



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



Oral History Interview

with

Gregory Johnson

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Narrator: Gregory Johnson

Location of Interview:

Zoom

Date of Interview: 05/23/2024

Transcriber: Sadiya Quetti-Goodson

Summary:

Gregory Johnson reflects upon growing up in the Patrick Street and Queen Street neighborhoods of Alexandria, importance of learning of family histories, and repairing the neglect of black cemeteries in Alexandria.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
0:00:16	4	Introduction
00:00:16	4	Born and named
00:01:10	4	Childhood Memories and Neighborhoods Description
20:51	9	Familial Memories and Description Immediate Family
00:30:23	12	First Funerals Experienced
00:41:48	16	Visiting Douglass as Child and Describing Ecology
00:52:12	19	Description of Alexandria as a Youth
00:58:46	21	Early Education
1:13:04	25	Hearing Dr. King Speak at the March on Washington
1:18:23	26	Career Journey
1:42:42	32	Reflections and Hopes about Douglass Initiative and Importance of Community Remembrance
2:12:31	40	A Forever Memory

General	Childhood; Family; Education; African American cemeteries; Systemic Racism; Segregation; Family histories; Civil rights; Air forces; Jim Crow; Klu Klux Klan; The March on Washington;
---------	--

People	Johnson, Gregory; Johnson, Michael; Cloud, Tyrone; Mr. Chaparral; Belfield, Nathan; Grayson, Lawrence; Wigglesworth, Johnny; Johnson, Stephen; Crown, Tyrone; Mother; Father; Haney, Steven; Haney, Michael; Haney, Patricia; Mr. Holloway; Johnson, Andre; Johnson, Stephanie; Johnson, Steve; Johnson, Jeffery; Aunt Fanny; Johnson, Calvin; Johnson, Wallace; Fredericks, Johnny; Dorsey, Philip; Crawford, Berner; Butler, Kerry; Douglas, Kirk; Mrs. Jones; Gibson, Robin; Marnie; Ives, Burl; Ford, Steve; King, Martin Luther; Coates, Viola; Talbot, Willie; Pointdexter's;
Places	Alexandria; Alexandria Colored Hospital; Duke Street; Fairfax Street; The Berg; 1321 Queen Street; Black Rosemont; West Street; Patrick Street; Parker-Gray; Black Rosemont; Jefferson Pool; American Legion; Mount Vernon Avenue; Charles Houston; Mr. Chaparral Store; Payne Street; Queen Street; Gum Springs; Jefferson High School; New Mexico; Reebok's; Dixie Pig; Washington Street; J.C. Penny's; Atlantic Research; Mount Jezreel Church; Georgia; Washington, D.C.; Wythe Street; Petersburg; Fairfax; Johnson Pool; Fredericksburg; Culpeper; Barnesville, Georgia; Cameron Street; Jefferson Pool; Potomac River; Freedman's Cemetery; Coleman Cemetery; Douglass Cemetery; City Creek; Seminary Road; Christ Church Episcopal Cemetery; Old Town; T.C. Williams; Fort Hunt Park; Chinguapin; Fort Ward; Pepco Power Plant; Torpedo Factory; Woodrow Wilson Bridge; 720 Patrick Street; Parker-Gray School; Mount Vernon Avenue; George Washington High School; Jamestown, Virginia; 7-Eleven; Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport; South Patrick Street; 14th Street Bridge; Palestine; Israel; San Antonio, Texas; Ellsworth, South Dakota; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tampa, Florida; San Felipe, New Mexico; Sandia Casino; Greeley, Colorado; Manassas, Virginia; Baltimore, Maryland

Gregory Johnson [00:00:16] Good afternoon, my name is Gregory Johnson and I was born in July. I'm 69 years old right now, I'll be 70 come July fifth.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:28] Happy early birthday. My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 27 years of age. It is the 23rd of May, 2024, and I'm here with Mr. Gregory Johnson. So thank you so much Mr. Johnson for agreeing to do this interview. It's been a pleasure getting to know you over this past two weeks. I suppose we can start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

Gregory Johnson [00:00:50] I was born in Alexandria, at the Alexandria Colored Hospital.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:55] Alexandria Colored Hospital. And where was that?

Gregory Johnson [00:00:59] When was that?

Kerry James Reed [00:01:01] Where was that?

Gregory Johnson [00:01:02] In Alexandria, Virginia off of Duke Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:04] Off of Duke Street?

Gregory Johnson [00:01:05] Yeah they had a colored section in the back, as they called it.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:10] Yeah, interesting. Where was your family living when you were born?

Gregory Johnson [00:01:18] Well, when we were born actually you know I can't remember the street. Yeah I want to say it was Fairfax Street down near the Berg Area when I was very, very - I mean I was just a little newborn baby actually. And then we moved to 1321 Queen Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:40] 1321 Queen Street.

Gregory Johnson [00:01:42] Yes. And that's where most of my memories begin, is from 1321 Queen Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:51] So what are some of those early memories you have from living on 1321?

Gregory Johnson [00:01:55] Oh, gosh. Well I remember how tight-knit the community was itself, in itself. And I mean I could hardly go just about anywhere in that community, and people knew of me, knew my parents. And so I felt well cared for, if you will, just by having neighbors that knew who I was.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:22] Right. Could you describe the community in a little more detail?

Gregory Johnson [00:02:26] Sure.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:28] Yeah, please.

Gregory Johnson [00:02:30] Yeah. Well, the community at 1321 Queen Street, we were just bordered on West Street and then going all the way up to Patrick Street, then going north, going towards the Parker-Gray area, which is Little Haiti or whatever. And then, going a little south of that you had the Black Rosemont area. And then going further east, then you had the Berg, the projects. So in a radius of about 4 miles, I want to say, that was the black community. 4 mile radius. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:14] So it's interesting you mentioned, "Black Rosemont," because I've only ever heard that area referred to as "Colored Rosemont." Growing up did you call it Black Rosemont?

Gregory Johnson [00:03:26] No, I just called it one of the places where I used to go and hang out down by the Jefferson pool. So I didn't know any names of the communities then. I mean it wasn't until later in my late teen years that I actually got to know the names of those little communities that was in that area.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:45] Okay. So what are some of the earliest memories you have of growing up in the black community in Alexandria?

Gregory Johnson [00:03:54] Well, as I said, some of the memories were all childhood based fun and games, you know, playing and running up and down the streets during the summer and the parents being outside watching us run up and down the street on Queen Street. Having foot races and racing around the block to see who can go around the block and come back the fastest. It was a very vibrant community. The only playground that we had in that area was up near the, I think it was the American Legion or something like that it was called. But it was all a concrete asphalt playground so, you know, we had a couple of basketball hoops, some playground equipment. But if we wanted to really play, you know, in like a real playground environment, then we would have to go under the railroad tracks and go into the white side of town and play on the playground that was just north of the train station. Which we got ran off a lot when we went over to play. Because they had grass, they had monkey bars, they had all the neat stuff that kids love, so we would take that chance and go there and play on that. But as I said, we would get run off because we weren't supposed to be there. It was a segregated society.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:20] Yeah, absolutely. So did you all make the trip across the train tracks frequently to try to play on that playground?

Gregory Johnson [00:05:28] Well, we didn't go across, we went under. There was a trestle that was above, so we went under the trestle and that would take us towards Mount Vernon Avenue. And from there if we went left, we can get to the playground going towards the train station. I was a free range kid. Our parents both worked so we had to just make do with what we had as kids.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:58] Absolutely. Could you describe briefly what your home on 1321 Queen looked like while you were growing up?

Gregory Johnson [00:06:06] Yeah, it was a shotgun shell, shot style of house. It had two floors. The bottom floor being as soon as you came in the door there was a living room, which was very small. Maybe an eight by nine, eight by ten living room. And that was everything there. And then we went

straight flow into my parents bedroom, where they had their bed and then the kitchen. So their bedroom was in the kitchen.

Kerry James Reed [00:06:37] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:06:38] And then going towards the back of the house, then there was a small stove and a kerosene heater. Which we knew when it was getting cold 'cause the kerosene guy would come and fill up the tank with kerosene so we could have heat for the winter. It was gray in color, was a grayish color. And when I say it was, even at a child's standard, it was a little shack, but I had fun there. And then as we went upstairs, we had one big room. Off to the side closest to the stairs was my sister's bed, she had a little twin bed. And then we had a larger bed. And I say we, my brothers, the three of us, four, no four of us at that time would sleep in one bed and then that's where we slept. The bathroom I remember distinctly because it was very, very cramped and small. And if you had to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, oftentimes a couple of my brothers, and I won't say their names because one is still alive. But would pee in the bed all the time. Michael J. (Both laughing). But anyway so the bathroom was all the way down the stairs and then we had to contend with, I mean we used to hear rats coming up the stairs and going down the stairs. So one thing we try to avoid was bringing food, well, our parents wouldn't let us bring food upstairs unless we snuck it upstairs to snack on or something. And that's about it. We had a backyard and that was my adventures on where I would go and dig up the dark black dirt. That was our backyard. I would dig up dirt and look for treasure sometimes, and then right behind the fence, that was basically not a fence, but we would go to the alleyway. And that's what we played as well, in the alley right behind the house. And I do distinctly remember waiting for the apple. There was a big, huge apple tree in that alley and we would wait for the time for the apples to get nice and ripe and we would have that summer snacks. But sometimes we couldn't wait and we would eat green apples, and of course we would have to run to the bathroom after that. So the alleyway was also another place zoned for us, you know, staying close to home, we would play in the alley. I got to tell a story. Because this is one story that tells you what kind of a precocious kid I was. I always was experimenting with things, I mean that was my whole entire thing, was experiment. And me and my play friend, Tyrone Cloud. We used to play in the alley, and we used to play army and all this other stuff. So his dad had some kerosene, no gasoline, excuse me, his dad was a plumber. And he had a gasoline container and there was an old abandoned 1940, I want to say a '42 car that was in the alley that we played in. And I decided to show my friend Tyrone how to make a bomb and it worked.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:10] Oh, wow.

