INTERVIEW OF DR. JULIUS COMBS

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q What was it about the West Side that resulted in so many people such as yourself, John Conyers, Damon Keith, and so many other people going on to bigger and better things?

A I think it basically was that quality of community where the entire neighborhood was involved in seeing that all the values, the morays, the ethics, were being followed; that the children were expected to achieve. The parents had this notion that you have to do better than I did. They were totally behind it and did not accept no for an answer. That is the basic thing. There was no alternative. Some escaped. I can remember a couple of neighbors who got in trouble and joined the Army. All in all it was just that kind of parental community involvement in your development that made things happen. I can think about folks just in my block who became physicians, educators, going on to school administrators just in my little block on Hazelett; that was almost universal.

Q So this concept of a village -

A The concept that it takes a village to raise a child was not spoken in that sense. It was acted out on a day-to-day

basis. You could not step out of line because anybody had the right and duty to make sure you stayed in line, not just your parents, and no one hesitated to make sure that you stayed in line.

Q Would you say you were in a sheltered kind of environment?

A I don't say it was sheltered. I would just say it was more or less controlled. We weren't sheltered. We were exposed, taken places, wherever we could go and the family could afford. It was the entire community working towards the same basic objective.

Q I imagine this community helped you through whatever obstacles may have come your way?

A We didn't think about obstacles. I tell people all the time that I didn't realize that we were poor until I was a sophomore at Wayne. That was the year that I didn't have to work because I had done the summer at the Ford Motor Company. I should say that was a semester. I went to the cafeteria in the Student Center to get my little half pint of milk to go with my brown bag. I noticed that people were buying food in the cafeteria. That struck me as strange because I wondered where they got the money to be able to go through the cafeteria line and buy food and then go to school. Then not being a severe dummy, it suddenly came to me, “they are not poor; you are.” I would say that that was part of the neighborhood. We never felt any obstacles or were aware of it. We were supposed to do things, and that was just it, that realization finally hit me.

Q Now you spent the summer working in the factory?

A Oh, yes.

Q Tell us about that.

A Well, what was interesting was the Production Foundry of the Ford Motor Company in the Rouge. I had never been in a factory. Secondly, I had never been exposed to this kind of labor.

The first night there was another fellow who I knew who was at University of Michigan, and who was also a person that ran long distance track. He was a little bity fellow. So the first night we were on, they put us on this crankshaft line. Now, a crankshaft had come out of the molding and went through a shakeout where they knock all of the sand off this rough crankshaft. It would come out of there and it was our job to take the crankshaft off of this one line and hang it on the other line. Well, now I probably weighed at that time somewhere around 170. I think Aaron Gordon probably weighed around 130. The crankshafts, when they came out of there, weighed 105 pounds. Now the person that broke us into this job was probably about 6'4 and weighed about 250 and had arms like you couldn't believe. So he stood in this little V between these two lines and he put these crankshafts one to the other as if he was playing with some kind of toy. So they put me in there and, of course, I grabbed one of the crankshafts and tried to turnaround and hang it on the line. Well, anyhow the line got so backed up they had to take us off and send us to Labor Relations. They kept moving us around and I finally ended up on this small parts molding machine. I stayed there for the rest of the summer. But, it was interesting. I think I got my best honor point average for my entire four year career at Wayne State. I think I had one C out of five classes. I mean that was inspirational. I said, I am not going to do this like my old man.

Q Tell us something about race relations growing up?

A Well, it was not something about which we had a great level of consciousness. I would say while I was at Sampson Elementary there was one African-American teacher: Mrs. Coates. When I was at McMichael Intermediate, there were none. When I was at Cass Tech, there were none. My entire career as an undergraduate at Wayne State, there were none. The first African-American Instructor I met when I was a Resident on Obstetrics and Gynecology in the Wayne State Program was Dr. Addison Prince. Other than that, I had none. At Sampson there were a few Caucasian students, not many. When I was at McMichael there was about 50/50. Cass Tech, at that time, was probably somewhere around 90% to 10%. It never was a problem because there was not any other interaction except on the school campus. So I never saw it as a problem. There were some things that we didn't do. There were restaurants, Greenfields a chain; they didn't serve African-Americans. You knew that so you didn't go there. Other than that I never had a real kind of confrontation on any kind of a racial basis at any time. Now, in some other instances they were there, and you found out about it. It was not a day-to-day awareness that you had.

