

INTERVIEW OF GLENN WASH

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q Mr. Wash, first of all thanks for taking time out of your schedule to talk with us.

A Absolutely my pleasure.

Q We very much look forward to the discussion. Just to begin, tell us about your parents, where they came from and what they did for a living?

A My parents were Texans: Texarkana, Texas, Texarkana, Arkansas. My father was out of Texarkana, Texas. My mother was out of Texarkana, Arkansas. When they married, they moved from there to Chicago. From Chicago, my father came over and started working here in Detroit at Kelsey Hayes Wheel Company. That is when I came to Detroit, at a very early age. But my first exposure was probably to the public school system in Grand Rapids, which was unusual because at that point in time, I don't think there were enough blacks in Grand Rapids to develop any prejudice. So I didn't know I was black until I got to Detroit; it became very apparent, very fast.

Q What became apparent?

A When we moved in here in the area of McGraw and Grand River. We lived about four blocks away from the Olympia. The living conditions were radically different from what we had been accustomed to. Not that we lived that well in Grand Rapids, but it was a lot different. As a matter of fact, I lived on Tillman in the early days right across from the Stinson Funeral Home. We used to hear the pump going on the bodies. We used to sneak over and watch them embalm bodies sometimes.

Then from there, I moved over to 23rd, which was 23rd and McGraw. If I remember correctly, it was 5911 23rd, which was directly across the street from the McGraw Grade School. Now the funny thing when I lived eight blocks away, I got certificates for never being late to school and never missing school. When I moved directly across the street, I could never get there on time, because usually I would lay in bed and listen for the first bell, and try to get dressed and get to school before the second bell. That was in the early days there.

Q How did your family come to move from one place to the other, from Grand Rapids to Detroit and then to the different areas in Detroit?

A Well, work was somewhat scarce in Grand Rapids. My father was always an entrepreneur. In the early days he had a restaurant in Grand Rapids. Work opened up here in Detroit, and he used to ride the rails between Grand Rapids and Detroit. So then after that, he moved the family down with the intent of trying to get a better way of life for us. But he still did things like make candy and so forth. I have to say that my father was always an entrepreneur. As a matter of fact, my grandfather and uncles back in Texas, we never worked for other people. My grandfather had a farm, and

he had a small strip mall in a little city adjacent to Texarkana.

So he supplied that store from his farm, the fruit, the vegetables, the milk, eggs came from there, plus he had a cleaners and then he had a little hardware store. Then he had a little ice cream parlor in the same strip. So we go back a long ways in there.

My uncle ran the cleaners but my father was a little more - - he wanted to move a little bit. So he left there and went to Chicago. He came back, he married my mother, they moved to Chicago and from Chicago to Grand Rapids.

Q Was that unusual in some place like Texas for a black man to own a farm and have all of the other businesses?

A Yes, considering the conditions during that period of time, yes, it was very unusual, because most of the people in that area were employees as opposed to employers. He had several people working for him. But we used to go down there in the summertime in later years and he had all kinds of vegetables and fruit trees, which made it very interesting for us.

Q What was that contrast like, to grow up essentially in the North, in Chicago, Grand Rapids and then Detroit and then have those experiences in the South?

A We really didn't start going back South until we got here in Detroit. It was quite a contrast. As a matter of fact, my brother and I were known as the little bad dudes from Detroit. We would go around saying, "sir," and that was all that was mandatory there in Texas. We had some unusual experiences during the time I was there. I can remember experiencing the aftermath of a hanging. So there were some things that impressed me about Texas, at that time but

our family was pretty close knit. We stayed pretty much to ourselves, so we didn't get into too much trouble after going to town.

Q You said the aftermath of a hanging?

A Yes. They had had some incident downtown in Texarkana. You got to understand that Texarkana is a part of Arkansas and a part of Texas. There had been some incident downtown where somebody was supposed to have done something and the guy got hung. I can remember that because everybody closed down and stayed at home until things chilled out.

Q Was it a black man?

A Yes, it was a black guy.

Q You don't remember the incident?

A I don't remember. All I remember is that he was hung in the area where they shipped cotton out of. That is about as much as I can remember. I was fairly young at that time.

Q It was in plain view? it wasn't out in the woods?

A Oh, no, it was pretty much in plain view. Things were pretty touchy when I was a kid in Texas.

Q Wow. A lot we take for granted?

