



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER  
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA  
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



# Oral History Interview

with

## Lawrence P. Robinson

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**Interviewer:** Francesco De Salvatore

**Narrator:** Lawrence P. Robinson

**Location of Interview:**

13513 Open Valley Way in Gainesville, Virginia, Robinson's home

**Date of Interview:** March 7, 2023

**Transcriber:** Michele Cawley, PhD

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**Summary:**

*Lawrence P. Robinson reflects on his experiences living through segregation and integration. He describes the impact of community organizations and his involvement with them.*

**Notes:**

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<b>General</b>	Centerville VA, Stone Quarry, Battle of Manassas, Segregation, Hot Rod Racing. Integration, Departmental Progressive Club, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Racism, Elks, Charles Houston Rec Center
<b>People</b>	Lawrence P. Robinson
<b>Places</b>	Centerville, Alexandria, Cameron Station

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:00:04] Hi, I'm Lawrence P. Robinson, P for Parcel. I am 92 years old. Today is March the 7th of 2023. We're at 13513 Open Valley Way in Gainesville, Virginia, my home.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:00:28] Great. My name is Francesca De Salvatore, and I am here with Robbie. And today is March the seventh, 2023, and we're at his home here in Gainesville, Virginia. So I want to start Robbie with. So can you maybe describe some of your earliest memories growing up in the area?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:00:54] My earliest memories growing up, I was born in Fairfax County at a location that the home and everything is not there now. In fact, it was located on U.S. 29, right where that very large hole in the ground, the stone quarry is. That was my father and mother's home. Born to what was in that day's society, a reasonably poor black family. Call it families. We were called then. Life was not easy, but it was bearable. My father, in addition to being a farmer, worked at that stone quarry operating a jackhammer. I remember those days were good days. There were good days. We were not poor, poor. We survived. We survived because my daddy and mom were survivors. They saw to it that we survived. We were educated. We, I say "we" because of my family and maybe I, was educated in the local school system, Cub Run Elementary School. Believe it or not, the building where I attended elementary school is there today. It's been added on and it is now a church. But I could walk into the building where I attended grade school today.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:03:13] I went on, if we will stick with education for a minute. I went to high school at Manassas Regional Industrial High School in Manassas, Virginia, which was the only high school available to colored people that day. It was called a regional high school because children from all over not just Northern Virginia, but Faqir, Prince William, Arlington, all attended that school right there in Manassas. Didn't go to college. When I graduated high school, went on to work. I remembered things about my early childhood. I remember being in grade school with my buddies. We got an education. We had one lady who taught seven grades in that one room school. And when I say she taught seven grades in that one room school, she did just that.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:04:41] What was it near? So where was this school?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:04:44] The school is on Lee Highway and it's in Centerville. You would call that area now Centerville Centerville, Virginia, Cub Run High School.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:05:00] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:05:03] We got an education. Miss Gray, Miss Barrow was one of the teachers. She left and Miss Barrow took her place. But they, they saw to it that you got an education. My younger days, I had dreams of being a better citizen, a better man. And I guess even back then, I was planning how I was going to do that. I was a good student and the system allowed, back in those days, I never went to the third grade. My teacher decided that, that I was at a point in gaining an education. From the second grade, I was promoted to the fourth grade. Never went to the third grade. And that had an impact on my young life later on because I was able to graduate from high school. I was only 16 years old. I was a year ahead of my time, and I went out to get a job. And guess what? You couldn't get a job at 16 years old. So what I did, when I graduated high school at Manassas Regional Industrial High School. I went back to school and of all things, I took courses in farming. I guess the old farms stuck with me because I couldn't get a job, so I had a year to kill. Well, I killed it by getting an additional year of high school. Fast forward a little bit here. My, my days of grade school, high school were pretty average, with one exception. When I graduated high school. I was selected to be the valedictorian of my class. Very, very happy to, about that. And leaving high school, I went into the work life world and I had lots of jobs, had lots of jobs.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:07:47] Before we got to that part of your life. I'm curious. Let's backtrack to your childhood and your parents. And so, you mentioned something about your parents that was interesting. You said that they were survivors. Can you tell us more, like what do you mean by that? What you mean by that about your parents?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:08:07] I meant that my parents were those who took a lemon and made lemonade. Oh, I could talk to you about the house that my father built, where we were raised. We moved into that, we built that house. When I say we built that house, my dad and his family built that house. I remember clearly the basement. No machine to build that basement. The machine that built that basement was my daddy with a shovel and a pick and a wheelbarrow and my sister. He dug the hole that would be our basement. And my sister and I would take the dirt out of the hole up a board and dump it out in the field. That's how we dug our basement for that house. And then my father and his brothers built the house. The house, that house is there today, where I was raised.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:09:28] Can you describe what that house looks like? Like what? What did it look like?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:09:33] It was a typical family farm house. Let's see, three bedrooms, the kitchen, living room. And back in those days, living room, you didn't go in the living room. The living room was there for looks. And to say, I got a living room. You lived in the kitchen, in the dining room. That's where you lived. And that house, too, is right there today, just down the road here a little bit. So very typical family home, farm. That's where my dad really got into the farming.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:10:27] So. So. Well, what's your dad's name?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:10:31] Willard Robinson.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:10:33] Willard Robinson.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:10:34] Robinson.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:10:36] And so what did he do for a living?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:10:39] He worked at the stone quarry running that jackhammer. And, of course, he.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:10:46] Can you describe, so where was the quarry? Just for people who don't know where it is.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:10:51] Okay. The stone quarry. Most everybody knows where Bull Run is, where the battlefields were, where the battles were fought. And everybody knows where Centerville is. Well, if you're on Lee Highway, that Stone Quarry is about halfway between Centerville and the battlefield on U.S. 29.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:11:20] Okay. And yeah, can you talk about so a little bit more about your dad working there at the quarry? Like what did he do there and.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:11:29] He worked hard there. He was a hard worker there. And my father because of his employment at that stone quarry, running that jackhammer with that rock, that rock dust being surrounded with that rock dust, died because he had no breathing equipment. And he, not only my dad, but his whole family worked there. And it was a day in time when we were not sensitive to or were not aware of the adverse health conditions under which they were working. We were not aware that that job killed my father. Oh. We were not aware that's what happened. But my dad was a hard worker. Loved life. Loved his family. There were

