

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

John Cunningham Oral History Interview

Stephen Hansen, Interviewer

January 24, 2018

Steve Hansen (SH): This is Steve Hansen, I'm ah, talking with John Cunningham today is January the ah 24th of 2018. Ah, John thank you for agreeing to the interview and maybe we can just start by talking about your background a little bit. When were you born? Where did you grow up...

John Cunningham (JC): Mm-hmm

SH: ...and some of your experiences of growing up?

JC: I was in born in Columbus, Mississippi on August 4th, 1948. And um, I did a few years of my early childhood there went one summer in Oakland, Alabama when my parents had ah, gone North seeking work the plant in Mississippi the Moss Type plant where my father worked and we lived in those houses around the plant closed down, they decided to go North and left us with his aunt in Oakland, Alabama and we stayed there, and then when they found work, after several months of a year they came back and got us and brought us to St. Louis, we stayed.

SH: Excuse me, do you remember roughly when that was?

JC: It's all pre-school I wasn't in school, so

SH: Okay

JC: So it's somewhere between the time a fella goes to school, I started my schooling in East St. Louis, so all of this happened before ah...

SH: So it would have happened before 1952? 1953? then?

JC: mmmhmm that's right! And uh, and we moved to a place called Rush City right outside of East Saint Louis, um, you wanna know what I remember about the South? When I was little? You might find this irregular, but one of the things that stand out in my mind was I had a cousin he was in his 20s, very muscular guy and one day I was in the backyard and you know they used to have clotheslines and sometime they strung wire for the clothesline rather than rope. Well we would, somehow I was in the yard and I look up and see him draped across the clothesline. He was bleeding cause he had been cut and so we ran in the house and I remember this very vivid, screaming and hollering and they got him down and they and they asked we asked what happened and eventually our parents told us that a white man had cut him and so - it didn't make sense to me. 'Cause I knew the white man, he had crutches so, we trying to figure out how this big strong guy could get cut by this white man and so finally they told us that he had been gambling playing dice he was accused of cheating and other men held him down while the cripple man cut him with a razor. So, that's one of my vivid memories from Mississippi as a child, you know?

Um, but you know, that's that stood out and then of course in Oakland, Alabama I lived on a farm my father's aunt and uncles farm and so I got a taste of farm life there. Saw 'em kill chickens, cut their heads off, wring their necks stuff like that. Um, so, Rush City, it was like going back in time while we were in Mississippi living in those I just call them row houses, outside the plant they had running water, bathrooms and stuff like that when we got in Rush City, there was no toilet in the house they had a outhouse there was no water in the house there was no electricity in the house so we went back in time. We had ah, lamps, kerosene lamps for light, um, a wood burning stove to cook and heat the house with, and you have to have a night soil pot if you used the bathroom at night and of course in the cold of winter you didn't want to go out there. And I had not been exposed to that type of living before it was a completely cultural shock. Then we went to Washington Elementary School you could catch a bus or you could walk across the railroad tracks or hop a train to get over there [laughs] um, but I was educated in the East Saint Louis school system all the way up until 12th grade and I went to I had one white teacher during my entire education in the classroom that was I started out in Washington School then I went to Webster School - these are elementary schools, and then at Webster it's in the third grade where I had my first white instructor and then I finished my elementary years at um, Franklin Elementary School and went on to Hughes Quinn and then Lincoln High School which is pretty closed now in East Saint Louis.

SH: What were the schools segregated?

JC: Webster was the only integrated school that I attended.

SH: So Lincoln High School was ah, you would have graduated what? 66?

JC: 66. It was at that time that ah, segregated. They divided the city you lived on the south side of ah, one of the streets eventually they let some of us go to ah, East St. Louis Senior High School, and others but when I started at Lincoln it was segregated.

SH: So East Saint Louis was a bustling city in the 60s and the 50s and the 60s?

JC: It was on the decline.

SH: It was already on the decline?

JC: Yeah, the um, there the businesses the stock markets and all that stuff were still there but the hiring was starting to decline a little bit so the stock markets and all that stuff was still there but African American employment was starting to decrease um from what I understand from what I know about it. Um, I remember when I was a I came home my first year from college looking for a job in the summer at SIU Carbondale and my girlfriend was um, a senior in high school and we both applied for jobs at the packinghouse at the same time took our physicals and she got hired but I didn't. And it just messed with my mind a little bit, I'm a guy, we were both looking for summer work, um, but then of course they were trying to I guess hire a minority and a females fit more than one category of minority ah, race and then gender when they hire a female. So she's making money and I'm not. [laughs] Very frustrating but I made it.

SH: Did you finish your degree at Carbondale?

JC: Yes.