A It is not too much better here in Detroit. When I came to Detroit, the blacks lived on the West Side of Grand River and the whites lived on the other side of Grand River. If you got caught on the wrong side of Grand River, you just might get your butt whipped.

Q You didn't venture too much on the other side?

A Well, no, you didn't go over there too much. Grand River was sort of the dividing line. A little later things got little better. There was an A & P there. In the early days we used to shop at A & P. One of our first ventures in business was carrying groceries home from the A & P. Then I got into the manufacturing business of making pushcarts for other people to carry the groceries home. Then I had a little jigsaw and I used to make shelves and different things and sell them in the neighborhood. Prior to that we were selling candy for my dad who made candy and we used to go out with baskets and sell candy to the neighbors.

Q It sounds like the entrepreneurial spirit carried on from generation to generation in your family?

A Well, yes. I never went to work for anyone with the intent of being their employee. I was there with the intent of finding out what was going on and trying to learn as much as I could. It turned out to be a pretty good policy. My father always said, "don't get hung up with the money, that will come later; just learn what you can about what was going on." That is what we did.

Q How did you choose some of these ventures. I heard that you built birdhouses and carts as well as shoe shining. How did you determine those would be good businesses for you?

A Well, I have always loved woodwork. That has been a natural with me. I happened to get a jigsaw for a present for Christmas. From there, I got my little sander and so forth. So I was fairly apt in the woodwork shop back in those days. In school you had manual training and then you had college

prep. I was in manual training so I learned how to use all of the tools and things. So, I made a few things and people seemed to like them. My mother belonged to a lot of different clubs. When these club members would come over and see these things, they would say, "Oh, I would love to have one of those." I said, "Oh, boy, here is a chance to do some good." I look back and there were some major catastrophes. I never did get the birdhouses big enough for the birds to get in them. People bought them and encouraged me that way.

Then when we moved up to McGraw and Warren, we lived right next door to a poolroom and across the street from a poolroom. The neighborhood was predominately black. We had a drug store in the area. We had some shows and things. I can remember back in that period some of the theaters you had to go in the balcony. We were not permitted on the first floor.

We had a place there on McGraw, and we had a big basement. So then we started having little dances in the basement and we kind of worked that out, because we had the musicians that used to come over and practice in our basement. This was in the later years. The Donald Byrds and the Barry Harris and Yusef Lateef and the guitar player, Kenny Burrell. Burrell will tell you that he did not play in my basement, but I got news for you. We had all of the local musicians come over. Even Miles came over one time.

All of the different guys used to practice in the basement. So in turn, we would have a little dancing and I think it cost a quarter.

Q You would charge them?

A Oh, yes, you had to make money. Then my dad had

some brilliant idea. It was a shoe shine stand built against the back wall of the poolroom that was next door. We shined shoes there. I guess one day my dad was out and he saw a place over on Milwaukee and Woodward, and he talked to the gentleman there. It was right behind the bank.

We decided that we would put a shoe shine stand over there. We had the shoe shine stand there. From there we were looking at behind Cunningham, which was over on East Grand Boulevard and Woodward. There was a Cunningham store there. In front of Cunningham at that time were men's and women's lavatories that were underground. It turned out to be quite an adventure and it was about the time that I was getting ready to go to high school. We had a shoe shine stand there. As a matter of fact, most of the guys on the West Side know my first employee; he was Tommy Tyler, one of my dearest friends, who died not too long ago. We made quite a bit of business there. We made quite a bit of money. I put my first thousand dollars or so in the bank across the street from, shining shoes. You can imagine that at fifteen cents a piece, that is a lot of shoe shining. In the summer we shined shoes there and had quite a bit of business because down the street from us was the Latin Quarter. I learned to drive in the parking lot. So we got to parking cars and I used to park cars on the weekend for the Latin Quarter. There was a parking lot behind Cunningham's and so on the weekends that is what I did, besides shining shoes.

Then we set up a business with the other parking lot guys and the people would leave their shoes in the car and we would go and get them, shine them, put them back in the car. We gave the parking lot attendant a percentage for handling it for us. So that kept us in business during the week. We worked seven days a week doing that.

Q What were your other friends that you grew up in the neighborhood with doing at this time?

A Unfortunately and in retrospect, I guess I didn't have too many friends, because most of them were out playing basketball and doing other things, not that I didn't have the opportunity at times to do some things. A lot of our people were dependent on us being there because they would wear the same shoes in the factory that they wore to church. We learned how to shine shoes that had grease on them. That got to be a good thing. We normally shined shoes at fifteen cents and we normally got about twenty-five cents for the shine.

