Bruce Nesbitt

A Transcription
Of An Oral Interview

708 S. Mathews Ave.
Urbana, Illinois
August 4, 1983

Interviewed by
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Champaign County Historical Archives
Urbana, Illinois
2001

Introduction

This interview is with Mr. Bruce Nesbitt, the present director of the Afro-American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois. Mr. Nesbitt has lived here his whole life. He was born on November 14, 1932, here in Champaign. This interview is being conducted on August 4, 1983, at the Afro-American Cultural Center, 708 South Mathews, Urbana. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department. This tape is part one of a two-part series.

Bruce Nesbitt, Oral Interview

SIDE A, Tape One

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, first of all, Mr. Nesbitt, could you tell us your birth date and where you were born?

Bruce Nesbitt: Okay. My name is Bruce Nesbitt, and I was born in Champaign-Urbana. And I was born November 14, 1932. And I've been in Champaign-Urbana since, except for a tour in the service, which was in 1953 through '56.

Roundtree: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in Champaign-Urbana, some of the experiences that you can remember?

Nesbitt: Well, I went to Marquette School, which was a integrated school, because there was only three blacks attending upon my matriculation and we constituted that integration segment. I went to Marquette K through 6, and I went to Marquette basically because of the geographical outlay for the Unit 4 Schools. It seemed to me that the majority of blacks during that time went to Willard School or transferred from Lawhead School. Willard was only a block and a half from Marquette School.

As I grew older, I guess I belonged to the Boy Scout troop here in Champaign – Troop 11. I spent quite a few years of my young life with the Boy Scouts. I guess I went as far as a Life Scout, three merit badges from a Life Scout during that time. And then I went to Champaign Central High School

where I participated in sports up until my junior year, basketball and football. I just gave up sports.

My senior year in high school was one of my best years, academically. One of my disappointments in high school was the bare fact that having passed the criteria to graduate, I did not fulfill the requirement to enter college here at the University of Illinois, because rhetoric was one of those requirements. And counselors in those days never suspect that blacks would even be interested in going to high school, so they didn't inform you or gear you toward or prepare you for college. But, I was very determined about that, so I extended another semester and took some art courses and rhetoric just to put myself in that position.

I started working as early as junior high school. My first job, being a dishwasher at the Inman Hotel, where my father was chef for 35 years. But he thought that I should grow in that kind of a business and start at the bottom. I spent two years washing dishes. I spent another two years being a busboy, and then it was quite an achievement to become a waiter, full time. But, I've had a good work background. I was taught very young that this is a means of assisting the building of families, because everybody participates at every opportunity to bring money into the household, so I've been working ever since.

In reference to my academic background, I chose not to enter college, even after going back to take rhetoric. And instead, I entered the service. I spent my time in the service in the Sixty-First Field Artillery Battalion of the First Calvary Division, and I left service as a sergeant. My experience in the service,

was based around two or three things. I was an athlete – I played baseball and boxed while I was in the service. I was also a gunner with the 105 Howitzer Division. And then the remainder of my time in the service, I spent as a troop information officer, and helped disseminate the news from overseas to the troops as far as obtaining newspapers of what was going on across the country in America. I say in America because my tour was briefly in Korea and the remainder in Japan.

When I got out of the service I of course went back to work. I had contemplated going back into service, but I found out I had to go back to Korea to extend a tour of duty before I could get back to Japan, so that disallowed that. But since then, I was a janitor at the Champaign National Bank in Champaign, of course. I was a driver for Bongarts Pharmacy, and I left there and the police department in Champaign from ’65 or ’64 through ’69 when I retired from the police department, and commenced to work at the University of Illinois. Since then, I have worked at the university here, the initial capacity was as a Director of Campus Community Relations of the Student Services Office. Since then, I transferred to the Directorship of the Afro-American Cultural Program, whereas I'm still here.

Roundtree: Could you give me a little more information about your family background, your parents' names, their occupations, and if you can remember, why they came to Champaign and what year?

Nesbitt: My father, I'm going to be strapped for the years exactly, but I do know that my father come from Little Rock, Arkansas, and my mother's roots, I believe were in Tennessee; however, well, not really her family's roots were in Tennessee. My mother was born in Homer, Illinois, strangely enough, but they was migrating from the South and selected Champaign-Urbana as a site. My father come previous to my mother's arrival. He had came to Champaign when he was twelve or thirteen years old to find work. I think most blacks was headed towards Chicago but, that being the paradise for, or the illusion for the fact that it was employment there, but stopped along the way, en route to Chicago.

