Biography

Bishop James L. Black was born on January 4, 1945, on Keesler Air Force Base, Biloxi, Mississippi, to Mr. Louis Black and Mrs. Adel Black. His father was a civil servant, employed at Keesler Air Force Base. His mother was a homemaker who gave birth to six children. His parents were among the first black registered voters in Harrison County in the 1950s, and both were charter members of the Biloxi NAACP. His mother was the first black woman in Harrison County to register to vote in the 1950s. He is married to Mrs. Bobbie Black. Reverend Black is a former civil service employee with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. At the time of this interview, he was the pastor at the Faith Tabernacle of Praise in Biloxi, Mississippi. Reverend Black is a graduate of Nichols High School in Biloxi. He attended Mississippi Valley State University, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Jefferson Davis Campus, and Jackson State University. He served as an NCO in the US Marine Corps, and he is a Vietnam veteran. He is a nondenominational Protestant, involved with the Boy Scouts and the NAACP, and is an advocate for housing and civil rights. He is the recipient of numerous civic awards and NAACP recognitions.
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This is an interview with Bishop James Black, the pastor of the Tabernacle of Praise. Have I got it correctly?

Black: Faith Tabernacle.

Smith: Faith Tabernacle of Praise.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: A church on Rodenberg Avenue in Biloxi, Mississippi. Today is March 6, 2009. Reverend Black is a longtime resident of Biloxi, and today’s interview we’re going to possibly talk about two topics. One will be the early days of the civil rights movement in Biloxi when Reverend Black was young, [and] he was an associate of Dr. Gilbert Mason. And secondly we’re going to be talking about Katrina, if we have time. So Reverend Black, I want to thank you for your time today in helping us gather this. Could you—

Black: Thank you, Dr. Smith.

Smith: Could you state your name and spell your name the way you like it to appear?


Smith: And your date and place of birth?

Black: Well, I was born at Keesler Air Force Base, Biloxi, January 4, 1945.

Smith: What’s your spouse’s name?

Black: Bobbie Black.
Smith: OK. And what are the major occupations you followed in your life? Can you just sort of list out what you did and when you became a pastor, when you got into the ministry?

Black: Well, my first major job was, I was with HUD, Department of Housing and Urban Development. I was a real estate appraiser, initially. And then I became a multifamily housing specialist with HUD. I stayed there six years, after which I went into business for myself and subsequently into the ministry. And from there forward, pastor, you know.

Smith: OK. Do you need to get—

Black: Yeah.

Smith: —that? And let’s see. And how long have you been in the ministry?

Black: I’ve been in the ministries—gosh, let me count those years up. Now it’s about thirty years, about thirty years, um-hm.

Smith: And have you pastored other churches besides this one?

Black: No, this is the only one I’ve ever pastored before.

Smith: You’ve always been at Faith. That’s a good—

Black: Faith Tabernacle.

Smith: That’s a good (inaudible) record.

Black: Yeah, we founded the church, and we’ve been here.

Smith: Oh, I see.

Black: All that time, right, um-hm.

Smith: And do you have an estimate of the membership of the church?

Black: No, not really. We have a lot of military. We fluctuate a lot.

Smith: Can you tell us a little bit about where you went to school?

Black: Well, I went with the Nichols High in Biloxi.

Smith: In Biloxi?
Black: I attended Mississippi Valley State and also Jackson State. I also went to Gulf Coast Community College. I went there for the purpose, as a matter of fact, to integrate back in 1965, integrate the schools. I was the first academic student, Afro-American academic student there. I specified academic as opposed to trade because my mother, an Afro-American, went there a year or two with me and got in the trade industry there, but I was the first academic student to register at Jeff Davis Campus.

Smith: So you were there in 1965 and ’66?

Black: Right.

Smith: At Jeff Davis?

Black: I was there in [19]65. I only went there one semester. I went for the whole purpose of integrating it, and then I went back, left there and went to school.

Smith: Interesting.

Black: Yeah.

Smith: Great.

Black: The whole purpose.

Smith: Great. So your experience of school desegregation was pretty much that year of desegregating—

Black: Yeah.

Smith: —the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Black: At junior college, at Jeff Davis right now.

Smith: So you finished all the way through at Nichols?

Black: Yeah, right, right. I went to Nichols, um-hm.

Smith: OK. Did you serve in the military?

Black: Yes, US Marine Corps, and I’ll probably tell you—

Smith: I see the evidence of it.

Black: I’m a Marine, yes, sir. Yes, sir.

Smith: What rank did you attain?
Black: Well, I was two years on, down in Vietnam. So I got E-3, and I got out after my Vietnam tour. Yeah, um-hm.

Smith: Were you in a—what was your job in Vietnam?

Black: I was 0311 Combat Marine, and I was a rifleman, ground-pounder, you know. I was in, went into combat, and came out in combat.

Smith: What year was that?


Smith: Do you know the name of your unit, what the number of your unit—

Black: Yeah. Well, I was in the Third Marines, because I was in various aspects of Third Marines.

Smith: OK, great. Do you have any particular civic activities that you think other people would, if they knew about, they would understand your point of view better? What kinds of things have you been involved in? I see all kinds of honors and awards on your wall.

Black: Yes, sir.

Smith: What do you consider the most important civic activities you’ve been involved in other than pastor of the church for the last thirty years?

Black: Oh, I’ve been in, probably the movement was the defining aspect of my life.

Smith: The civil rights movement?

Black: Civil rights movement, yes. I started when I was twelve, joining the youth branch of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and I advanced to become the youth, at age fifteen I was the president of the youth branch of the Biloxi branch of the NAACP.

Smith: What year would that have been?

Black: You’re charging my memory now. This is [19]59, [19]60, something like that. Yeah, [19]59 or [19]60 or some area, um-hm, I came to the youth branch, our youth branch when I finished high school, (inaudible) finished high school.

Smith: OK, great. Well, let’s go back a little bit then with that thought. One of the reasons for talking today is just to think about Dr. Gilbert Mason and the wade-ins.
When did you first come to know Dr. Mason? How did he make an impression on you?

**Black:** When I first came to know Dr. Mason through the Boy Scouts, he was our scoutmaster of Troop 416, and I was a member of Troop 419. We were competitive troops, if you will, which really enriched our lives tremendously, the competition, the camaraderie. So Dr. Mason was the first black Eagle Scout that I knew, and he was an adult, but he was like a boy when he put on his scout uniform, if you will. So I got to know him first through the Boy Scouts, and secondarily after joining the branch of the NAACP. When I first joined the youth branch, I really wasn’t aware of him as an individual. Well, (inaudible) civil rights. I mean, I knew him from the Boy Scouts. I joined when I was eleven, and I got involved with the movement when I was twelve, so I knew him only as that scoutmaster.

**Smith:** What kind of a person was he? What do you remember about him in those early days? What’s your earliest memory of forming a notion of the person?

**Black:** Well, if I speak as a child, depending on how early you’re talking about—are you talking about prior to age fifteen or there forward, fifteen forward?

**Smith:** When does he start being a figure in your memory, an important figure in your memory?

**Black:** Probably around age thirteen or fourteen, because I made Eagle Scout when I was fourteen, I believe it was. And so he was instrumental, not so much in my becoming an Eagle, but the other Eagle Scouts that he had, a (inaudible) guy from his troop became an Eagle Scout before our troop did. So we kind of learned about him through the scouts. So my memory of him then was one who, a person who was a good scouter, loved scouting, and I fell in love with scouting which was really my life prior to the movement. I mean, I’d just live and eat Boy Scouts and scouting. So Dr. Mason had that love for scouting. I thought he loved scouting more than he did anything else, in my opinion, more than frats and the (inaudible) movement at the time that was—he loved Boy Scouting.

**Smith:** So he was, in your mind, closely associated with Boy Scouts. When did you become aware of him as a civil rights leader?

**Black:** Again, about age fifteen or so, I really became aware of what it was about. I understood what racism was about early on to the extent that a young person could understand it, but I became more aware of his involvement and his leadership around age fifteen.

**Smith:** And what were you seeing him do?

**Black:** Mostly organized, bring the community together. He was a forceful, articulate individual at the time and the most powerful—I came up in a structured home. I had a
father and mother, but my father was a civil service worker, and kind of on the quiet side. Dr. Mason was an extrovert, who seemed fearless and talked about social injustices at large meetings we would have at the UBA Hall and other places. So that was my first awareness of him as a leader and as an articulate spokesman for the cause here.

Smith: You mentioned one location where you remember having some meetings for civil rights, as we talked about. What locations, where in Biloxi, what halls, what houses can you remember attending civil rights events at?

Black: Yeah. What they call the UBA Hall. I don’t know what that stands for. It’s something united, something benevolence association. That’s what it was, yeah.


Black: Yeah. UBA Hall, St. John Church.

Smith: St. John’s AME?

Black: Yeah, right, the basement of the church, an old church back in the old days, the one that’s where the Bent(?) Park is now is right there on Division Street.

Smith: St. John AME is in a different building that used to be a Baptist Church, but it was at the place where Bent Park is.

Black: Yeah, at the place on Division Street, yes, on Division Street there between, yeah, on Division right across the street from where Dr. Mason’s office used to be, kind of. Meetings there and also at Mr. McDaniel’s Funeral Home here, held meetings at W. D. McDaniel’s Funeral Home. I remember meetings there. So those were the three primary places that meetings were held, civil rights meetings were held, as I recall them, the three main places that we attended them. Those are the only three that I can remember, really.

Smith: Do you remember any national figures from the civil rights movement speaking in Biloxi?

Black: I really don’t.

Smith: Do you remember—I’ve seen a picture of Roy Wilkins at—

Black: Yeah.

Smith: —New Bethel. You were not at that, at that event?

Black: I’m not going to say I wasn’t there. I just don’t remember. Well, Roy Wilkins didn’t mean anything to me until I went to the March on Washington, and
then it all began to take shape as to who he really was as a national figure. But I really don’t remember that. I will say that almost anything that was held, my parents had us there because they were involved in the movement, the adult branch, but I don’t remember. Oh, yeah. It’ll probably come to me, but right now I don’t remember that.

Smith: What was your father’s name?

Black: Louis Black.

Smith: Louis Black, and your mother’s name?

Black: Adele Black. And my mother is still living. And I’m proud to say that they were among the first Afro-Americans to register to vote in Harrison County in poll tax days. They were very active in that, and they voted early on.

Smith: When was the approximate time that they would register to vote, yearwise?

Black: I can’t remember exactly, but I know that it was in the [19]50s.

Smith: In the [19]50s.

Black: Yeah, even before then—I’ve asked my mother. I think even a little before; it had to be the earlier part of it, yeah, um-hm.

Smith: There was a considerable, a larger number of black people percentagewise registered up on the Coast during those days than there were in some other parts of the state.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: So they were in the early part of what became an important aspect of civil rights in Harrison County. What was your mother’s occupation?

Black: She lived in the house, a stay-at-home mom for the most part.

Smith: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Black: Yes, uh-huh, five.

Smith: You had five. How many brothers and sisters?

Black: I had two brothers and three sisters, yeah.

Smith: Two brothers and three sisters. So it was a large family, and she had plenty to do at home, and your father was a civil servant at Keesler.
Black: Right, worked at Keesler.

Smith: Great. Well, talk to me a little bit about the thing that drew you into civil rights. Your parents were involved. Is that what drew you, or what was drawing them to it? Being a member of the NAACP was not an easy thing in Mississippi in those days.

Black: Yeah, it wasn’t, but they would kind of shield—Daddy worked for the government so they had kind of a shielding thing there. But it wasn’t so much what they did. My cousin, June Bug, would always—the June Bug belonged to it, and he drug me along. He was a little bit older than I was, and he drug me along to it.

Smith: What’s June Bug’s full name?

Black: Arthur Lee Jacobs.

Smith: Arthur Lee Jacobs.

Black: Yeah, right, Arthur Lee Jacobs and he was, he and some of his classmates were in it, and he brought me to the meetings with him. So that’s what kind of got, brought me to, not so much the movement but into the branch, which led into the movement.

Smith: Do you have any particular recollections of the wade-ins? There was a small wade-in with Dr. Mason and eight or so other people, some boys and their fathers in 1959. Then there were a couple of other big wade-ins. Do you have any recollection of the talk about those or the planning for them or participation?

Black: No, not that one, but the second one, yes.

Smith: Of 1960 you have some recollection?

Black: Oh, yeah. We were, a lot of us were involved in that one. That was the one that took place east of Main Street where there were brutal beatings in that area. A vivid recollection of—

Smith: Do you remember any of the—well, how did you become aware that there might be demonstrations on the beach? How did you become aware of that?

Black: Well, I missed being there when it actually started. I was late and running, and by the time I got there, as a matter of fact, the—

Smith: How did you know to go there? How did you know to go to the beach that day?
Black: Well, I can’t remember. I really can’t remember. I don’t remember how, but what I remember most vividly is people running from the beach. I remember running up on Holly Street, running down the track, and that. I don’t remember what was the—how it—because the youth branch wasn’t necessarily involved.

Smith: The youth branch probably wasn’t formed at that time.

Black: No.

Smith: It was probably formed right after that.

Black: Exactly, we weren’t formed, so.

Smith: Do you remember Dr. Mason speaking—

Black: It was by word of mouth.

Smith: —about the need to desegregate the beach?

Black: No.

Smith: Before that time?

Black: No, unh-uh, no.

Smith: But somehow you knew that there was going to be an effort to challenge that. The previous weekend he had been arrested and held in trial, and then that really seemed to get things going.

Black: You have a good memory.

Smith: Your memory is going down there—

Black: Yeah, just to challenge it.

Smith: —on Sunday afternoon in April of 1960. Tell me about that. You said that you were running away from the beach. What was down there that you saw? Bring that picture back to us.

Black: Well, I didn’t see a whole lot that day because of the number of people. If you were late, then that meant that the whites had literally blocked off access to Highway 90. I was north of Highway 90, coming to the beach, and it was so many of them with chains and different instruments, tie rods, And it happened, everything happened so fast. The Klan, I remember Jesse Davis, and he played quarterback for the school, throwing the ball. As a matter of fact, Jet Magazine had a picture of him in the sand on the beach throwing the ball. And we used to joke that when the vigilantes, when
the Klansmen, whatever they were, came, he threw the ball and caught it too, running just that fast. That joke was for a long time. But I just have a vague memory of them. My (inaudible) memory is much more vivid. I’m more involved in that one from the get-go to the end of it, but that one I just remember Mr. McDaniel getting beat down in it, beat in the sand with a chain, and Mr. Rainey getting out in a boat fishing, and one of the gentlemen swimming out there to where he was rather than coming back to the beach. And Mrs. McDaniel falling down over her husband so they wouldn’t kill him, because they were beating him so his head was in the sand, bloody. And everybody running and screaming, because it was just a surprise, if you will.

Smith: And you said that you ran away from the beach. You ran up Holly?

Black: Um-hm, and would hide.

Smith: What was behind you that you were running from? Were people pursuing you?

Black: No. We were all—well, at some point, just not off the beach necessarily, about—I mean not, say, a hundred feet off the beach or fifty feet off the beach. We were running from fear. Everybody was out running. We didn’t have any defense. We had nothing to fight back with, and so I just remember everybody moving away from the beach, once in a while looking back, and it was just a horrible time. I remember that night when things were not so nice in the city.

