

**ORAL HISTORY OF
RICHARD KIRKLAND BOWDEN
Fifth Interview
January 19, 2010**

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewee is Richard Kirkland Bowden, and the interviewer is Joshua Klein. The interview took place at the Courthouse on January 19, 2010. This is the fifth interview.

Mr. Bowden, we're going to talk now about your early life. Why don't you
Mr. Klein:

starting by telling us where and when you were born, and we will work from there.

Mr. Bowden: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, December 24, 1935, at Jane Terrell Hospital in South Memphis. Jane Terrell Hospital was owned by Dr. Terrell. It is now demolished, but in those days African-American or Blacks were not permitted to be admitted to white hospitals or white medical facilities for medical care. So some doctors – black doctors, African-American doctors – built their own hospital and Dr. Terrell was the owner of the property and lead doctor. Efforts have been made by me to get my birth certificate and other vital information, but in 1935 the government didn't think it was important to keep records of blacks and when the hospital burned down and was subsequently demolished, there were no records. My birth mother was Susan Margaret Anthony. She was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, completed high school in Jonesboro, attended Arkansas AM&N College – now University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff – two years. She later moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and took a job teaching in a public school. In 1934 she met my father, who was a dentist in West Memphis, Arkansas, and became pregnant out of that relationship, and I was born. She saw fit to leave Memphis and move to Washington, D.C., and I was adopted by John Horace and

Vernetta Constance Bradshaw (her maiden name), last name Bowden, when I was six weeks old. I was reared as a Bowden. I met my biological father in my early teens. He was still practicing dentistry in West Memphis, Arkansas. My adopted parents insisted that I make that contact, as well as keep a relationship with my biological mother, who, after the adoption, maintained contact with my adopted parents. Periodically, as I got older, I was able to visit Washington, D.C., and spend some time with my biological mother. There was never an attempt by my adoptive parents to avoid having a wholesome relationship with both my biological parents. As I look back and listen to the psychologists and psychiatrists of this day, it was a good decision on their part, and I think that they were a little ahead of themselves, or ahead of the times. By speaking of them, John Horace had an eighth-grade education. And in those days, a black man with an eighth grade education was equal to, in some instances, one or two years of college because of the type of teaching that they had. He was a very gifted man, both intellectually and with his hands. His trade was a plumber and a steamfitter. My mother was a homemaker. He refused to allow her to work. He was a homeowner. He worked for a company that was responsible for building Grand Central train station in Memphis, Tennessee. He was the lead steamfitter and plumber when they built the Grand Central station, which has been torn down. I say that because many years later – I was in my early twenties. Remember I was born in 1935, so now we're talking 1950 or so, 1955, somewhere in there – they had a very severe renovation problem with the pipefitting at Grand Central. He had since retired. There were no blueprints of where the pipes were laid, and it was costing them tons of money and time to locate. And someone remembered

that he was the lead person, so they came to him to ask him to help them locate certain pipes. As I said he was a smart fellow. He remembered every foot of pipes, steam pipes and water pipes that they laid, and he charged them an enormous fee to get that job done because they were at his mercy. There were no blueprints, he had it all in his head. I thought I would just share that.

Mr. Klein: That's a good story actually.

Mr. Bowden: We lived in a community which was named after Frederick Douglass. It was a self-sufficient community, first grade through twelve. There were several people in the community who taught at that school, certified teachers. There were two private preschools in a person's home who was also certified. I attended one of the preschools. When I say separate high school, we had at that school many of the amenities that other high schools in the city did not have. There were five public high schools for African-Americans: Booker Washington, Manassas, Melrose, Hamilton, and Douglass. Booker Washington, Manassas and Hamilton were more centralized downtown. Douglass was, I guess you can refer to now as out in the suburbs. It was within the city, but on the edge of the city limits. The school was very, very high on academics. Our principal had a PhD in Theology. My chemistry teacher had a PhD in Chemistry. He couldn't get a job teaching any place else but in high school. My history teacher had a Master's in American History. The best she could do was to teach in high school. My music teacher, a PhD from Oklahoma State, the best he could do was teach in high school. And others had advanced degrees, but the best they could do was to teach in high school. And they were dedicated teachers. And we could tell, and as I grew older and left high school, I could appreciate their dedication. They were not for the