Q So when the McGhees moved into that house on the West Side--

A On the other side of Tireman?

Q On the other side of Tireman.

A My mother used to work over there doing day work. So that was an event.

Q What do you remember about that?

A I just vaguely remember it. I knew Orsel but it was not something again that you had any real consciousness of. You knew that they moved across Tireman, and that was it. I didn't have any other feelings one-way or the other about it at that time, probably was too young for that to penetrate.

Q Within the West Side, within the black community there, tell us something about class relations within the black community on the West Side. Let me ask it this way: The term, elite, what did that mean exactly?

A We didn't have any elites on the West Side.

Q Okay.

A Because most of the people there with whom I am familiar, their folks were probably working at factory kind of jobs. Very few had gotten past high school, I would imagine, in terms of education. So we didn't have any of that kind of structure that affected us, at least it didn't affect me. I never encountered any of that sort.

Q You mentioned before the Sampson School Reunion later this week. What is it about the school that created that kind of bond between students that, as a result, many years later having reunions that people show up to and have a good time at?

A I think it all relates back just to the neighborhood, if nothing else, and the fondness that people have in their memories of growing up and starting off in that neighborhood. I don't know if that kind of camaraderie or delight in those memories exist in many other places. Jerry Blocker got the Westsider thing really moving. Some other areas have attempted to do that. I don't think they have achieved that because I don't really believe in my heart of

hearts that the spirit that existed on the West Side existed in any of these other areas. I am just not convinced that it did. So that makes a big difference.

Q You mentioned that you went to Cass Tech. Physically, how did you get to Cass?

A I had a teacher in the 9th grade, the Intermediate School now Middle School, ended at the 9th grade; high school started at 10th grade. I was informed that "you must go to Cass Tech." I had no idea where Cass Tech was. She said, I had to do that, and it was not my role in life or anything else to question what a teacher told me to do. So I went home, told my mother whatever her name was, said I must go to Cass Tech. So then we had to find out where Cass Tech was, and that is where I went; that is how I ended up there.

Q How did you get there on a day-to-day basis as a student?

A Well by this time I was living on Lawton. We had moved from Hazelett, but still on the West Side. We still had streetcars then. So I had to take the Crosstown streetcar to Grand River and take the Grand River streetcar to Henry, and get off and there you were at Cass Tech.

Q Were there other folks that lived on the West Side that would take the same route?

A Oh, yes.

Q Who are some of the people that you might be on the streetcar with?

A Well, there was a guy who was my best man, who

grew up and starting on Hazelett and they moved on Lawton. He was going to Cass. There weren't many others, but you picked up people on Grand River, because they were coming from all down the line. For instance, there was the guy named Thama Rowell. I am not sure where Thama started. His subsequent wife, Irene Ellis, also picked her up on the Grand River. There were a bunch of us. It was a nice ride and it allowed you to get a good part of your homework done from leaving school to geting home; so it was good.

Q West Side; how has it changed?

A Well, I guess it changed because fortunately or unfortunately, many, many, many of us grew up and moved on. That was the major change that occurred. Now I still had patients when I was practicing, who had grown up subsequent to the time that I was there and they still had the same kind of feel for the neighborhood. But when I drive through there now…For instance, I took my son through there to show him where I started; it is totally different. There are old buildings and I am sure they predated the 20s. There were frame houses in the main and over time they have just simply decayed and/or people moved away and left them vacant. I know on my block most of the houses were two-family flats, which meant that somebody owned them, probably somebody who was not a resident. So rental property always is in danger, and I think that is part of the danger there. There are lots of vacant spaces where houses used to be.