Smith: What did you see in the afternoon, in the evening after that in 1963?

Black: Then everybody went home and shut the doors that I can recall. And sometimes my memory fails me. I try not to mix up [19]63 with [19]60.

Smith: Um-hm.

Black: So I’m trying to remember what, because there were some shooters on Main Street in the Kitty Kat and them down like that. And it’s amazing; I remember how they sent the word out. Everybody didn’t have a telephone then, but the word went through our community like fire in dry brush to cut the lights off and get down below the windows, kind of thing, and that’s where we were. But I tend to think that was in 1960.

Smith: Did you see anyone, any vigilantes or white people running through the neighborhood or driving through the neighborhood causing trouble?

Black: No, I didn’t see any myself. No, I did not. And our parents kept us low to the floor, if you will. We didn’t see it ourselves, but we had accounts of it in the Main Street area the next day, various accounts of it, but I didn’t see it myself. And, no, I did not.
Smith: At what age would you have been in 1960?

Black: I was fifteen then.

Smith: Fifteen.

Black: Um-hm, yeah.

Smith: OK. So shortly after this 1960 bloody wade-in, the Biloxi branch of the NAACP was formed.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: And you became involved at some point thereafter in that Biloxi branch. You said that you had a good memory of later wade-ins, of the one in 1963.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Can you talk about your activities with the Biloxi branch from [19]60 to [19]63 and maybe how you became involved in things in the wade-in in [19]63?

Black: Well, mostly we did some sit-ins at various places; not a whole lot because we were still in the developmental stage, if you will, in terms of learning what to do. We attended meetings. We learned about nonviolence, a lot about nonviolence, participation in the movement. So really outside of—see, what a lot of people don’t understand, and there were a few that (inaudible) understand, Clement Jemison(?), understand that the adults, mostly the wade-ins in [19]60 and [19]63 and school desegregation was the biggest thing that the adults participated in. All of the sit-ins, like at Woolworth’s, the Dairy Store, the marches that we did, the youth did those things. I would initiate them and get some guys together, and we’d go do something. (Inaudible) would happen, and they’d come get us out of jail. They would go—attorney Brown would come down and—what’s the lady’s name? She’d come, too. I should never forget her name, a big lady. She was a lawyer for NAACP. They would come down and get us out of jail. We were in and out of jail seem like every weekend sometimes, so.

Smith: This was in that period between [19]60 and [19]63?

Black: Yeah, and in the latter part, the latter part of [19]62, going forward, (inaudible).

Smith: That would be after the Ole Miss riots, after that stuff.

Black: Um-hm, yeah.

Smith: So things were more active in Biloxi after Ole Miss, a lot of sit-in—
Black: Yeah, we did sit-in—

Smith: —demonstrations.

Black: Yeah, demonstrations. Go to that jail up there on Howard Avenue, and they would take us to Home Pride. That was when we integrated Home Pride. We did—excuse me, I’m trying to think—

Smith: What kind of a business was Home Pride?

Black: An ice cream place. And they had a little counter there, and we went in and would sit-in there and were arrested. There were just me and five girls that did that one. We did Woolworth’s. We were marching our old movie theater down on Main Street; because it was just a nasty place, and they had painted it like zoo colors or something. And we ended up closing it down; boycotting it closed it down. So we did a lot of boycotting in the small places that we would pick out on the main street, Vick’s little store, the Dairy Queen on the corner of (inaudible) Street and Division Street. We demonstrated there. So I’m talking now between [19]62 and [19]64 when most of this happened.

Smith: You said you were repeatedly arrested.

Black: Oh, yes.

Smith: And bailed out. Did you ever keep count of how many times you were arrested in these demonstrations?

Black: No, I really don’t remember, and I’ve thought about that. It happened so many times. The Greyhound Bus Station, we integrated the Greyhound Bus Station. We went in a couple of times, and we were arrested. And the third time we went in we didn’t go in there. Our purpose that time was to ride in the front of the bus. So Clem Jemison would drive Dr. Mason’s car, and that was in the latter part of [19]63, early part of [19]64. He drove Dr. Mason’s car, and we sat—(inaudible) Lester and I got in the front of the bus to test ride it to New Orleans, and he followed us to New Orleans in the car. And we successfully, we sat there. And we were always doing stuff like that riding. Most of the young guys worked at the garage, hotels, different hotels down on the beach. So we would get on the bus, and they would tell us we got to get in the back, and we refused to get in the back. And we were doing it before Rosa [Parks] was doing that. We would sit in front and refused to move, and he would stop the bus, and we were belligerent then. And so we would continue to sit there, and we would do it again. And Ed Hopkins, it was very funny; we would sit in the front of the bus and keep riding. That was the city bus then. So we tried the Greyhound Bus at the Greyhound Bus Station, and we rode in the front. So they arrested us the first few times we went in that side over there, and they finally left us alone. We kept doing that. But we were arrested a number of times. As a matter of fact, we was
going to jail, and they had the (inaudible) through. And Jess Brown would come
down and get us out, had wired it to the grocery store. It was $25 to get us out is what
it was. Sometimes they didn’t even know we were going down and doing it, and then
we call them and say, “Come get us out of jail.” And they got kind of frustrated with
us because we didn’t tell them we were going. But we would go and come out, and
then when we—well, he would not get us out. He would come when we had to go to
trial, and (inaudible) always won. Trespassing or some crazy stuff like that they
would charge us with, and we’d keep doing it. We were young, and we didn’t have
anything to lose, and it was a challenge to us. Only one time without any brutality, but
usually the police—I mean they weren’t nice, but they weren’t as brutal as in other
places.

Smith: Let me ask you this. Did you have any occasion to just observe the reaction
of ordinary white people to what you were doing, other than the police? Obviously
the managers of the business would call the police. Did you—

Black: Ooh, yeah.

Smith: What did you see?

Black: Anger, anger mixed with what we perceived as hatred and sometimes
frustration, because we would keep coming back to the same place over and over
again, but mostly anger and hatred. I really, if a young person could—I guess I
would—I’m looking back now, more seasoned, with a more seasoned view, but I still,
the anger and hatred. Disdain is the word I would very frequently use to describe the
attitude and what we heard, the words that came out of their mouths. And sometimes
it was funny, because we thought we were more controlled than they were. They were
adults, and they assimilated adults. They would get angry, cuss, call us all kinds of
names. And we were kids then, so we figured we were winning when that happened
because we saw how ignorant they were, calling us all kind of names and things of
that nature. So, yeah, we did get a chance to observe, observe them mainly, especially
in [19]63 at the beach wade-in there.

Smith: Were you, as a teenager, were you aware of whether or not there were any
divisions of the white community over what was going on?

Black: No, I was not.

Smith: There was a newspaper editor in Pascagoula named Ira Harkey(?) who was
just about run out of business in Pascagoula up there.

Black: I heard about that later on, but—

Smith: But you weren’t aware of the—
Black: Wasn’t aware. We painted all Caucasians with the same brush. We felt that they all—I learned later on that wasn’t true, but during some of the bus rides and that sort of thing, we—but I still didn’t know of any Southern whites. No, I take that back. That one priest—I forget his name—if you look at the picture, and I got a copy at home.

Smith: Is that Reverend Argood(?)?

Black: Exactly, and I was—

Smith: He was with Back Bay Mission.

Black: Exactly. Was that his name? He’s in the picture with a collar on. We was marching off the beach. Have you seen that picture? I’m sure you have, yeah, with Dr. Mason in front and him, and I’m the skinny guy with the little hat on. So that was the only nonblack that I knew during that era that participated in it, and it was sympathetic to our cause.

Smith: Well, let’s talk about the planning for the 1963 demonstration. What do you remember about how that was all conceived?

Black: Well, I don’t know. I’m not sure any of the youth was privy to any information about the conception of it. We knew that we were going. We were told we were going, and we all had assembled on Division Street, I believe it was. We all assembled there. It was orchestrated by the adults, and we just wanted, “Here, we’re going, too,” kind of thing.

Smith: That one had been planned and then delayed sometime, because of Mr. Evers’ death. Do you remember anything about that?

Black: No.

Smith: OK.

Black: Just that, but not the specifics of it. Again, we were kids who were not given, were not privy to—now, later on the youth branch president was allowed to come to some meetings, the executive meetings of the branch, but that was later on. But that particular event, it was—and I think it was on purpose. They kept it close to the vest, and not too—but it still, by the time we got ready to go, seemed like everybody on the Coast knew it, because them people showed up like ants in a sugar factory.

Smith: Did you have any special preparation on the day of the demonstration?

Black: Not that I remember.

Smith: Y’all were pretty much veteran demonstrators by then.
Black: Yeah, I mean, “Let’s go. Let’s go do it.”

Smith: You had already been sitting in and had seen the inside of the jail in Biloxi before.

Black: Yeah.

Smith: Well, how did things unfold on the beach in 1963? What did you see? What did you do?

Black: Well, again, we went down to the beach on the corner of Porter Avenue and Beach. Dr. Mason, for whatever reason, let me drive his car. I didn’t have a driver’s license. (laughter) He let me drive his blue Buick, [19]59 Buick. I’ll never forget it; let me drive his car down to the beach. And I had two of the other younger fellows in there with me. I’d go to the beach and park on the northwest corner of Porter and Beach, and got out of the car, and of course it was hot, and I left the windows down. And we walked across the beach, and everybody got together, and we assembled. I want to say they had prayer for them. I don’t remember exactly. But some walked out in the water, some nervously. We just stood around talking and really sort of oblivious to the gathering to the west; at least I was. And I can’t remember how long it was between the time we went there. We saw policemen, patrolling up and down, city policemen. Then all of a sudden on the—what they call the concrete wall?

Smith: The seawall?

Black: The seawall, yeah, saw patrolmen coming down on there. I guess it was the sheriff there, riding a motorcycle down that seawall. Seem like there were about two million of them, but of course it wasn’t. And then all of a sudden all these white people came from everywhere; looked they were hiding, and they just popped up. Because we were playing around in the sand, messing around and talking. I can’t remember exactly. And—(disc 1, side 2)—we said something, yeah, right-on kind of stuff. And all of a sudden they appeared from everywhere.

Smith: And this was 1963.

Black: Sixty-three, yeah, oh, yeah.

Smith: So the white people showed up in big numbers in [19]63, also.

Black: Big numbers. In my opinion, there were more in [19]63 than there was in [19]60. But we didn’t see any—it wasn’t the same kind of violence. OK. We were there for awhile. I can’t remember how long it was. All of a sudden the police started coming; more cops than we had ever seen before. Then more people began to assemble down, and we were just told to keep on what we were doing, “Don’t pay them any attention.” And we did. There were some men there who might’ve been
categorized as little tough guys, Schneckenburg(?) and those who were kind of—men who were from New Orleans, and they were kind of tough. So they were determined not to, based on what they said, “Ain’t going to be no beat down today,” kind of thing. We couldn’t have beat all them folks anyway; there were so many of them. But anyway I looked across the street over there, and I saw these guys get out of Mason’s car. And I had the keys to it. “What are they doing?” They were fooling with the car, and I was wondering why the car was on fire. They had set the car on fire. And I got scared because I had driven the car down. But they were going through his car, searching, trying to find—wasn’t nothing to find, and so then the bullhorn started about, “You’re trespassing,” or whatever they said. “We demand that you leave.” And of course we didn’t leave, ignored them, and that went on for a while, and I don’t know exactly how long. And then an eighteen-wheeler pulled up, or some such vehicle, and it went on and on and on. And basically it was a kind of a Caucasian/Afro-American standoff, if you will. And they were telling us we got to leave and then threats and names being called, but nobody came down to the sand like they did before in [1960]. It wasn’t the same.

Smith: The police were between—

Black: Were between.

Smith: —the white and black.

Black: Yeah, they were.

Smith: And in [19]60 the police—

Black: Were part of it.

Smith: —were part of it.

Black: They were part of it, yeah. Then they were part of it. So that was the difference. It was peaceful for the most part. It was peaceful from the standpoint of the violence, I mean I should say, correct myself. And then finally, we acquiesced to their command. I don’t know. There was so much going on with us there, who devised the strategy, “OK, let’s go now.” So we were told to line up, and Dr. Mason in front and this minister, and I was third. I was high-strung, you know, and whatever, “Come on with it.” Just unwise. And so they parked a van, the truck van, east of the lighthouse, as I recall correctly, up on the median there. No, it wasn’t a median. It was just in the highway where they had it blocked off. And so we were all under arrest and blah, blah, blah, blah. And so when they said that, then they began to march off the beach and get in the back of the truck.

Smith: The police were escorting you off the beach.

Black: Yes, um-hm.
Smith: And taking you to the moving van.

Black: Right, right, to the moving van, and probably the thing I remember the most about that whole incident was when we got—when everybody was in there, they tried to close the door on us. I’ll never forget that. And those men all of a sudden became not so peaceful. They began to push back on the door, and I was up front trying to push, too, because look at that picture. There you see a little hat, and I was trying to push because, “There’s no way you’re going to shut the door on us.” I didn’t know if they were trying to suffocate us or run us up in the water or something, whatever. And I never, it didn’t really occur to me that would be something they would do. I’m a kid still. I remember the men saying that, so they did not allow that door, and Dr. Mason would be hearing about it, that door not being closed and other men were, and they didn’t close it. We drove to the Biloxi jail, and it was forty-some of us, forty-eight, forty-nine—didn’t get the exact number—rode to the Biloxi Jail, and stayed there for a while, and they took us to the Harrison County jail where we spent—

Smith: Where was the Harrison County jail at that time?

Black: Down by the old bus station. Do you know where the old bus station was in Gulfport?

Smith: In downtown Gulfport?

Black: Yeah, Greyhound, yeah, right across the street from there, yes.

Smith: So all of those landmarks are gone now.

Black: Yeah.

Smith: Gulfport was clean swept by Katrina.

Black: Yeah, sure, that’s right, yeah.

Smith: It was the old part of downtown Gulfport.

Black: Right, the old part of downtown, exactly. That’s where the jail was. They put us all forty-seven, forty-eight of us in that jail; I’ll never forget it. And we spent the weekend there. Well, not the weekend. That was Sunday evening. Then we got out Tuesday, I believe it was, because I missed school. I was a senior in school then. I missed school that one day, I believe, if my memory serves me correctly, and I went back to school that Tuesday. And that was the bulk of it. Of course, some other drama along the way, name-calling and different things, but we felt real good. We accomplished what we had come to accomplish in that time. And what the white man didn’t understand, that every time he arrested us, it only empowered us. He didn’t understand that had he left us alone—like the time we sat in different places—had he
left us alone and the police would not have come, the media would not have come, and we would’ve been just going there, and (inaudible). I felt like that since then. But they always made such a big deal of it, so that just encouraged us to do it again the more they stopped us. But had they just ignored us, we probably would’ve gone away to some extent to the point that we wouldn’t have felt that kind of victory. Every time they arrested us, we felt victorious. Every time they harassed us, we felt victorious. That may sound odd, but we knew that we’d gotten their attention, and we agitated them, and we would bring about change because the way they conducted themselves, we knew we were making progress. (Inaudible)

Smith: What about—your stays in jail were usually fairly short when you were doing the sit-ins.

Black: Right.