dollar. Not for the payday. It was because they enjoyed teaching. The school, outside of the churches in the community, was the focal point in the community. During the Depression – 1929, '30, '34, '35 – the members of the community – as I said it was on the edge of the city, so everybody was a property owner. There was no rental property in Douglass. You owned your own home. There were no apartment buildings. Some property was on larger lots than others. There were some vacant lots that I'm not sure who owned them. But those lots that were vacant, people converted them into gardens – vegetable gardens, flower gardens. And during the Depression, the school had a cafeteria and the principal made the cafeteria and the cooking facilities available to the community. So folk would harvest the food, take it over to the school, and the wives or the women would can all of the food that was harvested from around the community, and then they would share it. So I'm told that nobody went hungry because there was plenty of food.

Mr. Klein: Were the gardens communal that were in the vacant property? There were plots of land of a lot of different neighbors who had their own plots?

Mr. Bowden: Right. It was a combination, because I remember we had, I guess, maybe three to five acres where the family planted the garden as part of the community. We had peach trees, apple trees, pears, you name it. Pecans, and vegetables. Families in the Douglass community planted and worked the garden that provided food. But I'm told that's the reason they kept the garden and how it worked. It had such notoriety and history behind it that Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit in 1939. It was a newscast that was filmed and went around the country as to how the

community came together to survive. This garden project still is working in the community today.

Mr. Klein: The community was called Douglass?

Mr. Bowden: It was called Douglass. The city refused to let them name it Frederick Douglass because they did not want to give recognition to a black man in the city of Memphis. So they permitted them to name the school Douglass, but would not let them document, officially, Frederick Douglass High School.

Mr. Klein: But everyone there knew it was named for Frederick Douglass?

Mr. Bowden: Of course.

Mr. Klein: The Eleanor Roosevelt visit, you would have been pretty small. Do you remember it, or did people talk about it later?

Mr. Bowden: People talked about it later, and the high school had a copy of the newsreel. And on May Day each year there's a big festival with activities and that type of stuff – they would show that newsreel, and I remember seeing it over and over and over again. So it was documented and etched in my mind. As I said, the school was the center of the community. A lot of activity took place at the school. It had a very, very strong Parent Teachers Association, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, drama club. Didn't have any foreign language when I was in high school, but we had the math club, chemistry club, Hi-Y club. All kinds of activities.

Mr. Klein: What was the last one, High Wire?

Mr. Bowden: Hi-Y. Hi dash Y. That was a club that was tied into agriculture. And it taught the fellows social graces. The counterpart to that for the girls, I think, was called The Daughters of Douglass. And then it evolved into the Sons of Douglass, but it started out as a Hi-Y club. And the advisors used just any excuse to get us

together as boys and taught us the graces of how to treat ladies as women. How to open doors, how to hold chairs when they sat down. And those kinds of social graces. So that was instilled in us at a very, very early age. And it was fun. School did not end at 3:00 o'clock. Because it was a community school, everybody walked to school so we didn't have a bus to catch. There was no television and all those other distractions to get you to go home, so everything was done right there at school. You enjoyed being at school. Not only did you have your academic enrichment programs, you had your social programs. The population of the school was 300, that's for grades 1 through 12. The first graduating class, class of 1946, I think had 23 people. My class, 1953, had 42 people to graduate. So a very small school. Obviously everybody knew everybody, and had a very harmonious relationship. We had an outdoor swimming pool, three tennis courts – two clay, one asphalt tennis court. A nine-hole golf course in high school. And this was all on the campus. Of course you had a lot of property and the powers that be in Memphis did not want us using their facilities, so they provided us with ours. See, we had a very, very strong community, and they voted. And they made the politicians aware of their power to vote. So they were able to get things that other folk were not able to get.

Mr. Klein: There's so many follow-up questions I can ask you. You mind if I ask them?

Mr. Bowden: Sure, go ahead.

Mr. Klein: So which of those school activities and clubs were you especially active in?

Mr. Bowden: In the glee club, the drama club, basketball, boxing, swim team.

Mr. Klein: That's a full schedule.