SH: What was it like in Carbondale in the 60s?

JC: Well we had one of the largest African American populations on a major university at that time, and so, for a lot of guys that could have been a little culture shock but I had - I was in the Boy Scouts and I had been the only black at Senior Patrol Leader Training one year so being around or working with white people and we see 'em at camp a lot and of course we see 'em in athletics um, it didn't set me back but Carbondale was known for being a party campus. And Delyte Morris was President at that time. And there was a lot of activism going on on campus. You might recall the riots occurred while uh, I was there and they closed down the university. It was pretty rough if the - many of the African Americans were not involved in the issues that the students were protesting against and we didn't understand least I didn't the severity of what was going on on campus. And so, once they passed these rules about how many people could congregate and stuff you know they had rules could no more than 5 people congregate or they would intervene, um, so, when the rioting started, not being attached to it you would see a crowd rushing towards you and you say, well I'm not in this, so you keep going in the direction that you want to go - you think you're going to class, but behind the crowd are the authorities and they don't know you from anybody else. And a lot of my friends got struck by the police and so forth and they would course we would meet and they would tell us I'm not even in it. Because we really didn't know what the issue was. Eventually, you know, we found out that ah, SIU Carbondale had an office where they were training Vietnamese to go back you know it was called a Vietnamese Study Office they were going back to Vietnam and the students felt that America was taken advantage of the Vietnamese population by sending these people back to the country, so, but that's what was going on, and National Guard came in, state police came in, I got tear gassed, you know they just come into your - I lived off campus, they came into my um, apartment area we lived in trailer homes, the state police said it's curfew time go into your apartment, trailer, or whatever, and then they said it, and afterwards they just start throwing tear gas, none provoked them, but that's what they did and so you know if you know anything about tear gas it leaves a residue so a couple of weeks after they have gassed us you touch the counter in the house and then rub your eye you know get burned so, that was just one era of Carbondale other than all the parties I went to and ah learning how to study for college I majored in Math Education and minored in Physics. And there were only 3 blacks in the Math Department. So when we got ready to storm to form a study group there were 3 of us sitting there and ah we managed the best we could um, on our own. The other kids didn't want us to be in their study group probably because they didn't think we had anything to offer, you know, but that's just the way it was at that time. Some of them were meeting blacks for the first time, as well they came from communities where there weren't blacks and some of us came from communities where we didn't interact academically with whites and um, there was no anger we got along well, it wasn't didn't anybody do anything to you, but that's just how everybody was living at that time. It was okay for me I lived in an integrated dorm and eventually, you get your own place because you want to do that.

SH: So how did it make you what was your perception you talked about with the rioting and you weren't participating but you were still swept up into it? How did that make you feel?

JC: Frightened. Because you realize you could be ah, could be hurt and you don't know where the um, rioting is going to take place you have no idea you could just be walking and then all of a sudden something would break out and as you know um, you go to Carbondale campus they build some

buildings down there that's supposed to stop rioting with all that crazy design I was on campus when Old Main burned down you know one of the traditional buildings at Carbondale, but I found out a lot of our problem was we didn't know the issues and we weren't informed. We were there for our education and really didn't understand the dynamics of college. Least I didn't why the uh students didn't want Delyte Morris to be President. Eventually, it became obvious why some of them objected him to being president you might remember he built the uh the house for the President. He had heated driveways, and the students just felt that was inappropriate use of funds and that he was taking advantage of his office and living like royalty so they just kept protesting him. Also, what the university did that I thought was unfair I told you if there is some students rioting I just use that word because we didn't think we were rioting, in front of the university center there was a big glass window. We had no idea that they had a camera up there. So if you were just there standing around in a group talking, they were taking pictures and they were IDing students who they saw in a group and they were accusing you of being a part of the people that were activists and doing these things and you could get ah, disciplined on campus so it was rough time on campus.

SH: When you were on campus did you did the African American students form communities through fraternities and other associations?

JC: All of that was there. Fraternities, sororities, very I didn't join one first of all I went through a couple of smokers, uh, I'm ah more of ah individual. This is what is what I felt, now you might say that this is a bunch of malarkey, at the time when African American minds are ripe for learning, we polarize ourselves in these fraternities and sororities. And so we started alienating each other when we should have been coming together. So these groups I never understood em. They always tried to sell me the bill of goods about the Pan-Hellenic Council, they come together but I never saw it. I never saw the service that I thought they should be giving to the college community. Now that's my opinion of course. Ah, so and I wasn't attracted to them, and plus I didn't have the money they wanted in order for you so that might be another reason.