Q So when you were growing up many people owned their own homes?

A No, no. When we lived on Hazelet, my folks didn't own

that flat. The folks who lived above us didn't own it. I think the people next door, Mr. and Mrs. Harris, they might have owned their home, because it was a single house. I don't think the Tribbles who lived next to them, no, they didn't own that house. I know the Fosters who lived next to them didn't own that house. The Metcalfs didn't own that house. So it went right down the line. So there were very few owners, and that's what changed my situation. My folks finally got whatever it took to buy a house. So they bought this house on Lawton, and we moved out.

Q Okay. What do you tell your children now about the West Side, about growing up on the West Side?

A Oh, I tell them that it was a real community and the fact that everyone had a part of you. There was nobody who didn't have a part of you. You could be anywhere, and if you were doing something untoward somebody was going to tell you about it, stop you, and report it. We kind of had a similar experience with our children when I was living in Palmer Woods. We had a lot of folks around our age with children around the same age. We imposed the same kind of thing on them. Nobody called an adult by their first name. That is just something you don't do. Nobody would talk back to an adult and so forth. It carried over and they did well with it. That was a continuation, if you will, of that entire neighborhood philosophy that we took with us with our own children.

Q Do you have any final thoughts about the West Side and growing up there?

A Well, I think you would like to sometimes speculate and say I wonder where I would be if...It is difficult for me to even have that speculation. I wonder sometimes where I

would be had it not been for that neighborhood. I tried to wonder, but I can't imagine not having the influences of that neighborhood. So it one of those unanswerable questions. That is my final thought. I would imagine that most who grew up in that era and that area would have the same kind of feelings.

Q Okay. All right.

Dr. Combs, how did your family move to the West Side in the first place; where are they from originally?

A Originally my father is from Georgia, somewhere near Macon. My mother is from the Clarksville, Tennessee area. Somehow or another they both migrated to Detroit and met somewhere in Detroit, probably through a mutual friend that they had. The friend probably was a couple that attended Second Baptist Church where they both took up membership. This is probably how they got from the south to Detroit and then subsequently met each other and subsequently got married.

Q Now why Detroit as opposed to --

A Now I have never asked that except remember now, the Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford started out sometime before that paying outrageous wages of like five dollars a day. This was a significant attraction, not only to whites but to blacks to move from the south because of this economic stimulus that was going on in the factory. So that is probably what got my father there. Now, my mother was just looking for a way off of the farm. So that's how she got here.

Q What kind of work did they do when they got here?

A Well, my father worked for thirty-three years in the Production Foundry of the Ford Motor Company. My mother started off doing day work and some of her stories are she had never seen an electric iron before moving to Detroit. These are things that she had to learn very quickly in order to do this kind of work, which she did. And then came WW2 and the great recruitment of women into the manufacturing areas in town. So she then got a job working for the Chrysler Motor Company basically for what is known as Mopar now Motor Parts. So that is what they did.

Q Did your father talk about what it was like working in the foundry at Ford?

A Well, he talked about it being hard and dirty and we could see that by how he looked when he came home. And he talked about the fact that he didn't wish to see us in that kind of situation.

Q So that had some influence on why you didn't go into the factory for work?

A Well, as I have said I went there for a summer. That was enlightening. It gave me a great deal more respect for my father because of what he had to endure on a daily basis by working in that institution.

Q When your mother worked at Chrysler, what kind of work did she do there?

A She worked on a power sewing machine for a long, long time. They were making cushions and other kinds of upholstery things for vehicles on those power sewing machines. My mother, being as she was, eventually purchased herself a power sewing machine that she did this kind of thing as a little side hustle. My father got into portrait

photography, she got in to doing things on that power sewing machine, which I never could understand how it worked; but she did, and that was all that was important.

Q What kind of things did you guys do at home together as a family?