Now, I do believe that my father came here in 1918, something about 1918 sticks in my mind. That's when he had came. I'm from a family of eleven and I lost a sister, two brothers, so the family has dwindled somewhat. But, my mother's name is Paula E. Nesbitt; my father's name was Herbert Aris Nesbitt. And we've all, except mother, worked in various capacities in Champaign-Urbana. My sister, is now – I have two sisters that are away, one in Louisville, Kentucky, one in Chicago, Illinois – but the rest of the family is here in Champaign-Urbana.

Patrick Tyler: Could you give us the names of your sisters and brothers?

Nesbitt: Yes, I have a sister named Sandra, another sister named Janet, Mary Jean, and brothers named William, Clarence. Deceased is Herbert and Paul

Ronald. And Hilda would be one of the sisters. Let me think. It's a large family. I'm thinking if I got them all, I believe that I've gotten them all. _____ .

Roundtree: I was wondering, okay, during the fifties, along those years, some people had to provide housing for the black students who couldn't house at the U of I. Did your family take in any students?

Nesbitt: Right. One of the things that our family done during that time, as far as taking in students and trying to house and feed them, was my dad was working fairly close with the black football players, in particular, from the university, and so he housed them. One person specifically would be J.C. Caroline, who still remains in Champaign. J.C. was All-American player here at Illinois, and he spent one year in Canada playing football, and then the remainder of ten years he spent with the Chicago Bears. Now J.C. and me are very much like brothers. I hadn't shared that experience with a number of people that was in our household. Me and J.C. slept in double bunk beds, so he become very much a part of the family. And . . . . (Tape recorder is turned off.)

And then a couple of more names to be mentioned, I guess as far as people who stayed with us was Abe Woodson, Hugh Woodson. There was a kid named Jefferson. (Tape recorder is turned off.)

I don't think that we took in any girls in the house that stayed with us, but a lot of university kids would spend time over to the house. There's one thing I guess, because of the largeness of our family, we had a handle on a whole lot of

people, or a whole lot of people knowing us because of the number of us probably in Champaign-Urbana and expanded over to the campus. I used to visit over on campus quite a bit. I spent a lot of time at the Illini Union. I went to the sorority and fraternity houses on campus because at that time, the campus and community was a very intricable part of campus life because of the housing discrimination on campus. So, you got a chance to meet a lot of students, and they in turn meeting you.

Tyler: Where did you live, you know, during this time? Where was your house located?

Nesbitt: Okay. I've lived in two places in Champaign, at 408 East Church, that's where I spent my early childhood, and then the remainder of the time at 503 North Ash Street. Whereas, my mother still lives there. We refer to it as headquarters, okay, but she's been there for a number of years.

Roundtree: During the time that you were on the police force, I understand that you were the only black policeman?

Nesbitt: Yes, at one time, there was a period in there that I was the single black policeman in Champaign.

Roundtree: Could you tell us some of the experiences on the force?

Nesbitt: It was a different or strange relationship, but, you know, I knew where I was at, at all times. I got along fine with the majority of the personnel. But one of the things that I'd recommend was that I had the opportunity to work in the area of my people, the North End. I would prefer working there because I'd always subconsciously or consciously believed that white police officers in a black community misused that community, and I would be there firsthand to kind of regulate some of that misuse. I always supposed that these things would not occur if I was in the car or on that particular beat, and that was one of the things that I requested to work, the North End. And most of my tour on the police department over the four-year period was. I worked from 11 to 7, 11 at night until 7 in the morning, when most of the activity, especially on weekends, was going on, so I had a chance to firsthand see that for three years. I never worked the day shift much at all, and primarily worked northeast Champaign. That was very important, and I got my wish.

I was there during the time that the gangs were running. I was in a very precarious position because my feelings about the job is whatever the job may be, you do the job well and you do it according to the rules of the job. You weren't a very popular person being a policeman, and you weren't a very popular person being a black policeman in the black community. But then, I wasn't getting paid for popularity. I think that I conducted myself in such a manner that I was respected, and that's all I ever asked for as a policeman in the North End community. And certainly there were times when you hated to arrest a person,

or having known that individual, but then a job is a job. What you try to do is minimize the affect of their arrest and still if there was a crime committed, address it.