Gregory Johnson [00:10:12] It blew the car up, flames were everywhere, and the fire department came. And of course I ran and hid and stayed hidden for a long while until somebody had saw us in the alley playing and told the firemen, and they came to my house. But the good news was my parents weren't home because both of them were at work. One was going to work and one was coming from work, but wouldn't be home when the fire guy came over. But that's my experimental phase. And then of course, I stayed there until I was in fifth grade. Yeah, I was up in 5th grade. We used to walk to Charles Houston school from there. It was about four or five blocks that we would walk every day. Rain, sleet didn't matter, unless they called school off which we always prayed for snow, even in the summer or springtime. But yeah, so that's what 1321 looked like in my vision. But like I said, it was always the summertime was the best time in that neighborhood. Because like I said we would basically

have foot races and on occasions, you know, there would be some neighbors barbecuing or something going on always during the summer.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:37] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:11:37] And we used to go up to Mr. Chaparral's store, who was a local, well he was a Jewish man that owned a store on Payne and Queen Street on the corner of. And we used to go up there and we would collect bottles, so we can get like ice cream or chips or something like that, candy.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:59] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:11:59] And my favorite was squirrel nuts. My teeth show it too. (Laughing). But anyway, but yeah so Queen Street was a really good experience for me growing up. I was unaware what was going on civil rights wise, but I do remember a white guy stopping by 1321, and I was sitting on the stoop and I was in my underwear. I was a little boy sitting on the steps at the house, was just one step up, but I was sitting on the step watching the world. And it was early in the morning, I remember that and it was a summer day and this guy came through and he had a camera. And he asked, "Hey, can I take your picture?" And I said, "Sure." You know, I was a little kid, I don't care. And he took pictures of me and I never saw the result of those pictures. I'm sure they're somewhere in somewhere tucked in, because it was during the civil rights, that the push of the civil rights occurred. Just before, I want to say it was [19]62. I want to say it was 1960s, '62 area, around that time.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:08] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:13:10] So yeah. So seeing that, that was interesting because it was unusual for a white person to walk through the neighborhood unless it was the police. And that was it, you know so.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:22] Very quickly, how old were you while you were experimenting with explosives, I guess we could say?

Gregory Johnson [00:13:30] (Laughing). I was maybe at the oldest age, I think I was like six or seven.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:39] Okay, okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:13:40] Yeah, I was in the cinema. Yeah, I was a little scientist and I even killed my mother's flowers.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:48] Oh my goodness!

Gregory Johnson [00:13:49] Yeah, I had seen this movie and it was about these giant creatures that were basically turned giant because of radiation and stuff. So I mixed bleach and some other chemical that kind of, I do remember the bleach and I poured it on my mother's flowers, and I killed all of her flowers in the front.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:15] Oh my word.

Gregory Johnson [00:14:17] Yeah they didn't grow tall like I thought they would. They never grew tall, they died in minutes.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:29] So you mentioned one of your friends is Tyrone Cloud, was his name.

Gregory Johnson [00:14:33] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:34] Is that Cloud. The C-l-o-u-d?

Gregory Johnson [00:14:37] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:38] Okay. Do you remember any other of your friends from the neighborhood growing up?

Gregory Johnson [00:14:44] Oh well, I wasn't so much of a kid with a lot of friends. I chose one friend and that would be my one friend.

Kerry James Reed [00:14:51] I got you.

Gregory Johnson [00:14:51] So basically but Tyrone Cloud and then there was Nathan Belfield. And his family had moved on West Street from Gum Springs. And he like to imitate that he could speak a foreign language. So he would speak gibberish in a foreign language and we all thought he was speaking a foreign language. But Nathan Belfield, I'll never forget him. And that was another one in the Queen Street area. And then there was Lawrence Grayson who later I find out through Ancestry.com that we're cousins. We're related. And so that was interesting. But this is when I'm an adult, I found out that the guy that I played with we're related. Then there was Johnny Wigglesworth. And that's the Payne Street crew that I play with sometimes.

Kerry James Reed [00:15:52] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:15:53] And Johnny Wigglesworth, he was one of the younger of the family, so him and I played together. He had older brothers and sisters there. So we all played around there. And that's where my brother Stephen, we were riding on this jeep truck, on the edge of it, where my brother Stephen fell off of it and the tires barely missed him.

Kerry James Reed [00:16:21] Oh, man.

Gregory Johnson [00:16:22] Yeah, it could have been a tragedy in that alleyway. We always played in the alleys. The alleys were our play zone because like I said, our playground was asphalt. So unless you want to walk over by the train station, it was basically that's all we had to play with. Until we could go up into the project area off of West Street where my other cousins live, who I'm very close with. And we grew up together, all of us grew up together. So we would go up there once in a while and play up there. There was no such thing as rivalry, you know, I can go in South side of town, I could go to the projects up off of Wythe and Patrick Street. I can just about go anywhere I wanted to go and play, but my main playmates as a child was Johnny Wigglesworth, Nathan Belfield and Tyrone Cloud. Tyrone Cloud, both him and I were inseparable, in fact that name brings a story. It was in August, I'll never forget it was in August and we were over at Jefferson School across the

street on West and Queen Street. And we were laying on, they had rolling hills. This is where we used to take our cardboard and slide down the hills. And after a day of playing and we would lay back on the hill and then we talked about what were we going to be, and looking at the clouds at the same time, looking up at the clouds and talking about what we're going to be when we grow up. And the strangest thing in the world was during that conversation I basically told them that I was going to move to New Mexico because I had saw the Wonderful World of Disney. I was gonna move to New Mexico and be a cowboy, and become a cowboy. And that's what I was going to do. And strangely enough, I'm here in New Mexico. So a little eight, nine year old boy talking about where he's going to go when he grows up. And Tyrone had other dreams, but unfortunately, life dealt him a bad hand because he made bad decisions later on in life as a teenager and grown up. But so, the experiences on Queen Street was, I mean for me it was ideal. Like for kids. I mean, I had all the freedom in the world. I could cover, I mean miles, if you will. In the summer, I can go one side of town to the other side of town. So I enjoyed that really a lot.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:11] Yeah, absolutely. So I want to circle back to something that you said a little while ago, where there was a white gentleman that came to the neighborhood to take photos of you in the civil right era. I imagine it sticks out in your head because of the rareness of the occasion. So I was wondering, how often did you see white people in your neighborhood growing up?

Gregory Johnson [00:19:39] Except for the insurance collectors, the furniture, people would collect for you know, people who had got furniture on credit or stuff. But basically, it would be rarely ever. And even though, I mean you go three blocks and we're in a white neighborhood. Going three blocks south, we'd be in a white dominated neighborhood. But it was unusual to see a white person walking in that neighborhood. Although at Jefferson High School, which was an all white high school across the street from where I lived, and during school time, that was a no play zone for us because the big kids would chase after us and try to beat us up and stuff like that. So we didn't go over there until the summertime because the school would be out and we could play all we want over there. So that was the interesting thing about that.

Kerry James Reed [00:20:45] So could you describe your parents briefly?

Gregory Johnson [00:20:51] Yeah. My parents, my father, my mother. My mother was a very hard working lady. By day, she worked as a maid, a domestic for the Haney family, Dr. Haney. I'll never forget that because I always didn't like their kids too much because he took too much of my mother's time that I wanted to have. But Dr. Haney and that crew. Those kids were Steven, Michael and Patricia. I remember the kids to this day. And so she did that by day and then got home by 1:30, or maybe a little earlier, and she would cook dinner, get ready, and then head off to work at Dixie Pig as a cook. And then she would go work at Dixie Pig and then get home at 1:00, 2:00 in the morning, depending on if they kept her. And she would ride the bus. The bus would drop her off up on Washington Street across from the J.C. Penny's that was there and she would walk home. The 4 blocks, 5 blocks home, in the early morning hours. And my dad, he worked several different jobs before I became cognizant of what work was. He was working with the water company for a little bit, and then he got a job as a janitor, a handyman type of job with the Atlantic Research. And there I got to meet some of his coworkers who would come and stop by the house. And one guy that would, Mr. Holloway would come and pick my dad up and they would go to work together in the car every morning. My father, a well-built man, you know, muscular. He was about five'ten, five'eleven, I want to say about five'eleven and my mother was about five foot four. And a pretty

woman, very pretty woman and very religious. So my mother was the religious one in the start that when we were growing up on Queen Street and we had to be marched to church on Sundays, and we hated that because we would have to go to church and get there by 8:00 in the morning, and we'll be there to 2, 3:00 in the afternoon. Our Sundays were burnt, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:36] Oh, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:23:38] And my Dad would just stay home and we wanted to stay home just like Dad. But no, we had to go to church. And then, a strange twist of things, my dad later on became a member of the church and became a deacon or I think he was a deacon.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:55] Oh, really?

Gregory Johnson [00:23:56] Yeah. So he joined the church, I mean, later in his life. And I was long gone as far as my pursuing of being in other places in the military. But yeah, he became a member of the church and a hard working member of the church. So that was interesting, really interesting, you know for a man that never went to church and then watching him. We didn't want to, we wanted to stay home and play, but we couldn't. We had to get cleaned up, we all took turns in the bathtub. I mean, so you can imagine this old big urn bathtub, and the water would be filled. So the first person in the bathtub got the best water.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:44] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:24:45] The last person in the bathtub got the bad water. So I try to put myself between 1 and 2 spots. All the time.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:53] Naturally.

Gregory Johnson [00:24:54] Soon as knew it, I heard the water running. I was right there waiting to take off my clothes and jump in the bathtub and get cleaned up. And my brother Andre didn't like baths too much, so he would delay as long as he could. But yeah, we would all have to take a bath in one water.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:15] Very interesting.

Gregory Johnson [00:25:16] Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, I didn't realize, you know, how poor we were, you know, as far as economically because there were surely other families that were doing much better than we were.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:30] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:25:31] You know, and I could see that. I could see, you know, kids getting bicycles and I could see their Christmas toys, and I could see even their houses, some houses that I went into. Whoops I don't know how that got there.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:50] So briefly, what was the church that your mother took you all to?

Gregory Johnson [00:25:56] It would be the Mount Jezreel Church on Payne Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:59] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:26:00] Yeah. And that's where all of us. Can you see me?

Kerry James Reed [00:26:04] Yes I can.

Gregory Johnson [00:26:05] Okay, well, because I got all this other stuff popping up on my screen, and I don't use this computer that often.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:12] Oh, no.

Gregory Johnson [00:26:13] So I really don't know my computer.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:16] That's all right. I can still see you.

Gregory Johnson [00:26:18] Yeah, okay.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:22] No please continue, I'm sorry.

Gregory Johnson [00:26:24] No, go ahead, go ahead please.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:26] So you mentioned some of your siblings up to this point. And I was hoping that you could give me a brief, not description of them, but where were you in the order of siblings?

Gregory Johnson [00:26:39] The home siblings, I was number two. Andre being the oldest, then me number two, then Michael, then the twins, Steve and Stephanie, and then the baby Jeffery. In fact I remember when my mother brought Jeffery home, I didn't know my mother was pregnant until she brought Jeffery home. And I got to hold him and he smelled so much, he smelled so good as a baby, I wanted to hold him all the time because of the baby smell. (Laughing). But yeah so that was our lineup.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:15] Absolutely. So did your mother or father ever talk to you about the family history?