SH: How is it that you um, when I grew up, my parents were exactly the same age, I was born in 1948 as well, graduated high school in '66, but my parents always told me I was going to go college, in retrospect, I don't think I ever had a choice, ah was that the case growing up in your family - or do you remember making a conscious choice of oh I'm going to go to college.

JC: Actually, I had a girlfriend who was adamant about me going to college, um, so someone has to be the motivating factor, it was not family because ah, I had a sister that had who's a nurse who had gone to college so I knew about college, I would go, but I didn't have a burning desire to go. But after you know, friendship motivated me to go ahead and then my best friend went and we were trying to be roommates so, and then I admired my two high school teachers. My math teacher, and my physics teacher, so they made a big impression on my life and ah, I was in an honors society and of course all those kids in those type of organizations tracked I was on track team people expect you you know in our community to do something with your life so I had all these forces pushing me. And I was a little tentative but I stepped out you know after their encouragement.

SH: What do you - looking back on it, what were the forces that um, that shaped your life do you think as a child and family, church, what institutions ah do you think had the greatest influence on you in the

community?

JC: Church and Boy Scouts. I was - I believed the Scout Oath. I believed the Scout Law. I'm still a Scouter. [laughs] Right now. I'm on the council, executive council I've been ah Assistant Cub Master, Cub Master and Scout Master and Boy Scout and growing up I had a unique opportunity to my good friend's father was a minister so they had to go to church. He knew our parents he was a minister so they go through the week. Well, I didn't have to go but I went. And I listened, I had a different perspective than him. They were being forced to go I was choosing to go. So I listened how they griped about it. And my father died when I was 12 so I got to see how they felt about their father managing the family and I listened to all that things they said but I felt good about having something to do, being with someone and then my friend's fathers, whenever there was an event like a father son dinner one of those men would come up to me and say - don't worry you mine today. So, I believed um, in the Bible, you know, and a lot of the stories made sense to me, uh, course I when you go to college everything gets challenged if you're not careful the ideas on campus can cause you to go astray or take a different path maybe for a while for some people other people get lost I heard all, I heard God was dead, I heard God created the world and left, um, my one of my favorite professors was Professor Ship philosophy professor and you know they take you through all those hedonism, externalism, I listened and all that, some of it sounded good some of it didn't. So, and I liked philosophy you know although I was a mathematician so you know the it's a side of you if you a mathematician and a scientist that believed in cause and effect you look for it but eventually you discover you can't find it in everything um, that's called faith.

SH: Was um, we're both Baby Boomers and we both we grew up in America that was expanding economically and [clears throat] excuse me, socially and do you feel like um, that like you were part of that American Dream of of of of upward mobility?

JC: Not for a long time I didn't. I graduated from college with a degree, education degree. So when I got ready, now I did my student teaching in Belleville, um, I was one of the first blacks to come into Belleville School District and do student teaching. To my knowledge, and um, I had a great ah teacher to work with me. John, um, lemme see, Mr. Wademiller - John Wademiller, and um, he kinda shielded me from a lot of the um, insensitivity that was there I had a - I only saw the principal once my whole experience when I first arrived he wasn't personable at all. I just leave his name out of the conversation, I listened to ah going to the lounge and listen to them nasty jokes they try to tell em about black men this German man - I ignored it and I wouldn't comment on it I was taught not to do that. When I got it ready to put an application in Cahokia they told me they were not accepting applications, never heard of that before. Usually, you can put an application in anywhere for a job same thing up in Belleville where I had done my student teaching. Couldn't get an application from them and later on I got visited by the uh I didn't know even existed til IBI - Illinois Bureau of Investigation asking me is was I discriminated against or something like that in something they were doing and of course I had to say well, I never got the application, I never got an interview from these communities so you know I couldn't do that I went to work in East Saint Louis where I had grown up so I went back to my city that I grew up in and eventually got hired.

SH: In teaching?

JC: Yep. At my high school.

SH: At Lincoln?

JC: Yep. [laughs] I was there for a year.

SH: Explain about then, so you felt frustrated during these years but you said for a long time you didn't feel like you were part of the the American Dream?

JC: No, it was, well, we are led to believe and I think it's true that this country, is probably the closest thing to Zion that you're going to get it right here on earth. America. Where all people regardless of their ideas, their race, you know all of the things that we discriminated when we look at someone or learn about that that really wouldn't matter, but I felt that it did. That the color of my skin. None they didn't know whether or not I was a good mathematician or what - but - how do you feel when none even give you an application to fill out to apply for a job. They could have given you the application and put it in file 33 and never called you but at least you got the paperwork, you know, I went back to where I came from and waited on an opportunity to get hired and I was welcomed and eventually start working and so, I was because of the subject matter everybody thought I was smart. [laughs] You teaching math they think you're smart.