Q What year are we talking about now?

A Oh, God, I am not too good on years. I guess I was about, must have been around 13 or 14 years old.

Q That wasn't your first business, the birdhouses and the carts --

A It really wasn't a business. It was something that I did. I guess that was my first business because, of course, all of the neighborhood was in danger, because I would pay for my wheels for my carts. I would go by and see these buggies with no wheels on them. I was slightly suspicious where the guys got the wheels from. That was an early business.

I went to Cass Tech. I shined shoes all the way through Cass Tech and earlier in my first years at U of D, I still had the shoe shine stand; it was fairly profitable. Of course, there were other things that we did on the corner. We handled a lot of different activities. I guess it is safe to say now, we were the lookout for the mafia when they would be

trading the betting slips in the parking lot behind us. There were different tickets and things that you come through to pick up for whatever, we didn't know. There were different people picking up tickets, and they would leave. That was a focal point.

So Tommy Tyler and I were there, but we had other employees that sometimes were extremely busy. At that time I tell you how tight Tommy and I were. Tommy lived on Tireman and I lived at that time on Warren and McGraw. You got to realize this is East Grand Boulevard and Woodward. The streetcars were six cents and the bus was a dime. We used to walk home. We were that stingy. We enjoyed it. It was summertime, but he and I were working together then.

Q Tell us about McGraw and McMichael and then Cass?

A Well, I went to and lived right directly across from old McGraw, which had the wood floors in the auditorium. I think the toughest person in the school was a girl named Daisy. Daisy could whip everybody in the school. At that time in our neighborhood you did one of two things well; you either ran well or you fought well. You had to learn how to do one of the two.

So when I left McGraw, I went to McMichael and it was always kind of amusing because the majority of the classes I was in, there were very few blacks. There were two Glenns. There was always a dual between the two Glenns. I was the black Glenn and then there was the white Glenn. So when the instructor would read off the grades and things, it was always Glenn. They would wait for the last name to see which Glenn it was. That was always through school, though. Then I went to McMichael.

From McMichael, I went to Cass Tech, and I went into the Architectural Department. I think at the time, I went in the Architectural Department it was initially about fifty kids coming into the Architectural Department. It was about four blacks at the time in the class. It was quite an experience going to Cass. We had everything going. We learned. We had the drafting and we had all of the different courses and things: electrical and mechanical. We learned how to wire a house in conduit. We learned a lot, hands-on learning. At the same time you had a good academic program going. When I came out of Cass, I was doing calculus and other things. Cass was a good experience, particularly for networking. I found that a lot of people that I met later in life were people who had gone to Cass. Now, the mayor knows me, but I am too old. I am a Cassite. I guess I am too old. We had a lot of good experiences at Cass. The kids had a lot more in common. I was in the Architectural Department. We had the Architectural Club, and there were some things that happened in the Architectural Club. I can very vividly remember one time I was the president of the Architectural Club and we went out to Cranbrook. We stopped at a restaurant to get some food. I was the only black in the group. I was president of the club. They would serve everybody but me. That was sort of a shocking thing to occur, because then I had buddies who all ordered food and walked out and left it. I told her to give me six cheeseburgers to go. So when I walked out, I left the cheeseburgers there, knowing when I walked out and left them, that they were not any good. Those are things that you experience in the early days and you look back and say, "Okay, that is the way it is."

I had a little hustle going there during the same period of time the Second World War was going on and there was a lot of need for housing. So I was doing a lot of drawings

and stuff for converting four family flats and doing work in houses in order to get more rooms. So I had a very early experience down in the Building Departments. So I guess I have been doing this now over sixty years in construction. At that time, there was no City Hall where there is now. We had a City Hall sitting at the opposite end of where the County Building was, but on Woodward. It was a red stone building. I remember distinctly; it had bird crap all over it from pigeons. Where the Ren Cen [i.e., Renaissance Center] sits is where a lot of the Building Department was, as well as the Health Department. We would go down there to get permits and things. So I had exposure from the time I was in the Cass Tech to the Building Department until now.

Q Cass Tech, it seems so very unusual for someone from the West Side to be at Cass as opposed to Northwestern, which I am guessing is where most high school students in your neighborhood went. How did you get to Cass in the first place?

A I was always interested in architecture, although I am a lousy draftsman. Well, I was a good draftsman, but I was never a good artist. I couldn't get the renderings and stuff.