Gregory Johnson [00:27:23] Well, my father just touched on it. My mother, she left Georgia. So, the situation in Georgia wasn't of her liking. I mean, 'cause she's living in Georgia during the Jim Crow era. She did tell me a story about one of her brothers being killed by the [Ku Klux] Klan. And she told me that story about they were playing baseball and what was the sheriff. Oh, God, I got to try to remember. But the sheriff's son shot her brother over a baseball game. The little black kids had beat these teenagers in baseball, and a fight ensued and my mother's brother basically was fighting the guy. And she tells me that story. She told me that story and I remember. On my dad's side, you know, he told me about his people being educated people and he being the dumbest of the family type of thing. Which wasn't true, but he didn't, so much he wasn't as close to his family. But his sisters would always come and visit on Christmas. And of course, I would always go down to the

Berg to visit my Aunt Fanny and my aunt's sister lived in Washington, D.C. for most of her life that I knew her. But his sisters were something else. And then my Uncle Calvin, which they kept saying, "You look like your Uncle Calvin, Greg." And I just saw this tall man. I'm going, "He's tall." You know but they used to tell me I look like my Uncle Calvin. I resembled him more, and my Uncle Jack. So my father's uncle. But anyhow, Uncle Calvin was my father's brother. And he had another brother that was killed in a card game of some sort off of West Street I want to say it was.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:46] Interesting.

Gregory Johnson [00:29:47] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:47] So your father's family, if I'm not mistaken, had deep roots in Alexandria, correct?

Gregory Johnson [00:29:53] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:55] Yeah. And then...

Gregory Johnson [00:29:56] In Virginia for that matter.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:58] Yeah. Yeah, it was Fredericksburg if I'm not mistaken.

Gregory Johnson [00:30:01] Culpeper.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:02] Culpeper, that's it. Excuse me.

Gregory Johnson [00:30:04] Yeah, Culpeper. So that's where his grandfather's side of the family came from.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:11] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:30:14] And his mother's side, I think was somewhere in Alexandria, somewhere. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:23] So I know that from speaking with your siblings, that you all took a trip down to Barnesville, Georgia, when you were a kid for a family funeral.

Gregory Johnson [00:30:39] Yeah. It was, I want to say it was my grandfather. You know, it was my grandfather's funeral. My mother's father.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:50] Was that..?

Gregory Johnson [00:30:51] My mother's father I believe it was. Yeah, it was my mother's father.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:57] How did you all get to Georgia?

Gregory Johnson [00:31:00] By train.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:00] By train.

Gregory Johnson [00:31:01] We had to wait in the colored section. I remember that for sure, because I was sternly rebuked when I started walking towards the, I wanted water or something like that. My mother just yelled at me, "Get back over here." And then she whispered, "This is the white people section over there." And so that's how I got to know what segregation was.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:32] What was it like to travel to the Barnesville? Was that the first funeral you ever experienced?

Gregory Johnson [00:31:41] Yes, it was. It was my very first. But I didn't experience it because basically the kids were, how can I put it? We were too young to know why we were going. So the only thing I remember about going down there was running around the grandparents house and running into a rose bush and getting rose thorns all over me. That's the only thing I remember. And I remember where they lived. The road was a dirt road at one time. It was a dirt road. I remember that. But other than anything else, I mean, little kids don't know they're at a funeral until, you know, they're told they're at a funeral. But I do remember just prior to my granddad, my mother's side dying, she had brought me down there for visit for whatever reason. I'm not sure, I think that my parents were having some difficulties, as far as relationship wise. And this is when it was just me, Andre and Michael at that time. And my grandfather making me some roasted pecans on a potbelly urn stove. Made for good. I can still taste those pecans. He made such great, I mean, I'm still a fan of pecans, but I can never replicate how he did it. But I do remember eating pecans, my very first time eating pecans, and really enjoying them.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:16] Yeah that sounds delicious. On a potbelly stove he roasted?

Gregory Johnson [00:33:18] Yeah. Potbelly, old urn, I think it was a coal, no a wood stove. It was a wood stove.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:25] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:33:26] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:27] That does sound really good.

Gregory Johnson [00:33:28] And I remember the outhouse too. That was my first venture into an outhouse really brought home what rural living was like, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:39] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:33:41] Yeah. I'll never forget that smell either.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:47] So if that was the first funeral you "attended," quote, unquote, but didn't really experience, do you remember the first funeral that you did experience, you know, go to, see the casket, everything like that. Do you recall?

Gregory Johnson [00:34:05] As far as family members?

Kerry James Reed [00:34:07] Or somebody from the neighborhood or anything like that.

Gregory Johnson [00:34:10] Oh, well the one that struck me the most, which was, well there's two that I went. One was Johnny Fredricks who died on Patrick and Queen Street from [a] asthma attack. And he died right there and we went to his funeral. And then, Philip Dorsey who was killed by a guy who broke out of the insane asylum or something like that, people had said. But he had stolen a car and my brother Andre was just walking a bit ahead of them, and Philip got ran over and his body mutilated from the car accident.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:05] Oh my word.

Gregory Johnson [00:35:07] Yeah and he had a closed casket.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:11] And the reason given was there was an escape..?

Gregory Johnson [00:35:15] Yeah guy, that was the white guy, and he had stolen a car and he was barreling down Patrick Street. Just on Patrick and Wythe Street right there in that area there, right on the corner. And he basically came up on the curb and took out Philip. And my brother was already across the street and the guy swung the car back out and was going down the road. But then soon thereafter there was police cars coming after him so we don't know what happened after that. But yeah, I remember that. I remember that one.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:55] My word, that's horrible.

Gregory Johnson [00:35:56] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:57] Was there a place for the mentally ill nearby?

Gregory Johnson [00:36:07] Well, I don't know. I really don't know. I know there's one in Petersburg.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:12] Yeah, I know of one in Fairfax.

Gregory Johnson [00:36:19] Maybe it's Fairfax. I mean, but I remember in Petersburg, people would make comments, "Oh, that boy's crazy. He needs to go to Petersburg." Something like that, stuff like that.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:26] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:36:28] Or that man was crazy, or that lady was crazy.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:33] Oh my gosh, that's fascinating in a very morbid sentence.

Gregory Johnson [00:36:38] Yeah. And then I had a friend that I used to play with all the time. Johnny. He drowned in the Johnson pool. And me and Tyrone had went to the Johnson pool because we used to chase after fire trucks. (Laughing). Kid thing. But we followed the fire trucks to the Johnson pool and then when we got there, we saw a firemen throwing grappling hooks into the water and just dragging the pool. And we heard people talking and then that's when the guy said, "I got it, I got it." I'll never forget that. And they start pulling on it and out of the water came my

friend Johnny. And, you know, he was all swollen from the ingestion of water in his body and stuff and they pulled him out. So I remember that. I didn't go to his funeral. He was my friend. He lived over near the Black Rosemont area, but him and I used to play all the time together at Jefferson school. On the south side of school we used to play over there on those hills. It'd be close to the Cameron Street and the swimming pool, the big swimming pool, the municipal pool that was segregated.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:12] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:38:13] And then thereafter, when I moved to Patrick Street, they started building the swimming pool over at Charles Houston so that we had a pool to go to. A swimming pool. Because, you know, I mean, we can stand and watch the people at Jefferson pool, you know, through the fence and get water stuff thrown at us or stuff like that. Or we can go to the river and swim. And then at that time like I said, the Johnson Pool was in disrepair. It had shut down and just 'cause the city wasn't providing any funds to keep the pool running, so they actually just let the pool be neglected. And you know, it took another person. They built the school- I mean, the pool because of the Johnson twins, I mean the Johnson boys, drowned in the Potomac River. And they built Johnson Pool so that we could have a pool to go to. Well that went good for I guess 10 to 15 years, maybe longer. But then the city did not fund the pool anymore to keep it open or to keep it repaired. And so they just closed it down when the Jefferson pool was now open to black people to go to. And they just let that pool go in disrepair. And I can tell you that we used to go there to hunt for tadpoles in the water.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:51] At the pool?

Gregory Johnson [00:39:52] At the pool we would have tadpoles. And from what I'm hearing is that's the reason why he fell in, but he was at the pool trying to catch tadpoles.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:04] Oh wow.

Gregory Johnson [00:40:04] Yeah. And he fell in and he couldn't swim so he went down to the bottom and the mud sucked him down even deeper into the pool. And they had to basically dredge the pool. And it always puzzled me, even as a kid, knowing that how come they didn't drain this pool? Why didn't they drain it? That is the biggest question and issue still facing me to this day is why didn't they drain that pool? You know, it could have been me. That could have been me who fell in it because that was our hunting spot for tadpoles and frogs and whatever else we can come up with, you know. And so, that bothers me to this day. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:58] Yeah, absolutely. So do you remember where Johnny Fredricks and Philip Dorsey, where they were buried in the city by any chance?

Gregory Johnson [00:41:11] Chances are they will be buried at one. There was two burial places for blacks in that neighborhood. One is the Douglass [Cemetery]. And there was another one.

Kerry James Reed [00:41:30] Freedmen's [Cemetery], Coleman [Cemetery]?

Gregory Johnson [00:41:33] It could be Coleman, could be Freedman, one of the two. But yeah, they are buried there. They are buried in one of those cemeteries. Yeah. They could be in Douglass, too. I don't know to be honest.

Kerry James Reed [00:41:48] That'll be interesting to see. I wonder if I can find a record of that. I probably can. Speaking of Douglass, did you ever have cause to go to Douglass Cemetery while you were growing up?

Gregory Johnson [00:42:02] Once again, as a kid being adventurous, you know, just a bit adventuresome. And I think I told you in the last conversation that I did read the headstone, but one stuck in my head, which was the Butler name. And I can't remember the first name. But it's so strange because I think my grandmother was buried there. Kerry Butler. But that name remained in my head and when we were talking about when we first got started on this Douglass thing. And I'm going, "Yeah, we got some relatives there, you know, and I think we do." But I remember Butler, and then when my brothers sent that picture out of some names or something, I saw Butler and said, "Wow, that could be the Butler I saw."

Kerry James Reed [00:43:02] So when you visited Douglass as a child, did you know that the Butlers were family, or did you know that you had any family buried there at all?

Gregory Johnson [00:43:13] No, I didn't know. I didn't. But, you know, I mean, because as I said, as a child, I mean my thing was adventure.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:22] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:43:22] And exploration. So I wasn't too attentive, if you will, except for that one headstone.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:30] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:43:31] And that's all.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:37] So why adventure to Douglass? What was appealing about going to the cemetery?

Gregory Johnson [00:43:45] Well it was one, we can get in there and get into where the City Creek was and you know, the name of the city creek, it's famous.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:55] Yes I do. (Laughing).

Gregory Johnson [00:43:57] And, you know, once again, frogs, snakes, minnows, tadpoles, anything that we could catch and bring back home and play in the water. Even though we shouldn't have been playing in that water. Playing in the water and as I told you before, you know, back then there was some wooded area that was in that area. And I think that wooded area would be located where those apartments are now. I want to say there was some woods there, but yeah. So Douglass for me was exploration, but I did set foot in it. I did on many times, many occasions, especially during the summer. If I didn't head towards the airport area, I was going that way, I was going south. And so

that was for me, my adventures during the summer. But during the winter, I would never ventured in that area, you know, during the wintertime. Never. It was only during the summer.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:06] Why not during the winter?