Smith: But this one with the beach, you were in there maybe forty-eight hours. How were you treated in the Harrison County jail during that time. Do you remember?

Black: I was a scared; I know that. It was a different experience.

Smith: Why were you scared?

Black: Because it was a different experience and not so much scared of being beaten up in there like that. They said we couldn’t get out, so that was it, that we couldn’t get out. I’m used to getting out. Said we couldn’t get out, and they couldn’t get out. We had to stay in, and that’s what was scary about it. We couldn’t get out. I had just turned eighteen, somewhere in there, not just, I was about to turn eighteen. But anyway, they kept me as an adult; I remember that. So that’s what it was, the fact of the unknown at that time. It wasn’t a little-kid thing anymore; people were serious in this thing. So I think that’s what it was. And then we were all right, because I mean they arrested a gentleman, Mr. Estes(?), and arrested them, and everybody, they were cool. So I finally calmed down myself. You know what I’m saying? Because I, getting out, they said we can’t get out, we got to stay. “What?” That’s what I mean. The fear of the unknown of what’s going to happen to us, kind of thing. And the jailers, I can’t remember whether or not they helped us to feel that way or not, but they weren’t very nice, though. Nobody was beaten that I remember, just vulgarities.

Smith: So you got out of jail. Were you called to testify in any of the court cases that came out of either 1960 or 1963?

Black: No, we had to go back to court. I’ll never forget it. We went back to court the same day that Kennedy was shot.

Smith: OK. So this is when finally the trial—

Black: Yeah, trial.
Smith: —was, nineteen—

Black: Sixty-three.


Black: Right.

Smith: Went on until November before the county trial.

Black: Exactly.

Smith: What do you remember about the trial?

Black: Not a whole lot. What I do remember is someone coming in—this I’ll never forget—coming in and saying that President Kennedy had been shot, and someone saying, someone, one of the white fellows saying, “Yay, so-and-so, so-and-so, good.” Something like that. Blew my mind. And then shortly after somebody said he’s dead, and then some more awful comments were made, and blew my everlasting mind.

Smith: This was in the courthouse in Harrison County.

Black: Yeah.

Smith: Gulfport.

Black: Right, the court there, they was jubilant. I mean, they were like you would’ve thought LSU [Louisiana State University] had beat a northern team or something. They were so jubilant. They were happy. It was really amazing. And the comments they made, man, about why Kennedy should’ve been killed. It was amazing. I remember going back to class. Then I had gone back to school that day of court, back to school, and like my English, Miss Vaughn’s class, the English class, And they were talking about it, and I sat there. I was late for school because we had to be in court that morning and was sitting in the class, and we were talking about it. I sat there numb, because what did that mean? But the reaction of those men, that’s what got me, how they—well, they weren’t men; they were males—their reaction to President Kennedy being shot and then killed, just for a teenager.

Smith: What about the presiding judge or the district attorney, any of those?

Black: When I start to recollect those little things about it, I want to say that the jury said something, but I halted because I didn’t—I wanted to be sure about what I said. In my memory that was something said, but I halted because I can’t be exactly sure. But I have this memory of the judge saying something derogatory, but I didn’t want to state that without my memory being very, very fixed.
**Smith:** OK. So this is your senior year in high school.

**Black:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** You spent a couple of nights in jail and been to court, and that case kept on being appealed. Were you convicted?

**Black:** Yes.

**Smith:** You were convicted.

**Black:** Yes.

**Smith:** You were always convicted.

**Black:** Yeah, but let me say between the beach wade-in and the court date, I went to the March on Washington, and I—

**Smith:** OK. I was going to ask you about that.

**Black:** Yeah, I was one of the youngest persons there. I was young. And I bring this up because that was empowering. I had never been—I’d been out of state along the coast of Florida, but I had never been up that far north before. I was just a Mississippi boy. And I’m going to say this very quickly, we—I’ll never forget—we went to the March on Washington. We stopped in Montgomery, Alabama, the bus stop there for a bus rest and everything. And I’ll never forget when getting out of the bus, and there were so many black folks. I can’t remember how many buses. We went to Jackson. Everybody met in Jackson and got on the bus and shaked hands with everybody, and the buses were trailing each other in a caravan going there. And we got out of the bus in Montgomery at the bus stop, and we all went on the white side, went through the black side around to the white side and sat there. I mean, there was a lot of dark folk there. I’ll never forget this woman saying, “We don’t serve niggers.” I’ll never forget that. And one of the men saying, “We don’t eat them neither, ma’am.” I’ll never forget that. First time I heard that. And we sat there; she didn’t serve us, but we didn’t move neither. The police came. There were just so many people; they just let us alone. We finally got back on the bus, and the caravan left and went to Washington. But I brought it up to say that I was empowered when I went there, and my whole, our perspective changed. We were not isolated down in South Mississippi. They were the national movement, and that’s when I became really aware of how broad this was. The first time I became really aware of the fact that it was not just Afro-Americans who were in this trouble. There were a lot of well-meaning people that were not, didn’t look like us who were there, with great love. And I remember when our bus pulled in, all the people were shouting, “Yeah, Mississippi,” like we had escaped. I’ll never forget that. I’m like, “Why are they yelling?” Mr. McDaniel and I went from the Biloxi Branch, and I was sitting near the window, and he was
sitting right there, and I was looking out the window, and it was just so surreal. But hearing all those speakers, and Martin Luther King was not the most inspiring person at that time, meaning that he spoke, but so did others; so did Wilkins. So did Bernard Rushing, and so many others spoke, but they were more fiery to me, and I identified more with other teenagers than him. But amazing, his speech became the great speech. But seeing all those people, when I came back to Biloxi, it was on then. It wasn’t nothing. We got all these, they said 250,000, and you’ll never make me believe there was only a quarter of a million people there. I just wouldn’t, I don’t believe that it was. If it was half a million, if it was a dime, if there were ten there, you know what I’m saying? But nonetheless, it was a different perspective then when I came back. My experience was different. I felt I gained in power, and I really felt empowered. If I had any fear, it was gone because, “They can come on with it now. We got all these people.” So that really, really helped to catapult me into a different mind-set regarding the movement.

**Smith:** So the march on Washington was very powerful. You mentioned that you and Mr. McDaniels, the undertaker, funeral home director, had gone from Biloxi. Any others from Biloxi that you remember that went to Washington?

**Black:** No. We were the only ones from Biloxi. The branch sponsored us, and they only sponsored two people, and that was he and I they sponsored to go.

**Smith:** So you met up in Jackson—

**Black:** Met up in Jackson, right.

**Smith:** With other people—

**Black:** At the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street in Jackson. Medgar Evers was there and other people there, sure did, uh-huh.

**Smith:** OK. Well, you came back empowered, you said.

**Black:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** Did you continue to do sit-ins on through [19]63 and [19]64?

**Black:** Yes, sir. I left to go to [Mississippi] Valley [State University] that summer in August with the band. We continued to do things, sit-ins, boycotts, until we had to stop saying boycott and use other terminology, but yeah, we continued to do those things until we left. Sure did.

**Smith:** OK. And you went to school at Valley. Do you have any special recollections of your start to school at Valley?

**Black:** No, nothing.
Smith: Was the civil rights movement very prominent on people’s mind, or they pretty much just focused on the school?

Black: It was like we was in a different time zone, a different—because I had never been to the Delta before, and it was a culture shock for us, and I don’t mean other friends. Well, the guy who was the voter registrar for the City of Biloxi, Lucien Brown—I went because Lucien Brown and Jerry Wright were my best friends. We were all in the band together. That’s where they were going, so I said, “OK. I’ll go there, too.” Because my sister went to Alcorn, and so I went to Valley. They were way up there in the middle of nowhere, and it was like a total, like we’d entered into a whole other zone from the Coast. So no, there was nothing, and I don’t remember anything about civil rights being an issue on campus there, unlike Jackson.

Smith: So they didn’t have a youth branch at [Mississippi Valley State University]?

Black: No.

Smith: So you were pretty much focused on school?

Black: I’m not going to say that, but I wasn’t that wild. I wasn’t so much wild. It was fun. I was there for the gaming. I forgot I went for an education. But I do remember, though, going down to Itta Bena, the little town, and I do remember bringing some of those same—because we felt somewhat uppity. We were in the Delta, from the Coast. And so when we went downtown to Itta Bena, we went with attitude, like the people there, this is the Delta. And we’re from the Coast and guys from Jackson, so we would go in their places and boldly without any concern. We never got in any trouble, though, but we would go into places whereas the locals wouldn’t go in. But we would. We would go in there, and then we went right to the campus again. So they got used to us, I guess, and just didn’t make an issue of it. But, no, there was nothing outstanding like that at all.


Smith: And you said that in the fall of [19]65 you participated in—

Black: In the—no, (inaudible).

Smith: Let’s back up for just a second. Let me ask you about the summer of 1964, when we had that so-called long, hot summer, the big infusion of students from up North who tried to do voter registration. Did you have any memory or interaction with that?
Black: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was the first time we had been that close to white folks, in terms of—yeah, SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], CORE [Congress of Racial Equality].

Smith: CORE folks?

Black: Yeah, CORE folks, exactly. We saw a new part, because the NAACP people were mostly passive. And these people from CORE were talking to—and SNCC and SCLC were talking—well, especially SNCC and—you understand this thing?


Black: Yeah. So SNCC and CORE people were more aggressive, if you will, more violent, and they came there. That’s when June Bug, Arthur Lee Jacobs, came back, because he had left to go to Mary Holmes Junior College up in the Delta, and he came back with a bunch of overall-wearing people and driving a Volvo with four-cylinder engines in them, that sort of thing, and these (inaudible) Valiants, some Valiants with the straight-fixed engine in them we used to drive. And it seemed like everybody had one. So the voter registration (inaudible) was what it was about. But I remember one incident and (inaudible) and I, we went to. They trained us on voter registration. And we would go to different areas on the Coast, registering people. Well, we were assigned to go to Wiggins; had a place called—gosh, it slipped my mind. It was Turpentine Quarters, Turpentine Quarters on Highway 49 at that time, right through Wiggins.

Smith: This was a black neighborhood near where the mills used to be.

Black: Exactly, and the mill was on the east side of 49, and I was on the west side, and it was a community of houses in a big circle, like, with a water pump in the middle straight out of 1800s or something, amazing. I knew it was there; you couldn’t see it from the highway when they actually registered, starting registering people to vote. And that was when I heard the adage about pulling “hen teeth,” and I’m not sure what that means, but certainly, that approached that, talking to people about registering to vote. And it was like we were suddenly in a time warp here. These people didn’t want to hear it, and we went from all—I’m talking about shacks, they were literally shacks, shack after shack. We found out that they, that the people didn’t get any—and we talked to some of them, and we learned about how they had a general store across the street. They worked at the Turpentine Quarters; they didn’t actually get paid. They were going in, and they would buy food on the books, and buying food on the books, it wasn’t like a—it was amazing how that system worked, but nobody—

Smith: It was like a company store.

Black: Like a company store.
Smith: And they had a credit account.

Black: Had a credit account, exactly. And everybody lived like, with hardly any real money. And then they worked, and they didn’t want to talk to us. They didn’t want to talk about registering to vote. “We don’t do that,” kind of stuff. So someone told us that we would get in trouble if we didn’t get out of there. So it was about dark; I’ll never forget. It was close to dark, and both of us was driving, Rehofus and I. And we left, pulled out of Turpentine Quarters, took a right and started going back down Highway 49. And back in that time, Highway 49 wasn’t a four-lane then. By the time we got on the highway real good, we did not quite get on the highway, somebody pulled behind us, and got up real close behind us, and we heard some yelling or whatever, and Rehofus, we were still teenagers.

Smith: Do you know how to spell Rehofus?

Black: Yes, R-E-H-O-F-U-S.

Smith: OK, Rehofus Esters (inaudible).

Black: Rehofus Esters, yeah.

Smith: OK. So you’re coming out, and somebody’s on your tail.

Black: On our tail, yeah, and they would look back, and they said, “Man, they following us.” At first I thought we were being melodramatic, but they were actually following us. And I didn’t want to come around, pull up beside them, and that sort of thing. Man, we—and it was dusk, dark, and we were in Stone County, and we knew about Stone County. Stone County was not Harrison County. And he opened that little slant-six Plymouth up that we had, and took out. And he came behind us, and we were scared. I was scared to death to tell you the truth.

Smith: And had the events happened at Philadelphia by that time?

Black: No.

Smith: Or this was before?

Black: Before, yeah, before.

Smith: So these students who were working voter registration experienced intimidation.

Black: Yes.

Smith: In a lot of places.
Black: And some beatings, yeah, and some beatings, yes, and different things went on, and we heard some stories. And we were told that—we were all talking about how dangerous it was, and what they will do to you. But these folks were told not to go back to Turpentine Quarters again, and we didn’t go back. So that was a harrowing experience. They never did catch us.

Smith: How long were you chased?

Black: All the way down to Harrison County, into Harrison County. Man, it seemed like about 500 miles to us at that time, but it never was, because he was driving, and it was dusk, dark, and he wasn’t an experienced driver. And we were always looking back, and, “They coming! They coming!” They never did catch us. We were wide open, as fast as we could go up and down those hills on Old [Highway] 49.

Smith: How many of you were in the car?

Black: Just two of us.

Smith: Just two?

Black: Yeah, Rehofus and I, we went up there to register.

Smith: How many do you think were in the car chasing you?

Black: Three. It was a pickup truck, yeah.

Smith: A pickup truck?

Black: Yeah, three, I think about three of them, yeah.

Smith: OK.

Black: And we didn’t go back either. We never went back to Turpentine Quarters again. And years, some years back, I went there to see what was still there. Of course, it’s gone. I just went to see the old ground, and it was the first time I’d ever seen that before, a water pump in the middle of the ground and shacks in a circle like that. That was amazing to me.

Smith: Did they not have running water—

Black: No.

Smith: —in each house? So they were coming to a common—

Black: Right.
Smith: —common ground.

Black: And no running water and no indoor bathroom.

Smith: Well, OK. That’s the summer of 1964, a lot of violence. Do you have any recollection of your feeling about the civil rights workers that were killed at Philadelphia?

Black: No, nothing. Nothing I can remember. I don’t; I sure don’t.

Smith: OK, well—

Black: Ironically here the other day, some people from the Institute for Indian Development were here in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and two white females and an Afro-American woman. And the two white females were sitting here, and they’re both from Philadelphia. And I sat there while they were talking, and I wasn’t even listening until some point. They were from Philadelphia, Mississippi. And one was—well, now one was too young. She was about twenty-four, twenty-five. And the other one was, I guess about my age, or close to it, so she had recollection of it. And they mentioned it, talked about that; the older lady did. And I was sitting there thinking like, “They’re from Philadelphia, Mississippi.” And my mind just went, “The fact that they’re sitting here, talking to a black man. And two white women, how things have changed, really.” One was talking about what happened there, and I thought if I ever talked to someone from that area or something, I would have a bias beyond reproach, not, but beyond measure. But I had talked to her before, but we never really discussed that. So they talked about it some; this young one, and the older lady did. But they were totally at ease, though. I didn’t sense anything. So when you mentioned that, it made me think about that, yeah.

(Disc 1, side 3)

Smith: Well, you mentioned that you went to segregated schools through high school. You graduated from Nichols High School.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Could you talk a little bit about Nichols and about any feelings or ideas that you had about that whole concept of desegregating schools?

