

Interviewer:

Interviewee: Larscene Turk

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That's correct. You've been near someone who knows me very well because you are right on target.

It was 1949 – 1950.

That's correct. I grew up in a little place, a village called Loachapoka which was an Indian village right outside of Auburn Alabama near Notasulga which was another Indian town and it was a farm on which I was raised.

[01:38]

Yeah, prior to even hearing about Talladega, I was kind of like going to and from school with my older brother and sister and it was kind of a babysitting thing if you will. I didn't have a babysitter so my grandmother with whom I lived would just allow me to go to the school and of course the school did not object to my coming along with them although I wasn't learning anything but at least I wasn't having to stay home alone but doing that I did learn something. It's kind of like something will rub off on you. I learned my ABC's and how to count and things like that and spell fairly well because I would listen to the other kids in the classroom and I was learning that way. I never was able to read anything or write anything so I was very much limited as to how much I was learning but during that time there was a lady in our community. She was as they called them at that time a white lady who told us, my grandmother and me, about the school in Talladega and told us that they would take us up to see it although they had not been up there but they had heard a lot about it and evidently had seen some of the advertisements on it and convinced my grandmother to let me go. And of course my mother who was in the picture also was more or less kind of nonchalant at that time because my grandmother was kind of the main one in our family and so she just said to my mother, yeah, we're going to let them take him up there and we're going to go with him and see just what's up there because we want him to learn something and sure enough, this family, this white family took us in their car and took us to Talladega and that was our first encounter with the school and it turned out very well.

[04:09]

It was although they told me I didn't do much crying because I was always an outgoing person wanting to meet new people and try new things and all that kind of thing so although it was

lonely I must say but I managed to spend the night of trying to read and feel Braille and all that kind of thing. That's what they told me it was, those dots and all those kinds of things so I would always do something to kind of occupy myself when the lights would go out until such time as I was able to fall off to sleep and we were in a dorm where our beds were relatively close together so it wasn't like I was in a room by myself and all of that. So I was always around a lot of other young boys around my age. So that kind of helped a lot and I did get to go home every once in a while.

[05:44]

Well by me being so young and not having been exposed to anything of a curricular for the blind, my assessment would not be the best one but for me I learned. That's when I started learning Braille but of course I might go back and tell you that I didn't start school at age six. I was eight years old when I started because that was when I heard about the school but I did play catch up. Oh, how about that. So I started off learning Braille and really how to count and how to write with what they call a slate and I guess they called it an awl at that time but now the same little punch thing they called it a stylus but then we called it a slate and awl. So to me that was a major accomplishment that I was able to write something in code, feel something with my fingers and found that it was making sense and I was really putting letters together to form words and that was something that really turned me on. So I didn't get exposure to the manual things, trade oriented at that time. I guess I was just too young to know much about that.

[07:30]

Absolutely. Absolutely. Based on the fact that I guess I got a lot of my energy and enthusiasm from my brother and sister knowing that they were reading print books and now here I am learning how to read Braille and I was then able, each time I would go home to at least talk to them on a much higher level about words and beginning to make sentences and what have you. My expectations then were beginning to rise but at that time I never dreamed of some of the things outside of learning how to read and write Braille. I never dreamed of what I really wanted to be at that age in life other than being able to relate and talk to others on their level.

[08:31]

Yes, absolutely in fact I was involved in the chorus and in the third grade or fourth grade around that age and grade I did get some exposure to the piano. I learned how to make cords and read a little simple Braille music. Braille music was a little different than just literary Braille. It took a lot of little symbols and what have you. I did have some exposure to that but not that much. It didn't appear to me that that was something I really wanted to do but I think it was a requirement that we at least had some exposure to that.

[09:35]

Well tell you the truth I would say generally no but we did have a choir, we did have quartets on campus, but to be encouraged even if you appeared to have a talent that would take you someplace or a gift, there was no one pushing us in that direction but we would get the opportunity to go off campus in a group, quartets or with our choir and sing at a church or sometimes at maybe some other function under the leadership of our supervisors or teacher, our music teacher or what have you. But on the weekends our quartets, we would mostly sing around on campus or for our what we call our vesper services or our chapel services and that was on Sunday mostly and that was it.