Mr. Bowden: And I started out – I was never large enough to play football, physically, but in order to be a part of the football atmosphere, I joined the pep squad. The band director wanted to start a new trend, this was my sophomore year in high school. He wanted a drum major. All the high schools had drum majorettes. That means that girls led the band. He wanted a male figure to lead the band. And I was on the pep squad, and he came to me one day and asked would I be interested in it. I had no idea what he was talking about. But I said yes. Because it tempted me when he said you will be out front leading the band and the girls will be behind you. And I think that got my attention. So then I joined the band and became the drum major. The first African-American drum major – high school – in the States of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. As I said, the accepted behavior in those days was for girls to do it. For whatever reason, guys didn't want to do it. And we were known throughout the tri-states. They had the band competitions, and we were the leaders, first place, in most of the competitions.

Mr. Klein: So you traveled to several surrounding states?

Mr. Bowden: To competitions.

Mr. Klein: And you played at games too?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. Now in the spring of the year, there was a carnival – Cotton Carnival. Memphis was the depot or the depot where the farmers from Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas would bring their cotton – after it was ginned and processed – to Memphis, to be shipped by boat and train to various textile places. So there was a carnival atmosphere. These places that they brought was at the end of Beale Street. Beale Street goes right into the river.

Mr. Klein: That's B-e-a-l-e, right?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. It's known for its music now, but it had other purposes, if you will. So, the high schools – I'm not sure of the origin – but there was a carnival and there was a carnival of all of these bands. And then the bands had a competition. Now this is the black community – the Cotton Carnival on Beale Street – and we would participate. We – Douglass School – would participate, and for three years in a row we won first place in the competition. After high school I was admitted into LeMoyne College, the fall of 1953, I completed two years, was about to be drafted in the military, but I chose to volunteer to go into the Air Force.

Mr. Klein: That's when we started off with all of the things we talked about on your earlier tape.

Mr. Bowden: Right. Now, growing up in Douglass was a marvelous experience. It was fun, fun, fun times. At the furthest northern part of the high school campus was a wooded area. Uninhabited woods. I don't know how many acres, but a wooded area. And within that wooded area was a river, Wolf River, which is a tributary to the Mississippi River. In that wooded area was a camp ground, Camp Daniels, and that's where all of the black boy scouts would have their jamboree in Memphis and surrounding areas, at Camp Daniels. When it was not being used as a camping site, of course we took advantage of it as a community. Even though we had a city-operated and owned swimming pool, many of us chose to swim in the river. As a matter of fact, that's where I learned to swim, in the river. Your parents told you don't get in the river until you learned to swim, which is kind of difficult to do.

Mr. Klein: Then who would teach you to swim in the river then if your –

Mr. Bowden: The older guys. Joe Washington . . . the older guys taught you to swim. But it was a fun, fun time.

Mr. Klein: So if you grew up on four or five acres with all those plants and the rest, were there a lot of chores involved? Were you expected to work a lot on them?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. All of that acreage, other folk used it as well. [Mr. Bowden subsequently explained that that land was not exclusively owned by his family.] I had chores around the house. When my father would come home in the evenings, he would start attending his garden. And I used to go out with him and worked with him. So he said to me one day, you know you come out here everyday, you need to do your own garden. I said fine. So he said, I'm going to take a space over here and make some rows for you so you can plant your own garden and learn how to take care of your own garden. I was excited about that. I may have been 8, 9 years old. So he said, "What do you like best? What is your favorite food?" I said spaghetti. I'll never forget that. He said, "Fine, that's what you should plant, some spaghetti. Go in the house and get some spaghetti, and we'll plant some spaghetti." I remember it as though it was yesterday. I went in the house and got it. He said, "You've got to break it up in small pieces." He showed me how to split the row. I had three rows, put the spaghetti in the rows and covered it up and watered it. He said, "Everyday when you come home you take the water hose, and I want you to water your garden until your spaghetti comes out." Religiously, after I do all of my stuff at school, I rush home to water my garden. My mom came out and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm watering my garden." She said, "Oh, that's nice." The only thing that would come up would be weeds. And I was pulling the weeds. I don't know how long it went but it came a time

and she said, “Well, what’s in your garden?” I said, “Spaghetti.” And she chased my father with the water hose. She said, “You’re making a fool out of that boy! Have him out here! You know spaghetti is not going to grow!” It was a big joke with him.

Mr. Klein: Was your father a big joker?

Mr. Bowden: Yeah, he was a big joker. He told jokes. Life was fun. But I remember that as though it was yesterday. Because I was anxious to have my own garden. By the way, I still love spaghetti.

Mr. Klein: Do you still garden?

Mr. Bowden: Yes, occasionally. Yes, I still garden.