Black: Then?

Smith: Yeah.

Black: Desegregation wasn’t even a thought when I was in school. The only thing I remember we had about that, we used to talk about the fact that we got those raggedy books, with all them funny-sounding names in them. In the old days, the books had
the hard covers on them; didn’t have like numbers, and I guess like one, two, three, four, five, six and through ten. And we might’ve had about three or four names before we got the books. Those were (inaudible) books. And initially, we didn’t have a gym until, excuse me, I was maybe in the ninth grade or something like that—I’m not sure—before we finally got a gym. We were playing ball outside on the asphalt court.

**Smith:** Basketball on an asphalt court?

**Black:** Yeah, asphalt court outside with two poles on either side. But we never really thought about desegregation at that point.

**Smith:** Did you see—

**Black:** Well, I shouldn’t say we didn’t think about it, but it wasn’t some—like when we were doing civil rights efforts, we never thought about in the fall, going to a white school. It just never crossed my mind.

**Smith:** Did you see anything other than textbooks or the lack of a gymnasium to make you believe that there was a serious problem with the funding or the way the black schools were—

**Black:** School bus; all we had was the small, “cheese” bus. We called it cheese bus, the little short bus. It wasn’t as long as this room. We called it the cheese bus; I don’t know why we called it the cheese bus. And we didn’t have—oh, yeah, there were many things that we weren’t—now, we weren’t even aware that we were cut short in a lot of things, school instruments, for instance. I was in the band. School instruments we were short on. And you know what, we used to—and I was very much aware of segregation then and racism. Oh, very much aware of it. I’ll never forget. I was amazed how the white men and boys would come to our football games and sit in the bleachers like nothing. We wouldn’t dare go up there to their games. I never did. But one of our guys would go and watch, and they would go to the events on Bearman Street and watch the games through the fence. But they would come in and sit in the bleachers, off to the side and watch our games. And we would have a problem with that. “Why can they come to our games, and we can’t go to theirs?” Something like that. But we never made a big issue of it. We were having too much fun in school. We didn’t think a whole lot about it. We enjoyed it. I regret—I’ll tell you right now, I regretted segregation of schools and many of my peers that have reviewed this thing have realized that we made a mistake. Integration was more of a hindrance than a blessing to us in many ways. Had they really given us equality and separation, that would’ve been all right, but we didn’t have any equality, equal funding for our school, because the leadership we had in the black community, the principals and teachers we had, the attention we got in school, because we had lawyers and people that would leave here and go to northern schools, did well. Vanderbilt, you know, one of my classmates went to Vanderbilt, Tennessee State, and other schools north of here. So we were getting education, and it’s hard for people to believe that, but I sat down with many young people, and I said, “Well, what you want to do, spelling, reading, math?
I’ll hang with you, old as I am.” But we were educated, and we had a sense of place and value, and that’s what James Boyd yesterday was talking, and I was talking, about being—I was president of my, I was class president in my sophomore, junior, and senior year. I was president of the student body two out of those three years. I was president of the (inaudible). But we had opportunity to be, and to have leadership roles in school where most Afro-Americans don’t have that now, in the majority, the white schools, if you will. So integration was a bust from our concern for us in many ways. It took away so much from us: our community leaders and some educators, I mean, and made them assistant principals, close our schools down; open—I have some memory, some place where we belong, and many of us lament the fact that integration happened as it did. And it was a mistake in a lot of ways for our children. We have seen a decline socially in our communities, we believe as a result of it, mainly as a result of it. There should’ve been another way. We should’ve gotten equality. It shouldn’t have been forced. The force should’ve been if they get like when we sued, like when I sued the Biloxi school district, we were—the federal judge said, essentially, that be it Biloxi High, or be it Nichols, if you put a book on Biloxi High, you put a book on Nichols. You’re not going to run out of funds, so we can’t do it. So it should’ve been, in our opinion, that if they get new books at Biloxi High, they get new books at Nichols. Let’s keep our black principal; let’s keep our teachers. If some white kids want to go over here, let them, because it’s their neighborhood school. Let them go, and blah, blah, blah, and not force it. I think over time the thing would’ve evolved, and forced integration, I think, was a mistake, big mistake, particularly at the race to our, the culture changes that we have experienced, socially and even economically for a while.

Smith: When did Nichols stop functioning as a high school? For a long time it was a junior high.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: But at some point it stopped functioning.

Black: As a high school.

Smith: Do you remember?

Black: I don’t know exactly. My brothers was telling me that, were telling me it was in the late [19]60s, I think.

Smith: In the late [19]60s or early [19]70s that they—

Black: Yeah, right, uh-huh.

Smith: —pulled Biloxi into one high school.

Black: Exactly. Well, one of them guys—because I had long since been gone.
**Smith:** At the time, one of the arguments about desegregation would have been that the curriculum at the white schools was more pointed toward college prep than it was at black schools. Do you have any reflection about that?

**Black:** Yeah.

**Smith:** Advanced science, advanced math, foreign language, stuff like that.

**Black:** Yeah. And I’m sure there might be some truth to that, but I mean that could have been corrected with us getting the books that they were getting. And if our teachers weren’t qualified to teach those subjects—and I believe they were; they were some brilliant people, man. I look back on those—I just think it could’ve been, again, equality, you know equal access rather than the way it happened. So yeah, there was some argument about that. But again I want to say that we had students going to Vanderbilt University right out of Nichols. We had lawyers, doctors come out. So if there was some disparity, I would suggest it had more to do with our access to books and science lab and that sort of thing. In fact, we had a fine workshop. Now, they built us a fine wood workshop.

**Smith:** It was sort of vocational.

**Black:** Yeah, vocational, yeah.

**Smith:** That’s what they tried to do.

**Black:** Exactly. Fine, real fine. But our biology lab stunk. I mean, we were dealing with frogs, and so we had to get them in—bless his heart. I don’t recall his name, but he wasn’t the best science teacher in the world. Sure they had some bad ones at the white schools, too. But, so if we had equality, we could’ve done—and I think we did just as well in many areas, as our counterparts at the white schools did. I think we did well. We just didn’t have access to the equipment that they had, and that could’ve—I would have been fine with that. I didn’t need to go sit beside a white kid to feel equal. That’s another story, though.

**Smith:** Do you have any recollections of who some of your outstanding teachers were at Nichols, people that pushed you and made people that went off to Vanderbilt and did well?

**Black:** Dr. Jessie Trotter; greatest teacher in the world. Now, Trotter—

**Smith:** What did he teach?

**Black:** He taught history. And some social sciences. But Dr. Trotter—

**Smith:** I’m glad you had a good history teacher.
Black: Hm?

Smith: I’m glad you had a good history teacher.

Black: (laughter) Yeah. Dr. Trotter was, he was smarter than all those teachers where we were concerned, because even back in the old days we had assembly every Friday, our schools, and Dr. Trotter would get up, when it was his turn to be, he would use words that the other teachers didn’t understand, and we thought that, well, that just tickled the lot of us to death. And we thought he was the most smartest thing going. He was a good teacher; he was the best teacher I had. And it’s a shame to say; I didn’t have any other teachers that I really would give high marks to. They were mostly average, I thought. You might find it hard to believe, but we actually have a social structure in the black community. Well, you have social sciences, or you have something else. You would believe it, too. But we had social structures, and those social structures even would spill over to our entire education or something. I was talking to my daughter not too long ago about that, and they felt shortchanged because if you were light-skinned, you got this or that, whatever the case might be. But Dr. Trotter was our best teacher. Now, we had a lady named—who was our English and typing teacher; I forget her name. She was good. No favorites; that was about the favorite I had. And he was the hardest one, too, mind you. Miss Barnes was a good teacher, but I don’t think she could really—what she knew—I mean she had trouble communicating with the students, in my opinion. Our math teacher, I don’t recall her name. She was good. No favorites; that was about the favorite I had. And he was the hardest one, too, mind you. Miss Barnes was a good teacher, but I don’t think she could really—what she knew—I mean she had trouble communicating with the students, in my opinion. Our math teacher, I don’t recall her name. I always thought she didn’t like boys. I guess we were just bad. I guess, because she never could—and I was, I was a good student, but I also managed—I stayed in, doing something. And I was president of the class and the student union, too, but I was always doing something, aggravating those teachers.

Smith: Did you know Miss Nichols?

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Fannie Nichols?

Black: I had the pleasure of being whipped by her, one or two times.

Smith: Could you talk a little bit about her?

Black: Great woman. A great woman. I didn’t know Mr. Nichols; he was before my time. But Miss Nichols, in my opinion, was a great woman who fought for us, and we didn’t understand then, but they had to do things a certain way with the white power structure, to get us things. And we didn’t understand that then. We was like, “Be more vociferous. Be bolder.” But Miss Nichols was a great woman, in my opinion, a great educator who really wanted her students to do well. I’m convinced of that. At the time, I didn’t understand it, but [she] really wanted us to do well. Then Mr. Duckworth came on in my senior year and became our principal.
Smith: Was that C.J. Duckworth?

Black: That’s the guy. Oh, you know them all, don’t you? Yeah, C.J. Duckworth, yeah. He came with the cream. We had the cream of the crop.

Smith: C.J. Duckworth eventually was the president of the Mississippi Teachers Association.

Black: OK. I wasn’t aware of that, yeah.

Smith: Yeah.

Black: Yeah, he—

Smith: He grew big.

Black: Yeah. He was forward-thinking. He really was and very different than the matriarchal approach that Miss Nichols had. A story I’ve told where Miss Nichols—and I was a junior; I think I was—paddled me, because we had respect. We wouldn’t hit back or nothing like that. Oh, no. So I went and told my daddy a lie; I told my daddy something—because I had to tell him something—she’s onto me or something. And he took me up to the school. And, see, what had happened, and Miss Nichols told him what had happened, and my side wasn’t important anymore, and he liked to kill me. (laughter) That man liked to kill me, like “I dare you!” So yeah, Miss Nichols was great; I’d give her an A plus. She fought for us having things at the school that we didn’t understand at the time. And they had to do it, with their head down, so to speak, and that was kind of a cultural thing, how they had to react to the white power structure, um-hm.

Smith: Excellent. Well, let’s see. You did desegregate Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College, as it was called at that time. Jefferson Davis Campus was opened in the fall of 1965.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Talk a little bit about how you decided you would be involved in that, and what you found when you did?

Black: Well, I came home during summer break, and school was over then, and I was bored, I guess. And I hadn’t done anything all year but Valley, in that regard.

Smith: No demonstrations?
Black: Yeah. A friend of mine named William Griffin wanted to be an electrician, and they were opening up a class out there, and a couple of other guys, and they were going to that vocational school. I wanted to go back to school.

Smith: Now, this is Jefferson Davis Campus?

Black: Jefferson Davis Campus, exactly, that’s correct.

Smith: Jefferson Davis.

Black: Jefferson Davis Campus, and you couldn’t let that pass by. So I said, “Well, I’m going out there to register.” And again, see, there wasn’t any problem with the vocational part of it, but getting to the academic part of it, I went and registered, and, man, I had a hard time that year, that semester. I went to the president a couple of times about how I was being treated. They used to draw all along the campus. They had a walkway. They had these little signs, drew little pictures of me, and I used to wear a tie and stuff.

Smith: You were the only academic?

Black: Yeah, student, yeah.

Smith: Only black academic student?

Black: Um-hm, at that time. And they made a mockery of that. I wore a necktie, and they would draw pictures of me, mocking pictures of different things and put them up on the wall or whatever. So I went to the school president, and he said, “Well, maybe if you”—I’ll never forget this—“Maybe if you”—

Smith: Was this J.J. Hayden?

Black: I don’t think—

Smith: (Inaudible)

Black: Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure was.

Smith: Or was this the campus guy? There was another one there.

Black: No.

Smith: A Dean Lipscomb.

Black: No, no, no.

Smith: OK. Go ahead.
Black: I think it was Hayden; I believe it was.

Smith: OK, Hayden. He was an old Pass Christian boy

Black: Hm. Is that right? OK. That seems like what I remember because I—you know Desporte, Junior Desporte?

Smith: Um-hm.

Black: He was there at the time. I didn’t realize it. As soon as I went back to the Coast, he would talk about it. I didn’t remember him, but he remembered me, and he used to talk about it all the time I was there at Jeff Davis, like we were buddy-buddy.

Smith: Yeah.

Black: Yeah, it was kind of funny. But I went to him to complain about how they, what they were doing. And he told me, “Why don’t you blend in more with them? You say you dress wearing a necktie and stuff. Blend in with them.” I never thought—and that’s verbatim, “Why don’t you blend.” And I’m thinking, “How can I blend in with them?” That was the oddest thing he said. But I think what he meant was that I wasn’t a regular guy. I probably was older than most of them, because I had been in school a year at Valley. And see, in high school in senior year, we wore neckties like three days a week.

Smith: At Nichols?

Black: And we did, and that was just something that we instituted, and we did.

Smith: You did wear neckties at Valley?

Black: Yeah, sometimes, we sure did.

Smith: It was a very formal atmosphere.

Black: Yeah, um-hm, and we wore that. And everybody didn’t do it, but some of us, Lucien and Colby and other guys would do it, too. You’d wear it. We would do it. Just, it was a dress thing, and we would do it sometimes, less at Valley than we did at Nichols. We were very consistent at Nichols with it. So it was the kind of thing that we just did. And it was odd, so they would draw these pictures of me with neckties on and stuff, and sometimes like that and different things.

Smith: You’re showing—

Black: Yeah.
Smith: —like a hangman’s noose.

Black: Exactly. And he assured me that it wasn’t racism. He used the word racism then, but that’s what it meant. They were just kids, “having fun, and don’t pay no attention about those kind of things.” So I got out after that first, that one semester, and went on my way. But I just did it for the sake of saying someone could, because they didn’t even invite, it wasn’t an open-door policy for Afro-Americans. But the guys said that they were going to vocational school, and it was really an invitation to come in and learn a trade, but they did not do the same thing for the academic side.

Smith: Did they have any black faculty at Jefferson Davis—

Black: No.

Smith: —when you were there?

Black: No.

Smith: Neither vocational nor academic?

Black: No.

Smith: How do you remember the faculty over there?

Black: How do I remember them?

Smith: Um-hm.

Black: Average.

Smith: Were they supportive?

Black: No, no, not supportive. They weren’t aggressive in a negative way, or they weren’t against, necessarily, but they were not supportive either. And if something would be said, or they’d say something, they would pretend like they didn’t, like it didn’t happen, or whatever. Somebody would say something, make a comment in class, a racial comment of some kind, and so from that standpoint they didn’t—and that’s one of the things I complained about, [that] they wouldn’t say anything. They’d let it slide. So that I do remember about it, yeah; wasn’t very nice.

Smith: How do you evaluate that experience? Did it add to you or subtract from you? You said sometimes the sit-ins added to your power.

Black: Um-hm, yeah.
Smith: How do you think that, desegregating that campus and during that first semester—

Black: For a while empowering, after a while it became boring. It wasn’t about going to jail and that kind of thing. It wasn’t really that much of a deal, big deal; it really wasn’t at that point. It wasn’t any fun because wasn’t anybody there to share the experience with, so it was just—and I was trying to remember did I finish that semester out. I’m sure I did, though. Yeah, I did because I sent for credits that year, as best I can remember, that I can remember, and my recollection of that is not as good as I hoped it would be.

