviews. This is one interview from this project.

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General	A.C.R.P Pilgrimage
People	Delvin Jalon Reed
Places	City of Alexandria; Mobile, Alabama

Nora Malone: [00:00:03] Okay. Can you tell me your name, age, the date, and the location?
[00:00:07][3.6]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:00:08] Well, my name is Delvin Jalonn Reed. I'm 18 years old. Today's date is Monday, May 22nd, 2023, and the Alexandria City High School Black box. [00:00:21][13.1]

Nora Malone: [00:00:22] Awesome. And I am Nora malone. I'm 18 years old. It is May 22nd, 2023, and I'm at the Alexandra City High School Blackbox Theater. So, let's start. What did you think about before going into the pilgrimage? [00:00:34][11.6]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:00:36] Honestly, being from Alabama, I was just thinking about what am I going to learn? What am I going to learn that I haven't learned? How can I have a deeper relationship with a place that I call home and where all my family is? [00:00:47][11.6]

Nora Malone: [00:00:48] Yeah. And explain to me why you chose to attend the pilgrimage.
[00:00:52][3.1]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:00:54] Well, I saw it, I was like, I feel like out of everyone on this trip, I will definitely be the person to have the most different experience, because I already had that connection and that relationship, and they've already fed me the propaganda that they teach you in the education system down there for all of the two years. And I'm glad I got there because they don't teach you, or at least my parents did, went out the way, and they were like, "this is a lie. Here's what you do," you know. But with the teachers there, they let you believe things. I remember a teacher try to tell me Robert Lee was trying to fight for the North, but he was like, "Oh, no, Virginia is my state, so I'm going to fight for the South," when obviously he just fought for that for the South because he he wanted to keep slavery. So, they try and make these Confederate soldiers, these traitors, look like heroes. But when really, they're just traitors. [00:01:42][48.6]

Nora Malone: [00:01:43] Hmm. And how do you feel, like, that you being from Alabama affected your experience on the trip versus your peers? [00:01:49][5.6]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:01:50] It was, like, it was a lot of ways. But I thought this was, and how does this make sense? I remember walking through the lynching museum, and then I found my home town square, and it was the longest, it had the most names on every square that I've seen in there. And that really hurt me. I really broke down after that. And so, it was kind of like reconciling with how can a place with such a gruesome history make somebody like me? [00:02:15][25.1]

Nora Malone: [00:02:17] Yeah. So in your opinion, what's missing or incorrect in the mainstream, like, historical narrative in Alexandria? And you can talk about Alabama as well. [00:02:24][6.8]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:02:29] The myth of a happy slave and that all slaves were ignorant. We were not ignorant. We just had to, we couldn't exactly express it because if we did, then they would kill us. And so we had to make it seem like we're one way. And then behind their backs, we were having these intelligent conversations because black people at the time, how we're doing petitions to try and get their freedom, they were advocating. There were so many rebellions and so many group efforts. And while there was also the small, like, singular ones, there was educated black people all

throughout history. And black people have always been educated. And the fact that they want to seem like we didn't get educated until after we became free, it's really appalling. [00:03:15][46.1]

Nora Malone: [00:03:17] And did the pilgrimage alter any of your relationships with your peers? [00:03:20][3.0]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:03:21] I'd say a lot of my peers I've definitely gotten closer to or, like, because before I would probably only talk about surface level things with them, like how your siblings and whatnot. But now I can go, I feel like, Oh, this is someone who wouldn't dare. We had this conversation before and maybe we can have deeper conversations now and I can like talk to them about stuff other than how you're siblings that can be like. So, what do you think of the current position that, what do we think about black people's current standing in society and how can we help to improve that? [00:03:54][33.1]

Nora Malone: [00:03:57] So, what was an exhibit in these museums that stuck out to you, like, the most? [00:04:02][5.3]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:04:05] I've said this on many occasions, and I really do believe it was, like, the transition inside the National Peace Museum, the big museum where you can film and stuff. And so you walk in and then it's like you're going through and there's the water exhibit with all the waves and the beach and all the stone heads and then all the documentaries. But then it really settled in, and I really just had to sit down and take it. I almost missed the bus pack because of this. And it was like, look at all these inspirational black figures on this big golden wall, which is all around the room, on the roof, on the walls. It's just amazing. And then you walk into the next room and you see modern examples of influential black figures and showing that we're still going, we're still coming strong. And all this modern art that we're making from this tragedy and suffering that we faced. [00:04:56][50.4]