SH: When did you start your job in Lincoln High School?

JC: 71. September of 71. Stayed there a year.

SH: So you must have been ah, you avoided the draft cause you were in school and then you got a teaching deferment?

JC: Course I got the deferment as long as I was in college, so I was called up when I was in college and I got my deferment because I was a student ISA, and I was told when you graduate you may have to report. Then, the lottery came, and I lost that. [laughs] and my number came up in the lottery so just so happened fate would have it, I had an ulcer. So when I went to the ah draft board my doctor gave me my X-Rays I had a duodenal ulcer and so everything else was alright with me but they decided because I had the ulcer I didn't need to go to in, and I left running. [both laugh] and a lot of my friends had been drafted in St. Clair County and several of em died in Vietnam War. Ahm, we always felt but we didn't know that African Americans were being ah, more of us were being pulled than other races, we don't know, but that's what we believed. Bout the war.

SH: Yeah, that was a special time for us um, I remember sitting around the radio listening to them draw the lottery numbers and everyone calculating their chances and I think all of us had friends or knew people who died in that action.

JC: Somebody up there liked me. When my number came up I didn't have to go so that's what happened. I had my feelings about that but I didn't like the idea of being college educated and then having to go to the military and be a subservient perhaps to someone who wasn't. It just didn't set right with me, but I understood it you know that's the way it's set up.

SH: So, in 71 you began teaching and um, kinda talk about your career then.

JC: Um, I have had one of the I think is a unique opportunity to return to the environment that educated you. So, I was lookin' cause I was right out college um, to the you know I would be embraced because of ah the training that I had by my people who had taught me uh, and then when I had - I didn't realize the principal made the schedule and I had all practicum I all practicum math classes that's high school arithmetic and um, I went back to the chairman and I said look um, fresh out of college I remember trigonometry, calculus, and all this stuff and so I said Kenny I look at this schedule it's very frustrating and he says well, whatchu wanna be? Jack of all trades and the master of none? you know he was saying I wanted a schedule with all these challenges but you know it's I didn't know the work world. The work world, low man on the totem pole, gets the bottom of the rung so I eventually convinced them to give me an Algebra class with all those high school arithmetic class. Then, the second semester, they in the district started subject area coordinators. So, the chairman of the math department who had been my high school teacher was promoted to a position they took him out of the classroom and I got those classes that I had been uh wanting to get. So I'd have first year the first semester I had all those arithmetic classes and then the second semester I got a good sprinkling of the type of subjects that I wanted to teach. Then the second year they did a reduction in staff, and I went to a junior high school, Clark Junior High School. Um, I carrying the physics and the math they gave me a split subject of science and math and I made the decision my own choice, cause of my mix with the staff and uh, I chose to take most of the science classes. General science, earth science, stuff like that. um, and that was that was ah a decision that affected my career in that school district. Eventually, I became chair of the science department the retiring chair came to me said he'd like me and he was going to recommend to the principal that I get his room which was a lab with gas and running water and all that stuff and so, I got that position at the school and I kept three science classes and two math classes so that I would have my vote would be in the science department eventually the assistant superintendent was looking for someone to be the science coordinator. She had been my high school English teacher, so she came in my room several times watching me teach. Um, before that, I had wanted to be the Dean of Students cause I was working with all the kids in the school, club, over the Student Council voted the most popular teacher by the kids, so when the position of Dean came up I didn't get it. The principal - I went to him because I was upset I'm putting in all this time I wasn't doing it for the job but when the job came up when I looked at the staff I felt I should have been first guy popped up in his your head but I wasn't. And he told me don't get upset, you just beginning your career, get your Masters, and your time will come. Well, I was angry but I took his advice, and when I had got that Masters in Administration and Supervision when the lady came looking for a Science Coordinator, one of the qualifications was to have a Masters in Ad you know so that you could evaluate staff and it wasn't but a couple of people in the science department that had their administrative certification his - if I had gotten that Dean's job, I might not have gone back to college as quick and gotten my masters, so you know, sometime you have to listen and get the good out of what people saying to you.

SH: When um, when and where did you get your masters?

JC: 1976 SIU Edwardsville.

SH: And, what was the trajectory of your career then after, after you got your masters?