Smith: Well, then you went on back to Valley?

Black: No. I went to the Marine Corps after that.

Smith: You went to the Marine Corps.

Black: Yeah, the Marine Corps.

Smith: From Jeff Davis you went to the Marine Corps.

Black: Yeah. They—and I will always—

Smith: What was in your mind that made you decide to go to the Marine Corps?

Black: Well, I’ll always believe, I’ll always believe that the draft board punished me, (laughter) because they drafted me. And I had a student deferment, and I’ll always believe that they did. That’s just my own paranoia, perhaps, but I’ll always believe that that was a—because I got drafted after that semester. And why?

Smith: Were your grades OK? You were eligible to go back to school?

Black: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I could go back to school. And I just will always believe that they punished me and pulled my number, if you will. So I was drafted, and we had a choice of—all of a sudden they were drafting then for Vietnam. We were called replacement troops. Some went to Vietnam, came back, and HUD [Housing and Urban Development] had a training program for Vietnam veterans that was just like college. You could go four years, and at the end of the four years, you’d be a GS9, and so I got into that. And that’s another story there.

Smith: So were you involved in the NAACP again when you came back to work for HUD after Vietnam?

Black: Mildly, not on the order of before. I think that things had died down some. I was more belligerent then and more militant then. I didn’t fit into the peace movement kind of thing then. We had experienced some things in Vietnam, and if
you remember Jackson State had happened and Texas Southern had happened, incidents there. Vietnam had happened, where black and whites didn’t get along over there well. Many deny it. But I will say when time came for a firefight, we were Americans; we really were. There was a tall, very, very country white boy named Couch who came to my rescue when I had went after Vietcong, and I’ll never forget him coming and standing with me, firing together as Americans. We went back to the back; when we went back to our base, we were separated. And oh, we could call up— What was her name? (Inaudible) Tokyo Rose in Vietnam. I’ll never forget; Jackson State and Texas Southern had happened. Jackson State had happened, one of them; I think Texas Southern at that time where the students had gotten shot, and she would talk about the, she said, “The soul brothers.” I’ll never forget that, “Soul brothers, why are you here to fight us?” In broken English, “Why are you here to fight us when,” I don’t know what she was saying, “white man,” or whatever “are back home killing your people, and you’re here fighting us?” And that stuff worked. You would hear it at night, and they would blast it. The Vietcong would blast it. End up doing a radio shoot and blasting it, and so you’d find whites and blacks were tense over there. You understand; we had been trained to kill, and we were killing every day and being killed, so you’d go back to the back, and you’re frustrated and had lost a friend or whatever, and you’d say—it’s a wonder we didn’t kill each other. After we’d come back in or out on bivouac, we’re out on patrol, not that we had a whole lot of time in the back, but when we were out, just next to each other, I wonder how many of us took each other out fragging, with fragmentation grenades, and like that. (whispering) 

Smith: OK. Well, I know you’ve got another appointment, so we’ll cut it off here today. Maybe I can get you to talk again some other time.

Black: All right.

(Disc 2, side 1)

Smith: OK. I’m going to have to tag that thing again. This is a continuation of our interview with Reverend James Black. The interview again is taking place in his office at his church on Rodenberg in Biloxi. The interview is conducted by James Pat Smith of the USM history faculty. Today is April 2, 2009. When we were together last we talked about particularly the civil rights movement, and so I wanted to talk about your role as a minister, how you became involved in the church, your sense of calling, whatever led you into doing church work after Vietnam.

Black: OK. Well, admittedly going into the ministry was totally a departure from which I had set for myself as a goal. And out of trouble in my life, I ended up—of course in the Afro-American community almost everybody goes to church when you’re young. It’s part of our social upbringing, if not spiritual, if you will. And I, too, had—I’d been told when I was a little boy that I was going to be a preacher. And so I never romanticized it. It was just something I heard and put in the back of my mind and never thought anything about it. But after Vietnam, so many things
happened in my life that led me down the path I shouldn’t have been going down, which eventually led me back to my roots, if you will, in the church and in the gospel. Again, even at that, I had no intention of becoming a minister, but the calling was there. I’m almost certain of it now after thirty-something years. I’m certain that it was really the calling, but it wasn’t what I originally determined to do. And so we moved back here, and the Lord led me here. Originally I was coming back to Church of God out of Cleveland, Tennessee, which is a predominantly white church, and if you will, sent me here to start a, quote, “Church of God.” And when I got back, I went to my mother’s church and realized that that church was half empty, and I didn’t see the sense of starting another church. That one was half empty, but nevertheless that wasn’t my call, and for four years or so, I kind of did a truant-of-Israel thing, wandered in the wilderness, if you will, till I finally obeyed and did what the Lord told me to do. And then my wife and I started a church in our home back in—my timeframe makes it back in 1976; I think it was ’76. I’m getting my time here mixed up. No, no, ’86, I think it was ’86. I believe it was when we started the church, yeah, in ’86. That’s when it was. So, and we progressed to here, at this time. But might I add that it is almost a natural progression from the standpoint I’ve always been involved in community things, service, and our church is really involved in service, which I think our highest calling. I think too many times we think being religious is our calling when actually the Lord called us to serve people, and so just a kind of natural progression to what I’ve been doing much of my life in terms of reaching out and serving people. And this kind of made it official, if you will, in terms of the biblical command that we serve, and that’s where I am, and that’s why we’re here, to serve people.

Smith: Now, was this at the time you were working for HUD, or was this after you’d—

Black: Oh, this was after, yeah.

Smith: After you’d worked for HUD?

Black: Right. No, when I worked for HUD, I was what they called a real sinner, at the time. I wasn’t thinking about church. But the Lord has a way of calling things to happen in your life to turn you around. If he has a calling in your life, I’m a strong believer now that ultimately you’re going to obey the calling, and he has a way of allowing things to happen to you, not necessarily to call them, but allowing things that happen to you to get you back on track or get you on track where you should be. No, this was after the HUD time.

Smith: You said that your belief is that the church would be about service. How has that been a part of this church as you’ve grown in your ministry here?

Black: Oh, that’s been our greatest part, everything from our jail and prison ministry, and even after people getting out of jail, helping them, in terms of housing and other kinds of things. Our senior food ministry, we have several hot meals for seniors. We
have a food ministry here in the church where we give out boxes of food on a regular basis. People come; they call for food. Our clothing ministry, we have a free clothing ministry where we give out clothes to people that have need. Housing assistance has really been popular. It seemed like we were the only church around here for a while, but one of the reasons people come to us because we are open all the time. Our church door is open all the time. We’re one of the few churches of color that’s open every day, and so other churches referred them to us here. Our youth outreach went, I think, from Boy Scout troop. We had a Girl Scout troop. As part of our community service, our youth outreach program that we’ve had. We’ve had through the National Institute of Environmental Health, we’ve had an environmental training program to train people after the hurricane hit, after Katrina. We have some classes that we had that would teach them more mediation and those kinds of things. We were a distribution center after the storm here for a while, and we worked with victims of the storm in every capacity, from transportation to food; we worked. We work with Veterans at the VA [Veterans Administration]. And also, we recently bought a home, and now we’re housing homeless women and at capacity now. So it’s a constant—I could go on and on. One of the things we did, we have a 501[(c)(3), tax-exempt status for nonprofit, charitable organizations] where we do environmental justice work. We believe that, have a strong belief and have been doing that now for twenty years. We strongly believe that part of our problem in health and economic parity has to do with environmental issues, that people of color and other poor people, the Native Americans, have been disproportionately affected by negative environmental issues, and that is putting in plants and that sort of thing and put them in neighborhoods, etcetera, etcetera. So we’ve done environmental justice work for years now, which is an extension of our church work. And so that’s some of the things we’ve done in terms of community service. So this is, again, a part that the Lord called us to do, that in Proverbs says, “Speak out on the call to the poor and needy, to be a voice for them.” And that service has included even schools working, (inaudible) formed, say, Nichols Coalition when we fought the school board to make sure they didn’t tear down our old school. And then eventually that moved to having, going to federal court and suing them, having to defeat the ballot here for the bond issue, and then having to get it passed after the federal judge said we could have the school. So all of that is part of our service, and I involve my church members in it. I take a group of them to school board meetings, and so all of that’s part in our perspective, in my perspective, it is part of our service to the community, part of our calling in the Lord to certain people.

**Smith:** That’s great.

**Black:** Long answer to a short question.

**Smith:** No, no. I think it’s really a good answer. Let’s talk a little bit about Katrina. Just think about the storm. When did you become aware that Katrina was out there, or there was something big and dangerous?

**Black:** I guess probably when everyone else did; but so many people would say they had all of these revelations. But this is one thing; I can truly say that we do a lot of
praying, like most Christians do, I hope. And we really had a thought that this one was serious. We really did. And our actions dictated that. By that I mean, many times storms come, and we wouldn’t even hardly cover up anything, like our glass in the front, but this time we did. But in (inaudible) where I live, it’s relatively, I guess, safe. I say relatively. And we didn’t leave the area. But I think we were in church. Most churches closed that Sunday, before the storm. We had church, and we came and got before the Lord and prayed, and asked the Lord to keep us, keep the community. No one had the idea it would be of the magnitude it was. I just don’t believe anybody had that revelation. But we did think it was going to be a serious one; really, really had that thought and (inaudible) premonition, this revelation from the Lord. And at the church we did begin to board up. The brothers, we started, boarded the windows where things were blowing around already. And many of the members hit the road after that, the highway, and left. But I think maybe that Friday and that early Saturday morning, we had some thought that we were in for something serious. And then that Sunday in church, because I remember WLOX was saying all the churches were closed, and blah, blah, blah, and so I had my members calling to let them know that, “We’re open. Our church doors are not closed. Our church doors are open.” We didn’t get any visitors, mind you, but we did have the majority of the people of the church that came. Yeah. But very few families and there was a few that had left, but we had church that Sunday. A full scale service and got out and, as I said, we put the windows, closed the windows up; I mean, covered them up, and then I went home, my family and I, and some, most stayed, but some did leave the area.

Smith: And what part of town do you live? Where are you?

Black: I’m in west Biloxi. In west Biloxi in Edgewater Estates, and mine is about the fourth house from Pass Road and the fifth house from Pass Road, and I have a large, I think, about an eight-foot wall that covers the courtyard in the front. So it has a lot of trees by house, too, and boy, I lost part of a beautiful, beautiful oak tree in the front yard.

Smith: So you stayed in your house?

Black: Yes, uh-huh.

Smith: In Edgewater Estates during the storm. What did you experience? What did you see during the storm while the (inaudible) was going on on that Monday?

Black: Well, that’s something to recall. I’ve never seen trees—one tree—we have a big lot that we own next to our house. I’d never seen trees bow, just going from east to west, if you would, with the wind blowing it and touching the ground on both sides. Not a real big tree but a tree, I guess, twelve, fourteen feet high, kind of an ornamental tree, the wind blowing so strong. I saw it, and I still have the wood, and I took pictures of it because nobody would believe it. This tall pine tree on the northeast side of the house, literally the wind cut out a piece about sixteen inches long, sixteen to eighteen inches long, piece of wood, and hurled it to our roof, penetrated our shingles,
the plywood, the decking, and down into the inner parts there so much so that it touched the insulation. The insulation was on the tip of it. I let it stay there for a while, because nobody would believe that, literally, but it cut off the tree and hurled into our roof. And we were thinking, “What if that would have been an individual?” And be able to penetrate those shingles and that plywood. The decking was about a half-inch decking up there. So that was probably the most astounding part of that. But all day long, hearing that wind; I mean literally all day it went on and on and on. And my daughters were there at the house with us and one grandchild at the time, and we were prepared, as much as one could be for that. And God is my profound witness, I did something I never did before that Sunday morning. I’ve never bought a generator before, never have. I was on my way to church, and now I was right in front of church, and I just had a thought, and those who are not in this realm won’t appreciate what I’m saying, but it came to me. It wasn’t a coincidence. I never done it before. I lived on the Coast most of my life. I’ve been through hurricanes, and I never thought about buying a generator. And a strong voice said, “Go buy a generator.” I got in my truck before church time, ran up to Home Depot, bought a generator, put it in the back of the truck, and come to church, and thought no more about it. And lo and behold, that Monday we needed it. It was the salvation for us because we lived, we did quite well during that because we had water and that kind of stuff. But seeing the ferocious nature of this storm was just something; hearing it all day long, it was just so long. It never would stop, and it’d go on and on and on.

Smith: How much damage was done at your house? You said you had the piece of pine tree through the roof.

Black: Not much damage at all; shingles, mostly. That was the biggest damage, shingles, and that’s why some of the leaking, in some parts of the house. But other than that, we didn’t have any broken windows or glass or that sort of thing. But mostly was, 90 percent of our damage was shingles, and then subsequent leaking as a result of the shingles being—but not a vast amount. So we were blessed.

Smith: So you’re high enough that you did not have any water through the walls?

Black: No, I didn’t. And ironically, on the north side of our subdivision, people did, probably about five or six houses to the front of us that were flooded out, ironically. But we were just in the right vicinity, the right place, not too far south and not too far north, a place where no water came, and we were blessed by that.

Smith: So south of you is—you’re near Edgewater Mall.

Black: Yeah.

Smith: That would be south of you.

Black: Yeah, that’s—
Smith: There was water there.

Black: Oh, yeah.

Smith: In that shopping center.

Black: That was devastated, um-hm.

Smith: And you had water north of you, but you were on the high ground in the middle.

Black: Exactly, right in the middle, exactly. And we had just gross damage to the trees and that sort of thing, a lot of damage, but to our home and home next door and all of those around us, immediately around, say, north of us, about the third or fourth house down, then it gets lower, and the water from the Back Bay came in and just devastated some homes.

Smith: When you went outside your house the first time, do you remember when that was that you decided that it was OK to go out and see the situation you were in? What did you see? When was that, and what did you see?

Black: We went out that Monday evening real late. Well, we went out during the day; we would go outside. We went out the front door, and we have this, say, wall like, brick wall that’s in the courtyard there. I remember one time my daughter and I went out about one or two o’clock, and we just wanted to look at the front and see. The wind was still howling and going on, and we went, and all of a sudden we heard a loud sound. And she and I went running back in, laughing, because it was a big crackling. When we did get to go out, we could not believe how the street was totally covered with tree limbs and trees, and that was just the fourth house down from Pass Road that was totally covered. It was just amazing to see how much, the power lines and all down in the street, totally inaccessible from Pass Road. Luckily there was a golf course, old golf course behind my house, and so we were able to get out that way, go on the golf course and get to Pass Road. And that Tuesday morning, I went out and got on my bike and rode across Pass Road down to Edgewater Mall, and that’s when I saw it. I had no idea it was that bad.

Smith: What was the impact on the people of this church? How many of your members would’ve wound up dehoused, house unable to be occupied?

Black: I was trying to think. One brother lived near the Gulf, in Gulfport, in some apartments. The whole complex was wiped out. One of my members lived in a shared, a home for disadvantaged, no, disabled, excuse me, in East Biloxi; totally wiped out. So we had a few who lost everything; not many, but a few who lost everything. We had some that had, of course, damage. Others had damage, but we only had, we had about I think two or three, three or four that lost everything in the
storm. And others had moderate to light, if you will, or light to moderate losses and damage to their homes.