Mr. Klein: But with better luck now that you know what to plant?

Mr. Bowden: Better choices.

Mr. Klein: What sorts of expectations did your parents have for you when you were growing up? Did they have you working pretty hard, or did they have you relaxed and having fun?

Mr. Bowden: Relaxed and having fun, but with responsibility. Dad would always tell me, “You can be anything you want to be. If you decide to be a garbage collector, be the best garbage collector they have. Have a reputation among everybody in the community and in the city that ‘there goes the best garbage collector we have.’ Whatever you do, do it right. Do it with all of your heart and all of your might.” I was very active in the church, so was he. She sang in the choir, he was an official at the church. I sang in the choir, as I grew older I taught Sunday school. Very active in the church. So I had a very good religious, Christian-based background. He was my boxing coach, and outside of the baseball team at

school, he was the manager and coach of the Little League baseball team during the summer. So he was not a staid person. He loved to play cards. Friendly games, not gambling, but fun games. So that's why I say growing up was a joy, was a joy.

Mr. Klein: Were there a couple of big churches that pretty much everyone was in, or were there smaller churches, or what? Were there divides in town depending on which church you went to?

Mr. Bowden: In the community, predominantly Baptist. There was no Catholic church in Douglass. There were several Methodist churches. I can't recall a Presbyterian church, but they had other churches. I can't recall a Presbyterian church in Douglass. We did not have to go outside of the community for basic stuff. If you bought a pair of shoes, you bought it from a black merchant. Now if you wanted to get a tuxedo or your better garments, of course you had to go downtown. That was always an interesting experience because I remember always my parents would say, "Go to the bathroom, we're getting ready to go downtown." I would say, "I don't have to go to the bathroom." "Yes you do. Go to the bathroom, we're going downtown." I didn't realize then the reason for it. I think I was a senior in high school when it really occurred to me the reason they wanted me to do that before we went downtown – because I had to go into a colored-only bathroom and they didn't want to do that. He was against that. So he'd rather go to the bathroom before you go downtown, or wait until you got back, than to subject me to that colored-only bathroom.

Mr. Klein: But he wouldn't say this to you explicitly?

Mr. Bowden: No. No. He never said it. I never heard the words, “You can’t go to that bathroom,” or “You can’t drink out of that water fountain.”

Mr. Klein: Would he express anger about the restrictions?

Mr. Bowden: No, not that I can recall. He was a very calm and easygoing guy because he kept away from that kind of atmosphere.

Mr. Klein: So Memphis was segregated in housing, in schooling, in the public facilities like the theaters, everything?

Mr. Bowden: Yes, in everything. My first job outside of carrying the paper or delivering groceries was in the next community called Hollywood, which was a budding community which was all White. That’s where the theater was, and I was the ticket taker. I think maybe I was 15. I was the ticket taker at the Hollywood theater, and the Blacks had to go upstairs. They had an entrance on the side where you bought your ticket and went upstairs. I guess that’s the reason I don’t go to the movies now. I took it as a job, but I didn’t like what was going on. I just never would attach myself to movies. That’s the way it was.

Mr. Klein: And you accepted that?

Mr. Bowden: I did, because I wanted the job. And then there came a time as you got older you looked for other sources of income. I waited tables for a while, while in college. That was an experience. And then I joined the military.

Mr. Klein: What was it about waiting tables that sticks in your mind now?

Mr. Bowden: Well, to see how – Well, the hotel where I worked, it’s a famous hotel now – the Peabody Hotel. And the first job I had before they let me go into the dining room was walking ducks.

Mr. Klein: Now you should explain what the ducks are. Not everyone knows this.

Mr. Bowden: In the Peabody Hotel, there are trained ducks, and three times a day the ducks come into the lobby, get into the fountain and eat, take a bath, and leave. When I was there the ducks had a suite – a two-story suite – in the hotel. The caretaker, which I was one of, was able to adapt to that because we had ducks and fowl at home, so feeding the ducks was not anything foreign to me. So you'd walk the ducks in tuxedo. The ducks would walk you, I should say, because they would lead and you'd follow the ducks, because they knew where to go. They had a red carpet. You'd come down the elevator and the carpet would already be laid out by someone else. You'd follow the ducks. The ducks would go get into the pond – a half-hour to forty-five minutes – and then go back. That's three times a day, and that was during the summer. And then you got tips. No one was supposed to touch the ducks or anything, but you'd make a tip by letting folk take pictures of the ducks. The manager would turn his head because you weren't getting paid but like a dollar an hour or some foolishness like that. So you made your money by letting folk take pictures of the ducks. A friend of the family was the head waiter and he brought me on the floor as a bus boy and then he promoted me to waiting tables. Didn't wait tables that long because I took the lifesavers test because I was a swimmer. I passed the lifesavers test so I could make more money as a life guard at a public pool.