A My family is all gone away. We have an empty nest and it is wonderful and we just travel a lot now.

Q I mean, when you were growing up.

A When I was growing up we did the usual things, the games, the children's kind of club arrangement. I played cub scout master for awhile. I don't know how anybody can do that for a long period of time. We did all of those kinds of things. My son played little league ball, and the usual things, nothing extraordinary.

Q Okay. My sense is that folks in the same way they watch TV now, people listened to the radio?

A Yes.

Q What kind of things did you listen to on the radio?

A Well there was this program on Saturday afternoon, but you had to get all of your chores done before it came on. Then there was ***Lux Presents***, which was on Monday night, which was another show that you had to get through with your homework before that came on. There was ***The Shadow***, ***The Green Hornet***, ***The Sweaking Door***, all of those radio programs came on on Sunday evening. Then, of course, there were the church programs. Reverend C.L. Franklin had a show on every Sunday night that was not missed. It was this kind of thing.

Q Do you remember anything in particular about the shows other than that they were just on?

A I mean they were just there. I mean they were like short stories every Sunday. ***The Green Hornet*** say was a mystery, but the Green Hornet was some kind of super hero, as was the Shadow. The Shadow clouded men's minds so that they couldn't see him. That was just a wonderful concept for little kids growing up, that somebody could do that and you couldn't see him. These were just great mystery stories that took place over half an hour, and then they were gone. You remembered the Green Hornet's car and how it sounded. You remembered that the Shadow clouded men's minds so they couldn't see him and so forth and so on. You remember all of those things.

Q You mentioned that before you could watch the shows on Saturdays and maybe other days too, you had to finish your chores?

A Yes.

Q What kind of chores did you have?

A Well, my mother was intent that everyone would know how to maintain the house and everything that had to do with the house. So, of course, there were dishes. There were no dishwashers except the kids. There were no cleanup people except the kids. We had to assist with the laundry. On school days in the evenings it was generally getting the dishes done and put away and getting your homework done. That was your main occupation.

Q Did you had to put coal in the furnace at all?

A See, my father in the main took care of the furnace. I

think he probably had some idea that he could do it better. The cost of moving coal driven instruments, hot air furnaces and I am sure he felt that he could best manage that better than having me. I was the only boy that was around there.

Q Okay. Tell me about the block that you lived on and the kind of relationships that you and your family had with neighbors?

A The relationships were cordial. Now the only problems that you had sometimes was in the summer raiding people's fruit trees. I don't know if they have got any fruit trees anymore. I know in my yard we had a monster apple tree. Don't ask me what kind of apples. There was everything from plums to cherry trees, peach trees, all up and down. Of course, as kids it was great fun to see if you could raid somebody's tree. Of course, you would very often get run out of their yard. That was part of the fun. It didn't produce any harm to anybody and nobody really objected; they just thought it was necessary to run you out. They didn't give you permission to come in to their yard. So generally speaking, if you had gotten permission there would have been no problem. Again it was more fruit than anybody was going to eat themselves.

In the neighborhood it was just cordial. We had alleys then. Going to school at Sampson you could take a shortcut through people's yards to get to school. Now it really wasn't a shortcut because all you had to do was go to Milford. I lived between Milford and Cobb. I was midway the block so all I had to do was to go to Milford and go down Milford and you were at Sampson. I guess in a child's mind, this was a shortcut, to cut through these yards.

Q Did you ever get caught getting somebody's fruit out of

their yard?

A As I say they tell you, “get out of that tree and go home.” So that is what you would do.

Q Did your parents ever find out about those kind of events?

A As I say this was just something you do and this is what the reaction would be, simply because you didn't have permission. That was about all it meant.

Q You are a member of Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church?

A True.

Q Who was the pastor there when you were there as a young fellow?

A Robert H. Pittman.

Q Do you remember anything about him that stuck out in your mind?