Smith: Now, your church runs a radio station.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: What’s the name of the radio station?

Black: WQFX-AM, 1130.

Smith: So you run the radio station. What kind of complications do you have when you have a church that’s running basically a gospel radio station?

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: I’m right?

Black: Right, totally gospel.

Smith: And that was—it was for the community-service type things.

Black: Right, um-hm.

Smith: So what are the complications with that? What happened to your radio station?

Black: Man—

Smith: Did you try to stay on the air for very long?

Black: Yeah, we stayed as long as we could. We broadcast the weather, and all of a sudden, boom, it was gone, nothing there anymore. Our technology allowed us to do most of it by computer, but that Wednesday or Thursday I was allowed to travel to Gulfport. Our transmitting site is in Gulfport, and I went out there, and the whole building was gone. It was devastating. The thing was just—the tower was still there. I could see the tower a mile away, and I started praising God for the tower still being there. And it never occurred to me about the building. When I got there, it was like I saw it was gone, but I didn’t see it was gone. And I still went through the gate, and I looked around, and it was scattered throughout. (Inaudible) at the site there. We have our towers held by wires, and I looked around, and my building was scattered throughout, over the woods there, all over the place. And so we walked to (inaudible) in the half, I guess, trying to get things back together. But yeah, it had a tremendous impact. We lost big time, as a result of that, um-hm.

Smith: How did the role of this church change as a result of the storm?
Black: It didn’t. It might’ve intensified what we’ve already done, but it didn’t change. It really didn’t, and I’m very proud to say that we had church the day before the storm, and we had church the Sunday after the storm.

Smith: Did you have power that next week?

Black: Yes, we sure did. Power came back on that Friday over here.

Smith: So you’re near the Veterans Hospital.

Black: Right.

Smith: So you’d have been in that grid that they worked on pretty quickly.

Black: Right. So we got power back that Friday, in my home, too. We got power back that Friday. But even though the decision—we had a lot of power damage here and mostly roof damage, but we didn’t have any water rising.

Smith: So the church had a lot of roof damage.

Black: Had a lot of roof damage, yeah. We had [sheetrock] hanging down. So on one side of the church, we had church on that side, and that following Sunday we still had church. We had about thirty membership here. We lost quite a few members. We did lose some members as a result of that. Some left the area and never come back. We lost about, probably about fourteen people, I guess, in a relatively small church. So and that was over the course of a month and a half or two. But the role has not changed; it intensified. It’s ironic, because we had planned to, that year, to remodel the church, and we were lagging behind in raising funds for that, and blah, blah, blah, blah. And then the storm comes and tears up things, and blah, blah, blah. We had carpet on the floor, so all the carpet got wet; had to be taken out. And the pews got wet. So we ended up remodeling the church completely. I can say our insurance company treated us very fairly. That wasn’t the case with many, but we were treated fairly by the insurance company, quite fairly, and everything worked out quite well.

Smith: You want to mention the name of your insurance company that you felt fairly treated by?

Black: Well, State Farm. Yeah, State Farm they treated us quite well.

Smith: They got a black eye in a lot of places, but they did your (inaudible)?

Black: Yeah, that’s quite right. Here and at my home, too, and other properties that we own. I had no complaints whatsoever.
Smith: So you didn’t have rising water and all of those issues. You had wind and leaks from the rain.

Black: Well, in east Biloxi, our rental properties, they was—I remember walking in one and sliding across the floor in the mud. Oh, yeah. We had water all in those, yeah. And down on Kelly Avenue area, east Biloxi, yeah.

Smith: Did your role or work as a pastor change with the storm? How did your day change, the same, different?

Black: Ooh, yeah. It magnified tremendously. I’m a hands-on kind of pastor, also a general contractor, so the houses that we own—well, as a pastor, my focus became getting the church back in order. So as a pastor my role, people needing help because we were one of the few—for instance, we had a number of funerals here, people that some of them I did not know. But the funeral home director that I know asked me, and some people asked me if they could have a funeral here because we were one of the few churches that had power; we had the facility here. We tore the cushions off the pews and had solid oak wood there, which worked out fine. And we tore the carpet off the floor, and we had a concrete floor, but other than that, I mean we were ready to work. So we had quite a few funerals here. That was different; we became kind of like a little center for that, having funerals. And that’s not something I would herald, but that’s what happened.

Smith: I had a pastor in Gulfport tell me that he had so many funerals that he felt obligated to go to them, but there were so many at his church that he eventually got to the point where he just couldn’t go anymore because it was burdening him.

Black: Um-hm. Well, I didn’t have any sense of burden associated with it. They just wanted to use our church. Of course, I think I did most of the funerals; I believe. And I didn’t have to go anywhere else, but I did have them here at Marshall Funeral Home. They had all of them here. It wasn’t that many, but it was having pastored—all the period of time I’d been pastoring at the time, I guess seventeen, eighteen years, whatever it was—I can’t remember exactly—I had only had one funeral here, and it was a very old gentleman, or two, but they had moved here from somewhere else, New York or somewhere. But anyway, I never had a funeral with longstanding memories. No one ever passed away, so that was—all of a sudden we’re having all these funerals. So that was different. But my role as a pastor did change because it became a caretaker’s role now; it became an intervention role mostly, than before.

Smith: Can you give some examples of caretaking and intervention that would’ve been on the different level?

Black: Yeah. Well, caretaking from the standpoint of the church itself, the physical plant. I became responsible for getting the church back in order.

Smith: Getting the buildings.
Black: The buildings, actually. People had their individual lives to get back together, and my house wasn’t that bad, so my house wasn’t a priority, in a sense. My wife and I, she understands; God’s house first. So in that sense I was starting to get the church back and contracting and getting things done, as well as some of the—had to take care of the widows we had. People, some of them had homes and didn’t have husbands or whatever, so we were having them get, make sure that they didn’t get shystered, if you will, and working on their roofs. Most of them had roof damage. In that sense, and you were just helping and making sure that the people were taken care of. And in addition, working on the church here. I bought a twenty-two foot trailer—never owned one before—hauling shingles from—oh, gosh, that’s nightmarish, just working. And so that role did change. I mean they were sixteen-hour days, if it was a minute, just early in the morning, just working, just doing, so. No complaints, though, because we were alive and well. And it was a sad time and an exciting time because of renewal. I’ll never forget when—Dr. Smith, we had looked out across the street over here in September. It was the oddest thing I’ve ever seen, and I doubt if I’ll see anything like it again, to see all of those trees and the leaves, brown, the ugliest color brown. You know what I’m talking about? That was something to see, and I remember somebody explaining about the sap in the trees, and they had some kind of—and I don’t know if it was true or not. But to see that happen when we go from a green summer or early-fall kind of beautiful colors to a dead brown, everything just changed. So that was surreal and unbelievable. But anyway, my role did change as a pastor, um-hm.

Smith: You said that you—well, when you listed off all of the social activities that the church, as far as community ministries—you mentioned that you were involved in housing assistance of some sort. Did that predate Katrina, or did it start—

Black: No. That predated Katrina. And houses had—

Smith: What were you doing? What were the specifics of that program?

Black: Well, housing assistance, I mean mostly we helped folks with rent, mostly. We get a lot of calls from mothers who—I’ll tell you; it had lessened some, particularly right after the casinos came. We were really inundated, and other churches were, with assistance for housing. People were using their money for gambling and didn’t have the rent. We were sure of that because that spike was just too severe, and we did find out some of them actually used their money for gambling and didn’t have money for their rent. But that’s what I was using our finances, to help people with their rent. And our primary focus were women seniors and women with children that were about to be homeless. We helped them a lot; helped pay rent. And they would get some from here, some from there, different churches. And during that period of time many of the churches prior to Katrina, some of the churches combined together because they had people going from church to church getting money, and so they combined together. But we were still giving, to the best of our knowledge being good stewards, were giving money to people for housing, yeah, um-hm.
Smith: Did that program change with Katrina? Did you find yourself more actively involved in trying to secure people housing?

Black: Yeah, we did. It changed, not so much because they didn’t—of course gambling now and losing the money, but because they just were homeless So we found ourselves to the best of our ability with resources we had, and ironically, we ended up with more resources then than we had before on the storm, helping people find places to stay again. Now that was, it was overwhelming for a while; I’d say the first five or six months after Katrina. And it was overwhelming, and then it began to—after FEMA finally got involved, MEMA, and they began to—we had less requests for assistance.

Smith: What about the radio station? Did anything change with it with Katrina? When you got it back on the air—you said it was off the air for, what? Six weeks or so?

Black: Yeah, exactly.

Smith: Did anything change with what you were doing with the radio station?

Black: No, that didn’t change. Emmanuel, another radio station in Laurel, Mississippi, and because they had a storm problem up there, too, but we didn’t have any severe problems up there, so the roles remained the same, just doing public service announcements, but that wasn’t any significant role change, no.

Smith: So you didn’t have any new types of programs or anything to try—

Black: No.

Smith: —to address the storm in particular? You said this church was involved in some relief activities after the storm.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Do you want to describe what you were doing?

Black: Well, we primarily had a distribution center for quite a season, trucks rolling in, leaving stuff. We have a large fellowship hall over there, and people would come by and get stuff. The NAACP used their places for—they got some monies. And the mayor, ooh, that was something. We starting getting plenty people lined up and lined all around the building to get—they were passing out money, and so it was used for that purpose. So we had an active role, again, because we did have a facility that was functioning. And so we used the distribution center, and people used it for food, and as I said, to pass out money, for training. We trained workers to do post-Katrina work and everything from, again, that abatement and other environmental-related issues,
training. Hazardous training, hazardous material training, that was done. So those were the biggest roles that we played after the storm, yeah, um-hm.

Smith: You said the NAACP had helped you with resources. Do you remember the other groups that sent—any other groups that sent resources through your church?

Black: No, let me restate. The NAACP did not give us any resources. They used our church for distributing monies, and we were like a center. They got some money from some roofing, so people would come here to pick up or to sign up for it. The checks and the money was given out here. But we don’t know where this stuff—people would call us and, “We’re on our way.” And if I had to say where the stuff came from today, I couldn’t tell you. They were from up North, and they would send us—we had jackets and all kind of winter—I mean, it was September, and it went to October, and they were getting all kind of winter clothes, ten-below-zero kind of clothes. But we got food, and we had food and clothing, and we finally got rid of all that stuff, but it took up so much space in there. That part of the church was just filled, on both sides, were filled with stuff, boxes and boxes of clothing.

Smith: Did you have any experience with volunteers, working at your church at all?

Black: No, ironically, for some reason we didn’t get any assistance from volunteers. We didn’t really request any, but we didn’t get any monies or any volunteers, and it’s a good thing, because other people needed it more than we did. So our volunteers were church members, and they did do a lot of work.

Smith: Think about the community as a whole for a little bit. What do you think the impact of all these volunteers that came in from the outside has been on the community?

Black: I wish I could say that I believe it would have a lasting effect on us. I wish it would, but the volunteers coming here was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to the Coast, I believe. I remember the churches, particularly the one on Pass Road down there was the first one I saw to go into action.

Smith: Is that First Missionary Baptist?

Black: No, here in Biloxi.

Smith: Oh, here, OK.

Black: It’ll come to me in a moment, but they were right down on Pass Road. It’s right before you get to the credit union on the left-hand side. But they were up—let’s see. That Wednesday they were already in action, Wednesday and Thursday in action, providing things for people there. I think the volunteers were the most wonderful thing that happened to the Gulf Coast. They were totally astounding to me. The North Carolina Baptist Men Association, I remember them because they were so
prolific, but all of those people coming down here. And one of my members worked at Camp Biloxi down there, and he talked about the people coming in, just doing. It was just wonderful. I think that if the Gulf Coast didn’t learn from that, we’re pitiful. We’ll never be at a rational level of being charitable and loving, because we received the greatest outpouring of love this country’s ever seen, in my opinion. And, too, I think our distance to the New Orleans area or anybody, I think, but they were here first and perhaps most profoundly, but I think that the volunteers demonstrated what people had talked about forever in terms of love, Christian love, and mostly the churches. And so I’m very proud of it that the churches showed forth that we solved—even though we heard some complaints about the discrimination and things. And I’m sure there probably were some, but for the most part, I’d give it an A because of the love that was shown across the board, to all people. And the people were just wonderful.

Smith: Let me get you to reflect a little bit on race relations around the storm. You’re a person who’s had a lifetime of working to make sure that the people are treated fairly. Think a little bit about Katrina and the way the community functions and race relations. What did you see there? Did the storm show you anything different than what you might’ve expected in terms of race relations in the community?

Black: I think that here there’s always been a sense of neighbor-helping-neighbors in emergency situations, but I think the storm elevated that because it was an equalizer. I mean it’s all equal, to some extent. I know of a couple of people that lived on the beach in East Beach, Biloxi there, who just caught a plane and got out of here. So and we went to their home up in South Carolina or somewhere else. So, to some extent it equalized us, not totally, mind you. But I cannot say that I wouldn’t have expected that. I’d never given it any real thought because there’s always kindness shown. It’s amazing how now a white man will open a door for me, and say, “Sir.” But that same white man will vote against removing the flag, the state flag. It’s amazing to me how the difference is, and so we would show servility in these kinds of situations. We reach out—if I might kind of go off track for a brief moment. It reminded me, and it always comes to my mind, of when I was in Vietnam. There was a white guy named Couch. And I’ve forgotten what’s everybody’s name in the military, except this one guy or maybe two or three fellows I remember, maybe three guys, I can remember their names. But Couch was a big, white fellow from Georgia; he was a Georgian, who qualified under the definition that of redneck, (inaudible) this guy, that Larry guy, Larry the Cable Guy, and big guy, a lumbering kind of guy of no particular social graces whatsoever. And to be mocked, if you will, under normal circumstances. But I remember one particular episode—I won’t get into details—where I was at peril because of my being chased by a Viet Cong, and Couch ran after me. I shouldn’t have run in the first place as lead patrol, but I saw this guy running down after him, and Couch ran after me and caught up with me as I was firing at the guy. He stood there beside me. We went across the water, and big Couch took this particular Vietnamese guy and threw him on his shoulder, and we came back across about a twelve-foot ravine there, came up and went back to our unit. It always stuck in my mind, this Southern guy; he and I, we would never speak otherwise. I mean, we were told in Vietnam that blacks would go in their corner, whites would go in their corner, after
we’d done our job. But when it came to that perilous time, that time, he was right there, and that was our relationship, black and white, then. And I compared it with Katrina. They were perilous times, and we came to each other’s aid. We came to each other to help. People offered me help, and I offered people help, to somebody who looked different from me. So—(Disc 2, side 2)—I had one really bad negative incident but other than that, everything went quite well in terms of race relations. Overall, I think we get an A for it, and the volunteers get an A plus for what they did for us.

Smith: Do you think that the storm has had any lasting positive effects on race relations? We’re into now—

Black: Yes.

Smith: —a little over three years now.