Nora Malone: [00:04:58] And as someone who was recording a documentary about this pilgrimage, how do you feel like that kind of altered your experience of the pilgrimage? [00:05:04][6.0]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:05:05] It made me, like, improve my relationship with people in general. I really had to, like, when you see all the the footage of all these people's thoughts and you're coming in, you're editing together, then you stop and you take a moment to realize, like, because like as a part of a coping mechanism, you kind of disassociate yourself and you're like, "Oh, they're not going through what I'm going through." Or, "Oh, you just don't think about how other people are feeling," but then you're forced to listen and take in and feel what people are feeling and what they're saying. And it's kind of like, "dang, these people are people too." And I feel their emotions also. And so you have this stacked on top of your own emotions. There's a whole lot of pressure. And so although if you could disassociate, you could really, like, the project could have been done faster. But, also if you disassociate, you wouldn't have gotten as good of a result. But if you do take your time to invest yourself, you come up with a great project, but you also have to take on the weight of other people's emotions other than your own. [00:06:17][71.7]

Nora Malone: [00:06:19] And so, did you attend A.C.R.P events around the pilgrimage, not just those? [00:06:23][4.2]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:06:24] Yeah. [00:06:24][0.0]

Nora Malone: [00:06:25] Can you talk about those? [00:06:25][0.5]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:06:26] You know, after A.C.R.P, I've actually become a lot more involved in the community. I've been going out to different events and just seeing people and it's like after seeing, meeting these people on this trip is like, I'll be like, "Hey, Laura," or "Hey, Paul," from the trip. And it's like, before, I had never, like, really ventured into community events. I never really wanted to be involved that much. And so after, and seeing so much, I just keep making a point to go out and get involved and just see how our community doing and ways that we can do better because there are still issues here and we can't just focus on making large scale issues in our state or our nation. But we have to start off by making these small changes in our little cities and then we can move on to our state and then we can move on into our country and maybe even the world. [00:07:13][47.4]

Nora Malone: [00:07:15] And how do you feel like you as a student connected with the adults on the trip? Because I know it was kind of like it was two separate trips in a way. But, do you still feel like you made that connection? [00:07:22][7.3]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:07:23] Yes, definitely. It's throughout media, and throughout your life too, you don't realize that teachers are people too, you know. It's like we glorify our teachers and put them on a pedestal and make them seem like heroes that have nothing wrong and don't experience emotions and all this. But then being on this trip and you see it and you seeing your teachers crying and breaking down also, you just start to realize, these are people too. And that before they're teachers, they're first and foremost people and that it's okay to have a conversation with them that isn't related to school where it's okay to be like, "Hey, how you doing," and whatnot. Because these are real people. They're like your parents, but they didn't give birth to you. They're like your parents, but they didn't give birth to you, but they take care of you through the day. They teach you things. They help you get informed on the world. Not all teachers are good teachers. And we have to, need to be cognizant of that. But also, not all teachers are bad people. But the thing is to remember is that these teachers are people. [00:08:22][59.0]

Nora Malone: [00:08:24] And can you talk about any strong emotions you felt while on the trip? [00:08:28][3.9]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:08:31] I'd have to say while on the trip I felt a great sense of pride in my people because my people suffered through all this and they're still here. They didn't run away. They didn't die out. They're still here. They're still living. They're still fighting. They're still thriving. We're the pillars of this country. And we're going to continue to lift it up. We're going to lift it up, and eventually we're going to take it back for ourselves. [00:08:54][23.8]