The gang experience, I spent a lot of time talking to the various gangs, and their gang leaders. And, if you talk to one gang more than you do the other gang, there's always that little bit of dissention, but overall, I take pride in the fact that I was able to talk to the gang leaders. I was able to take and convene them at the police station to discuss why all this foolishness of killing one another, especially, the black population, you know. Blacks was not the enemy. Okay, so, I spent a lot of time explaining that and the whole ridiculous attitude of shooting at one another. The whole ridiculous attitude of being in crime, because it leads to nowhere.

One of the things that I spent a lot of time doing was talking to young people that was on the streets during the curfew. And the curfew then was more in effect, I mean you sixteen years old and you out after eleven o'clock, you was in trouble. But then, it was more than just arresting them. I was really opposed to just arresting that young person, but take him home first and try to explain to him the reason for this law. Now, if he continued to violate this law, then he'd have to be arrested. But to arrest somebody for the first time just because they violated curfew was weak in itself. But my job was not to interpret the law but to enforce the law. But I spent a lot of time interpreting the law.

And I spent a lot of time with the white police constituency trying to explain cultural lifestyle, cultural habits, why these people are out after 11 o'clock for lack

of things to do. Why these people are involved in crime, because there's no jobs. And if you're idle, you have nothing to do, then sooner or later, you're going to yield to the temptation of committing a crime. So it behoove them to know why people do what they do. And that's probably one reason why that I quit the police department, because I spent too much time trying to interpret. You know, I've always been in favor of helping or assisting young people, but why this job, you know. But what I believed in and what the law says, we come to grips with that too many times, you know, so I thought I could do better in another position, in another capacity. Though I felt as though I'd done as much as I possibly could as a police officer.

Roundtree: Okay, during the – I think it was the early '30s, '40s, or somewhere in there – we've been talking to other people and they said that they remember the segregation in the theaters. Were you too young to remember that?

Nesbitt: No, well, I'm still young! (Laughs.) The problem was that that segregation continued on up through the '50s. There was a section in the movies, and depending on which movie, the Rialto or the Orpheum Theater or the Park Theater, where blacks sat. There were stores downtown where you was treated indifferent from the regular customer. So, segregation existed long up into the '50s. It didn't stop in the '30s or the '40s at all, because the thing with the movie theaters was very true. The thing with the bars was very true. The experience was in 1954-55, J.C. Caroline dared or challenged the campus

barbershop, and went in for a haircut because he was a popular athlete, you understand, and they refused to cut his hair. So it was apparent even that late when it was a big issue and there are some newspaper articles in reference to that. But that was one of the, I spent a lot of time picketing the Steak 'N Shake on Green Street, because they allowed the black customers to drive up to and use the facilities of the drive-up window, but they could not go inside. And, so we went and picketed, and I was very much a part of that movement to get Steak 'N Shake open.

I spent some time in the early ‘60s with Jim Ransom and some other people in the community picketing downtown, I think it was the Sears and the Penney's Stores, behind blacks, because blacks was – and boycotted those stores because blacks was spending money with those franchises. So in that manner, I have paid my dues. I can remember very vividly in my adolescent years when I was going to grade school, I had to go right past Meadow Gold Ice Cream Company which was right on the corner of 5th and University Avenue. And they always had the sign posted in there, "We reserve the right to serve our customers," which was a selectivity thing. It was to say in a subtle manner that if you were black, we don't want to serve you and come up to this counter. No. Everything was to go. In most restaurants, in most places, Meadow Gold, like I said, I very vividly remember that.

But I can also remember being a little black boy running around to the back to get the remains of the ice cream that was left in one of the big gallon cartons as a gesture of some compassionate white man's extension of friendship,

and that was rare, you know, there was only one or two that would do that, you understand. But no, that certainly prevailed under those circumstances.

Roundtree: Later, during the ‘60s how did the civil rights movement affect Champaign, the black community?