At that time in order to get in Cass you had to have a B plus average. So that eliminated a lot of people. If you didn't have the A or B plus average you couldn't get in Cass. They had a lot of courses and things I was interested in. I was always interested in construction, so that was the natural place to go.

Q At McGraw, could you fight or run, which was yours?

A It would depend [laughs]. I could out-run Daisy, so that worked for me. I was pretty good. As a matter of fact,

in later years I went to Kronk. I was going to try to do some boxing, but my boxing career was cut short by having gone to Brewster. I can always remember this fellow who was about five foot tall. I was at that time about five foot six or seven. I danced around, I hit him every place I could. He finally said, "Well, enough of this." He was a terminator. He killed my boxing career.

Q Tell me about the block that you grew up on, 23rd near McGraw?

A Yes, 12th Street, at that time the show we went to was the Granada Theater and that was at Junction and Warren. It was a unique theater. At that time when we used to go to the show, you would have the two main features, then you would have the news, then you would have the cartoons, and then you would have the chapter picture plus they would probably give you a dish. Everybody's house had all of these different dishes. None of them matched because nobody went back to get a whole matched set. Then they would have the movies: Frankenstein, the Werewolf, etc. That is how you learned to run. You had to go to church before you went to the movies. That is how we got the show fare, either that or bottles. I can remember many a day running from Warren and Junction all the way down to 23rd and McGraw, nonstop, from seeing these chapter pictures and so forth. The neighborhood was good. They didn't worry about us coming in at night. They were always talking about the hatchet man in the neighborhood. When the street lights came on, you automatically found your way home early. The parents were talking about so and so disappeared or this guy disappeared, so you were home early. We played baseball in the early days when I wasn't working.

Q What kind of rules did your parents have, other than you had to be home before the lights came on?

A My parents were extremely supportive of most anything I ever did. I don't think I had too much time to generate any real problems and so forth. My father always taught me to do anything you want to do, and that has always been supported. He didn't have a lot of money and stuff to give me or anything like that, but I always knew he was in my corner with anything I tried to do. My mother, she did a good job early. All she had to do is give you that look and you knew from that look. I go out now and I watch the little kids jump up and down, and I say, "Boy, if you only knew." My mother would not have tolerated that, not for a second.

You would go downtown and that was always a big thing, downtown Detroit. The street cars, riding down and going to Hudson's during Christmas and going to the ten cent store across the street, getting the waffle with the ice cream, meeting under the Kerns clock. These were big times, exciting times; that was all part of being here in Detroit. I think that a lot of what is occurring, a lot of the fault that is happening in Detroit has been the fact that people are not cognizant of the history of Detroit. When they try to build back something and not understand the way it was built to begin with they get into trouble because things have changed radically since that time. That is one of the problems I have currently with the city and trying to develop here in the city.

Q What kind of things did your family do together when you were growing up on the West Side?

A Well, my father was working most of the time. My

mother did day work at times, but they had these clubs and things like I mentioned. There were the Craigs and the Tylers. There were a bunch of families where the mothers belonged to these clubs, which proved advantageous at times and it was disadvantageous. They had membership all over the city and sometimes you had to go across town. At that time, we had what they called the West Side group. Then we had the group on the other side of Woodward, below the Boulevard. Then you had the North End, which was above the Boulevard on the East Side. And sometimes you had to go to other areas, but I lucked out because I went to Cass Tech, so I knew people all over the city. We just didn't know that we were deprived because you didn't get out to make a comparison as to what other things were going on.

Q What did these clubs do?

A In the summertime, they might go out and have picnics, and they gave the mothers an opportunity to get dressed up and get away from things. Sometimes they would have dinners. They would have little dances and things to get the husbands out. You got to understand that there was really no social life for blacks during that period unless you went to the night clubs. The mothers would get together and have their little social affairs. That was primarily it. I really didn't stop and look at it; we didn't have too much to do.

Q I understand that you went to Tabernacle?

A Yes, my family went there for years. As a matter of fact, my father was there a long, long time. I kind of fell out with Tabernacle, though, in later years because the churches have not been consistent. They preach one thing

and do another. I am in construction and I have a real problem with the fact that a lot of churches when it comes to do their construction stuff didn't follow through with what they preached out of the pulpit. They took all black money, but didn't use black builders to build the churches; that irritated me.

Q When you were at Tabernacle growing up, do you remember any particular sermons or particular preachers that kind of had an impression on you?