three of us. I had one brother. I had one sister. My brother, my sister, we just recently buried her about four weeks ago at the age of 90. My brother died early in life. He had medical challenges and died early. He was epileptic. We lost him a long time ago. My brother Haywood was the. My father was a very muscular big man. My brother Haywood took after him. I took after my mom. I wasn't as big and muscular as they were and still am not, of course. My sister Helen. We were a close knit family. We were a family. Coming up, we learned values. We learned that you get out of life, what you put into it. And it was fun. I enjoyed it. I can remember things like, speaking of my early years, that just how close a family we were and how we all just got along. Discipline? Discipline was not something you had to teach. It was inherent in you to be disciplined and be a good kid. My daddy didn't have to spank me or beat me. My dad, if I were doing something that I shouldn't, my dad could look at me and say, "Boy." And that meant whatever you're doing, don't do it no more. That's what discipline was for a child. When I go into a grocery store or a restaurant now and see these kids running around and yelling and carrying on, man, we didn't do that. You didn't even think about doing it. Not only did you not do it, you didn't think about doing it. My early years were the memories of my early years are of coming up as a typical colored family with values. You may hear me say values more than once, because I think that is something that we all should have as a part of our life. Is that what is right? Values is doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. And that's what was instilled in us by our teachers, by our religious leaders, by our law enforcement people, and our parents. It was a part of growing up, to have a sense of doing the right thing. I look at TV now. I looked at TV this morning about cities that are experiencing serious crime problems and the numbers of people who are committing those crimes are youngsters. I saw this morning that Walmart is thinking about closing some of their stores because of overwhelming thefts by young people. Young people didn't do it when I was young. I may be getting off subject here, but my early life was adhering to and practicing values, doing the right thing for the right reason.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:17:36] That's great. Well, since we're talking a little bit about your father, could you maybe describe his his family? Like who? Like who was his family? Like his family history. What do you know about them?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:17:49] Well. Oh, man you said the magic word that time. Now family history, I don't know how much you want me to talk about that, but that's an entirely different subject. You and I walk out that front door right now and I can take you to the grave site of the very first Robinson. Just down the road here.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:18:17] Really?