JC: I start teaching in 71, got my masters in 76, and 78 I was a science coordinator in East Saint Louis and I had the option of staying in the classroom or coming out of the classroom part of the day. So I

decided to stay partly in the classroom cause I still I was trained in teaching the gifted and I liked the gifted classes although I would take some that weren't in my career. Now, it became frustrating because from I get promoted in 78 and all the positions that came open between 78 and 94 I was never interviewed by the East Saint Louis uh, HR. I was in the building, my I had an office a desk and everything space - office space in the central administration I'd hear about vacancies so one day I went to the secretary, I put my resume together and I gave it to her and said I wanted to see the Human Resource Director because there was a vacancy that I was interested in. The position was Principal of the Math and Science Academy and I felt that I had the credentials to do that job, and in my career, I had been at the same when the math coordinator retired, I had been both math and science coordinator I had done both jobs without additional pay so I set out there from 8:30 til about 12: something the secretary came out and just told me he's not gonna talk to you. And so, you know from that moment on, I realized there's no upward mobility. This was in the 80s about 86, 87 something like that I guess - I'm just guessing and then one day a friend of mine told me of an assistant high school position in Alton, and I had to make a decision if I would stay in East Saint Louis, or if I would take a chance and ah, interview for the job in Alton, and I did and I became Assistant High School Principal in Alton for 1 year the next year I became middle school principal, had my own principalship uh, next after 4 years, I got an opportunity in Alton to become human resource director, then after 4 years in human resources they decided they wanted to reduce the directors they chose to reduce human resources, which I told em who's gonna do it? They said the superintendent was going to run the human resource department I said it won't work, human resources is the most accessible position in the district, the superintendent is the least accessible so I don't know how you think he's going to do it. So it looks like I'm out of the central office, as fate would have it, um, one of the other directors had a health problem and he had to retire and I moved into that position and became Title I Director for 4 years, and then, I was asked to go back to um, Human Resources my last couple of years, so I did you know, 15 years in Alton and it was a very rewarding career.

SH: Tell me about the changes that you witness in education over your career? How would you characterize those changes?

JC: Um, the classroom used to be closed and teachers pretty much did what they wanted to do. Decided what to teach, and they the book but they taught what they wanted to. But that that changed everyone um, had to get on the same page that's one thing. So you begin to function better as a department, some of your ideas and things you like to do you had to give them up because content became important, passing these tests became important I felt they stifled the teacher's creativity because there are some things that people do well with students that impact on students and help em make a real decisions and a lot of that had to go cause we had to start following and taking these test which I didn't think did what people wanted them to do because I've been on state committees, and um, I remember one year when we gave the state test, we found the school that had the highest test score for that subject area, I've been on the committee to develop the test for some for certain subject areas so we went, sent a group out to see what this place was, and it had none of the characteristics that you thought should exist in order for the kids to it wasn't a hands on classroom, we don't know what he did so great to cause the kids to score so high on the test, so you couldn't emulate what he had done with the students and so eventually, this testing started driving education. I think it was pushing it in the wrong direction but, there are some things that education demanded that children be able to do. There was some legitimate concerns from employers that kids were coming out of high school, but yet when they come into the jobs they couldn't use cash registers and they were poor mathematicians, poor writers, um, that's true that was true. Um, but now I

think it's just out of hand. And unfortunately, they took physical education um, we lost a lot of that in the curriculum we lost the arts turn in the curriculum so, it doesn't make sense um, to try and push solely academics, but, because America has this unique system where communities control the education you do have kids coming through school with different exposure but they are meeting the workplace so they were trying to get some consistency um, with that. Illinois almost made a mistake of saying that students that employers could look at the test scores of the students in Illinois, and decide whether or not they were hireable so then we raised the issue you can't see the test scores from people that come from other states, so how you gonna discriminate against your own students? Um, based on the test? So they kinda dropped that. But remember it was the employers that thought this was a good idea as well to start all this testing and education.

SH: Having spent your entire life mostly well, certainly your adult life in this area, how would you characterize the social and economic changes that have occurred that you have witnessed? The, everything from factories closing in East Saint Louis to factories in Alton to um, Edwardsville, Glen Carbon growing the shift in the population? What have you witnessed that strikes you? (45:23)