Nesbitt: The civil rights movement in the ‘60s started down with picketing downtown. That was very effective. You can be very proud of Champaign-Urbana, because they stood up on some of the major cities. And starting in down South, they started it. And Champaign-Urbana woke up, and they started picketing and they started boycotting, and the whole national fever caught on here and this wasn't done solely by blacks. This was done with some constituency with white people. Persons most sympathetic was probably the church people, even though there were some churches that were very obviously still racist, did not believe in such a movement – it was too soon, too much too soon, and did not participate.

One of the things that was happening during that movement was the reliance again on the black church, a place to convene, a place for the information to be disseminated to the congregation, so they was to participate. That's always been the crutch for black people, is by church. And so, they played their role in it. But there was a lot of sacrifices made.

In particular, and I want to mention this, was some of the sacrifices made by John Lee Johnson, Roy Williams, and some of those people that age who

tried to formulate and finally did formulate this plan for the E.O.P. Program, the Educational Opportunity Program, here on campus in 1968. Their roles are very important roles, because now you get the impact of 500 new students coming to campus which is going to change a whole lot of things. They weren't any more educated than the kids today, but they had the will to learn.

I can remember persons like John Lee Johnson going out and recruiting. At that time, E.O.P. students come from across the country, from down South, Philadelphia, East St. Louis, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York, even. But the E.O.P. program, the solid foundation, was due to the community interest as well. _____. And so rarely does the community get credit for that, and this is an opportunity and time for me to mention that. But the E.O.P. program did have a great impact on what's happening here, because now we'll have to get into the housing and provide housing for the blacks because I think it was 1966 before there were even any houses that late on campus here that blacks could get into the dormitories and what not, you know.

Roundtree: Previously, you said that when you were in high school, and that the counselors didn't influence the students, you know, tell them what they needed to take in order to prepare them for college. Would you say that now, in your experiences, with your children, that they have?

Nesbitt: I really think, without naming individuals, without even thinking of individuals that the counseling programs across the country, and particularly, because I can witness it in Champaign-Urbana are weak. They. . . .

[End Side A, Tape One]

Bruce Nesbitt, Oral Interview

SIDE B, Tape One

[Remarks joined in progress.] . . . for young blacks, still coming out of high school. I think they do everything on automatic that may ever be available. If you ask them a question, maybe they will answer your question, but they're not very thorough with their response. They're not very – it's my impression that they're not very sincere. It's more of a job for them than it is interest at heart for the growth and development of young black kids coming out. I don't care how you look at it, I don't care what's offered in the high school, it still has to deal with the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic, and if you don't have that down pat it messes your opportunity for employment somewhere along the line. Or it ill prepares you for college.

Now I've been a witness, because I know that the transition from high school to college is great in itself, but to come here unprepared in an institution of this size and with the credibility it has, you got to be on the ball. And, there's nobody out here giving away anything, because racism exists still out here, you know. So you can't perpetuate that kind of thing. I think so many kids are lost in college because they haven't been prepared in junior high and high school.

So that has to happen. It doesn't start happening in high school, it has to happen when you're coming out of the K through 6 years, that career has to be geared then. So, I find the counselors totally ineffective, and I don't care who they are, that's the way I see it.

Roundtree: Okay, have you been a member of any organizations here in Champaign in the past or now?

Nesbitt: Yes, I used to belong to, well, let's go back and start with the Boy Scouts. Okay. I spent some time after coming out of service with the, it used to be an Amvets in town, a Black Amvets on East Washington Street, the 600 block. I belonged to that as the historian. I have belonged and still belong to the University Elks Number 619, though we don't have a facility, we still have the organization and some money that will tie us together still. We meet less frequently, but it does exist.

And then I was the youngest Exalted Ruler of the Elks in the Illinois-Wisconsin Association. I was the state officer with the Elks, and I'm now affiliated with Iota Phi Theta Fraternity. I've served as _____ of the fraternity, the graduate chapter. I'm a national officer now with the fraternity. And I'm also affiliated with the Don Moyer's Boys Club of Champaign-Urbana. My present position is Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Boys Club. So that's the things that I'm most directly involved with, though I've been affiliated with the NAACP, the Urban League, OIC (Opportunity Industrialization Center) in whatever capacity I could've been, you know. These things I wanted to see grow, so as I can expand or extend myself to assist in any area there, I will. I'm a card holder for those organizations.