A Yes, I had a fairly good life there, but I wasn't that much in church as maybe I should have been. When I should have been in church I was shining shoes. Sunday morning was a big day on the stand over on East Grand Boulevard.

I can remember some of the ministers, yes. I thought that Tabernacle had a big influence on the West Side. Then during the same time, we had the Nacirema. Oh man, when you went to the Nacirema, that was high on the hog. I found that rather surprising when I went back there a couple of years ago. I was looking for the rest of it. As you know, as a child you see things one way, and when you get to be an adult you find out they weren't as big as you thought they were. We had a lot of churches in that West Side, in that triangular area. I call it the Golden Triangle. You take Warren and Tireman and Livernois and the Boulevard as sort of a triangle. A lot of the prominent blacks in the city came out of that immediate area. We had quite a few churches. We had Chapel Hill and Tabernacle.

I guess if you look at that period of time, I guess we would be considered some of the middle class blacks here in the city. A lot of the WestSiders never went to the East Side

because they had illusions about what was happening on the East Side. That was the bad side of town. I had quite a bit of experience on the East Side with my shoe shine stand. In the later years when I was older I used to walk down John R. Walking down John R, I would go past Ann's Bar and down further to the Chesterfield and the Garfield and all of the bars and things down there. Of course that was the exciting part being under age and getting in the bar sitting there with the beer in shaking hands, thinking you would be put out any minute. That was a period of time I can remember seeing a lot of people that were legends at those bars back in those days. I get rather amused by a lot of the guys that call themselves street people who haven't the faintest idea of what it was all about, but it was a good lesson.

Q It sounds like you got around the city in a way that your peers did not?

A They operated in an enclosed area and had a very limited exposure. By having gone to Cass and having a lot of diversified friends that came from all over the city, I got to know a lot of other parts of the city and what was going on with different types of people.

Q Looking back on it, was it unusual that you, as a young black guy, were the president of the Architectural Club at Cass?

A Oh, yes. I think what occurred is that in my early days in Grand Rapids, I found out that white folks were just as dumb and didn't know no more about things than black folks, so I didn't let that bother me. I have never gone into anything on the basis of saying, "I am black and he is white."

It is about he is smarter than me or he is dumber than me.

Even when I went to Cass, I was the only black in the class. The same thing happened at U of D. I was the standard. You were above Glenn Wash or you were below Glenn Wash. It wasn't that you had As, Bs, Cs, or Ds; it was "Did you beat Glenn." That was the word. They kept me in the competitive sense.

I went to Cass and then I went to Highland Park and then I went to U of D. At U of D in the wintertime, I worked in the factories at night in order to go to school. I would come in early, sleep on the drawing boards, and wait for the class to start. My parents never really knew where I was in school. So I wanted to be an architect at the time. And at that time most of the counselors said, "You don't want to be an architect. We don't have any black architects. Why do you want to be an architect?" It was discouraging. So I probably ended up with more general courses than anybody I know. A lot of courses were totally unrelated to being an architect. U of D was an experience and unfortunately during that period of time, I was the only black in the whole engineering school. There was another black guy; he claimed to be Hispanic, so I guess he doesn't count. It was interesting; they were interesting times.

Q Did you experience any or much racism?

A Well, no. I was cognizant of the fact that there were times, but I didn't let it bother me. It wasn't enough blacks to get anything organized and going. I think in the whole school we used to meet at the library, which had just been built at the time I was there. The blacks used to meet in the morning at U of D and sort of discuss things. If it was ten or twelve in the whole school at that time, it was unusual.

Q What kind of things would you discuss?

A Well, how the classes were going, the problems that we were having because we were beginning to understand racism at that time. They had a co-op system at U of D and when it got down to the placement of students, it got to be a little difficult to try to get a black student into a firm was a little different.

Q So how did you openly do it?

You come along and worked with Leonard Jarosz. How did you find it?

A How did I find it?

Q Yes.