Mr. Klein: At a public, not the hotel pool?

Mr. Bowden: Yeah, public pool. And it was more fun.

Mr. Klein: You were in high school and college?

Mr. Bowden: High school and college. And then I got certified as an instructor, a swimming instructor. So when I was in college, I made money as a swimming instructor, as well as a life guard in the summer.

Mr. Klein: Let me ask, you were a pretty young child during World War II. Do you have memories of that and how about what you knew about it as a child and what was happening in Douglass?

Mr. Bowden: Well what I remember most is lights out, sirens going off, and we would turn off all the lights in the house. It was an air raid type of thing. And glass was a premium, and metal. At my age, I may have been the only boy at my age, all the other boys were older, they were doing other things, so I had a paper route. So when I would serve my papers, I would tell my patrons to save your tin cans and bottles and I would be back to pick them up. So I had a bicycle and a wagon, and I would tie the wagon onto my bicycle and I'd go from house to house to collect tin cans.

Mr. Klein: So you'd tow the wagon?

Mr. Bowden: Tow the wagon, collect tin cans and bottles, and bring them home. And dad had a hand crusher. You put the tin cans in there and crush them and flatten them out. I'd almost forgotten that until you mentioned it.

Mr. Klein: And then you'd bring them over – there was a scrap yard?

Mr. Bowden: Take them over to the school, and they would weigh them and pay you. On certain days they had somebody over there to weigh and pay.

Mr. Klein: And what newspaper were you delivering?

Mr. Bowden: *The Press-Sentinel* and *The Commercial Appeal*. *The Commercial Appeal* in the morning, and *The Press-Sentinel* in the evening. So I'd get up early in the

morning – before I go school – and served *The Commercial Appeal*, and in the evening I'd rush home and serve that before I did anything else.

Mr. Klein: Now that was a busy childhood.

Mr. Bowden: I was busy. I was busy.

Mr. Klein: How old were you when you were delivering the newspapers?

Mr. Bowden: Twelve or fourteen, something like that. Of course, I was boxing at the time. Part of my training was running with the papers. Didn't have time to get in trouble. Seriously. Because we were just so busy doing stuff. Doing positive stuff. Didn't have time to sit around to think about something criminal to do.

Mr. Klein: First I do want to hear about boxing.

Mr. Bowden: Okay.

Mr. Klein: You said your father was one of your first boxing coaches because he boxed.

Mr. Bowden: Yeah. Right. As a youngster, right.

Mr. Klein: You're not a heavyweight, right?

Mr. Bowden: When I first started out I weighed 68 pounds, and my last fight I weighed 134.

Mr. Klein: So what weight class is that?

Mr. Bowden: When I was sixty-eight, that's called mosquito weight. I stayed mosquito for a long time, then went to flyweight, and lightweight. I boxed from, I guess, about 8-years old until about 16-years old. My last fight was in St. Louis, Missouri. I was always tall and had long arms. I had been fairly successful in AAU and Golden Gloves. Bear in mind the competition was always African-Americans. I had won some trophies and things and I had gotten a little cocky, beside myself if you will. Didn't train as hard as I should have trained. And the last fight I went to, a tournament I was in in St. Louis, Missouri, and my father told me, "You're

not ready for this fight.” He said, “I’m going to let you fight, but you need this.”

I remember that very well. I said, you don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m good. And I have a scar on my eye now where this guy cut me. Because he was fast. He was faster than I was because I wasn’t in shape. And I got tired in the second round and I lost the fight. Take them off, I’m through.

Mr. Klein: Is that right? After that you figured no more?

Mr. Bowden: Because I didn’t want to train. I didn’t want to train.

Mr. Klein: You were still swimming and a few other things?

Mr. Bowden: Swimming, and by that time girls had gotten my attention

Mr. Klein: And then you said you were in the drama club too. What kinds of productions were you putting on?