Nora Malone: [00:08:57] So, I know that your history in Alexandria is a little different. Can you describe, like, your history in Alexandria, how long you've been here? [00:09:03][5.6]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:09:05] It was an adjustment, that's for sure. It was like, I wasn't that used to seeing that many white people around, actually. The only white person we had was this guy down the block. We called him 'milk man,' Mr. Murphy. And so I had to learn to adjust in that space. But

then there was also like, the way I act, it was different. And so, in fact, back in the fourth grade, a teacher requested that they put me on, like sedate me, so I could mellow out, or like, be like normal in their standards. And so it was kind of, it was, like, a rough adjustment to get used to. I didn't understand why I didn't fit in and why I wasn't like everybody else and why they don't want to talk to me. And then it kind of manifested into some bad habits and becoming like overall a strange person. And then I had to like over the years, like, undo that. Like undo, I guess you can call it trauma, and like, build myself up and then learn what it means to be myself. But I don't think I would have had to go through that. I don't think I would be as great as a person if I didn't have to go through what I went through. So moving here, I do think was a good thing. I like it up here. It's given me so many opportunities that I probably would not have had if I had stayed in Alabama and gone to Calhoun or George Washington Carver, one of those schools. [00:10:24][78.1]

Nora Malone: [00:10:25] How old were you when you moved? [00:10:25][0.8]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:10:27] It was like, I moved here at seven, but we were constantly switching between. And then we just kind of stuck here. [00:10:35][8.3]

Nora Malone: [00:10:39] What, like, difference do you see in the way that Alexandria versus where you lived in Alabama acknowledge their African-American history? [00:10:44][5.4]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:10:46] Honestly, the thing is, in Alabama, you're not going to hear about the African-American history in your schools or through like walkways. I mean, now you are because they've been making changes recently. But mainly it's just very, they don't talk about their past. Alexandria really like parades its history, of course, it's also a tourist spot. So, they're trying to get people to learn about what it means to be here. So, it's just, in Alabama, you come in, you're going to get looked at as an outsider. They're not gonna really tell you much about the African-American history. If you live there and you're learning about, you're only going to hear about the African-American history from your grandparents or the old people who will talk about it. I remember my grandma would talk about how her dad had gotten fired for her job because he was making too much money from his job, because you're making too much money. And so, it's like you're going to hear about it from the elders, but from here you'll hear about it in your school system. They have an African American studies course. We didn't have that. We don't have that in Alabama. It's still not there. And there's so much culture down here. And so I'm just saying the difference is that you don't really learn about it in Alabama. You learn about it. You don't learn about it from schools, but you learn about it from realistic accounts in Alabama. From up here, you learn about it from schools. And maybe occasionally you'll hear the realistic account, because this place, this is where Franklin Armfield was and all this other like traumatic history was also. [00:12:11][84.2]

Nora Malone: [00:12:12] In your opinion, how can, like, the residents of Alexandria and the government continue to honor Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas? [00:12:18][5.3]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:12:18] I think we just need to, well, I know that we should keep retelling their story. We need to make sure that people know what happened, the kind of suffering that they went through so that we can make sure that it's not forgotten because the moment they're forgotten and then what they then what they went through is meaningless. And we just got to keep that spirit alive, really. [00:12:42][23.6]

Nora Malone: [00:12:43] And how do you feel like your documentary reflects, like, continuing that legacy? [00:12:47][3.5]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:12:48] It's showing that people are hearing their stories and then they're going and they're learning more and they're using that information and it's changing them as people. And they're going to keep passing down that story and keep passing it down. And the stories are going to live through and people are going to learn where we began. Because before you can move forward, you must know where you began. [00:13:06][18.0]

Nora Malone: [00:13:08] And what was a challenging moment for you on the pilgrimage? [00:13:10][2.3]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:13:12] Definitely, it was, definitely kind of like, trying to like, still be positive because when you hear about so much suffering and trauma, it becomes real easy to become a cynic and be like, 'Oh, well, it's still going on today and things aren't getting better. What do we have going on?' And like, what's the point of trying? But then you had to find like, well, you have to find the joy. You also have to find the inspiration and the pride and you gotta find all the other emotion, because there's more to life than negativity. And so finding that joy and becoming, and being able to stay optimistic. That's what the most challenging part of this trip was. [00:14:06][54.1]