A Well, I was out and I worked in an architectural firm first: Nesbor & Williams. It was out on Gratiot, the other side of Harper. I worked there as a draftsman in an architectural firm, and I did a lot of designs for buildings in Dearborn. They had buildings all over the town. A lot of guys were building strips of offices. That is what I was doing at that particular time. One day I was there and I decided, enough of this. To tell you how far back this was, there was no John C. Lodge. I went and made application for a couple of places and went to work for a guy named Leonard Jarosz who was the ultimate of entrepreneurs. This guy was super smart. He was a real hustler. Anything he touched or went into was something. He took up guitar and in three years he was giving concerts. He took up skiing and after a couple of years later, he was one of the top skiers for his age bracket in town. I learned a lot from Leonard. He built offices and developments and so forth. He gave me the opportunity but he always said, I made him a lot of money, "so don't thank me." With him I learned or

was given the opportunity to go out and stake out property lines and build buildings as a builder and as a general contractor. Some of the first jobs I had with him was in the area of warehousing over on Meyers, on the other side of 8 Mile. Well, I worked on the Bell Telephone Company and a worked on a few other buildings, and that is what got me started going into construction. From there I went to two other firms with the intent of really learning what they were about.

I went to Alex J. Etkin; he was a general contractor. I was going to school at night and I was working for Alex J. and I learned a lot from him. He kind of took a personal interest in me. He gave me a lot of opportunity. As a matter of fact, I was superintendent of military housing in Battle Creek, Michigan. I learned quite a bit about concrete and such.

From there, the opportunity came up to work for a company called Practical Homes. With Practical Homes, we did a lot of housing developments. That was intentional because I wanted to know about housing and shopping centers. So I got experience in that area.

From there, was a company, H. L. Vokes out of Cleveland Ohio. I guess the last thing I built in working with Vokes was the Howard Johnson, which has since been torn down. I always had a suspicion that they found out that it was a black guy that built it and so they tore it down. That was the last job I really did for someone else. It was always with the intent of having my own corporation down the line.

Q What was it about the owners of the companies, Etkin and Jarosz and so forth that took an interest in you and saw it was okay to hire a black guy to supervise and have a kind of responsibility?

A Well, I found it rather flattering. I was sent by Practical Homes to Benton Harbor to build a project and they wrote about it in Ebony at that time. That was the biggest project that a black guy had built in the country at the time. We have been very fortunate in being first and doing different things. We obtained the largest bond a black guy had up to that date in time. I think we broke the barriers because we didn't let the racial - social aspect cut us back.

For example, when we do deals with a corporation, we don't get hung up with the fact that we are black. We go there with economics and we tell the bank how we are going to do it, how we are going to pay them back. That is all they want to know. "Are you going to be able to pay it back." That has been our approach relative to doing things. When I worked for the firms I did not shuffle. I don't shuffle. I came up front and hustled and worked, with the intent of learning the business. I was always volunteering for something, anything. "You need someone to work on Saturday? I will work Saturday." If they needed somebody to go and do that, I did that. I was always trying to learn and they appreciated somebody that was willing to do that. That is what I was willing to do.

Q The first job in that area, construction area, was with Jarosz?

A Yes, Leonard Jarosz.

Q Why did he realize this was a good idea to hire you?

A I wasn't exactly so naive. I brought something to the table. By the time I got there I knew how to survey and layout; I had worked in architectural firms. I knew how to draw plans and read the prints. I read electrical and

mechanical; I read all of the plans. I brought that talent that a lot of the white guys didn't bring. Leonard was an Austrian Jew and we got along fine. We didn't have any problems. I fulfilled his needs and made him money.

Q That is always key.

A That is key now. That is our problem. I think one of the problems black folks have, we operate out of a socialist approach without understanding the environment is capitalism. Make the money first and then donate. Too many people try to take the social agenda and try to make money, and it just doesn't work. You are out here playing chinese checkers and everybody else is playing chess.

In this city, this is the big problem. We have a social agenda which is contrary to what we are involved with. The dominance of the area is capitalism: General Motors, Chrysler, Ford and all of the other people are capitalists. We have a social agenda. We are trying to feed everybody, house everybody, but we should be concerned with employment, getting them a job or even better. I think too often we think in terms of employment as opposed to being employers. I am more interested in being an employer. I am more interested in being a leasor; and in being all of the other things as opposed to being a subordinate.

Q Your role as a board member in New Detroit, how have you leveraged your influence within the board?

A It is very fortunate from the point that most of them don't have any influence over me. If I don't like something, I say it. I am not independently wealthy, but I feel I have enough skills that I don't have to subordinate or kiss up to any of them. It has been a good experience. New Detroit

is not what it was initially. It is sort of watered down from what was initially. New Detroit, you got to understand, was sort of an insurance policy and not having an instance occur where these people lost all of their money: Chrysler, Ford and General Motors. Unfortunately, the end result is that it gave them an opportunity to get out-of-town. As you probably know, General Motors got all of their plants out-of-town. Everybody got their plants out-of-town. Even Chrysler moved out of Highland Park.