[10:56]

Well I would hear of some of our graduates moving. A few of them went to college and some, a few went into what they call the vending stand or into the small stands in the projects or some of the housing developments or what have you and those were basically the only ones that you would hear of. Every once in a while I would hear of one of our graduates going into the field of social services. One went to the Lighthouse in New York and another may have gone to Alabama State or some other college to become a college graduate but to say they knew exactly what they were going to do once they got out, there weren't that many. We had a couple to go to become a rehab counselor. We have one to also go into the recording industry, Clarence Carter who was in the rock blues industry now. He is still performing and he was back there prior to my coming. He was in school there and he lives in Atlanta now and he's still doing quite well.

[12:31]

Well I had one teacher there name Miss Christopher who was very instrumental in shaping my destiny if you will. I guess she saw something in me that suggested that I could do more than maybe run a vending operation or become a broom maker or something like that and encouraged me to pursue higher educational opportunities once I got out of high school which I almost didn't do because as I began to grow in knowledge and of course in age and experiences once I would come home during the weekends or during the Summer I knew that there were some things that I wanted to do and that I could do in spite of what others may have felt or thought and this teacher would always make sure that I got all that she had to offer in so far as good English skills and good spelling skills, etc., etc. and social skills and what have you. So with all of those things going for me, there was one gentleman who was also in her class who did extremely well and he was an orator and always encouraged me to go with him off campus to the libraries which we were allowed to do on the weekends and I began to start doing some public speaking and speech writing and what have you and so I saw then that I could do it and I began to get encouragement from my church when I would come home to do some speaking and what have you and teaching of some of the classes and this just gave me that something that I needed in order to say that hey you can do it, all you need is an opportunity but I knew that I wasn't going to get much help at that time from anyone other than my inner strength and whatever else.

[14:57]

Well after high school they encouraged me to become a masseur at that time which is now called massage therapy and so I accepted what the State of Alabama would assist me in becoming and I vowed that I would accept that but move on into more or less the educational opportunities and so I went to Kansas City Missouri and I studied to become a massage therapist and I practiced in the States of Kansas and Missouri and my sister who lived in Los Angeles encouraged me to come out there and I did that and I applied for the rehab program in Los Angeles and of course I was accepted as a rehab candidate out there and that's where I became my collegiate career and got my Associate of Arts degree at the city college there right out from Braille Institute of America on Vermont Street in Los Angeles. After getting that I went to California State East LA for a couple of semesters and while there I served as the junior volunteer coordinator at the Braille Institute for bringing sighted and blind youth together for educational and cultural activities during the summer and I met a lot of the stars out there and I got an opportunity to take a part in the Marcus Welby medical doctor series while out there and I decided then that I wanted to come back to my home State of Alabama and see what I could do and I did and I was able to get some support from the department of vocational rehabilitation where I finished my undergraduate degree at Auburn in social studies and then I pursued and was able to get my masters in education and of course had an opportunity to work for the department of vocational rehabilitation as a counselor and then after moving from there I was able to also work for Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind but before getting those last two jobs I just mentioned I had the opportunity to live in Philadelphia for a few years where I worked for the department of vocational rehab there and also for the associated services for the blind as a what they call an informational specialist. Right now I'm working for the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind as one of the directors of one of our regional centers so I am the director of the Birmingham regional center.

[18:01]

We provide services such as I should say Braille, services for deaf adults. We have an early intervention program at my center where we provide services for children ages birth up to three years old and we also have an activities of daily living which is an independent living program where we work with adults in teaching some adults who may have lost their vision late in life or students who are transitioning from high school to college who may need some brush ups in cooking, grooming, resume writing and you name it and we teach it there to make sure that blind and or low vision clients are able to move into another phase of their life whether it be college, whether it be work or whether it be living on their own or what have you.