[00:18:18]

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:18:20] Oh, yes.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:18:22] Is it in in Manassas or where?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:18:25] No, no, no. It is just off Lee Highway. If I may, I'll talk about that site out that Robinson Cemetery is just off Lee Highway, about half a mile from the place where I was born. Jim, jim Robinson, the very first Robinson. That's something we could talk about for hours. But anyhow, was a freed slave Gentleman Jim Robinson. The records are clear. Were freed by his master, Landon Carter. Before any actions were taken to free colored people. And he gave the freed slave who had no name at that time, he gave him a piece of land. It's there right now. Only again on Lee Highway. There's a an official marker there showing you where the Robinson house is. I think I'm rambling now, but Gentleman Jim Robinson, where did you get his name? When Landon Carter freed him and gave him that land, Landon kept the freed slaves' wife and children. Now, the question could be asked, why did he keep that woman and children and free the guy? He got rid of him. Got him out of the way, but he kept that woman and children. But that's all right, because fast forward. There came a time when Landon freed the wife and children, for whatever reason existed back in those days. But anyhow, Gentleman Jim Robinson became a rich colored man in the 1700's. I think it'd be appropriate to establish how he got his name. Well. When Landon Carter kept the freed slaves' wife and children, Landon, and this was documented in history, would sneak back to the big house, sit outside the window while the Englishman was tutoring Landon Carter's children. And that's how he learned to read and write. Well, he didn't have a name. He had begun to establish himself as a popular man. He needed a name. He took the name of the tutor, Robinson and that's why he had the name. Robert gave himself the name Robinson at the same time that this was going on, he had opened a tavern on Lee Highway somewhere near where Stonehouse is now. On Lee Highway and the Confederate Army, the Confederate Army, and as the war was transitioning and taking place, even the Northern soldiers were frequenting his tavern. He was popular. But they better not call him Mr. Robinson. So he took the name, they gave him the name Gentleman Jim. And that's how he got the name Gentlemen Jim Robinson. Because they couldn't call him Mr. Robinson, although he was a respected man. Again, we're talking in the 1700's. That's where the name Gentleman Jim Robinson came from. Go to the library, now were children taught about Gentlemen Jim Robinson In school? Heck, no. Does anybody care to relate to the fact that this colored man was rich, landowner in the 1700's. No. Let's fast forward. No, I don't

want to fast forward here. But, gentlemen, that's how he got his name. There's a book right there written about the life of Gentleman Jim Robinson by a local author that documents a lot of what I said. During the Civil War. the First Battle of Manassas and the First Battle of Manassas was fought on his property. It's in that book right there?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:24:41] Wow

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:24:46] The Confederate Army confiscated his house and used it as a hospital. Gentleman Jim Robinson had to move his family out of the house and they set up a camp. The war was going on. His house was being used as a hospital by the Confederate Army. Oh, there came a time when they gave it back to him. And the record will show that they gave him some money, some pitiful amount of money.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:25:23] My father. Back to my father. My father was raised in that house. Now, he was not there when they confiscated or anything, but later in life he was raised in that house.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:25:39] That's amazing.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:25:40] The Robinson family history. We could talk about it for. But again, his grave is right up the road here. It's on federally protected property. There's a, from the U.S. 29 back through the fields and woods, there's a 18 foot easement. That cannot be, that we can we cannot be denied access to that road back to that cemetery right now. Right now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:26:22] Wow. That's amazing. I'm curious. We haven't talked about about your mom as much. Can you describe your mom? Maybe begin with what's her name and then. Well, you know, and maybe describe her and also her family, her family history.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:26:39] Lillian May Robinson. Yes. Her maiden name was Robinson. And when I, when I first realized my mom was a Robinson, "Did Daddy marry his cousin?" No. They're two entirely different families. Mom was the, Mom came from the Scott family. His history, her history and her parents. Her mother married a Albertson I'm sorry. Her grandparents were Scotts. Mama was just so typical parent, hard worker, love to cook. And I could go right back and use that word "values" again. Mom taught us what was right and wrong. Beautiful woman. Beautiful woman. Her ancestors, in tracing her ancestors there was, she was and I