Q What do you do as a board member of New Detroit?

A Well, at least you get the ears of corporate America. When I first became a board member of New Detroit, only the heads were there at that time. I was supposed to be a prominent black businessman. So I represented the blacks as far as business, but at that point in time when New Detroit was first put together, you could only be the top person at the corporation. I could cancel Henry Ford's vote out, or I could cancel the vote of the Chairman of Chrysler, Ford, General Motors. All of the colleges and all of the major corporations, like Hudson and all of those people, those were the people that I was associating and dealing with. The only thing wrong is that the blacks during that period asked for the wrong things. They were asking for the social agenda instead of the economic agenda. They let the major corporations get out-of-town without compensating for taking away the tax base and employment. The biggest thing, though, the was tax base.

Q How do you stop a company from doing that?

A I don't know that you could stop them, but you should be compensated if they did do it or come up with an alternative of what was to be done. I am watching the city

and getting very disgusted and very discouraged. We have taken the position here in the city that most time we hear a lot of verbalization relative to what should be done, and no one ever does anything. I have watched the current trend as opposed to trying to get an economic base going in the city, the ministers have chosen to become Egyptians and start building pyramids, these big massive churches, putting the burden on their congregation. How can you cry about not having anything in the city and then put our money into monuments or nonfunctional buildings or buildings that only function on Sundays. So I am really at the point of saying I will be going to Atlanta, and from there I will go down to North Carolina, and South Carolina and look at Florida; I am thinking seriously of attempting to leave the area. It is just too heartbreaking.

Q It has gotten that bad?

A It has gotten that bad. We have two projects that we have been working on and attempting to do. We can't get the cooperation we need in order to do it. We are talking about multi-million projects.

Q It seems like a no-brainer. What is the problem?

A I can't talk about it too much because it won't do anything but alienate the people I'm dealing with even more so. When we were saying that they couldn't build shopping centers here in the city, we built a shopping center. 7 Mile and Livernois: CVS, Boston Market, National City Bank and Standard Federal. We built that.

Housing is not going to come back into this city. We keep hearing our politicians talk about housing. What the hell are you doing when you build a house for \$150,000 and sell it to

somebody for \$75,000 and then you give a twelve-year tax abatement. Every time I look up my taxes are going up, because you are giving out abatements. If you don't develop a economic base as you try to redevelop the city you are not going any place with it. If you don't let free enterprise or private sector people come in and develop and work with them you will never redevelop the city. I am watching that go on. I understand it. I have been in this construction over sixty years now. I have watched it and every time we get a new mayor in, he comes in with a whole new agenda, and throws out the baby, bath water, and everything else and starts all over. There is no continuity for the city. I worked and had offices in Cleveland; I have worked in Atlanta; and I have worked in other places and everybody, even Toledo has a master plan. It doesn't change every time they get a new mayor or change every time they get someone new. But we don't have the consistency. That is the part that gets discouraging. I don't get the kind of cooperation that I feel that I should get. If I am willing to put up my millions of dollars to do something, then you should be willing to support me in doing it, and particularly a black guy in this community. As opposed to telling the black youth this is what you should be doing, we should be showing them what can be done. I have tried to be a role model relative to doing that. I don't know how successful I have been at that. I hear I am tough, but I am not really. I am really a pussy cat.

Q You said or you made reference to a role model. Other than your folks, what other kind of role models did you have growing up?

A None. I don't need the Jesse Jacksons. I don't need these guys. All I have seen them do is to runaround and talk about things. I look at these things that come on

Sunday morning; we got a whole bunch of people sitting up on the stage talking about what should be done.

I heard somebody the other day being very critical of Bill Cosby. At least Cosby has contributed something material.

The rest of the people have done nothing but come with the intangibles relative to what should be done or how it should be done. We don't need no more studies. We know what the problem is. You need to go out and do something about what needs to be done. We need to get people in that know what the hell they are doing. Our political situation in this city is absolutely disastrous. I envision the city going into receivership and it might be a good thing. It might be a good thing because it may be like the phoenix, and we can come up from the ashes and evolve into what it could be. I just came back from China. Everybody in the world is building except Detroit, it seems to me. I go to Atlanta; they just built a whole new city inside of the city. Everywhere you go when you go downtown, you see nothing but cranes going. We got a place in Destin, Florida; all you see are cranes going. Everybody is growing. Don't even go to Vegas; they are the fastest growing city in the country. But you know it is just not happening here and there are very obvious reasons.