Mr. Bowden: We did musicals. Mostly musicals. A couple comedies, but mostly musicals. We had a high school orchestra called the Douglass Swingsters. And many of those members of that orchestra went on to play professionally. Ben Branch was probably the most noted because he made an album when Jesse Jackson first came out – for Jesse Jackson. His band was the musicians behind Jesse Jackson when Jesse Jackson first came on the scene. There are others whose names wouldn’t mean anything today, but they did well in the music business.

Mr. Klein: You mean he was behind Jesse Jackson the preacher?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. When Jesse Jackson went to Chicago, Ben was in Chicago. And he had a band in Chicago. He played at Jesse’s church and followed his political functions, and that kind of stuff. I started by saying with the high school orchestra and the glee club, you had your music there. So doing musicals was a natural thing to do. As I said, we had an excellent music director and he was very

high on theatre and that stuff. So we did a lot of musicals. Two or three times a year. We were always rehearsing for something.

Mr. Klein: Did you have any parts that stuck in your mind? Did you like acting? Did you take the big parts or the small parts?

Mr. Bowden: Whatever they gave me. I enjoyed it, it was fun. There were three of us that danced. It was one young lady, and two guys. We were a trio, we tapped. Tap danced. And we would go to other schools or to other places. Fraternities and sororities would have cabarets and dances or affairs, and they would invite us, and they would invite us to come as a show.

Mr. Klein: The college fraternities or sororities would invite you? You were still in high school?

Mr. Bowden: Still in high school. Fraternities would have their annual debutante ball or conferences, or Black and White Balls, or whatever they would have, and they would invite us to perform.

Mr. Klein: And another thing you brought up, you said you were too busy to get into trouble.

Mr. Bowden: Right.

Mr. Klein: This sounds like a small community, 400-person high school. Was this one of those communities where everyone knew what everyone else was doing and people were all watching?

Mr. Bowden: Oh, absolutely.

Mr. Klein: You had a lot of parents too.

Mr. Bowden: Yes. Everybody was a parent. But one of the things that I treasured was that out of twelve years of schooling, I only missed two days and it was because I had the mumps and they just would not let me go. And I was really upset, because I

couldn't go to school. Because that's where all the activity was. You didn't cut class because several of your teachers were in the community, and if you didn't come to class they would come by your house and want to know why. They wouldn't call. They'd see your parents on the street and say, "I didn't see Josh today." And you knew that. So you just didn't do that. It never entered my mind not to go to school. And my friends and guys that I hung around with. We enjoyed seeing each other at school.

Mr. Klein: And then what were the expectations both in the community and in your house, from your parents, for how people treated other people? How would you act towards older people, towards younger people, men and women?

Mr. Bowden: With the highest respect. "Yes ma'am," "no ma'am." "Yes sir," "no sir." Even today, some of those folk – I go back to the community some of those folk who are still alive, they're still Mister. I wouldn't dare call them by their first name. It would never occur to me to call them by their first name. Still "Mister," "Sir." "Yes Sir," "no Sir." To let you know how close that school community is, we have now, we still have an alumni association, a high school alumni association. We have a chapter in Cleveland, Ohio, a chapter in Chicago, Illinois, a chapter in Detroit, Michigan, a chapter in California, and we just started a chapter in the State of Georgia. The parent chapter is in Memphis, Tennessee. In July, 2009, I was elected the National President. But before that I was always active in that organization. And the mission of that organization is to further the education of the graduates of the school. This past midterm we just gave out \$42,000 in scholarships for youngsters who this is their first year in college.

Mr. Klein: Is Douglass still operating as a school? These are new graduates of Douglass High School?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. Douglass was closed from 1980 to 2009 because they started busing. They bused the black kids out of Douglass into White schools, but the White kids refused to be bused into Douglass. So the school couldn't survive with no teachers for them because of the lack of interest. So they closed the school. They were able to maintain the elementary school because you had enough of that age group to maintain an elementary school but not a high school. So we were able to get the city, through our city council person who is a graduate of Douglass, to prevail upon the city to rebuild the school. We just needed a \$25 million plant. So the first graduating class of the new school will be coming out this June, 2010. There are 147 students in that class. We had a big fundraiser. Our goal is \$160,000 for scholarships for those who qualify, who are accepted for secondary education.

Mr. Klein: That's impressive. Very impressive. It sounds like the Douglass graduates have moved all over based on those Chapters.