[19:09]

Well believe it or not, when I was in school, the boys, we had the big boys and the little boys and I was one of the little boys that always wanted to be like the big boys so I would listen to those

guys sing in the quartets and all and I wanted to be like them so I got an opportunity to sing in the quartets along with them. Once some of them graduated I would always come up in the ranks and I was also offered an opportunity to go on the road in my twelfth grade year back in high school to go on the road with Clarence Carter but I chose not to do that because I wanted to get my education and so but each time I would come home during the Summer having had the opportunity while in school to have access to piano's and all of that kind of thing we would just sit down on the weekend and bang on them and I would try to imitate some of the other guys and what have you and I learned enough chords to begin to play and so I started playing for churches with the little bit that I knew when I'd come home on the weekends and so it got good enough that I started singing and when I got married, my wife, we've been together now 37 years, she is sang also and we just started singing together and decided that we wanted to do an album and my wife and I and of course a couple of our children and a couple of other friends of ours got together and we did our first recording CD about three or four years ago.

[20:40]

Well in and around Birmingham. I play a little bit for the church that I'm now attending and I played for a couple of churches in the area since I've been back and I played some when I lived in Philadelphia also. So whenever I'm asked and a lot of times I'll sing for weddings or different other kinds of performances. In fact, I'll be singing for the ADA, Americans with Disabilities 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary here at the McWayne Center here in Birmingham on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

[21:25]

Well the fact that I confessed my belief at an early age and I always try to live what I talk about as well as what I sing about. I get a lot of intrinsic gratification in knowing that what I do not only touches me but it touches the hearts of others and I always want to say I want to be that example through which and by which others may see a better way and to get that encouragement and that strength from sometimes when they don't have it, to be able for them to move on and say to themselves they can do it. They can overcome just like I have. I mean I started on a farm drawing water and picking cotton and gathering other kinds of produce and now look at me now. So I can always say to them if I did it, you can do it and help them to know what it takes for them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

[22:52]

It is. I must say. I have that servant mentality. I think I was born to serve, born to disciple someone else and to share and to give back. The more you give the more you receive and that's my motto. It wasn't all meant for me and I'm not satisfied in knowing that I'm okay if I know that someone else is not okay then I ask myself what can I do to help them to become okay. That's the only way. I think that's the way humanity should live because no man is an island and

no man stands alone and in order for things to work like they should, it's enough for all of us but we just have to find a way to share it.

[24:23]

Well I don't know that I have just said more or less "why me" but I often look at it as an opportunity and as well as a blessing that I was made and given what I was given because it makes me different from a lot of others and that difference can make a difference in the lives of others and so I'm grateful. A lot of times I might say if I want to go someplace and have to wait for someone, sometimes I say well if I could only drive I wouldn't have to wait or if I need something read then that has been almost reduced to a nuisance now because there are so many machines out there now that I can get something that will read most things for me and I don't have to wait on someone else to read it so I'm not troubled or that does not bother me that much now. So but the fact that I am different, I do a lot of things differently because of not being able to see. It's an opportunity to really share new experiences and new horizons and new opportunities with those who can see or may have some other disability because once they see me doing this or doing that they may say well hey, I think I want to go to school to learn how to work with the blind or the low vision or what have you and I've inspired several kids when they were coming up to go into a career that they otherwise probably would not have gone into just as a result of being different or having to do things differently.

[27:29]

Well to answer the first part of that question, it makes sense from the perspective of those who look at or feel that a blind person has these "extra senses" if you will but that isn't so. It's just that if you use your eyes and I don't use mine and if all of the sudden I was able to see what you see it would just mean that I'm using my eyes now as opposed to my ears or my hands. It doesn't make me or you any different and make you any more special or me any more special because of how we do things. It's just that I have to use one sense more than you have to use that sense or you may use that sense I'm using, my ears if you will, I listen for a whole a lot of things that you don't necessarily listen to. It doesn't mean that you can't hear them. But I depend on those for travel, etc. and you depend on your eyes, I can't open my ears any more than they're already open but if you close your eyes, your ears begin to kind of kick in if you will for you and help you. I can talk about things now that I'm hearing and then you begin to hear them or listen for them and you hear them. But in so far as getting over with an audience I guess since an audience, the audiences have also been of the mindset that if you lose one sense or if you don't have the one sense the other one is just stronger, well it just means that you use it. It doesn't mean that all of the sudden since my eyes have gone numb my ears are going to become a really just something is going to happen magically in there. I have to train them to listen for those things I would have otherwise seen. So I guess I don't know if that answered your question.