Gregory Johnson [00:45:07] Because one, it was cold and you know. And if I slipped, because they had a lot of slime on some concrete that they had used for draining or directing the channeling the water, it had a lot of slime on there, and you could slip on that slime. And I know, because I slipped on that slime and fell into the creek before. So during the winter time, no way am I going to slip into that creek and walk what, 5 blocks, 6 blocks home, freezing, you know. So there was no way, no way.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:45] So last time we spoke and we started talking about it a little bit just a minute ago, we spent a lot of time talking about the ecology of Douglass that you witnessed growing up. And I think that's so interesting because a lot of the people I talk to, they have, you know, memories of Douglass, they, you know, remember playing in it. What have you, but you're one of the few people that can really remember the wildness of it growing up. And I was hoping you could speak more to that. So when you went to Douglass and you saw the surrounding cemeteries, how did Douglass compare to those places?

Gregory Johnson [00:46:25] To surroundings?

Kerry James Reed [00:46:27] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:46:28] As I said, as a kid, it would be probably normal. But the cemetery did have some upkeep. That was pretty obvious. You could see that it had some upkeep and even freshly dug graves and freshly buried. So you did get to see those kind of things. So I mean, that area was attended to, but I don't say, well now that if I compare it to the cemetery off of Seminary road somewhere.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:08] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:47:09] I mean, which is immaculate and the whole bit, so it's totally different for Douglass. Douglass was definitely an old cemetery. And I know that because as I said as a kid, I had this curiousness. And I remember reading headstones, and like I said, I remember some, but I also remember dates. And for some reason dates are very important to me when I look at them, I imprint with dates real quick. But, I do remember seeing the 18[00s]. I want to say [18]70, [18]75, something like that, I don't remember. I remember those headstones. And I mean, back then, you know, 1902 was a long time, you know. I mean, to a kid that's a hundred thousand years. So I would look at those things. And then I will also compare those dates to what was in Christ Church [Episcopal] Cemetery. The little cemetery they have in Christ Church. And the one that reminds me so much is they got this one where they have, I think, a mass burial. And they had this drummer boy that was like 12 or 13 years old that was killed in the Civil War there. You have to go see that, you know. Just to verify I wasn't imagining, but there's a drummer boy in the vast burial areas facing Washington Street, right close to Washington Street itself. But the boy was like 13 years old when he was killed in the Civil War. He was the drummer boy, and it has it on a drummer. So, I would compare those kind of dates because at Christ Church, you can go all the way back to the 1700s, at Christ Church. And so those dates always stuck in my mind. And at Douglass, I think, like I said,

the oldest date I saw at Douglass had to be around 1860. Maybe, but some that I do remember is 1860. Some of the names I don't remember because a lot of the older headstones were basically weathered.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:29] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:49:31] So you couldn't really see the names on them, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:35] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [00:49:36] Yeah. And you know, the other thing about Douglass was that the neighborhood that it sat in, although it's changed greatly, I remember houses being down in that area at Douglass. And that was the black side of town, there was a black section until they discovered that it's a lot of money in Old Town.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:02] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:50:04] And to go in and basically clear everybody out of there and redo the houses to meet the market that they were looking for. But yeah. Those are things I do remember, you know. And I'm sure that if I was hypnotized, I could probably remember a lot more than what I'm telling you now, because age and time is not a friend of memory.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:31] Of course not. Well, we don't have to go that far. This is fabulous.

Gregory Johnson [00:50:36] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:37] So, what kind of animals did you see at Douglass? You mentioned the snakes, tadpoles.

Gregory Johnson [00:50:43] Rabbit, occasional raccoon.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:49] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:50:51] I do remember this big, fat raccoon. I do remember that one. But yeah, raccoons, rabbits, snakes, wildcats, feral cats. Not too much dogs running around there but those woody animals I would say was there. Squirrel. Squirrel or 2. And stuff like that. So it had its own ecology there, I mean, basically had its ecology going on.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:25] So when you and your friends were playing around in Douglass, what sort of games did you play?

Gregory Johnson [00:51:32] Tag, hide and go seek, vikings. Where we took sticks and we had, like were vikings.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:41] Vikings?

Gregory Johnson [00:51:43] Yeah, don't ask me how we came up with vikings, but I think it's something that we saw in like a Kirk Douglas movie in fact.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:50] Okay. (Laughing).

Gregory Johnson [00:51:51] Kirk Douglas movie. But we were vikings and we played cowboys, Indians, soldiers.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:01] Naturally.

Gregory Johnson [00:52:01] We played a lot of different action games. But hide and seek and just playing war and cowboys and Indians was our forte.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:12] Absolutely. So were there any other areas in Alexandria that had this sort of wealth of flora and fauna like Douglass did?

Gregory Johnson [00:52:26] Oh, yeah. I mean. Where T.C. Williams is now, they had that. Fort Hunt Park. Yeah, Fort Hunt Park, that's was a long walk. That's when we would get out early morning. But what's the name of that place up by T.C. Williams... Chinguapin. Chinguapin had a little wild, wild area of, you know, trees and little woods that were, you know, not old, wooded area, but overgrown wood area. You know where the trees are really seriously old, but they more than 60 years old. And in that area and then there was, I can't think of the park, but it used to be a black neighborhood before when Civil War broke out, they moved them off of that and built a fort there, in Alexandria. Just north of T.C. Williams. I can't think of the name of the park. Fort Ward.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:35] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [00:53:36] Over at Fort Ward. So they used to be a black area as well. And they had trees there too. Yeah, they have trees.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:45] Okay. Chinguapin and Fort Ward.

Gregory Johnson [00:53:49] Yeah, Fort Ward. And I think there's a graveyard up there too that still remains. And you probably have to ask Michael or somebody, but I believe there's some black slaves that were buried up there, or black freedmen that were buried up in that area.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:06] Yeah, I'll have to bring that up with them.

Gregory Johnson [00:54:08] Yeah. And like I said, I was kind of a little history geek, if you will. History was my driving force for exploration. So, you know, I would explore and do those things.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:25] What about history do you think infatuated you so much?

Gregory Johnson [00:54:31] I think it was because the way my mind works. I would be asking those questions. Who are they? Where was it? Why was this here? This type of thing, so I would, in my mind, create a story for it, you know. Or I will create what happened there, you know, recreate what happened there in my mind. But history has always been a major part of my life. In fact, people at work tell me I know too much about history because I'm always talking about something history.

But, yeah. That was the driving force for me was history. I mean, that was probably my best subject, even in elementary school when we did Virginia history. We have to do Virginia history.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:18] Right.

Gregory Johnson [00:55:18] And then I went looking for the Powhatans and the Tappahannock Indians down around the Potomac River area, thinking that, well, they wouldn't be here because it's water. And then I would think, well where did they set up their camps and stuff? So that's how my mind worked, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:37] Absolutely, absolutely. You mentioned swimming in the Potomac earlier. So what'd the waterfront look like when you were growing up?

Gregory Johnson [00:55:49] It looked uncommercialized. The only commercialized thing that used to be, were remnants of the Potomac River, was old rotted out dock, where ships would dock. And we're talking, we're going back in time where there was sailing ships that would sail on the Potomac. So those docks were built to accommodate sailing ships or that being, you know, big ships, but sailing ships. And the only thing that really looked industrialized along the Potomac River, on the Alexandria side, was the power plant Pepco and where the water came out. And that's where we would cast our lines and let it float as far out as we could to catch big fish. And so the Pepco plant was definitely one of our stopovers. And then going south on the Potomac River. Like I said, you have the old docks, and then you had the docks that were built during World War II time at the Torpedo Factory. So you can see those old docks. So once you get my history mind start working, 'cause I knew that the Torpedo Factory was there to make torpedoes for submarines.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:13] Right.

Gregory Johnson [00:57:13] And just going south and south, we would go further south all the way to the [Woodrow] Wilson Bridge. And there's a little lighthouse underneath, that used to be a lighthouse there. And we used to make our treks all the way there. So I had open space. We had open space except for like the Berg, the projects in the Berg. But the Berg's were maybe, I want to say 500 yards from the river. And so it was all open space, all the way down until you hit the Torpedo Factory. And then you hit the other industrialized part of the Potomac River. But for the most part, it was just free. I mean, it was free. And you could go there and walk anywhere you wanted to go, but now I found out that you can't do that no more.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:12] No, you can't.

Gregory Johnson [00:58:14] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:15] There's, you know, there are lots of trails we can't take. The waterfront isn't free reign unfortunately.

Gregory Johnson [00:58:22] Yeah, but yeah, I grew up with it when it was free, just free. Skipping stones, finding good flat stones and skipping across the Potomac River and stuff. That was one of the things that I enjoyed.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:42] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [00:58:44] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:46] So, you attended elementary school at Charles Houston, correct?

Gregory Johnson [00:58:51] Yes, Charles Houston.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:53] And you could walk there?

Gregory Johnson [00:58:55] Yeah. From Queen Street, I went to Charles Houston. From Patrick Street, I was across the street from Charles Houston.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:03] When did you all move to Patrick Street?

Gregory Johnson [00:59:06] It was, I want to say 1966.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:10] Okay. 1966. What was the address for Patrick Street?

Gregory Johnson [00:59:15] 720.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:17] 720 Patrick.

Gregory Johnson [00:59:18] Yeah. 720 North Patrick.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:26] Where did you go? Please.

Gregory Johnson [00:59:30] Oh, sorry.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:30] Please.

Gregory Johnson [00:59:31] Oh no, I'm sorry, go ahead. High school, middle school?

Kerry James Reed [00:59:37] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [00:59:39] Yeah, so the middle school I went to Parker-Gray, which was round the corner from 720 North Patrick. It was just, you know, a couple of blocks and that would be at Parker-Gray. And then from there, walking a little bit further towards Mount Vernon Avenue, went to George Washington, which was at the time a high school. But when they started remodeling Parker-Gray, we had to go in the evenings. Our school time was spent in the evenings. Yeah, we had to go to school in the night.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:21] I did not know that.

Gregory Johnson [01:00:21] Yeah, had to go at night.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:21] Very interesting.

Gregory Johnson [01:00:21] Yeah, when they were repairing or remodeling Parker-Gray, yeah we had to go to school at night.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:31] That's really interesting.

Gregory Johnson [01:00:31] I get home, yeah we'll get home about 9:00. I think we would go to school at at 3:30, 4:00, and then we'd get home by 9:00 at night. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:44] That's so fascinating. When was this?

Gregory Johnson [01:00:48] They were remodeling Parker-Gray. '68, 1968, I want to say. 1968 or 1967 between those 2 years.

Kerry James Reed [01:01:02] Fascinating. No one's ever mentioned to me before. That's so interesting.