Roundtree: Okay, do you remember, during the ‘60s, there was a newspaper called the *Illinois Times*. Do you remember that newspaper?

Nesbitt: Vaguely. Vaguely. But I think that was Blanche Jamerson's paper. Okay, well, I remember it, yes, okay. The only problem with the *Illinois Times*, it was a good paper. It was unfortunately outdated news, but still news for the reader. Now, that's because this beautiful lady tried to do that paper mostly by herself, and then there is always finance involved in that. And so, she was the major contributor financially, so it didn't surface as strong as it should, though it did indeed have its impact, and it was good for this community. And, it was informative. It's just a matter of distribution and all the mechanics that a large paper like the *Chicago Tribune* or *Sun Times*, or even the local papers have the mechanical stuff to get it out, and have the personnel to get it out. But it was very significant and very impressionable for the black community.

Roundtree: Okay, during the ‘60s the gangs were rowdy or whatever, okay. I’ve been hearing some people say that the gangs are coming up again. Could you give your opinion of why you think they. . . ?

Nesbitt: I haven't heard that the gangs are surfacing again, but I would not be surprised. And the gangs only happen because of one reason – I'll live and die with this – that is because there's no employment, there is no means of making a dollar except taking a dollar, being slick about getting a dollar, being influenced

by drugs. The bottom line being too much idle time. If you give a child something to do, he will have a tendency to occupy his time with that. One of the best things that I've seen happen, right after the gangs disbursed, was that the same people was in them gangs began to play softball, constructive positive competition, in Douglass Park, and they had the league up in Douglass Park. And those same people, they used to argue, fight, and shoot at each other was part of a ball team, and instead of fighting and shooting you took it out this way, through some kind of positive action.

Now that was important and that was a very solid league. Even people in the community who lived as neighbors to Douglass Park began to come out and involve themselves in participating in the activities and it had become a very fond thing for them to do because it's in walking distance from home, you can enjoy the evening, and there wasn't any fights. It was well-regulated. Bud Johnson had a lot to do with that. They wouldn't have that nonsense up there where you had to be fighting and going on.

The umpire's word was the law, and it was very constructive and it gave somebody something to do. There was no uniforms bought, there was no equipment bought by the park district. The kids got together, they chipped in, they got their own uniforms, which they wore quite proudly. They bought their own supplies, and that is another thing – that you have a responsibility and if you got a responsibility and you address that, that helps you grow, that helps you develop and that will carry over onto the job. So that was a very important. . .

I'm concerned now that that no longer exists in Douglass Park, and most of the leagues that play for the park district, are playing in Dodds Park or Dexter Field, all across Champaign. I think the rationale the park district comes up with is the fact that we don't want to show any separatism. But what it done, was divorce the black community of having someplace to go and be amongst their people, other than church. There's no place in Champaign-Urbana for people to go. I have a problem with the very fact that the young people in Champaign-Urbana have no place to go. I think that young people in Champaign-Urbana ought to have a dance every weekend if that's what they want to do. But there's no place to have that dance, you see.

Douglass Center in itself, as a facility is closed during the summer, and the only thing is open is the park, under some modified supervision. And Douglass Center should never be, in my opinion, closed. And Douglass Center is the only place to go other than church in the black community, so the overflow in the black community and their responses to come on campus – well, as least the smaller the sights – at least there's some other activity, you see. Then the university gets concerned because everybody from the black community is coming over here. They understand that ‘cause they got something to offer. Northeast Champaign-Urbana does not have anything to offer, particularly to young people.

The best thing they had, like I said, was that summer league up there in softball. But, it's dissolved itself. And hopefully someday soon, that there will be a petition to get that activity back up in the park. It can be separatism, it can be

whatever it is, you understand, but it needs to be an outlet for people to get out of the house in Champaign-Urbana, northeast end of town. If it was a problem, that would be one thing, but there were no problems during that time. That was a very, very good thing. Now, I don't think that Douglass Center ought to be limited to just recreational sports.