Black: Yes, I do. Perhaps not manifested daily, but I think we know what to do now. We know what we’re supposed to do now, if you will. We’ve had a practice. If something happens, we are going to love mode, if you will. Love thy neighbor, and yes, I think it has had a lasting effect. I don’t think we ever—and I think we do better as a result of our tragedies that we’ve had. I think we’ll reach out to each other in ways we never reached out before. So to answer that question, yes, I definitely think it had a lasting positive impact on our community, that we would come together like never before, and work together in ways we haven’t before, yeah.

Smith: You mentioned the storm and thinking about Vietnam. Being a few other people that have reflected about aspects of the storm and Vietnam, is there anything else there that in the storm experience made you think about Vietnam?

Black: No, not really. Nothing I can think of. Well, of course, the rations people had, and they called it P38. They call it a little can opener. I got one of those, and I haven’t seen one of those since I came from [Viet]nam, I don’t think. And I went, “Wow, a P38, a little can opener.” But no, nothing else that really—except for those rations. They were different rations than what we had. We had sea rations in Vietnam. But that did make me think about it. And someone, well, we ended up with some of them some kind of way or the other, and I didn’t eat any. I didn’t want to do that again. (laughter) No.

Smith: Think a little bit about what the storm’s impact would’ve been with the elderly. What did you see? Did you see things that made you know there’s something different with the elderly as a result of the storm?

Black: The elderly?

Smith: Elderly, old folks.
**Black:** No. No, I don’t have—I just hope that the persons who do the emergency management are thinking—and we saw an example of it last year. I believe it was last year when CTA and others were planning some activities that would ensure that the elderly would have transportation. But other than that, there’s nothing that I’ve seen that would give me any concern regarding the elderly people.

**Smith:** Do you think that—some people have said they thought there were an elevated mortality rate there. They had a lot of people right after the storm sort of gave it up. Did you see anything like that?

**Black:** No, I don’t, no.

**Smith:** What about mental health issues? If you’ve read the papers for the last two or three years, there’s a continuing interest in mental health after the storm. As pastor, do you have any reflections on what you’ve seen was the mental health?

**Black:** Well, I’m not a fan of psychology, and I’m sure there are some issues related to it. I hate to keep—I’m referring back to the military, but I had—the VA, for instance, we have so many veterans. I’ve written to the *Sun Herald* and have written other articles about my position on that. We have guys who have post traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] allegedly from Vietnam and some sort. I don’t buy it. I just don’t buy it. And that’s just my personal opinion, and I’ve expressed that because I’ve seen so many con artists, doing it for financial benefit. Well, how does that relate here? I just find it so hard—maybe little children, little babies who (inaudible). That’s what I’m saying. But I think God has designed us to recover, to deal with issues, and I think sometime that the mental health industry do more harm than good, sort of kind of self-perpetuating if it benefits the—I know this is an unpopular position, but I always straighten out my thoughts. I just don’t believe that—and first of all, I don’t believe—if people were living in the Lord, they wouldn’t have no problems, but they were trusting in the Lord and not in themselves. But I’m not a fan of this post traumatic stress and this mental health problems, associated with this. Now, one of the sheriff deputies said there was a tremendous increase of bad behavior by the teens in the jails. I remember that. Now, that might be very well true, perhaps having more to do with dislocation and those sort of things. And they might have a description for that in mental health, too. But I think it’s bad; it’s a very needed butt-whip—I’m old school—and that would straighten it out real good. But I just—

**Smith:** They needed Miss Fannie Nichols on the spot.

**Black:** You said it.

**Smith:** Well, you told me that she straightened you some.

**Black:** Oh, yeah. You’ve got a good memory. And Louis Black, my father, is another one of those old-timers. So people, this modern-day stuff—Hurricane Betsy and all them other hurricanes, we didn’t have all this mental health stuff. And this is
new, and people finding—you got grants, so you get money. I think it’s self-
perpetuating. It takes a life of its own, and then it’s blown up. But it’s like, I think,
like the veterans. I think most of them were predisposed before they went to Vietnam
to be alcoholics or do drugs because I remember the first time I had ever heard of
marijuana—not really heard of it; I smelled it—I was in Vietnam. So I think some
things—and then you tell a person, you were embarrassed because of this, and then—
and I want to tell this. All I had to say was one thing, answer one question, and I
would’ve lied. I was being interviewed by a VA psychologist to see whether they
were going to put me in this program. A preacher friend of mine is in it, but had I
answered one question, I would’ve been eligible for beaucoup dollars. And this is the
truth. Was I having marital trouble with my wife at home? Are we having marital
trouble? All the other questions would’ve set me just right. But had I answered that
one question, I would’ve moved over into that next session, and I could’ve been
considered for—seriously, because I’m a 10 percent disabled vet, and that would’ve
put me to making some good money. But it would’ve been a total lie. And I know a
particular worker who worked for the VA who have told people to lie because of the
money. So I just don’t buy into the mental health thing. I think people in this country
have gone through all kinds of things, didn’t have all that mental health stuff, and they
came out well, and done well It’s a matter of personal strength or personal weakness.
That’s my soapbox.

Smith: Were you wounded in Vietnam?

Black: Sir?

Smith: Were you wounded in Vietnam?

Black: No, I wasn’t wounded in Vietnam, no.

Smith: OK.

Black: But I have tinnitus, a term they just pin on you, and according to the VA came
from the—and people were ignorant then, firing weapons, machine guns, right up—
are you military? And you know how they fire right at the ears? And so this is caused
by loud noise and blah, blah, blah, blah, so that’s where mine came from, yeah.

Smith: A loss of hearing.

Black: Sir?

Smith: Loss of hearing.

Black: Right, uh-huh, exactly.

Smith: Let’s think about this a little bit. Did you see any indications that bad
behavior was on the increase, yourself? For example, I have had ministers tell me
they saw a lot of people begin thinking about divorce right after Katrina. Did you see any increase in the community in general or within people in the church? You don’t have to name people, but did you see any indications of marriages failing at a more rapid rate than you normally would’ve expected to see it?

**Black:** No, sir. I cannot say I have. That’s a new one on me. I haven’t heard anything about that. And I’d really need to see some stats on that, whether it has a disproportionate or an increase post-Katrina as opposed to pre-Katrina. I’ve not heard of such, and I can’t imagine why it would happen. I mean I can think of some things, dislocation—

**Smith:** Trailers, money, more fights.

**Black:** Yeah, yeah.

**Smith:** I think most of the people I’ve talked to said, “Well, I think the marriage was weak anyway, but this is like a precipitating—

**Black:** Yeah.

**Smith:** —of things that were going on already, maybe. How about other indications of a special impact of the storm experience on teenagers? Had you noticed any impressions of increase in drug use with younger people?

**Black:** I really can’t say that I have an increase because, Lord knows, we have a street ministry, and there were a lot of those before the storm; there are a lot of them now. The only teenage problem I’ve seen that might have anything to do with any Katrina incident has to do with dislocation, them getting out of their environment to other areas, and family being separated from each other. But I don’t believe that Katrina could cause any increase in teenage problems relating to drugs or alcohol or teenage pregnancy or anything of that nature. Do I have any facts to support my position? No, I don’t.

**Smith:** You just haven’t seen it yourself.

**Black:** As a community person, and I did do a lot of community hours. I was president of the Steps Coalition, and we did a lot of community stuff, and I’ve not seen any facts to support such, either.

**Smith:** So your feeling is there were problems there before the storm.

**Black:** Yes, sir.

**Smith:** There are problems now, and the storm is not a significant—

**Black:** Right.
**Smith:** —factor that you have seen.

**Black:** No. Poor Katrina, she gets blamed for so much stuff, so many of our social ills.

**Smith:** She did kick up a few things. Let me ask you to just talk a little bit about—well, you’ve talked a little bit about insurance. Think about your—can you sort of evaluate the behavior of insurance companies, generally, from the people that you know and people that you’ve ministered to? Did you deal with people who were having special difficulties with insurance?

**Black:** As I sit here, I can’t think of anybody that I know personally, that just had private insurance companies, any of my members, those that I pastor, my mother, who (inaudible) somewhere else, I don’t know about folks that had any serious problems with insurance here.

**Smith:** Think a little bit about the four-letter word, FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency].

**Black:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** Think a little bit with us about FEMA for a time. FEMA arrived at some point after the storm and continued to be in people’s lives for a long time, and they’re still in the life of the community. Talk a little bit about your experience with people dealing with FEMA.

**Black:** Well, of course there are some negative, some minimum negatives, but you know people have got to realize that FEMA is not some abstract, mechanical instrument. It’s people, and if I take all the FEMA people out of FEMA and place the folks over here into FEMA, it wouldn’t have been any different. You understand what I’m saying? It was still people making mistakes, not knowing what to do, still have deadlines to run. And you got an executive at FEMA, somebody at FEMA had to make a decision, but the child is sick, so they missed doing something. It’s just people doing things, and doing things wrong, and not doing things well, I think. They missed a lot of cues. Our social perspectives, racial, if you’re talking about New Orleans and all this, that, and the other things, as well. I’m so empathetic toward—and I’m an environmentalist, from an environmental justice perspective—the toxicities associated with the FEMA trailers, for instance. Pat, I just think we’re an ungrateful people. I really do. Sure, that might be the case, but I think not. Lawyers are perpetuating this thing, and I’m going to just direct (inaudible) by FEMA. Yeah, FEMA was slow. The churches were much better, no government red tape, and they were slow, but I think for what this government has done for us on the Gulf Coast—and I didn’t get a dime from FEMA or the government, not a penny. I didn’t need it, thank God. But I think overall, in no other nation in the world I believe would’ve done what this government has done for our people. And it’s a shame to me that lawyers that want to benefit from
the mistakes of some, but the lack of gratitude, and nobody’s saying thank you. A lot of people were living free for three—some people are still living free. People I know haven’t paid their rent, haven’t paid nothing, for years, and the government wasn’t required to do that by law. So I know, and that’s just out of my soapbox here and not a popular opinion. And that’s why I had to step out of some organizations. I don’t agree with the let’s-kill-the-messenger, if you will. So I think FEMA did a poor job initially, but these are people, making mistakes, too much red tape, too many blah, blah, blah. They didn’t do well, but they never had this kind of a situation before in the history of our country. But I think, ultimately, putting people in housing, helping people, and people living in shifts, and doing all kinds—and we got a person in our homeless shelter who lived on FEMA for a number of years, and then she was on MEMA. FEMA a couple of years, then she went to MEMA.

Smith: MEMA is Mississippi Emergency Management Association.

Black: Right, living on MEMA, and then now she’s in our home. So God knows all that time. I know somebody else who even now is making—I know somebody personally who is making like eighteen or nineteen dollars an hour, but still paying sixty dollars a month rent. So people are not thankful. We’re not thankful. And I do not believe, from my knowledge of toxicity I’ve been dealing with for a while, that there’ll be in any serious, permanent, long-range damage to people, but this thing is going to play out in court, and they’re going to earn millions off it.

Smith: You’re talking about formaldehyde in trailers?

Black: Formaldehyde in trailers, yeah, because we’ve had formaldehyde in our homes forever, doors, carpet. People have lived with it forever, but now all of a sudden, in the trailers it’s killing people, and they have lived in homes, I would venture. No facts available to prove it, but that many people who are talking about formaldehyde in the trailers lived in homes with formaldehyde if they had carpet, if they had those doors, the little wooden doors in the bedroom, those bedroom, most low- to moderate-income homes had them. And all kinds of products in our home had formaldehyde in them, and they’ve lived in those. And yes, it should’ve been done better. They didn’t do it right, might even have been something crooked, but who knows? I doubt it, but the same material in many of those trailers are in people’s homes. And so we need to go back again and sue the industry, and way back because—and when we had Nichols and (inaudible) built, we insisted on green, being green. And they did that since y’all were building green, taking old products out of the home, out of the schools. In fact they caused asthma and other airborne kind of toxins. So yes, FEMA didn’t do nowhere near what they should’ve done, a lesson learned. I think it’ll be better next time. Not perfect, never will be perfect because you’ve got people, but I think overall people are not thankful enough. If somebody put a roof over your head and you live free for all that time and all you can do is complain about it, something’s wrong with that picture in my opinion.
Smith: If you had been called on to give FEMA a list of things that they needed to change, what would’ve been on that list?

Black: Things or people?

Smith: Things, well, either one, things that need to be done differently, just specific things to improve the process for other people down the line.

Black: Well, I think one of the main things is put people on the ground here or use people on the ground here already that know the community, that understand hurricanes. You’ve got people in Washington that have never been in a hurricane or been around a hurricane before who are making decisions about things. So that would’ve been my first thing. If they get people locally—forget all the rules and blah, blah, blah. This is an emergency. People on the ground that know somebody, know hurricane recovery, that understand. Get the guy in Florida that they just got now, or get somebody that knows about hurricane recovery and—

Smith: Are you talking about Obama’s new FEMA—

Black: Yeah, director.

Smith: —directors of emergency, a director in the State of Florida?

Black: Right, and I forget his name but, yeah, that gentleman or somebody like him or some community people. Use them to direct this thing, rather than the bureaucrats who know nothing about hurricanes and have never been in one before. That would’ve been the main thing I would’ve done.

Smith: OK.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: You’re the president of the Steps Coalition.

Black: I was; I resigned.

Smith: You were?

Black: After the governor appointed me to MS Home Corporation, I resigned. I couldn’t do both; I had too many things going on, so I resigned from Steps, yeah, but I was in Steps Coalition.

Smith: Talk a little bit about how the, about the work of Steps Coalition and your experience with them. Where did the organization come from, and what does it do, and what have you learned by working with that group?
Black: Well, the whole idea of Steps Coalition, in a nutshell, was to bring together nonprofit groups who were focusing on assisting and helping the community back from the devastation of Katrina, that we could work together and do a better job as a group, not changing anybody’s mission or direction, helping to enhance one another, and that was the primary focus of Steps Coalition. Stuff like, and like, I guess, in a form of a coalition, there are problems that no one really foresaw because you got all these heads, and anything with two heads is a monster. So they had all of these issues, but overall the intent was good. The idea was good, but the big problem—our big problem was those who—and I wasn’t part of the initial founding, but two or three people got together and said, “Let’s do this.” And then all of us were brought in after the first meeting, and we formed Steps. But our biggest problem was, with Steps, is that we chose the wrong leadership, executive director of leadership, if you will, someone who didn’t live on the Coast, who really wasn’t even part of the hurricane situation, who had never been an organizer, and never had really been on the ground with things, who was more of a philosopher, an intellect, than an organizer. So that was our biggest problem with it. What I learned from it is that if we’re going to address community issues, we need community people, who understand the community, people who understand the community. People who have been—one of the things I saw a lot of; a lot of groups were formed after Katrina that really, in my opinion, shouldn’t have been formed because they had no prior experience in community organizing, in community work. Some meant, I think they meant well, but they didn’t know what the heck they were doing. And we had that kind of leadership at the executive level, and when I was, many, many times, at meetings and hurt some folks’ feelings, but we were not getting anything done. For instance, the bylaws still—I’ve been doing that all this time, and still we’re working on the bylaws. That’s ridiculous. It’s totally ridiculous. And so having people who mean well but have no experience and CBOs, our community based organizations have no experience at grant writing, blah, blah, blah, on and on, in terms of focusing on any kind of problem, social ills. And I learned that if you have a coalition, then there has to be a general agreement on what the true focus is of the coalition. The one that I formed, we had five steps; I can’t remember them all, now, but—and one thing, we try to do too much, rather than having one or two. We got all of these focuses, and we try to do, I think Steps tried to do too much and thereby becoming ineffective. And the other problem I see—and then I’ll shut up—is that you cannot have, you should not have a political agenda that’s going to be harmful to the focus, the mission of the organization. For instance, everybody in Steps except one was a Democrat or a liberal-thinking outside the Democratic group, so if we got a Republican governor, and we don’t want to go down and sit down and talk with the person that’s in charge who really has got a key to focus up there, running things—boy, that’s just a lot of rain—excuse me.