Gregory Johnson [01:01:05] Yeah. Parker-Gray got a facelift and everything. And they did some remodeling because I think, and this is just me, but I think the city of Alexandria felt guilty. One, of that school go to, I mean, 'cause Parker-Gray was just going into disrepair. I mean, and we were still occupying that school. And I think federal regulations and stuff changed also. Excuse me, for the safety features of schools in Alexandria. So they had to update it, bring it up to date with the safety codes that Alexandria had to obey, you know. Because it was a federal, like an OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration]. I think it was before OSHA or did OSHA just coming into? During OSHA, when OSHA came and, you know, they had to remove all kinds of stuff. Asbestos and stuff like that.

Kerry James Reed [01:02:07] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:02:07] They had to do that.

Kerry James Reed [01:02:11] So do you have any special memories from your time going to school in Alexandria?

Gregory Johnson [01:02:18] As far as, you know, my teachers. You know, I'll start off by saying that I'm probably the only kid in America, and I'm not proud of it, but I'm the only kid in America to fail 1st grade. I failed first grade. I was a stutterer, didn't want to talk, did not want to do anything. So they made me repeat first grade. And then they started giving me speech therapy classes by the first grade the second time I started getting therapy. And by third grade, I started to read. I didn't want to read, I didn't want to do anything because I would stutter, you know. And for me it was a stigma. And I remember the teacher that showed me the most care was teacher by the name of Jones, Mrs. Jones. She was my first grade teacher. And she saw what my potential was, but she had to bring me back in first grade to start all over again with me.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:28] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:03:29] So by second grade I was reading, I was actually reading. And I remember my 1st words reading, Fun with Dick and Jane book, but I remember reading that book

out loud because I was asked to read it. So I read it. And without too much stuttering. And as time went on, I learned not to stutter. I don't know if there was just something from childhood traumas or whatever the case may be, but stuttering was a part of me for a while up and well, occasionally I do stutter as an adult, so. But yeah, that was one memory I'll never forget. Because like I said, I'm the only kid in America to fail first grade probably. But the failure was for good. And that's the way I look at it, because had they passed me on, I don't know, you know. I don't know where I would have been, but Mrs. Jones was definitely the teacher in elementary school that really made me come out of the shell and allow me to use my imagination. Which was great, you know. And so that was really good. And once again, though it was one of those things where my Mom, even though she didn't have a lot of money when there were school field trips, like you know, going to Jamestown. I remember going to Jamestown because it's a historical place. And I got to explore and learn about Jamestown to where I could talk about Jamestown and I got interested in Jamestown and started reading about the settlements of Jamestown as I got older. So, that was a good defining moment for me because I got to start to understand about Native Americans, the Powhatans, and the Topahanockes and the Rappahannocks. And what's the difference between them in the whole bit. And so that was a good moment in elementary and middle school. One of the things I used to do and love to do was run their track. And every week, during the summer, every day during the summer, I would run. I would try to do 20 laps, 25 laps as a kid. Just run, just run. And I did that. I ran 25 laps, it was nothing to me. After a while. Yeah. And then in George Washington High School, this was during a turmoil and the killing of Robin, what was his name, at the 7-Eleven. Robin Gibson. And he was killed at 7-Eleven, he was shot by one of the guys. But anyhow, we were, me and a couple of other guys walking, and I smell smoke. And we were walking by the auditorium and saw that the curtains were on fire. Somebody had set fire to the curtains in the auditorium. So myself and a couple of the older classmen, we went in and we started fighting the fire, and actually stopped the school from burning down.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:01] Wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:07:02] Yeah, yeah. And that's in the Alexandria Gazette. So you can probably find that story.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:08] Yeah. That's yeah, that's interesting. When was this? How old were you?

Gregory Johnson [01:07:13] I was in 9th grade.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:15] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [01:07:17] I was in ninth grade at George Washington. So it'd be around '69. I want to say 1969.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:26] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [01:07:27] Or before the school was desegregated. And, basically they came into the K-6 to 2 plan, and then we moved over to T.C. Williams. But yeah, the fire was put out and we actually felt good about that. We had did what we did, even though it was a fire set in protest by someone. And yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:03] So in our earlier conversation, you mentioned to me that once you got to T.C. Williams, you became interested in drama and theater.

Gregory Johnson [01:08:10] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:11] How did that come about?

Gregory Johnson [01:08:14] Well, the kids I used to hang with on the hill. They were white kids. Hippie, free love kind of people. And they used to talk about plays. And things I didn't know about. I didn't know about, you know, these plays and theater and all this other stuff. And one day we were sitting on the hill, and the guy had brought his guitar, and we started singing, Blowing in the Wind, one of the protest songs. And so I got up and started singing, Blowing in the Wind with them. And this girl said, "Oh, you've got a nice voice. You should sing in the choir." So I joined the choir. And then from the choir, they were doing musicals and the drama teacher came looking for people to sing in the musicals. And so when I was pulled into the musicals, did several musicals and did some drama, and some comedy. So acting became a part of me, that helped me get through the toughest times in high school. And I had this girlfriend and was madly in love with her, and loved her since 8th grade. But as we got older, and things start to change, her sexuality was in question, and you know, to my heart breaking in 12th grade. Yeah, 12th grade, she came out, you know, as being a lesbian and my whole world was shook. And so I repeated once again and pursued drama even more, and did 3 plays that year. And met this girl in drama and I'll just say her name is Marnie, I won't say her last name. But she was a white girl, and she was a relative of Burl Ives.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:29] Oh, wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:10:29] Yeah. And she really loved me, actually liked me. But I wasn't, I was so afraid of an interracial relationship because of the environment that I grew up in. I thought for sure that, you know, I would be killed.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:44] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:10:45] But she even came to my mother's house and came to visit and sat on the porch with me and just shot the breeze with me. But I wasn't ready to have that type of relationship then.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:57] Right.

Gregory Johnson [01:10:59] But anyhow. But yeah, I went deeper and deeper into my drama, and that's where, well when Steve Ford and I hung out a little bit and I convinced him to do the senior play, musical. And he came out and did that and we became friends then.

Kerry James Reed [01:11:24] So what plays were you in?

Gregory Johnson [01:11:30] Oh gosh. Anything Goes, Cabaret, Dino. What's the name of it? Auntie Mame, a host of others. And then one play that we wrote, the students wrote, the drama students wrote. And we did a play, it was a short 30-minute play that we did for other drama class students and so we did that. And then when I graduated from high school, I got asked to do a

community play that revolved around the slavery days of black people coming out of slavery. And I did that. And then when I auditioned for a play in Washington, D.C.. And I had to make a choice, either do the play or go to National Airport and work. So I went to National Airport and worked because I needed money.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:43] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:12:44] You know, 'cause my parents weren't rich, and I wasn't getting any money from them, you know. So I chose to go to work, so I didn't do my first play in Washington D.C.. And after that, I didn't pursue it as much, you know. Probably tapered away.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:04] Yeah. So in our last conversation, you mentioned to me previously that you had seen Dr. King's speak on the mall.

Gregory Johnson [01:13:16] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:17] Could you speak to that a bit?

Gregory Johnson [01:13:19] Oh, gosh. My kids love the story that I tell, they actually do. Well, I was about 9 years old. The March on Washington. And they got off the train or the rail cars because they had their wagons and stuff on these rail cars on Patrick Street. And it was on South Patrick Street, so it was way down on Patrick Street when a rail yard used to be. And I was sitting on the porch, my mother was sitting on the porch talking to the next door neighbor, Mrs. Coates. And I heard the singing. I heard the singing. And I may have to excuse myself to get something to drink real quick because I'm not used to talking this much. (Laughing). But I heard the singing. And they, I mean, it got louder and louder as they came down the street. And then I saw people coming out of their house, and they're pointing south on Patrick Street, just pointing down. So I knew something was happening. So I basically asked my mom if I can go see. Now I never asked my mom if I could go see something because I was used to being a free range kid. But on this day I asked her, "Can I go see?" And she was talking to Mrs. Coates and say, "Don't interrupt me when I'm talking to an adult," type of thing. "I'm sorry," and sat there a little bit longer, but the singing got louder and louder and louder to where it was now, maybe two blocks away. There was no traffic coming down Patrick Street, and it got louder. And then a motorcycle cop came down, like to basically stop traffic if there was any traffic to stop them. And that's when she said, "Yes." So they came down there singing, all this protest music, civil rights music, songs. And I actually asked her if I can go. And she said, I can go. And I joined into the march and I marched all the way with them, and I had seen people I had never seen before. Like I said, you know, for me my curiosity was overpowering. And so, to see these people that I could only imagine, you know, like what a Native American looked like, what a Chinese man looks like. What, you know, I mean, so just so much difference because my society that I lived in was closed, as far as interaction with other races and ethnic cultures. So we marched and we marched all the way up Patrick Street. And then we took a right turn and got on Washington Street. Was Washington Street? Yeah, Washington Street. And we marched up Washington Street. We then walked, marched over 14th Street Bridge and we just kept going. And then we went to the monument, we marched to the monument and there was people already there. I mean, there were people already there. And the speeches hadn't started, and we had to march towards the reflecting pool. So we did that, marched to the reflecting pool and people had their hats on that said all kinds of things, you know. You had wearing the white hats and had buttons and a lot of them were dressed in white clothing, you know. I guess they were like the organizers or the

people who were getting people in the right direction. And me and my buddy, we decided that we would go closer and go up the stairs, and they had a stage or like a stage that was built where the speech was given.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:29] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:17:31] And being little kids had went wrangled ourselves to the back, if you will. And there was Martin Luther King. And other famous people, by the way, not just Martin Luther King, but there was other people. But Martin Luther King was there and he gave a speech. And there was a lot of clapping, there with tears in the audience. Once again too young to know about the civil rights, as far as the importance of that moment, of that day, of that time. But I got to witness it. And I got to say that I was a part of it, you know, as a little kid.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:18] That's fabulous, that's an amazing story.

Gregory Johnson [01:18:19] Yeah

Kerry James Reed [01:18:23] So moving back a bit briefly, you said that you decided to go work at National instead of doing the play in Washington. How did you come to work at National?

Gregory Johnson [01:18:41] I actually went down to ask for a job. I started off as I wanted to be a flight attendant. Fly out of, to fly anywhere. I just wanted to be a flight attendant, fly anywhere, they may take me. So after that, they weren't hiring in that particular time, Eastern Airlines. And so I went asked, "Well, where they hiring?" And they said, "Well go talk to the person that's operating security, gate security." So I did, and they said, "Okay you're hired, you know, come back on this day." And they gave me a uniform, you know, and because I was working the Eastern gate I wore Eastern Airlines colors. And they gave me a uniform, shirt and tie, and a jacket and pants. So I went to work dressed up every day. So I enjoyed it. I like to say I was good at what I did, and as a teenager, I was very observant. So when they taught me how to use the quote, unquote "fluoroscope machine." That's what they called it back then was fluoroscope, I had the highest stop rate as a young kid there, then the adults that were working there. I was stopping illegal money, finding weapons, you know, stuff like that. This is even before the ban on weapons walking into the airport, you know. People would try to smuggle them in through, you know, the suitcase or the cash case. And then I even try to stop a high governmental agency, you know, one of those alphabet agencies, and I was quickly reprimanded for that.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:34] You said a fluoroscope machine?