I know there's an over population going to Douglass Center, because everybody, every age group can't play basketball at the same time, everybody can't use one softball diamond all the time. But then, the answer to that is to have alternate programs. Why not have drama? Why not? I mean there's a stage in Douglass Center, but I don't know what it's there for. I haven't figured that out yet, they don't use it, you see. I want to know why they aren't using the stage at Douglass Center. The best thing that's coming out of Douglass Center – this is no reflection on Nate Dixon. But then again, there's the people that live in that area is going to have to go to Nate Dixon to make him stand up as well to the park district and say, "Hey, there's a demand for these kinds of activities," and back him up. Okay. But the best thing they got going up there is that senior citizens _____ and very active and use the annex well. But that's one segment of the population of northeast Champaign. What are we going to do for young people? Don't put on or don't perpetuate the fact that the only thing for young blacks to do is play ball or have some kind of recreation. Because see, they're carrying that over into high school, and then they'll carry it over to college and they think they suppose to be pro, and that ain't working, you know. So, we

foster a lot of that ourselves. So, it's time for the black community to stand up and make some demands on what should happen in Douglass Center.

Roundtree: How were the job opportunities in the early years for blacks?

Nesbitt: Until affirmative action set in, there were jobs, but they weren't very meaningful jobs. There weren't any high paying jobs. They was always in some kind of servitude capacity, things that whites, as a rule didn't necessarily want, you know, but there were jobs. Today as we educate our people, and they become educated, there becomes less jobs. They become better qualified, and the jobs are gone, you see. Before, it was black people were less qualified, but they held down a job, which didn't pay any salaries. Now, if that much money is out there for a job now, then it's saying to me, America is about "White America," and they're going to get those jobs. So, that reflects on the Bakke case for someone, you know.

And then the other problem that I see, is those blacks that got those jobs during the ‘60s, forgot how they got there, aren't pushing hard enough in some areas to provide jobs for these young people today, you see. Now, that's done, and there's a waiting game going on now by the vote. You have to vote. And young people as they become 21, have to learn how to register to vote and do most things by the ballot to put black people in those positions. Because one of the things is happening, like I said, is those people in the ‘60s that may have gotten them job opportunities are so busy protecting their own job, or thinking

their protecting their own job, they don't have no time to stretch out or expand, extend themselves to reach out and bring some younger people up, you see.

C.E.T.A. Program does quite a bit for young black people, but then I have a problem with C.E.T.A., too, only because of the fact that it suggests that the only way that you can have that job is based on income. Well, now everybody that has that grade of income don't want to work no way, so they aren't getting proficiency and it kills and denies those persons who have an income over their standards. They've got to live, too. Now, I guess the rationale is that they got the better opportunity, but no, I think that you ought to take and offer the job to those people who want to work and have the skills to do that work, you know. But it has taken some burden off unemployment, but I just don't like some of the guidelines for it, you know. It certainly denies my family the opportunity to take and get a C.E.T.A. job. The C.E.T.A. jobs are on-the-job training, so you can learn some skills and my kids aren't so smart they can't learn, you see. But they're denied that because of my income, and I ain't rich, you see. But it's somebody telling me, you ain't rich, but you're rich enough, you see. So that affects my children.

Roundtree: Okay. How would you like to see the black community in say, about 10 years? For instance, during our interviews, we sometimes ask people that and some responses have been that they would like to see the blacks maybe get together a black business, a store, something, you know, that all the blacks are behind.

Nesbitt: Right. One of the things about some of the blacks in this town right now, is those that have businesses do not have any businesses in the black community. Of course, that's their choice, but that's what we need. I can agree with those other people. First, let's deal with the Oak-Ash area, which is void of housing, void of business. I don't know what it's zoned for – surely some business in that area – but there should be some single-family units in my opinion, that's constructed there with a playground area for the kids to grow up in a healthy environment. There should be an opportunity for a business or three or four to go up in that same area. And then it would enhance those people that's across the street from that vacated area, Gene's Quick Stop, that area, to take and do more to dress up that area, you see. That kind of pressure would demand that kind of pressure, but then Gene, I'm sure, I know Gene personally, I don't know what his feelings are, but you know if he can make money without a whole lot of overhead, you make money without a whole lot of overhead. The funeral home, you know, that's another sore spot with me. I mean, blacks are dying everyday. It seems to me that they ain't got to go to Owens to bury somebody, but they have viewed Parker's because of its oldness as a place not to go because it doesn't have that appeal. It doesn't have that chapel, so to speak, it doesn't have the same provisions that Owens Funeral Home has. Now it's sad that it don't have that because it's been there long enough and enough black people have died for that to be enriched, you see. But it's a attitude thing, I think, you know, well, "if so-and-so ain't doing it, I ain't doing it." But somebody is

got to be first. That Oak-Ash area ought to be – a cleaners there, for example. There ought to be. We don't need no liquor stores. We drive all over town to get liquor now, so we don't need no liquor store. We can get to that. But it needs to be a cleaners there, for an example, that would be a positive factor.