Mr. Bowden: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mr. Klein: Now what's the neighborhood, Douglass, like now?

Mr. Bowden: The neighborhood has changed. It has changed significantly. It hurts me to see it has deteriorated tremendously and a lot of things come to play. Folk were able to move out move up in housing. As folk got older and died off, the children went away, same as I. I knew I was not going to live on Oriole Street any more in life. I kept the property for a while, as long as I could, as rental property. But that was not a workable situation. I was here, and the property was there. Couldn't get

good tenants. So the community physically has changed. The spirit is still there. Now that the school is back functioning, we have visions that community will rise again. Because some of the folk who are grandparents now – who are in my age group – are still in and about the community. So there's hope that a revitalization will take place.

Mr. Klein: Did you grow up with any siblings or close cousins?

Mr. Bowden: No.

Mr. Klein: So you really were an only child.

Mr. Bowden: Right.

Mr. Klein: And do you think that affected how you were raised and all?

Mr. Bowden: Well, it's kind of difficult for me to evaluate that. That sounds like a movie, "On the Street Where I Lived." There was a family – the Mathis – two girls and a boy, and we became very, very close. As a matter of fact, we used to pass off as brother and sister. So I had that sibling relationship, if you will, except we weren't under the same roof, if I'm making sense to you. As I said, a very small school. So you get to know folk. I have a very good friend, Clarence Hayes who is still in Memphis. We sat beside each other for twelve years – thirteen years – we were in preschool together. We've know each other since we were five years old. And we've never had a harsh word, we've never had a disappointing time with each other. We tracked almost everything except he got married early. He didn't go into the military. He went to Tougaloo College, I went to LeMoyne, then he got married. But we are as close today as we were then.

Mr. Klein: That's great.

Mr. Bowden: So I can call him my brother, even though we are not biological. We talk to each other once a week.

Mr. Klein: How do you spell his last name?

Mr. Bowden: H-a-y-e-s. His first name is Clarence.

Mr. Klein: And when did your parents – when did they pass away? When did John Horace and Vernetta Bradshaw pass away?

Mr. Bowden: He died February 4, 1966, and she died December 29, 1967. He was born June 28, 1887, and she was born August 8, 1888.

Mr. Klein: Okay. They had almost exactly the same life spans and burials.

Mr. Bowden: Exactly. I was very, very fortunate. Very beautiful people. If I had to pick parents, I couldn't have picked a better set of parents.

Mr. Klein: Well then thinking about what marriages were like then and what they are like now, is there anything that strikes you about what you observed as a child watching their marriage?

Mr. Bowden: I'd like to say that I patterned myself after him, to a degree. He was very, very influential in my philosophy on life. If I have a personality, he influenced it. My godfather, Samuel Helm, who was one of my high school teachers, had a big influence on me. I was surrounded with very, very strong men in terms of academics, social awareness, political awareness, and how to treat your fellow man. Momma loved to cook. Everybody's mother is the best cook in town, but she had a reputation as being a very, very good cook. Particularly pies and cakes and pastries, that kind of stuff. To this day, the Fourth of July weekend is a big celebration at Douglass in the park. Folk from all over the country try to get home for the Fourth of July weekend to meet in the park. That way you don't

have to go visit anybody, because everybody's going to be in the park. The men in the community – many of the men in the community – will start cooking meat a day or so – in the park – before the Fourth. There were stationary barbeque pits throughout the park, and families or associates would choose one area and the men would cook. So you could go over there a day or so before, and you could smell meat being cooked in preparation for the big celebration on the Fourth. Women would be cooking pies and cakes, and that kind of stuff. And everybody would bring this food to the park. So, if you brought something, fine, if you didn't, no big deal. You just go from place to place all day. There was guaranteed three or four baseball games, age groups, and then sons against fathers. Swimming contests. All those kinds of things took place in the park. So she had to make more pies and cakes than normal because a lot of folk said I want some of her pie, that kind of thing. I hadn't thought about that kind of stuff, but sometimes when you ask me those questions, it just comes up.

Mr. Klein: It does. It brings up that kind of stuff.

Mr. Bowden: Those joyful moments.

Mr. Klein: Should we keep going a bit, or should we save more for next time.

Mr. Bowden: Well why don't we stop now and if you think of something else you want to get into, we can do more later.