Gregory Johnson [01:20:36] Yeah. X-ray machine.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:38] Oh. It's X-ray, okay.

Gregory Johnson [01:20:40] It was called fluoroscope at the time.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:42] Okay. Interesting, I didn't know that.

Gregory Johnson [01:20:44] Yeah, but it was the x-ray machine. It was a primitive x-ray machine. And so yeah, it was fluoroscope. Yeah, that's what they called it.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:57] So how did you come to know you wanted to join the Air Force then?

Gregory Johnson [01:21:03] Well, that's a good story. It all happened at National Airport actually. I saw this guy in uniform, and I had just walked away for lunch. And I saw this guy in uniform and I stopped him and I asked him. I said, "What branch you in?" And I'm used to seeing green, I never seen blue, and I like blue. And he told me. And then I said, "Well, what do you do?" And he said, "Well, I'm a security specialist." And I go, "Well what do they do?" And he began to tell me his story as we're walking towards his gate. And so my buddy on Patrick Street, Willie Talbot, I talked to him about it. I said, "Man, this guy looked sharp. He looked really sharp." He said, "We should, we should go join." And I said, "Yeah." 'Cause I need to do something, you know, because I wasn't right for Alexandria. I just knew it. Mentally, I was not right. Not in my neighborhood, I was not right for that, the mental part of it, you know. The things that be going on and been done, and this type of thing. I didn't have any hood in me. Growing up in the hood now, you try to figure that out. (Laughing). So I just wanted to go and test my wings, if you will, and that's what I did. So Willie Talbot and I went to the recruiting station. I took the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, scored pretty well on the test. And they said, "Well, you can go anywhere you want." But the airforce, that gave me the best story. Because the Marines just wanted a grunt and false promises, and I didn't want that. And the Army, I didn't want that, but I had a cousin who was married to an Air Force guy as well, and I had talked to him also about the Air Force. And he basically said, "That's where you fit in, Greg. Don't go to the Marines, don't go to the Army, go to the Air Force." And so that's when I joined the Air Force. And coming into the Air Force, here's a story for you. This is a great story because it's in time with what's going on now.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:17] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [01:23:18] I'm at the map station. That's where the military, everybody who's joining the Air Force have to go to this one place. And you going to do your oath of allegiance and raise your right hand and swear an oath and also get shot and all that other neat stuff. But anyhow, I had no fear of authority or rank because I didn't know what authority and rank was, you know. And I got into a big argument with the lieutenant about Palestine and Israel.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:48] Hmhm interesting.

Gregory Johnson [01:23:50] Back in 1978. Palestine and Israel. March of 1978. And I basically told them, "Well I think everybody needs a homeland, no matter who you are and stuff like that. And he was pro Israel and I was pro Palestine. And so we got into an argument. I mean, a literal argument and so anyway, it was time to go and raise my hand. And I went and raised my hand and it was time to go to the bus to ride to the airport. And he stopped me and he called me by my last name and I kept walking. And he said, he called me, "Gregory Johnson. Stop." And I stopped and he walks up to me and I said, "Yeah, what do you want?" He goes, "Oh, you can't say that no more." And I go, "What do you mean?" He says, "It's now yes sir, 'cause you raised your right hand." And I said, "Oh shoot," you know. And so he says, "And since you're so spirited, I'm going to give you this envelope. And in this envelope it's going to have every single airman that's going to be going to basic training the same day you are. And you're going to stop in Georgia and pick up people in

Georgia, and then you going to fly to San Antonio, Texas. And if you lose one person, we will have you court martialed."

Kerry James Reed [01:25:12] Oh wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:25:12] Yeah. And so we fly into Georgia, and then we fly into San Antonio. And I guess being kind of beaten up a little bit because, you know, I mean my mouth got me in trouble. I decided I'll stay in the back because I've seen movies before and how the TI's [training instructor] would come and yell at everybody.

Kerry James Reed [01:25:37] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:25:38] And mines came out and they called him the Grinch. And I was like, oh shoot, the Grinch, I don't like that nickname. And so he says, "Who's got the package?" And, "Is that the envelope? Whose current envelope?" So we all that had envelopes had to walk up to the front and give them the envelopes, and they would do the roll call of everybody in that envelope, and then they would tell you which way to go. Well, the guy I gave my envelope to, I was assigned to him. And so day 1 going in, we have a break in time where they just wanted us to break in and just relax a little bit and I did. And then the next day, they came in and they started teaching us, you know, marching orders and squad formations, this type of thing. And because that lieutenant had put a little note in that package, to the DA basically saying that I show signs of leadership, and I should be the dorm chief. And so without me knowing it and trying to avoid any kind of responsibility, I end up being dorm chief. And that was where my career started. I was in charge of 50 other guys.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:02] Oh, wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:27:03] Yeah. On weekends (Laughing). Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:09] When did you start working missile security?

Gregory Johnson [01:27:14] 1978 as well. I was assigned to Ellsworth in South Dakota. And I did one day on the flight line walking a B-52 and they pulled me immediately off the B-52. And because of my scores in marksmanship and all this other stuff. So they said, "Well, he'll be best out there in the missile field instead of walking around flight line." So I went to the missile field. The next day they assigned me to my missile flight, and I did a year and a half missile security.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:54] Interesting. When did you leave the service?

Gregory Johnson [01:27:59] 1986. I did eight years.

Kerry James Reed [01:28:03] 8 years, interesting. What did you do after you left?

Gregory Johnson [01:28:08] Well, after I left the Air Force, I stayed in Albuquerque for a little bit, then I went to Tampa, Florida. Thought I was going to get married to this one girl I was dating for a few years. And moved her back to Tampa, Florida, and when I got to Tampa, Florida, April Fool's, she didn't want me no more. And so I stuck around Tampa for three years working, making drywall,

driving a limousine, and designing fire suppression systems. I had three jobs because I had to get on my feet quick, you know?

Kerry James Reed [01:28:46] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:28:47] And then I met another woman there, got married, and she had three kids. Out the gate, she had three kids. And I kept talking about New Mexico and one day she said, "Well, that's where we going." And so that's where we came. We came back out here to New Mexico, and I've been here ever since 1990.

Kerry James Reed [01:29:14] Absolutely. That's fabulous.

Gregory Johnson [01:29:16] Yeah. My family didn't like it though 'cause I was so far out, you know. The question was, "Why're you want to move out there?" But I knew I couldn't fit in the neighborhood, you know, period.

Kerry James Reed [01:29:27] Right, right.

Gregory Johnson [01:29:28] And I didn't like the lifestyle that I grew up in around Virginia, Alexandria, and Fairfax of the racism that was prevalent, you know?

Kerry James Reed [01:29:39] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:29:39] So I came to New Mexico because there's brown people that looked like me, you know, and there's, you know, the Spanish food and tongue that I so admired from my first, previous girlfriend. That New Mexico was the place that I should be.

Kerry James Reed [01:29:59] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:30:01] And then from there I mean, I had a series of jobs coming into New Mexico. I started off as a trashman. I drove a trash pickup truck and picked up trash for the first 60 days that I was here in Albuquerque. I went to the state and applied for several jobs, and I got called up from Albuquerque Police Department, and they had gave me an academy date to start the police academy. But at the same time, the state called me too. And so it was just like, well what do I do? Do I want to carry a gun and work all these crazy shifts, or do I want to have weekends and holidays off? It was easy, weekends and holidays off. So I went to work for the state and I started off as a security supervisor for the state government computer mainframe system. So I had to develop security systems and stuff like that to protect that system. Then started doing work as a consultant for the state to other state agencies, to bring them up security wise. And got promoted to manager five level and started working with the museum from New Mexico last year security manager and security monument manager. Museum and monument, excuse me, manager, and did that for 10 years. And then when I got my first divorce, I mean mentally, my head wasn't in the game anymore.

Kerry James Reed [01:31:42] Right.

Gregory Johnson [01:31:43] So I packed up my box and my tablets up and I gave them, I think it was a 2 month warning that I was going to quit in two months, because I needed a little bit of money to get started over again. And was driving back to Albuquerque and stopped at a little small

casino in San Felipe. And was talking to the pit boss and he had seen my credentials hanging off, I forgot to turn the tags in. (Laughing). And he says, "You do security?" I go, "Yeah." And he says, "You know what, they're looking for a security guy. A surveillance guy and a safety guy." I say, "I can do all 3. Security, safety and surveillance." So I went and applied, got my gaming license, and started with San Felipe, and I worked with them for a few years until I made the mistake of busting the wrong person for theft. And I was packing my box again, going up the hill and Sandia Casino gave me a call. And they heard that I had just been released, so they wanted me. So I hadn't quit my job for more than two hours, and I'm getting another job.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:05] I know that's great.

Gregory Johnson [01:33:06] And I'm driving up. So they said, "Stop by the casino because you still got your gaming license and you would do the surveillance for it." So I did, and they started building a big hotel casino resort. So I was part of designing the camera, how the cameras were going to situate and protect the whole entire campus that they were building. And I did that for 2 more years. And once again gotta move on again, you know. But this time it was like, well I had to train somebody who didn't have the experience and I refused to do it and got fired basically.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:45] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:33:46] And then decided I go into business for myself. So I was an entertainer, and so this where the drama comes back in. I was an entertainer, and I brought karaoke to the state of New Mexico, and I had a standing room only show. Ask my brother Michael about it, he'll tell you about it. Had him get up when he came out to visit one time. But yeah, ask him about that, the karaoke show. And so I did really well in that. And I was doing that for 15 years.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:21] Oh, wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:34:21] Yeah, and I got tired of it because I start to see the people who were my first customers, kids coming in who were grown ups now, you know, and it's like, I've been in too long, I gotta get out of it. So I went into sales and I became a sales store manager for Mattress Firm. And I stayed with them for 16 years, you know, several times, manager of the year. Several times roving manager of the year, and several times selling over \$100,000 in mattresses.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:54] Wow.

Gregory Johnson [01:34:56] So I did that for, like I said, 16 years. And I finally decided I had enough. And so one day I'm driving, going to open my store, and I called the owner up. Said, "I quit." I mean, just I quit. And so I quit and caught myself retiring, and retirement lasted every bit of maybe 2 months. And I decided, I told my wife I want to go drive a shuttle bus. So, I'm gonna go down to the workforce and see if I get a shuttle bus driver job. Just something easy, you know. So I go down and I in process, and you know, they take my application and the next thing I know. Gary sat down. They say, "Well, you're a veteran." I go, "Yeah." And they go, "Are you a disabled veteran?" I go, "Yes, I've got, you know, 70% disability." He said, "There's a job here if you want it." And I said, "What is the job?" They say, "Well, you'll be a disabled veteran outreach specialist." And I said, "Yeah I'll try that." And so it's going on three years that I've been with them and had the

highest numbers in the nation of veteran placement. And I mean in the nation. You know, little small Albuquerque, who would have thought. Yeah so and they gave me an award about a month ago for having those numbers and stuff. And now I train also now. So now they got me on the road a lot, training new staff in the how to do the job. So yeah. So that's what I do. That's what I've been doing.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:52] That's fabulous. Well, thank you so much for the work that you do. That's terrific. So you say highest in the nation is that...