JC: Probably the fact that um the purpose of public education is not associated with employability. You know if you go and all of the things that would make you employable, after high school education certain forces in our country try to prevent young people from receiving that type of training I mean it's you know, you go to college the first two years of just they just get preparing you to learn how to learn but you already have gone through that in high school so high schoolers used to be able to come out or drop out or people used to be able to come out and drop out of high school and find a job that gave me a good living um mostly males mostly Caucasian males ah, but then the education system didn't respond to that that faded back and we didn't push important things into education that prepared people to be employed but in and other jobs in those areas began to shrink so it's like a pyramid. The jobs at the bottom, the unskilled jobs started going away so then the semi-skilled group that above it it dropped down to that same level that the unskilled labor people were at. So it forced everybody couldn't figure out where all the jobs were and so they thought somebody else was taking a job, but they weren't it was automation, the jobs were leaving the country, and people weren't watching, but that's capitalism and now we're trying to blame somebody for it and it's just it's not possible anymore to have a high school education and think that that alone will enable you to have a good economic track in our country. So now we trying to blame somebody. People blame the education system, well they say that the private and parochial school now over the years I have remember ACT and SATs and all that I said if that was true, if the private schools were doing better than the public schools when the Post-Dispatch used to put out the student performance you should see the ah private and parochial school students at the top but you still see the public schools at the top so I would tell people if that's - you know look at it, don't not what you think but look at academic achievement in the public schools and in public institution. We have - we still had a problem that young people aren't prepared for school in many communities. America doesn't look at the effects of poverty and want to do anything about it. Poverty leads to unemployment leads to crime. Everybody wants the same thing ah same assets, same ahm you know things that make life good for them but we all don't make enough income to acquire those things so we do other things to acquire them.

SH: When did you become involved in the NAACP?

JC: In the 90s, I became at that time it was secretary of treasurer and eventually they split the two

positions so I've been in it in office been in it a member for years but I became an officer when I got here in Edwardsville and now I'm President this is my 4th year as President, my second two year term.

SH: And, what kind of has African American man growing up in this area, what kinda challenges and frustrations have you dealt with?

JC: Well, it - first of all people don't understand NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They think that because when I was young we were called "colored people" and I've gone through the transition African-American Afro-American, Black, Black-American, um, they think it's that people of color, Caucasians and other groups don't have any ah, won't receive any value from associating the average person on the person on the street thinking say - black organization that's true cause you make it that. Now we have - there have been years when majority of our members not so now were Caucasian they would pay the dues but they wouldn't come to the meetings they wanted to see the organization's successful. And of course, a lot of the financial support you get is from people who have it together and a lot of times that's Caucasian organizations run by Caucasian men and women although we do have African Americans that support the NAACP with their funds too. And matter fact they start ahm, strangely enough, the organization people don't look at it as being powerful although it is um, we do things we advocate you might say well what the heck does that mean? I'll give an example. There's a lady who was in the senior citizen home who was about to be put out because she violated one of their policies. So who does she call? NAACP? And we have to go in there and advocate for her you know, and try to get them to understand what has happened to her, why she might have did what she did, but the truth of the matter is she needs a place to stay. So we end up, we do stuff like that. Then all these criminal cases that go on around here even the issues that come up on campus we call the Chancellor's let em know we're available. We try to put you know we say we'd rather work with you then to be around here trying to disturb something. We've been welcomed by Dr. Brown and you at the time and by ah Dr. Pembroke. So we try to interact but we try to stay back we do voter registration several of our members are deputy registrars and ah election work the polls, we purposely advocate and ask people to take on those roles. Um, let's just from the perspective of what's challenging us now, we have never gotten past the nightmare of race it's part of who we are as humans as we look at each other and discriminate and decide who we wanna associate with. And we still carry a lot of myths about people what they thinkin but they haven't even asked em, but you know we have our own biases and so the NAACP is trying to work through that and with people on both sides of the table that understand that other than what you can physically see about a person. Skin, hair, eyes, things like that all the other parts are interchangeable. The intellect has - doesn't stop because it's a brown head, there African Americans who have done things in all areas of academia successfully but people don't sometimes know these people exist you had an astronaut come here May Jemison and having another one come um, Dr. Buford. But you know people still have all these ideas and disenfranchisement is occurring with the vote through you know the political parties have gotten so polarized they've lost their minds, they've gerrymandered in order to stay in office doesn't matter what the population looks like um, we are going through another period. I didn't live I wasn't conscious of McCarthyism, you can read about it our country is taking a step backwards and um, I think if I was to say something about it I would say um white America is frighten um, because the opportunities that they think they should have are no longer there. Base on how they present themselves in the country, so we're making all the classic errors that you read about I guess you could say that Germany did, you know, they found somebody to blame for what was happening to the country. So how do I feel about it? What do I tell the people as President of the NAACP? I say don't be the seed everybody knows the

history of building walls. They don't keep anything out. That's a false sense. You can look at the wall around China, you can look at the wall they put up in Israel, um, it's crazy that a group of people would want to build a wall, they wouldn't want to pay the same dollars for insurance for the citizens in the country. But what we think is going to happen - I do - once they get the wall up, and they say they gonna keep people out, they gonna do like Germany did and they gonna look internally and start pointing at groups and blaming them and trying to disassociate and trying to prevent them from having any opportunity. You know, this is this is madness that America is in a situation where you either gonna have to decide if you're going to be white and evangelical or if you're going to be multicultural and multi-racial, multi-religion, and it looks like right now we're going towards ah white and evangelical and they don't even know what that mean. So, when we meet now in the NAACP we're trying to do things that touch all phases of this community, you know we work with Edwardsville School District we try to give education grants to both Caucasian and other minorities we just don't give out funds to minorities which people think we would but we know we have a choice to do that we want to promote your own as well but we can't say we one thing then do another. So, we're challenged too. Does anything I said make sense? [laughs]