It needs to be as promised, some single-family housing units, you know, people have been disbursed throughout this town, their property bought up and with no place to go. Nothing's wrong with that area, that area becomes what you invest in it, and what you put in it. Like I said, homes is one thing that could go there, a Laundromat could go there. I'm sure _____ in that barber shop over across the street would pick up and a beauty shop. All those things that people use everyday should be right there. Now once that happens, then other blacks will see that it's an opportunity for them. Not necessarily there because it will be overcrowded by then, but they will invest in a business, you see.

I think black people are leery about establishing a business, because they aren't sure ever of black support, you see. But if you set the tone, and you set the example that money can be made and that would be an opportune time to do it, then it can happen. Then it would act as a catalyst for other blacks to get involved. That's a sore spot with me because some development should be going on there right now and that land has been absent of housing, absent of anything for a long time and there's money there that was allowed for that but it's not occurred.

I think the black church – let me just jump on this black church business just a minute. The black church has a total responsibility to the community and I see no cohesiveness with the various churches because everybody's trying to do their thing, you see. And I don't know what part God plays in this whole thing, but sometimes I'm impressed that He is absent, because it's too much competition between churches and how I can get the biggest congregation and whose going to tithe the most. That kind of foolishness versus disseminating the word about how we can get something together. If each church took its congregation, you see, and each church had the same subject matter, and the same priorities, then it all could be done, you see, but the priorities are different. That can be a problem. It always starts with the church for black people, and it always ends at the church for black people. So, if you don't see progress in a black community, it's my opinion, that the churches in that black community are failing, you see. So, churches must take a stand to quit being selfish. They must take a stand and quit being competitive with one another and unify and preach the same sermon about the growth and development of Champaign-Urbana. How it would be better for all of us, versus how it would be better for my church, you see.

There's a big church up on Bradley, or there's another big church somewhere else on Main, you understand, but there's that little church down there at Third and Park who serves the same God, but don't prosper as well because the congregation isn't there. But I'm saying everybody ought to prosper. The big look out for the small, the strong look out for the weak, you know. And only ‘til we have that kind of cohesiveness will it be effective. How effective

would it be at a city council meeting to get the Oak-Ash Project, if every church and its congregation went to city council meeting, you see? Now we have a problem with the representatives there of the church to go because it ain't affecting them directly so they ain't going, what they going for? You see what I'm saying? But if you got the congregations from Salem, Bethel, C.M.E. and a few others together, they could not hold nor house that multitude of persons at a city council meeting. And then those folks that are holding up the growth of the Oak-Ash area would pay attention, you see. It's not too late to protest, boycott or march, you see, but that must be mentioned in church, because that's where the masses are in this town, you see. I can go out here tomorrow and try to talk about having a mass demonstration, you understand? Now, I'm going to get a few people that's going to respond, but I don't have the real mass. The real mass is in the church.

Tyler: How would, I have a question about, the youth in today's society, how have they changed, you know, with the youth when you was coming up? I mean are they more motivated or are they trying to get out and get their education?

Nesbitt: I think that per family, let me say it like that. There's some families in Champaign-Urbana have been taught traditionally that you must go to school okay, because it's a family way. We've always had somebody, you know. I'm not hung up in that. I think you ought to go to school if you want to go to school, you see. But if you don't go to school, you go to work to sustain the family.

Because even if you go to school, school shows me only one thing, is that it's an opportunity to be more knowledgeable of what you intend to do, better prepared. But then, there's nothing like experience. If you go to work when you're 15 and you learn for 10 years while the students are gone to school, your experience is going to pay off as well. So, I don't believe in forcing a kid and all that tradition about you got to go to school. School ain't for everybody. You see, ‘cause if you have no desire to go to school, and you're going out of habit, you ain't going to do nothing but be a burden on your family no way.