Gregory Johnson [01:37:01] Yeah, all states.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:03] Is that finding veterans jobs after they leave the service?

Gregory Johnson [01:37:06] Yeah, getting them jobs? First I enrolled them, so I had the highest enrollment rate. And then if, whatever barrier they had to employment, my job was to release that barrier to get it out of the way so that they can have a normal life. And have a lot of my clients with PTSD, like myself, I got PTSD. And I have a lot of homeless vets. I have several suicidal vets, I have a smorgasbord, if you will, of different barriers that these vets carry, and my job is to get them on the right road. Make them normal again, or halfway normal, and make them feel normal for a little bit. And so that's what I do.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:58] Yeah, absolutely. That's fantastic. So, Mr. Johnson, we've been talking now for about an hour and 45 minutes.

Gregory Johnson [01:38:06] What!? I didn't mean to talk that long.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:09] Nah, it's been fantastic. I'm absolutely enthralled with our conversation, it's been terrific. Before we move on to Douglass Cemetery though, is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to discuss?

Gregory Johnson [01:38:20] Oh. Well, you know, I told you about the PTSD I have. And that's the result of falling out of the helicopter.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:29] Oh my word.

Gregory Johnson [01:38:30] Yeah, well I didn't fall, I got pulled out. My tail rope got pulled out and I fell about 100 feet.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:39] Oh my gosh.

Gregory Johnson [01:38:40] Yeah, yeah. And so that's one of the things that really stays in back of me. And I don't think my family knows. But yeah, but word, so that's how I end up PTSD.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:59] Do you mind telling me when that happened, is that okay?

Gregory Johnson [01:39:03] Yeah, it's okay now. It was in 1985, one year prior to me leaving. I wanted to make a career, but 1985. And we were training for a mission. And so well I remember just shaking my head no because I threw my ropes out. We had a guy on the helicopter that had been retired, and he wanted one more flight. And the guy that's in charge of my team said, "Okay, you

can fly with these guys and stuff." And he gave the repel signal. It's like this. (Signaling). And I shook my head, no, but muscle memory he had me grab my ropes and throw. And they got connected to a high power and electrical line. And I had 5 safety tie downs. Hovering from the helicopter floor of that 5 forward, pulled out immediately, and the 5th was barely clinging. And then when the knot from the rope went through the opening of that old ring, that's when I went out completely. Straight down.

Kerry James Reed [01:40:25] Oh my word.

Gregory Johnson [01:40:26] Yeah, so.

Kerry James Reed [01:40:30] I'm sorry that you experienced that. Thank you so much for sharing. That's a very impactful story.

Gregory Johnson [01:40:43] I can talk about it now. But there was a time where I couldn't, I couldn't talk about it. And I thought I was going crazy. Because of the injuries that I sustained, it was tossed under the table, if you will. The report of me being in the hospital for that couple of hours, didn't make it to my files. Five years ago, one of the guys who was on the mission, he was in the jeep, taking pictures of the training event. And he got the picture of that moment of me coming out of the helicopter and the impact on the ground. And, so he's a SWAT [Special Weapons and Tactics] team instructor up in Greeley, Colorado. And one of my friends said, "Contact him. He's got the pictures." And I say, "He got pictures?" And goes, "Yeah." And so he sent me a big package, and I gave it to the VA [United States Department of Veterans Association] who had declined me since 1990, any kind of benefit or just getting a rating so I can go to the VA hospital. And he sent this out and I turned it to the Disabled American Veterans Office, and they got me my percentage. And then, three years ago, I got my hip replaced, where it was damaged, so I got that replaced. Here you go, that's the story.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:34] Well, I'm glad you finally got the aid that you deserve.

Gregory Johnson [01:42:37] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:38] My word.

Gregory Johnson [01:42:42] So back to Douglass.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:45] Yes, back to Douglass. So I know you mentioned that you had this idea that this Butler person, that Kerry Butler, that you saw on the gravestone when you were a kid that, you know, you had this awareness of this person might be related to you. When did you find out definitively that you had family buried at Douglass?

Gregory Johnson [01:43:12] I want to say about six months ago.

Kerry James Reed [01:43:18] Okay.

Gregory Johnson [01:43:19] Maybe six months ago. Well, since Michael started this project. I think it's been over six months. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:43:28] So when Mike first contacted you about Douglass and about his efforts to rejuvenate it, what were your first thoughts?

Gregory Johnson [01:43:49] I was happy. Right out the gate, I was happy because, like I said, I saw it in disrepair when I was a kid.

Kerry James Reed [01:43:57] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:43:58] So that someone's picking up the mantle to protect the integrity of the people who lived in Alexandria, died in Alexandria, family members who passed. And, you know, I mean it was, for me, it was something beautiful. Something, and not using the right word, but it was something that needed to be done. And I'm really happy to know that they are trying to get something done.

Kerry James Reed [01:44:35] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:44:36] But my faith in what Alexandria can do, it's not great.

Kerry James Reed [01:44:47] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:44:48] Because I know that if you don't have any weight of some heavyweight politician, or other heavyweight mentors, that project will disappear. The time and that land would be used for more apartment buildings.

Kerry James Reed [01:45:13] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:45:15] And they would be, out here in New Mexico, the one thing that and with me being around Natives, Native Americans, Navajos in particular, desecration of a grave is a big insult. And they have built over many Navajo graves out here and built houses and so forth. And it's something to take very seriously. Because if they can erase your ancestors, then they can erase you.

Kerry James Reed [01:45:51] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:45:53] You know, and so, I'm just glad to know that there's an effort, an honest effort being put forth to try to save, reclaim, find those missing bodies, you know. I'm quite sure I know where the missing bindings are. And that's going to be in some where they take all the dirty dirt and they go drop it in some landfill.

Kerry James Reed [01:46:20] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:46:21] You know, and I mean, I'm serious. I know that because, you know, where I live right now. And I get to give you a for instance, where I live now, we got a serial killer out here that killed 17 girls just in the same subdivision I live, where I live. And they held up building any more houses until they scoured the whole entire area where the houses were going to be built to make sure that there were no more bodies or bones. And then they found some ancient native bones just maybe 500 yards from my house. And so and it was those bones were given back

to the tribe for proper native burial. The person had died out in the middle of the desert, you know, type of thing. But they gave the bones back. And that would be my question is, if they can't find the bones, what are they going to do? Would they put a wall of those who were buried there with their names on so that there's a name that says they were here, but we don't know where they are now, but they were here. And that's important to me is to know, because I know that I've got more relatives than just that Butler name. I know I got Johnsons in there. I know I've got Poindexter's in there, you know, just from what little history I have been able to garner from myself. So I know that there's a lot of missing bodies, but the need to account for those missing bodies. And they need to, I mean, the people who own that property now, need to account for their mishandling of those bones. Because when you digging, you do find the bones, you'll find remnants of the caskets. You find something that says a person was buried here, interred here. But they didn't do it. And so now you're looking at a property that is earning money. And I'm gonna put it this way, you have a property on the property where my ancestors were interred, that are making money, by making those ancestors disappear. Okay, they are disappearing. And so something has got to be done as far as getting Douglass up to speed and getting the city, and maybe if you have to get to feds behind this, because this is important to wash away one's ancestry, is washing away me right now, you know.

Kerry James Reed [01:49:25] Yeah. I couldn't agree more along that same vein, what do you think community remembrance of ancestors does for the community?

Gregory Johnson [01:49:37] Well, I think community remembrance, it's a good thing if it's done correctly. It's a good thing to have that remembrance. But that remembrance can't work without accounting for all the bodies. It can't work. Only certain families would be able to say, yeah, I remember this. But how about the people who are long gone, who no longer live in that area. Their families moved out because they were forced out or something created to where their ancestors are now gone, so they're gone. So one of the things that I think would need to be done is definitely getting the names of all the people buried there. What you have currently, versus what was in the past. And then reaching out, because I think some of the families can be found in and around Manassas, around Culpeper, around Baltimore. Around those areas to families can be found. And I think that by putting this out, I mean, just have a very wide publicity or search for people who had relatives in Alexandria, Virginia. And what was their names, if they remember. Then that community remembrance will be fulfilled. But if we leave one person behind, if we leave 5 people behind, if we leave 20 people behind, we don't know how many people we're leaving behind, how many families will be left behind, you know. And that's something that needs to- I mean, I'm sure they kept records. There has to be a record of the burial, because you just can't bury a body anywhere, and just leave it and walk away. Because they had laws back then governing where you can bury a body, I know that much, you know. But community remembrance I would say if it's done with the spirit of reclaiming, done in the spirit of finding the, what's that word? Children, of the children, of the children. Finding their names and letting them know that hey, you know, you had a great, great, great aunt or great, great, great grandfather, or whatever the case may be. And they were buried here, but they're no longer here. But we wanted to tell you that we know they were here. If that becomes a destination spot for them to see. See that name on the wall, on whatever will be put up to remember those. Because it's easy to go and read some of the headstones. Yeah, that's good that some remain, but I know that there was more headstones than what is in that Douglass Cemetery now. I was back home in August, for a conference, and Mike had drove me by it, said, "There's

Douglass right there." And I'm going, "This doesn't look like Douglass." You know, it doesn't look like Douglass from my memory. It had more headstones. And like I said, where that apartment is, there were headstones over there. So I just know.

Kerry James Reed [01:53:37] So was August the last time you visited Douglass Cemetery, last August?

Gregory Johnson [01:53:45] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:53:47] Could you, you touched on it briefly, but if you could in more detail describe exactly the physical conditions of Douglass as you remember them.

Gregory Johnson [01:54:01] From August, I can say they were still in disrepair. I mean, they put a fence up, I think. I remember seeing a fence. I think maybe even a placard out front. I'm trying to think, if I remember seeing some type of marker saying Douglass Cemetery. Other than that, though. It's just there was more headstones than what I seen out there, just let me put it that way.

Kerry James Reed [01:54:38] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:54:38] But it doesn't look like, and maybe I'm wrong because I'm not there to see progress, maybe it's progressed. Maybe the city is getting behind it 100%, instead of lip service, you know. But I don't know. I don't know that, but I just know that it doesn't look like a lot of work was put into it, you know. Could it be because the community is now so dispersed and that there's not enough money coming in from volunteers to give money for the upgrade. Because the city's not gonna do nothing unless somebody else outshines them.

Kerry James Reed [01:55:25] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:55:26] Okay. So I work with state, so I know how the government works, you know. I know how they work.

Kerry James Reed [01:55:35] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [01:55:36] How many headstones, by your count, is there now?