Nora Malone: [00:14:07] And kind of going off that, like, do you have like a favorite moment from the pilgrimage? [00:14:10][2.8]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:14:11] Oh, I think honestly, my favorite moment was after. It was a moment that was very, like, strange. But what ensued afterwards was like, that was like heart warming for me because we were all inside of a dinner. And then they had made us pick cotton and all these other things, which isn't, like, that's not a good thing to have students doing. And they made us engage in prayers, even though not everyone is of a Christian belief. And so but then the conversations and how people were addressing this, instead of like yelling at somebody or arguing, the conversation of how they were addressing this and like, this is how things are here. But also they should've taken into consideration this was like the debates. It was like we as a people are advancing because before or if this was happening with some other people I know or people hadn't like, I don't know, grown up in a certain way, there would have been a whole argument going on and probably a fight or something, and it would've just caused a whole bunch of problems and it would've, well, I would have to say it would have set us back instead of moving us forward, as we should be going. [00:15:17][65.5]

Nora Malone: [00:15:20] So are there any important, like, individuals in your life that have helped to shape your understanding of, like, racism and oppression? [00:15:26][6.0]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:15:31] It's more of like, is there anyone who hasn't? Because throughout my life, everyone I know has been impacted and passed on this information to me, whether it be to not do this because this will happen, or do this, or pay attention to here. And this has been shaping the way that I move around in life. Like I guess I can say I move different because of the way that I've been brought up by my grandma. She's taught me to, like, find the joy in things and she's just made me an overall, not to get religious, but like a really big believer in Christ and that he

has a plan going on for us. And then there's also my uncle who's telling me to watch out for myself, because not everyone is going to be your friend. And that's the same thing my mom would tell me, not everyone is going to be your friend. And also, just like in general, my auntie, my grandma again, and like all my family, just teach me, be a good person and treat others how you want to be treated. Because if you just go in and you treat anyone, any type of way, then they're going to treat you any type of way. But if you give them respect, they will give you back. And if they don't give you respect, then by all means, don't give them back the respect. They have to earn that from you.

[00:16:42][71.0]

Nora Malone: [00:16:44] What changes do you want to see in the city of Alexandria when it comes to, like, institutionalized racism in the city or the school? [00:16:50][6.7]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:16:55] I think, at least in the school, we should start in the school because most of these people will end up either moving out and making changes somewhere else or like staying here and making changes. And if we start off by like, I guess cause I think like, at least for me, when the most people that we advertise in our school and show off to our main student body is people who are like AP students and, like, the top of the class, they're not, like, very relatable in some senses. And so I'm thinking instead of that, we have some people who, like, because we usually highlight either those people who are struggling and so we can lift them up or take the people who are shining and use them as a beacon of inspiration. But what about the people who are in the middle? We don't really see what's going on with them. And so I'm thinking if we take, not an average person, but a person who doesn't like really take APs and just takes like honors and whatnot, and they're just really going about their life the way that they think they should. And this is a genuinely good person and we like so have them. We like really highlight these people as well as these outstanding students. Then it will start to, people might actually start to get their message. Because they'll be like, 'Oh, that person's like me. Maybe I can do this to make a change in my life because he started off in worse situation.' That's why people look up the people to all these different rappers or football players that made it out from the bottom because they started at the bottom. And so people at the bottom look to go to the top. And so when you see someone who is also at the bottom like you and how they can go up and they're making all this money and they're able to do all this for their community, you're going to want to be like them. But then what if you're an average person and you don't see an average person go up, you just want to remain average. But if you're an average person and you see someone and you see them uplifted and doing all these things and just being a genuinely good person, you're going to want to be like them because they're an average person. [00:18:44][109.3]

Nora Malone: [00:18:47] In your opinion, what should the A.C.R.P's next steps be? [00:18:50][2.9]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:18:51] Definitely I think, well, our school has a B.S.U and I think if the A.C.R.P partners with our B.S.U, which also has recently started to partner with the NAACP, then we can make it instead of a school club, it can be more of an organization that can keep moving forward, pushing the black agenda, I guess you could say, and like uplifting black people and other people of color in general. And just like, helping us educate people or helping us get community involvement with issues that are black issues, especially from the black community. So, we can see more of them coming together and, like, coming together as a group to really uplift ourselves.