A Well I just recall that he was the minister. His wife played the organ. They had two sons: Randall and Horace. I remember now that he got killed in a car accident. He lived on Woodrow, which was a block from where the church was. It subsequently moved this past year. He was a block away on Woodrow; he got hit by a car going home. I was, at the time of his death, down South at my aunt's, visiting them and my cousins. It wasn't so much a visit; it was just that my mother didn't want this young teenager hanging out while she and my father were at work. So I got dispatched to Kentucky. That is how I learned about

tobacco farming and that kind of thing.

Q So when you went down South here you are, someone born and raised in Detroit, things were a little different in Kentucky?

A Significantly.

Q How so?

A No electric lights. No inside plumbing. Having to go to the fields and work this tobacco, which was a serious back bending job. Having to learn how to chop tobacco when it was time. It was interesting when I look back on it. It was basically seriously rural, seriously backward, as we would say now. My aunt and uncle were sharecroppers on this farm. So, there was very little money, very little anything except work.

Q For you, as someone from Detroit, what were race relations like down there?

A We walked to town every now and then, which was about two miles. There is a store that was up on the edge of the farm that sat on the Tennessee-Kentucky state line. Those were the only times that I ever even saw any white people. It was rare because we didn't have any real occasions to go to town. It was rare that we went to that little store because nobody had any money.

Q You took the train down there?

A Took the train.

Q Segregated seating arrangements?

A The seating arrangements changed in Cincinnati. In Cincinnati you had to take the L & N train, Louisville-Nashville train which, of course, was segregated. So you had to go into the segregated car which was always located somewhere, one car back from the engine. The next car to the engine was usually the mail car that was located back. They didn't have diesels at all at that time. These were all coal burners. So there was the soot and the ash, but that's the way it was.

Q So how did you eat?

A Eating was always wonderful on the farm. My aunt took care of that very well. You had a lot of chicken, because that was the easiest thing, chicken, ham, I never did decide I wanted any, but that is how I found out about mountain oysters and decided that I didn't think I wanted to eat any of those.

Q I actually meant the eating on the train?

A Oh, eating on the train: Oh, no, no. You carried your lunch. You packed a lunch to go, and that was it. The first part of the ride usually started as I recall about 11:00 at night. You take the train and then ride pretty much all night into the early morning to get to Cincinnati. Then you would take the train out of Cincinnati to Russelville, Kentucky. Then there was a little car ride from there to where my folks lived; so that was it. You did all right. You had a little lunch usually a little fried chicken or something or other.

Q Did it strike you one way or the other that you couldn't eat in the dining car?

A I Didn't know there was a dining car; had no knowledge of that until sometime later you found out they

had dining cars on trains. Oh really. Why didn't I ever know that? All of the train rides I took, well that was just it, there was a knowledge gap.

Q Tell us about the daily kind of routines in the house that your parents had you to do that you just typically did?

A You mean on nonschool days?

Q Yes, when you were growing up?

A Well basically growing up it was getting up, getting breakfast, going to school, coming home. Of course, you made your bed before you left. My mother would not have tolerated your not making your bed before you left out of the house, because something might happen to you and someone might have to bring you back. Your bed had to be in order so that was part of that. At night after super it was a matter of whose turn it was to do the dishes, getting it done and doing your homework. I was taking piano lessonsso I had to practice and that kind of thing. Then you could listen to the radio programs and then you go to bed. But see as we got older, when the war started, mother had to completely delegate the responsibility of housecleaning and she would give directions in terms of what was to be done and it had to be done by the time she returned from work. No big thing. She would come home and as was her routine, she would inspect to see if you had done your chores as directed. If things were not done to her satisfaction, then it meant that you had to start all over with the clear admonishment that it takes no longer to do it the right way than the way you did it. So now you are going to start over and do it the right way, which was a great lesson. That one has stuck: Do it correctly the first time, then you don't have to worry about covering up or anything else; so

that lesson stuck.

Q All right. A good way to end an interview.

A Okay.