Kerry James Reed [01:55:41] Headstones. I want to say it's in the 400's, but I know that there are over, I think of the records that we have, I want to say over 2, 200 people buried there. Just of the records that we have which, you know, the cemetery goes back to the 1860s, 1870s. I'm sure that the actual numbers exponentially higher. But just off the records, I think it's a little over 2000. So in my head when I'm thinking about coming down Wilkes Street, and I'm seeing Douglass, you have those 3 or 4 rows of headstones and they're small closer to the street. And then those are maybe 50 each, and you have that big sort of gap I guess, and the gazebo is at the end of it, and then on the other side there are a couple more rows about 50 each. If I just had to ballpark it, so I'd say roughly about 400.

Gregory Johnson [01:56:54] Yeah. So you can see from my memories, that cemetery was bigger. And as I said, the one thing I had is a head for spacial numbers.

Kerry James Reed [01:57:11] Yeah, yeah.

Gregory Johnson [01:57:13] I could look in that space and say, and looking back in my memory, I thank God I've been blessed with a long memory, just looking back, and it was a big cemetery. It was bigger than Christ Church. If I was to do a compare against, it was bigger than Christ Church. And I don't know how many in Christ Church, but it was bigger than that one. And remember that, you know, there was black people dying every day. That's how green made us it's millions, you know. You know, there's black people dying every day. So I mean, if you were to and there was only a few cemeteries that they could be buried in, period. Period. So yeah. What I remember of Douglass was it was bigger, it was much bigger. It was much bigger. And that's a shame because when I had heard about the number of missing people, you know, it actually saddened me. I mean, I actually have sadness and because it's just like you can you disrespected these people in life, you know, they got the short end of the stick on everything. They were held back from reaching their fullest potential, and only a lucky few could ever make it in Alexandria. Just a lucky few. And then in death you do totally just cover them up, take them up and put them somewhere else, without even letting families know that this is going to happen. Did that ever happen, where they told the families of, I mean, to tell the families that the relatives of the people who were buried there? Did they tell them anything about the construction going on down there? Or was it like one day they saw a big hole and a building going up?

Kerry James Reed [01:59:36] From everybody that I've talked to. So the cemetery stopped being active sometime in the 70s. I want to say '78, '76. And around that time a pipe was put into Douglass to deal with water overflow, I want to say. That's when the flooding issues started to arise. But I think the city records show a couple of complaints, but nothing was ever really, really done. There was no force like the kind your brother initiated. And then when those condominiums that are right next to it got built, I want to say, the 90s and the early 2000 was when that happened. To the best of my knowledge, there was nothing was said. But the city has gotten behind it. After we conclude the interview, I'll send you some materials about our most recent meeting, or you can ask or you can ask your brother for them. The plans to stop the flooding and, you know, make Douglass a respectable cemetery once again. But you mentioned earlier, I think it was in the first 15 minutes maybe when we first started recording, how you had been doing some of your own research after learning about the Douglass Initiative. And I was wondering if you could speak to that a little bit. Just how has, you know, learning about Douglass and know thinking about your family members interred there, how was that prompted your own research into your own family history?

Gregory Johnson [02:01:25] Okay, give me one second. I want to turn on the lights.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:28] Okay, no problem.

Gregory Johnson [02:01:28] I'm sitting in the dark now. The sun just went down out west here. And if you don't mind, I'll run to the bathroom real quick.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:47] Of course, no problem at all.

Gregory Johnson [02:03:09] Okay. Sorry about that wait.

Kerry James Reed [02:03:19] That's no problem.

Gregory Johnson [02:03:22] So, anyway, would you rephrase your question, please?

Kerry James Reed [02:03:25] Yeah. How has learning about Douglass and the Douglass Initiative prompted your own research into your family history?

Gregory Johnson [02:03:33] Well, there's still a lot that I'm trying to find.

Kerry James Reed [02:03:36] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:03:38] Because, you know, I know my father's father's father. And I don't know where my Uncle Jack's buried and my Uncle Calvin is buried. I don't know where they're both buried. People that I know personally in the family on my father's side. So I don't know where they're buried. I'm hoping it wasn't Douglass but chances are it was Douglass. And I'm thinking that if Mike had found Uncle Jack and all the other his brothers and everything, he would've mentioned something about it. So I'm thinking there's some other missing in the graveyard.

Kerry James Reed [02:04:37] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:04:39] And when I go into the Alexandrivaa.gov and I go into the cemetery, I don't find much information to go off of. I'm hoping that through Michael's research that we can trace further back to the first arrival of the Johnsons in Alexandria.

Kerry James Reed [02:05:03] That would be fabulous.

Gregory Johnson [02:05:04] That would be great for me. Something I can pass on. I would like to see that, you know. I'd like to see that.

Kerry James Reed [02:05:14] Yeah, absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [02:05:16] And not disappear. (Laughing). Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [02:05:20] Certainly. Glad that is something we're actively trying to prevent. And your interview, the conversation we've had tonight will go a long way toward preventing that sort of disappearance in the future. Because it's just been so unjust what has happened to the people buried at Douglass. Mr. Johnson we've been talking for two hours now.

Gregory Johnson [02:05:45] Yeah. (Laughing)

Kerry James Reed [02:05:47] It has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you this evening, and I'm sure you want to eat dinner and you want to do some other things, so I'll let you go here in a minute. But before I do I just have one or two closing questions, if that's okay.

Gregory Johnson [02:06:01] Yeah. That's okay.

Kerry James Reed [02:06:02] So firstly, we've talked about this at length, but just something maybe a little concise. What are your hopes for Douglass Cemetery moving forward?

Gregory Johnson [02:06:17] Moving forward, I think my hopes of this is that, one, that we do locate those missing. And two, that some kind of wall or stone is erected to where they have the names of the missing. Three, I want to see an apology from the construction people or the contractors who built this thing, who built over a grave, a sacred spot, you know. Everybody else has a sacred spot, then why can't my people have a sacred spot, you know. And four, the city of Alexandria to really put an honest effort and put out news releases on the updates and improvement because the news releases are not coming out. They're coming, you know, sporadically, you know, 1 month here, maybe 3 months, 4 months down the road there. And you can't get anybody interested if that information's not being bombarded. We are in an age of information technology.

Kerry James Reed [02:07:33] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:07:34] And there's no reason why that this information can't be bombarded into the communities in and around Alexandria. Because I'm sure that those are people who have people, who had people there, buried at Douglass. And I think once that front is united to a point where it's overwhelming because, you know, we're looking at 2,000 families. And then if you multiply generational, the average family was, back in those days four to five people, you know, the numbers start to double and then they triple, you know, by the time we reach 1978, you know, we're talking 10,000 people.

Kerry James Reed [02:08:25] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:08:27] And I don't think that 10,000 people is getting all that information, because I know that if they were getting this information, they would come out in strength. And that's what's gonna get this ball rolling to a point of finalization, completion. And where the healing of the missing can begin, you know. And that's important to me because now I'm feeling the missing. And prior to Douglass' project, I didn't have that feeling. But it's now with me. You know, I don't know how much longer I have on this earth, but it would be great to know that I've got some kind of healing from this, you know, from this. And I know that there is going to be other families out there who're looking for that healing.

Kerry James Reed [02:09:24] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:09:25] That sense of being, you know, because, you know, if not, you know, we might as well just revert back to the slavery days where we didn't know anything, you know. We didn't know where our parents or uncles and aunties were buried, and cousins, you know. Everybody has a right to know their ancestry.

Kerry James Reed [02:09:50] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:09:50] Everybody has that right. And that includes where they're interred. Everybody has that right. And if that right is not going to be fulfilled, then there's going to be a lot of disappointment. And maybe I won't ever make it back to Alexandria, but I'm hoping to live long enough to see Douglass reclaim some of its people.

Kerry James Reed [02:10:19] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [02:10:21] So that's about my thoughts on that right now, you know.

Kerry James Reed [02:10:26] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:10:27] I'd have to think deeper on it.

Kerry James Reed [02:10:29] Of course.

Gregory Johnson [02:10:30] That's it right now.

Kerry James Reed [02:10:32] And then along the same vein, how would you like to see the city treat black history moving forward?

Gregory Johnson [02:10:40] That it's Alexandria history. They talk about the Scott's that settled Alexandria, but there was people before the Scott's came to Alexandria. And there were people who built Alexandria, who built the wharves, who built the town hall, who built George Washington's estate. Who built all these things that get national, worldwide attention, but at the same time the people who built those are left missing. They need to tell the history and tell it honestly.

Kerry James Reed [02:11:18] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:11:19] You know, and I think if and from my perspective, if I know they're honestly doing something that makes me feel better.

Kerry James Reed [02:11:28] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:11:29] You know, and I'm sure that my ancestors would feel better wherever their spirits may be. They would feel better, too.

Kerry James Reed [02:11:37] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [02:11:38] And then like I said, I got kids. And one day, you know, they're going to have kids. And then I would like for them to know, you know, just exactly where my side of the family comes from, you know. Unfortunately, it's my father's side because my mother was from Georgia. But, you know, I still have relatives on my mother's side who were in Alexandria that passed prior to 1978.

Kerry James Reed [02:12:15] Yeah.

Gregory Johnson [02:12:16] So. But that's about it sir.

Kerry James Reed [02:12:21] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [02:12:24] Any more questions? I'm willing to talk for another three hours. (Laughing).

Kerry James Reed [02:12:31] I just have one more, the ultimate question that we ask everybody at the end. On a happier note, if you could hold onto one memory forever, what would that memory be?

Gregory Johnson [02:12:46] Oh, gosh. A forever memory. In relationships to..?

Kerry James Reed [02:12:53] It could be whatever, it could be whatever.

Gregory Johnson [02:12:57] Well one of the memories, I got all kinds of memories. But if I was to keep it on subject to Alexandria, it would be the moves that I remember twice. I remember as a baby us moving to 1321 Queen Street, and my mother put me up on top of a dresser drawer and she had some body powder. And I was sitting up there and I started eating the body powder and had it all over my face and stuff, and she yelled, "No!" at me, "No, no, no." And then the other one would be when we were moving to 720 Patrick Street, and we had a bigger space to live, bigger than what we left. And I remember the day we moved. And my uncles helping us move, and the painting that my dad was doing prior to us moving in. And so that's a couple of memories in relationship to Patrick Street and Queen Street. Those two memories, I'll never forget those. And then the last memory is surviving the helicopter.

Kerry James Reed [02:14:22] Absolutely.

Gregory Johnson [02:14:23] So that would be, I think, you know, life and death situations always make you remember one way or the other. (Laughing). But yeah, so it would be the helicopter accident.

Kerry James Reed [02:14:37] It's perfect. Well, Mr. Johnson, I want to thank you so much for speaking with me this evening. It's been an absolute blessing, it's been a pleasure. So I'm going to end the recording and just stay on with me for 1 more minute. But again, thank you so much.

Gregory Johnson [02:14:50] Okay.