SH: It does. It does to me anyway. And um, when - I guess what I'm trying to one of the things I'd like to get your perspective on is um, whether or not um what kind of challenges you personally faced as a black man in developing in this region your career and as an adult? Um. And not just the challenges but also I think the perspective on the African American community in this region? Um, what's the glue that holds it together? How does it survive against this majority that surrounds it?

JC: Well, for me, you know I told you when I was first looked around we were called colored. Then we went through identity crisis but the people around me the decisions I made at first my head was kinda low then eventually I listened and I began to believe I'm black and I'm proud and then I raised my head up. Well when you raise your head up you can see a lot more then when you walk around with your head kinda down. So you have to find self-pride. Um, that's what we try to help people to understand. But strangely enough, I don't know enough about the forces that keep people in poverty. People tell you it's education you get a good education then you can compete but if you listen to what I said that's not always true. If no one would give you an opportunity to have a job and so, we keep encouraging people to put their children in daycare rather than keeping them at home so that they would be able to function because everybody doesn't listen. We have um, we try to have and have had become in the past in some of our meetings we've brought in the employers from down here at the job site where Amazon is and all those guys telling people if you want to learn how to get a job here is this opportunity. Well if you advertise it, Facebook and everywhere else in the newspaper but when people who come in there's not enough of the people that you want to touch in the room. You know the people that are in there are folk already working. So, we're people who get locked into poverty and I keep talking about poverty it's hard to get em out of it. It's a lifestyle of it own. If you listen to the news, sometimes I wonder do white people die? Cause you don't hear about the crimes and stuff that they're committing they're doing it you can find it in the newspaper but it's sensational black crime is sensationalized on the news media and you'd believe that's all so when you getting all these negative messages about yourself not saying they're not true but there's not a good balance even in the news. So there are still people who are first-generation college students we have programs that we try to encourage the kids to get into make their life better because we still believe that you're better off being educated and trying to survive in this world if you don't. But people want the same thing and they don't want to go down the same avenue to get it and so they will try

to take yours if they haven't gotten theirs ah I lived in East Saint Louis for several years but I became you know victim of crime, my home broken into, we put bars up on the house which made me very uncomfortable because now my home look like a jail which I was trying to stay out of, no bars on the doors no windows around the air conditioning and then services I'm start raising children, and I wanted access to services and they weren't in that community and they aren't in the community in poverty either. Edwardsville, the city of Edwardsville there aren't um, a lot of low-income housing and if education is one of the basic factors for a person becoming upwardly mobile in this country and in its taught it that Edwardsville has one of the best education system in the area. But it doesn't have room for some of the people who the education system could help come up out of poverty because they don't have the housing for em. So that's very ah, it's difficult for me to I've talked to people about it, you know what does the city want to do? Where can the poor people live? There just isn't a lot of place for it and of course remember that's the idea. Education is important [beeps in background] and so people tell you that, they must believe it. And if you look for it where can you find it? And then my sons taught here in the Edwardsville School District and I met some of the kids and their idea of the kids in East Saint Louis, and I'm one of the kids from East Saint Louis it's negative. But they don't realize they're doing the same thing going to the same places and having accomplishments. They look at their accomplishments differently than when they see the black kids in East Saint Louis. And then the black people have I just want to say this without um, maybe somebody might be offended. Doing well, living in homes with 2 and 3 cars, got good jobs, incomes over \$100,000 dollars but we're not stakeholders in the community. We isolate ourselves we're not on important communities we may not even we'd be sending our kids to school but we've many times don't go with them. Pursuing careers and trying to get stuff but it's equally important that a person invests in their community ah be on PTO's PTA's at the schools. Get on boards, become active, and um, you know, I've ran into this that sometimes the establishment or whites who are in power recognize a few blacks that they think have something to offer and every time they need somebody to be on a board or fill a position, they go to these small group of blacks. And then if that person is not available, then they psychologically believe they have satisfied involving a minority. And then the black person who was asked and turned it down feels some type of I dunno what you call it, gratification that they were asked and weren't able to do it. So what did I do? I've been trying to tell the white people that are looking for black people to be involved I see what you're doing you're going to the same old don't come to me every time, you know I'm not going to be on every board cause I'm President of the NAACP but I want you to - I'll say if you're earnestly looking for somebody a minority to be a part of what you're doing then you ought not stop and ought you oughta recognize you're going to the same people. You're going to the same people. That's just how things work. And then, I told the blacks if you were asked and you can't do it and sometime you honestly can't then you oughta have someone else that you can refer the person who's seeking someone and then I've tried to encourage blacks to become more involved in politics um, voter turnout is depressing sometime in the African Ame - you know when we look at population and what we do at the polls we told it isn't as well as it should be.