Q Backing up a little bit: The Nacirema Club, you mentioned before?

A Oh, yes, yes.

Q You had events there?

A The Nacirema Club was sort of the place. We had the little coming out affairs for the girls. You had the high school parties and high school affairs. After the prom, you

might come to the Nacirema. It was sort of the elite of the elite; that was a whole different story. Most blacks we had a period of time when we had the elites [pronounced, “e-lights”] and then there were guys my color. It was a whole different period in time.

But I guess it is like most things, after it is dead, you only remember the good things. It is like going to the funeral and sometimes you are sitting there wondering who is in the casket when you get the description of what they did do or what they didn't do. As it is now, I can only remember the good things about the West Side and the people because it doesn't do any good to remember the bad things. I think that I am a much better person for having been born and grown up on the West Side.

Q What comes to mind when you think about Joe Louis as you were growing up?

A Joe Louis comes to mind, YMCA downtown Detroit, me hanging on his muscle without washing my hands for a week. Joe Louis brings to mind when I was a kid and I was in Grand Rapids, I will tell you how it was. He fought Max Schmelling. A matter of fact, we were out there in bloomers, my brother and I; we were boxing. Joe Louis was our idol. There was a period of time when we had wagons with horses, junk men and so forth, but Joe Louis was symbolic and had a real impact on us. He was the Mohammed Ali of his day, more so, because for blacks that was the only shining star out there. We have a lot of shining stars out there now. Back in that day, Joe Louis was quite a guy. Then you got a chance maybe to go out to Joe Louis's farm in later years. It was a good experience.

Q How did you or your family come to leave the West

Side?

A I guess we never really totally left the West Side. I was probably the first to leave the West Side, married a young lady out of Chicago and I moved to the Vernor and Van Dyke area. That was the first East Side experience for me. I would dare say that my parents ended up 90% of their life on the West Side after they got here to Detroit. We are old WestSiders.

Q The community has gone down a little bit. What is responsible for that?

A Well, a lot of things occurred: the economy, we lost our rapid transit system, which General Motors, Firestone and some of the other companies decided to kill off. We lost our tax base, with all of the plants and things moving outside of the city. It is just a lot of things that have occurred here in the city that has caused its downfall. I knew Coleman personally. Coleman was a hell of a socialist. He was a good union man, but he was not a good capitalist. I don't think we have had any guys thus far that had the entrepreneurship that is necessary to run a three billion dollar corporation. You can't have difficulty balancing your own personal checkbook and then step up and try to run a three billion dollar corporation, and never have run a candy store or run anything in your life and have illusions relative to how you think things should go. Then anybody other 50 years old is decrepit and is not useful. It is not just with this current administration. I go back to Jerry Cavanagh and come back through. This is one of the cities that Council and mayors and things have not done us well.

Q That is unfortunate.

Q Going back, you mentioned jazz in your basement?

A Oh, yes.

Q That is a little different.

A Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, Little Red, Big Red and all of the guys played in my basement on the West Side. Jazz was the thing. I still love jazz. I still go up to Bakers Lounge. I see some of the guys that used to play in my basement.

Q Did you interact with them at all?

A I can play the radio. I wanted to play drums, but my mother decided not to have me play drums. It made too much noise. I just enjoy good music, that is all.

Q Did you get to know them?

A Oh, yes, yes. I got to know those guys very well, very well. It is always good to be around guys who are super talented and most of these guys who came around were pretty talented.

Q Did that inspire you?

A Being around people that are ambitious and talented doesn't hurt you at all. If you put yourself around depressing people, then that is where you are going to be. I have been very fortunate. I have had some good philosophers. I have always been taught that most people who dislike you, dislike you for showing up what they haven't done. My business philosophy is basically, show me the money. Then the other one is don't get mad at somebody giving me a shafting in a business deal. You have to be in

the position to get it done. So you don't waste a lot of time worrying about what could have been or should have been. It is not how many times you get knocked down, but how many times you get back up. I have probably lost more money than most people will make in life.

Q Why do you keep on getting back up?

A That is the way I was taught. It is like exercising with weights. The more resistance you get, the stronger you get in developing, so that has been pretty much it.

Q Seems like a good way to end the interview. Mr. Wash, thank you very much.

A Thank you.

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