When you finish college, you're going to do the same thing you done if you didn't go to school, you're going to work. So, those that want to go to school and become better educated and take that opportunity to make more money for what they've learned, I think that's fine. For those that don't want to go to school, they should get a job and learn from experience. Parkland provides a lot of opportunities, particularly for blacks, because it's only a 2-year school and you can learn specific things. I mean, there's technology to be learned, mechanics to be learned, nursing to be learned. Which is a career. A career is only to make money. I mean, the only thing that’s going to keep you on this earth right now, is God and money. That’s all. Now, if you want to make more money, you get more proficient at what you do. But there's no reason why a person can't use their hands and make money, as well as use their brain and make money. There shouldn't be that class distinction about who went to school. All right?

. . .that I finished at the University of Illinois, or I went to wherever, but I come out of high school and I just went to work, you see. I have – I hate the

word, but for lack of a better word – the prestige that goes along with any college graduate, you understand. I'm Director of the Afro-American Culture at the big University of Illinois, you see? But I'm just a dummy that went to work, you see. But I'm just as smart as anything that went to school, you hear me, because I made it that way, you see. So, that's my philosophy on the school. I don't think that you ought to do something because somebody used to do that, you see. All you ever want as an individual is respect of another individual. That's all you want out of the whole thing. 'Cause if you make a dollar, they going to take a dollar, it don't matter, you see.

Roundtree: Okay. That's all the questions that we have, and if there's anything that you want to tell us that you can remember.

Nesbitt: I can appreciate you getting involved, because what you're doing by getting involved is getting an education. Now you're learning something about Champaign-Urbana. But what's happening in Champaign-Urbana is typical from wherever you may have come from, in that hometown, that former hometown. So blacks as a whole have to make up their minds what they really want to do, and impact it. Now you can talk about it for days. Our black community in Champaign-Urbana must remain in part where it is because that's where our roots is, what's where tradition – I can deal with the tradition of that. North End should never dissolve. We got blacks all over Champaign-Urbana, but it's historically sound to refurbish, rehabilitate and maintain, if you will, our land in

northeast Champaign. And all you do is make it better than it is, that's all. But there's no reason to go high sight and jump out over southeast Champaign, you know. Stay with your people, but when you cut your grass, have that neighbor who's going to cut his, you know. And then you have the same thing they got in southeast Champaign. . . See you take a gang and make a gang a positive force. The smartest people I knew was in them gangs. All they needed was to have their brain power re-directed in a positive nature, but through frustration, they chose that way. They weren't bad kids, they were forced into being bad kids because they wasn't ever given the opportunity. Some of the people in the gangs right now are working at the university, you see. They're working out here, got good jobs and it took them a little longer to see the light. But see, good jobs wasn't available to them before, you see. All I'm saying is you give me the opportunity.

I come out here in 1969-70 at the university making $8,500. Now my contention was, that was less than what I was getting paid on the police department. My contention was, that ain't no money. But, my biggest goal was the fact, "You let me in the door, and I'll make it." I'm making three times as much now, you see. I have no problem with that, because I, what you earn, I just want my fair share, because I'm going to spend it anyway and it doesn't make any difference if I'm making $50,000, I'm going to spend it, because I'm going to live like I'm making $50,000 dollars. So, raises in pay don't mean nothing to me, you know, because work has become a habit and a way of life for me and I know

that you got to make some sacrifices to get to that step. You see, so I took a reduction in pay.

So I knew one thing is that you give me the opportunity and I'll hey, I'll show you what I can do, you see. And I feel very good about being the Director of the Culture Center. I want to go a long way, you know. I'm involved in everything that's "Black" on this campus, and don't have no degree. But I know that anything that happens black on this campus, sooner or later, it's going to come to me, you know, or I'm going to be a part of that decision-making, and that's an achievement, okay, to me. And I have no problems telling anybody who suspects I have a degree that I don't have no degree, don't want no degree. I had a scholarship to come here to the University of Illinois in art, when I left high school, and I chose to go to the service. _____ for me. I know I could be smart, but if I go to the classroom, I'm going to miss something out here in these streets and you see, this is the way I have to live is on these streets. So that's my preface. That's as much as I got to say and I thank you both for interviewing me and I hope I've been of some assistance. Okay?

Roundtree: Okay. Thank you.