[00:19:34][43.3]

Nora Malone: [00:19:36] What did you learn from the pilgrimage? [00:19:38][1.4]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:19:40] Actually, I didn't, I'm going to be completely honest here. I was really, I had just started taking African-American studies that year, and so I wasn't actually that knowledgeable on my own people because I had moved up here. And so they don't really, it was like, when I moved up here, I kind of lost touch with my people in a sense. And so I wasn't really knowledgeable on things about being black. And so learning, when I saw, there was a little chart and I learned that, well, yeah, most of the slaves imported to the South were coming from Alexandria or reading those slave narratives. Those were really impactful to read. And I learned a lot from those or learning about the different laws that were placed just to keep our people down. [00:20:28][47.1]

Nora Malone: [00:20:29] And was there something, anything, that surprised you on the pilgrimage? [00:20:32][2.5]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:20:36] It was definitely the fact, it was just how much hatred that these people had, enough to kill newborns, infants that really took me back. That really, like, they don't teach you that in school. So you're like, 'oh, they were killing people who hadn't lived that their life. So at least it's not as bad as if they were killing people who hadn't really gotten the chance to see what life has to offer.' And that's how they tried to advertise it to you. But then when you see that they were killing people who had only been a few months old, then you really start to think, 'why? What makes you hate someone so much? Is it envy? Is it just that you're born hating?' Because no one is born to hate. Who gave you this reason? Who gave you such a strong passion of hate for black people. [00:21:26][49.7]

Nora Malone: [00:21:27] And how has this pilgrimage kind of shaped you going forwards? [00:21:30][2.5]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:21:32] It shapes the way that I carry myself. Before, I would not really, I wouldn't say I wouldn't really care, but I was very like, 'okay.' I was scrolling through life, strolling through life. If I messed up, I didn't really care. And it just made me, like, I was very passive. Now I'm very active. I'm looking at what's going on in our community. I'm analyzing. I'm choosing my words very carefully. Before I would just say whatever comes to my mind. Now, I'm very deliberate with what words I use. I like to read more now. When I come across an article about something going on, I check it out to make sure I'm in the know of what's happening or if there's something, new opportunities available to me. I do my best to stay involved in the community now. It gave me a lot more passion and drive now also, because if my people did all that and I want to sit here and be lazy, no, I can't do that anymore. I have to get up and constantly be bettering myself. I upped the way I dress so I can make sure that I'm constantly presenting a well-put-together look. I'm formulating the way I talk so that it looks like, it seems like I'm intelligent and I can get my point across as clearly and make sure that no one questions if I'm intelligent or not. And I eat better just so I can maintain this vessel that had a chance to be created because my ancestors decide to survive. I'm just constantly improving and getting better and better. And I can see with my peers around. My friend Darly, he has gotten so much better and I'm so proud to see him get to where he is now. And so, yeah. [00:23:14][102.1]

Nora Malone: [00:23:15] That's nice. And I know there's been, like, some people believe that the pilgrimage should happen again or some people believe that it shouldn't. What's your stance on that? [00:23:23][8.5]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:23:28] Personally, I do not think it should happen again. It was a thing where it was like we had the soil and we sent it down. And why would we send them back down with no soil? I guess to educate them. But I think for them, I feel like it's because of the weight that we were carrying, what we were doing that made it even more impactful. But now, it would just be more like going on a museum field trip, and I don't think it would carry the same weight that it did. So, I don't think it should happen again. But I do think that us and Alexandria, we should start advocating and pushing people to go check these out. But they should also remember to check out what we have here because there's so much local history and I pray that we don't find another victim. But if we do end up finding one, then I guess then it would be appropriate to have another trip, so we can learn more about it, so we can send more people to have the same impact. Because I feel like I feel like if it doesn't have that joining reason behind it, it is not going to have that lasting impact that it did. [00:24:36][67.6]

Nora Malone: [00:24:36] And is there anything else you want to say about the pilgrimage? [00:24:38][1.9]

Delvin Jalon Reed: [00:24:40] Go, go. If it's just by yourself, go. Because the one thing that I did not like was that we didn't have enough time. I was, again, I was almost late to the bus, but I didn't get to read everything I wanted to. I wanted to read everything. I wanted to watch everything inside those rooms. And I didn't get a chance. So, go on your own and just spend a week if you have to. Just going in there and visiting these different museums, learning this history, trying these foods, visiting these places because it's a historically rich area. But also don't forget that we have history everywhere, especially here. And also go watch "They're All Honored Here" because it is a great documentary that I put a lot of hard work and time into. Thank you.