SH: Sorry

JC: It's alright. Um, it's a challenge, um, we work with the ah police in the area I'm on the Madison County coalition we've seen minority hiring. When I say minority hiring we're not just talking about blacks we're talking about females, we're talking about bi-lingual Hispanic people because some of the communities are around here better off when they realize it that they need to look at minority employees and this university has been doing a good job recently and realizing they need to have some minorities on

its staff, police force and things like that we talk to these people and they attempt to respond and we talk to some of the police chiefs and mayors in the area and they are responding with opening doors for people but the problem is and always will be, you have to make a concerted effort to get a good mix of different people in whatever you doing. It just don't happen you know. So, it's all kinda things that challenge you in the NAACP.

SH: Is there anything you'd like to talk about that we didn't cover about your life or your career?

JC: I think what bothers that I'd like to say that concerns me the most is when people reason that I keep getting up and getting involved, when people see injustice, people who you believe who are good people and they don't say anything about it. They don't challenge it. When the truth is not told when people allow it to continue to be the menu it's gonna cause a problem. Um, I don't want to I've walked down the road when um, I've seen the you're now entering KKK County, I've seen been told that you have to be out of town or out of sight in town after dark in the surrounding - you know they call them Sundown Towns Sun-Down Towns. They exist in this community you know, I've been exposed to ah, universities in the area that the kids that come to the university have not had any involvement in their education with minorities it just everybody doesn't think of America like that but we still have these pockets. I hate for us to go down the same road that we um have come up looks like we're going backwards in society. People won't admit and now we're seeing it that some people were very unhappy when the Civil Rights bill was passed. We're seeing legislators trying to pass laws to take away voting and make voting difficult in our country when we send troops over in the other countries and try and liberate people and these people believed that voting for a democratic government is going to give them a better way of life and we're over here in this country taking that right in any way we can from our own citizens it's frustrating. To wonder why these people would want to do this um, and so that's why I get involved and that's why I'm voter registration, that's why I'm at the polls I got my assignment to be at the election doing the election but a lot of people want to enjoy what's good about America but they don't want to work to keep it that way and they put it in other people's hands and they don't even realize sometime they're doing it. It's just I don't know where we're going to end up because the millennials are more they integrate among each other than any other group. They love each other they have mixed marriages and all these things that many of these other groups are still fighting against so the country is evolving even though you've got people pulling one way and people pulling the other way the kids are walking right down the middle and then I want to say this. If it weren't for women, we would have more problems than we've got. Now a lot of the legislatures are men and you see how they are they refuse to work with President Obama and did all these nasty tactics and Congress and whenever the Democrats tried to do the same thing they did they call foul. So I don't know what motivated these men not to see the country move forward, I don't know why the ah Congress on Obama didn't get the infrastructure done and now now that ah Trump is president they aren't even talking about rebuilding the infrastructure and that seemed to be something that they all should be able to agree on. Most Americans, most voters are not informed about the candidates that are running for office. That's a shame. That's just the way that we've letting the vote um, not be as important as it was when the African Americans talk about people who died to get the right to vote and then many of us don't vote and then the other group is trying to prevent everybody except the folk they want from voting so it's unbelievable that in 2018 we're fighting the same old battles just don't know what to do about it.

SH: Well very good. Thank you I appreciate you giving me the time. Who else do you think I should interview? Should I talk with? To get the history of Madison County?

JC: Well, if you want a know about some people that grew up in this kinda remember, I'm both St. Clair and Madison uh, there's Dr. Carl Jason, there's Herman Shaw, Carl Jason Sr., Herman Shaw, these are African Americans. Herman is a President of the Lincoln School Alumni Foundation you know the group that advocated to keep the uh site over here where Mannie Jackson Center is. Mm-hmm

SH: Okay

JC: So they grew up in Edwardsville, and they went through the period where you had to go away to go to high school. I know Dr. Jason did, he went to Lincoln um in Missouri, that's where he had to go to Jeff City for his education.

SH: Is he ah Amal Jason's...?

JC: Brother

SH: Brother

JC: Mm

SH: I knew Amal pretty well

JC: He was one of my mentors

SH: Was he?

JC: Worked with me, yeah. He helped do some staff development.