Smith: (Inaudible) coming in.

Black: Yeah, that’s what that is, OK. You can edit that, I guess. Then, I mean that’s the problem. We have to be open-minded. For instance, I suggested—well, I had regular contact with the governor’s office then. “Let’s go and talk to the governor directly. We can make an appointment next week.” “Oh, no. We don’t want to talk
to the governor because we want to build publicity. We want to be adversarial because that will get us grants from the organization.” And this is in Massachusetts, because we want to be antagonistic, rather than get the problem solved. “We’ll sit down with the governor, and I think we can get some clear—if he don’t agree with it, then we’ll act against something, but let’s sit down and talk with him directly, and (inaudible) fourth level (inaudible) person down here.” But if you are going to act, because he’s a Republican governor, we all Democrats, then that shouldn’t be our focus. Our focus should be, “Let’s get this problem solved, and if this governor, whoever he is, doesn’t do right, then let’s raise the issues, rather than go send them on the steps of the mansion, raving the issue and having them talk to the person in charge.” I think we could’ve gotten a lot done, had we gone straight through the governor and said just what we needed to be done, blah, blah, blah, as opposed to out here screaming and hollering, making media noises because (inaudible) funding is like. I’m not making any sense now, but that’s my (inaudible). I’ve learned it. We’re going to—we had to put aside our political agendas and work for the good of the community, whether it’s a Democratic governor or Republican or whatever he might be. Let’s go sit down and talk with those in charge, and then if they don’t respond to our concerns, hey, I came out of the marching days; I came out of the sit-in demonstrating days. I don’t mean to brag, but I mastered that, and I know I’m being antagonistic. We guys know how to do that. Of course, white folks are not as scared as they used to be, so to speak. (laughter) So that changed.

Smith: They’re used to seeing demonstrations.

Black: Yeah, but that’s still a thing that you can do, to make things work. So that’s what I learned out of coalition then.

Smith: What are the groups that came together as a part of the Steps Coalition? Do you remember the groups?

Black: Ooh, I cannot remember all those because they had about thirty-something groups.

Smith: What were the main ones that stuck out in your mind?

Black: The North Gulfport Land Trust Group, Turkey Creek Initiative, Center for Environmental Economic Justice, my group, the, what is it? Latin American, the Latino Association here, then another, Mirror, another Latino organization, the Gulf Coast Women for Change were part of it. Those were some of the main groups. And I was always (inaudible) to get work at Riley Morris with the legal group, Mississippi Legal—I forget the name.

Smith: Mississippi Center for Justice?

Black: Center for Justice, excuse me, yeah, that’s it. His group and a group he worked for, those were the main groups. And then there were many startup groups,
many startup groups that were part of it post-Katrina even though CWC, Center for
Women for Change, Coast Women for Change was a startup group, but it was an
effective startup group. Those were the main groups, and there may be one or two
others I’m missing. The group that Mercy Hollison(?), can’t forget her, Catherine,
Mercy Hollison was another group. Back Bay Mission had a representative in that
group. So some very good groups were part of it.

Smith: If you had to—you said you felt that the Coalition had too many focuses.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: Too desperate in what it was trying to do, too many different types of things.
If you were to just, again thinking somebody fifty years from now listening to this,
you said if we had narrowed our focus, we might’ve been more effective. What would
you have narrowed it to? What would’ve been the two or three things that you think
might’ve been workable and more effective if you could’ve gotten a real—

Black: Housing.

Smith: Housing.

Black: Number one, yeah, housing number one. Economic development would be
number two, which we should’ve focused on more economic development. There’s
an environmental justice component, too, but I might not have—and I’m an
environmental justice person, but I don’t think I would’ve made that a main focus.
Housing, economic development, and I think health would’ve been the third one, or
health issues would’ve been the third one.

Smith: Think a little bit about the housing problems some more since that’s one at the
top of your agenda. Can you evaluate the way the grant program worked in
Mississippi Development Authority Grant Program? They were administering all of
this batch of community development block grant money. Talk a little bit about how
that worked. What was good about it? What [do] you think ought to be changed in
the way things like that work.

Black: I think it was a fiasco, in a word. I believe that—and of course we’re seeing, I
think, and we’ll be seeing in the future, people being indicted and prosecuted for
fraud. I believe in many instances there was too much money given away. It’s my
opinion because I’ve heard people in the barber shop talking, like money they got and
blah, blah, different things and even bragging about some of the things that
happened that shouldn’t have happened. It was too massive, and it was so big that
maybe couldn’t have been managed any better. We got all these billions of dollars
here, but I think now, for instance, we really have kind of almost a housing glut now,
here locally. And MCA, for instance, the study recently showed that the Coast would
have a housing glut in a moment. And so our problem is not housing so much as
affordable housing. So I think some of the money should’ve been used to address the
affordable housing issue as it relates to existing properties, rather than focusing on building so many new homes. We got homes sitting and houses sitting now vacant, so if we haven’t used some of that MDA money to address the owners of the old properties, if they got a house for X number of dollars, and let’s invest some of this money in that. And then on the backend, maybe five, ten years from now, a person can maybe pay down, pay that loan down, rather than put it in big money into building a lot of new homes, which, again, the study proved that we have and will have a housing excess here. And I believe ultimately can be proven years from now, there was a lot of vice going on, another word I want to use, of illegalities, illegalities going on. I think it would be from the top, from Jackson down. That’s my belief. So I believe that had we used some of the money to address the existing housing market, and maybe and certainly some new homes, but not in the magnitude that we are building at.

Smith: One of the complaints that’s often forwarded is that people who have no insurance, who owned housing and had no insurance were put to the back of the line.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: In the MDA grant program.

Black: Um-hm.

Smith: And generally these are people who meet low-income housing or what they call now affordable housing. Do you have any observation about that, that kind of a—

Black: Yeah.

Smith: What?

Black: Well, yeah. And it’s kind of dubious for me to be compassionate, and yet what about the other side of it? I think, though, that had some of them might’ve had $150,000 going to people, give them $100,000, then take $50,000 and address it to somebody who don’t have insurance. In other words, $100,000 would’ve done just as much with the insurance money and other things as an additional $50,000; and this is my opinion. So I think that we should’ve used part of that money for the uninsured, responsible uninsured, mind you. As opposed to giving you $150,000, we’ll give you a hundred. You might be glad to get $100,000 and make things work, and then give $50,000 over here to those who are—in the form of a grant—who don’t have insurance.

Smith: I’ve heard some people who have used pretty moralistic language about the way the money was handled out in the sense that they say, “If you did not have insurance, you were an irresponsible person, so you should’ve been punished and put to the end of the line to take the leftovers.” What’s your feeling about that? Is that a—you deal in moral thinking all the time. Is that a sound way of looking at the
problem, that the people who wound up without insurance were irresponsible, and they should be suffering because of it?

**Black:** I would hate to make a judgment on that, because I’m sure there might’ve been extenuating circumstances for many of them, but it does seem irresponsible to own a home and not have insurance, not to be a renter from—to be a landlord, have properties and don’t have insurance. Certainly there could be circumstances that would’ve prevented it, but for the most part I agree with them because if you now own a home and we pay the insurance, then there may be some unfairness there. But I think compassion should’ve been—should also be an issue. How much compassion? I don’t know, to be honest with you. But, no, I really can’t say whether that is right or wrong, but I do agree with the point that people should’ve been more responsible. And it’s easy for me to say, though, if I got X number of dollars coming in, and that person don’t. Well, a fire could’ve happened, same thing, people owning a home and not having—I don’t know how you own—you can’t own a home with a mortgage and don’t have insurance, anyway. So poverty would’ve been inherited, or it’s got some other kind of weight. Al that’s a lot of issues to consider there, I think.

**Smith:** If you put the poorest people to the back of the line even if they are irresponsible, do you see any kind of a bad business proposition there, if you look at the whole community, if you’re putting those folks to the back of the line?

**Black:** Well, not so much to the back of the line and all that taken care of you. The back of the line means that they’re not going to get any assistance, then yes, because I think ultimately the community will suffer as a whole. I think that it’s better that everybody be helped. Like I say, take $50,000 from that, or give it to those people as opposed to them getting over 150, because the person’s that typically got insurance will have $100,000 and do well. I mean, you could do a whole lot with $100,000; get off your butt and not just give it to a contractor. Maybe a lot of (inaudible) could not, but that’s the general thought, here.

**Smith:** You said that you had taken up work for the Mississippi Home Corporation. Talk a little bit about that group and what they’re trying to do.

**Black:** Well, I sat on the board for a while, and I got off the board. Let’s just say that they do have some good tax programs that help in multiple family builders. They don’t have any grants. There’s nothing really helpful to the little, the so-called little person, the middle-income individual; mostly for developers and those who are building multiple homes, multi-family units. They help those mostly. So there was nothing that I could see would really help the every-day Joe. And there is nothing in the program. As a matter of fact, I met their director recently. Two weeks ago I went to Jackson to meet with Diane Bolling(?), who’s the director, executive director, and there’s nothing, no programs they have, and they’re hoping that some come down (inaudible) but nothing they have that would help the every-day person on the street with their housing situation.
Smith: If you would again reflect on this storm, every kind of event probably has some positives and negatives to it. If you would reflect on the last three results as a result of Katrina, what would be the greatest positive thing that’s happened as a result of Katrina in your mind?

Black: As a community?

Smith: Yeah, or any other way of thinking about it. You define.

Black: OK.

Smith: You’re thinking Katrina and something really positive. What would that most positive thing be in your mind?

Black: And that’s a good one, and it should be an easy one but it’s—from a standpoint of community redevelopment, I believe that we’re seeing and will see a better, stronger structural Gulf Coast. By structurally, I mean in the buildings, curbside appeal, all of those sort of things. I think many people have been blessed by Katrina, and they’ll tell it. I mean we were blessed by it because I mentioned we were going to remodel the church, and money was short in insurance. That came along, and boom, we just had a bonanza, to tell you the truth. We were able to redevelop, rebuild, and etcetera. The positive thing that has come out from the standpoint of the future—

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Smith: Reverend Black, we had a power failure. You were talking about that lighthouse. You were saying that you’re, by no means, a crying man.

Black: No. I am, by no means, a crying man, but I kind of believe a tear might’ve emerged when I saw the lighthouse still standing there and all the houses. And that was a beautiful new home and hadn’t been built no more than a year on the beach directly east of I-110, and all of the houses were gone. The visitor’s center, the chamber building down there, totally, everything wiped out. And the restroom-stand on the south side of 90 there, the new pier, all of that gone. And there it stood, not gleaming mind you, but sturdy and perhaps defiant stood the lighthouse there. And I saw it, and I just, I believe I came near tears, if not so. It’s like, “We still can make it. There’s still hope.” It represented so many things, so many adjectives I could use to describe that we’re going to be all right. The lighthouse was still standing. I mean, I’ve seen it all my life, the lighthouse there, and I’ve never gone up it. It’s just there, something you just expect to be there, take for granted. And it was still standing. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was. Oh, yes. It was. It was. So many other things gone, and the lighthouse was still standing, so that was remarkable to me. I’m not capable to master the king’s English to express how I really felt at that time, and what it meant to see the devastation, then see the lighthouse still standing after all these years and the worst storm we have ever known in this country, as Mayor Holloway says, “tsunami.” The lighthouse was still standing there. It was just spectacular for me.
Smith: We’re three and a half years since the storm now. What still needs to be done? What are the greatest remaining things, do you think, that this community needs done? What would be the top of the list of two or three that really need to be done because of the storm?

Black: To me, economic development, building back, that people have jobs. Jobs mean houses, mean homes for people. Jobs mean education for their children. Jobs mean stability. It means returning to a way of life that we’ve gotten accustomed to here. So I think economic development is our primary focus, and that’s what I said earlier. We don’t have that kind of leadership to me that kind of—perhaps they have somebody looming in Gulfport who might do that, but we don’t have that. And there’s not a promise in Gulfport during this upcoming election, here in 2009. There’s such a need for aggressive going after the business, even in this climate here. And so if we could get aggressive economic development going, I think it would fuel our growth and our comeback more than anything else.

Smith: When will we know that our recovery is over, that Katrina is finished, in your mind?

Black: That’s a very good question. In my mind when Highway 90 has semblance of its past in terms of business, and we never see the homes again, and those are gone. I thank God that one, I’ve seen one or two people who have built back perhaps more elegantly than before in some ways. O’Keefe and the lady who is running for office—I forget her name, the attorney’s wife. Some have built back their homes. But I think when Highway 90 is back to its former glory, to some extent and maybe beyond. And when the Broadwater is alive again, because that was a staple in our community. The first job I ever really had, I worked there about two weeks, and then I got fired, as a teenager. But when the Broadwater’s back, when that part of the beach is alive again with businesses, I think we would’ve buried Katrina and our bad memories. And certainly there are some things to be remembered gloriously. And one final thing you mentioned, I mentioned Highway 90 coming up, the first thing that, one gentleman, two people drowned in the storm that I knew real well. One was the first black Eagle Scout on the Gulf Coast.

Smith: Do you know his name?

Black: James Rainey(?); I call him Pooney. Now Dr. Mason was an eagle, but he came from Jackson.

Smith: Right.

Black: But this guy made Eagle on the Coast, James Rainey. He had become a diabetic and lost both of his legs; he drowned in the storm. And a guy named James Dickie(?), who was at the time making those commercials on the beach about—like I remember he had a hat on. They both drowned in the storm, along with some other
people, but I knew those two fairly well, grew up with them. And then some of the other stories I won’t get into, but those were perhaps the saddest things that I’ve heard. Drowning from the Gulf Coast, the guy could swim. They both were Scouts, and they could swim, and what a way for Pooney to go out, being from Eagle Scouts and swimming. Well, we used to swim at the pool back there; had a black pool back in those days, a swimming pool, behind the school, behind Nichols and all could swim. And for them to drown in the storm was very telling and sad, again, because Pooney had no legs; legs had been cut off, and he was confined to a wheelchair for the most part. And so, in my mind, I imagine that water rising, and so many (inaudible) with the water rising, and people getting out. One family I know that beat their way through the sheetrock and got out. I know eleven people, eleven, twelve people up there, and a baby, so they couldn’t make it. They drowned. So that’s the other sad thing I’ll always remember.

Smith: Is there anything that we should’ve talked about today that we didn’t, something somebody fifty years from now might wish we had talked about?

Black: No. I probably might’ve talked too much. (laughter) But, no, nothing between the last session and this session. I think you asked good questions and quite a broad spectrum. I don’t have anything that I would add additionally, no.

Smith: Anything at all you want to say?

Black: That’s all I want to say, yeah.

Smith: Thank you so much for your time, Reverend Black.

Black: Thank you, Dr. Smith.

(end of interview)