can't tell you exactly how many generations or whatever, her ancestors were Indians from the Blackfoot tribe. So, it was never. We don't talk. We didn't talk about it because, my gosh, man, you just didn't have available to us then the technology that we have now where we can trace your ancestors. We knew it. Everybody knew it. But we didn't talk about it. One reason I didn't talk about it is because, well, we were colored people. That's what we wanted to be. Okay. And mom was typical. She was typical. She raised us. With her higher standards of conduct, raised us to respect our elders, raised us to try to be something in life. Oh, man. She was a beautiful woman, beautiful woman.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:29:50] That's great. That's great. Thank you so much for sharing that about your parents. Um, is there anything from your childhood that you want to mention, anything else that I haven't asked or anything that comes to mind as we're talking about these?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:30:05] Yeah. Yeah. Let's talk about growing up. As a child, I remember very, very clearly that when I was say 10, 11, 12 years old. I had a medical condition. My hands when they got cold, my hands would swell that I couldn't even make a fist. Today, if that happens to a child, that child would be referred to every doctor in the world trying to find out what the heck would the problem was. We didn't care. If I had to go out in the cold, then my hands swelled up. I went on did whatever I was out there for. And these were in my 10, 11, 12, maybe earlier, 8, 9, 10. But that condition, whatever it was, that would cause my hands to swell up when my body was cold went away. We don't know today what that medical issue was. We just waited for it to go away. I liked being a child. The only thing that kind of was a minus in my childhood was I was mischievous, as a kid. I had a knack for wanting to fight my sister, Helen and Helen could whip me any time she got good and ready. Let me tell you another. Santa Claus. Let's talk about Santa Claus as a child. I like Daisy BB guns. And Santa Claus brought me a Daisy BB gun for Christmas. What did I do with that BB gun? I shot my sister, Helen. Santa Claus came as punishment. Santa Claus came back and took my BB gun. Next Christmas, I want a BB gun. Guess what I got for Christmas? A BB gun that looked an awful lot like the one I had last Christmas. What did I do? I shot my sister, Helen. What happened? Santa Claus came and got my BB gun. Next Christmas, I got a BB gun. It look just like them other two. That's a real thing that happened in my life. The cycle was ask for BB gun. Get it? Shoot Helen. Santa Claus come get it. Next Christmas, you got another one.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:33:52] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:33:53] Was it another one? So my childhood was good. Was it, was I living in the lap of luxury? No, but I was living at a time in a place in a family that was fun. It was fun.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:34:25] What's it like reflecting on it right now for you?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:34:29] What is?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:34:30] What's it like for you to reflect on those moments from your childhood and and just think about that time?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:34:37] Well, I'll tell you what. I wouldn't take any of it back. I wouldn't take any of it back. I'm not saying that everything was good because it wasn't. But I think the minuses that I experienced as a child prepared me for manhood. The minuses that I experienced, taught me that life is not going to be perfect. Life is not going to be perfect.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:35:21] What were those minuses? What do you mean by that?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:35:24] Well. Haven't now not necessarily childhood, but early life, I attended segregated schools. Not only was my facility less than what other children had, the school books that the county provided to us were what? Used books from the white schools. We didn't get new books. We got hand-me-down books. We were in a less than, less than an adequate physical facilities. The white kids went to a nice brick school down in Centerville, Virginia. Had school busses that came to their house and picked them up and took them to school. We were in a one room wooden building with one teacher teaching all of us. Those hardships, and they weren't hardships to us. We recognize them as hardships now. But then, we were brainwashed by what was going on in life, that we were second class citizens. And we accepted it. But we took a lemon, made lemonade out of it. We got a good education. We learned. Here's that word "values" again. And how to be a man and woman. A man or a woman. Life is not, was not going to be easy. When the

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:37:47] What were other challenges that you faced during segregation? I mean, I know that there were many, right?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:37:55] At what point in life are we talking about?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:38:00] Yeah. I mean, going into your, you know, teenage years, going into adulthood.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:38:05] Yeah okay.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:38:05] Into adulthood, like, what

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:38:09] Going into adulthood. Okay.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:38:13] You mentioned the schools. They were. What else, were other experiences you had unfortunately?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:38:18] Well, as we left school and went into the work world. Now that's where you were exposed to segregation. I could be working beside someone from a different race. I would have to work twice as hard as my coworker and do twice as good to be recognized. And I'm not going to say as his equal because that wasn't going to happen, but worthy of keeping on the job. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Segregation. My early days. I can remember right here in Manassas, Virginia. If I was walking down the street, and those streets were just a little narrow streets then, some of them still are. But if I were walking down the street, and a white man was coming, I had to get out into the street for him to pass. That same street right now that I had to leave the sidewalk and go into the street, we are owning businesses on that street. So, I've seen that change and very drastically change. At work, segregation, being identified as a second class citizen was prevalent. It was. But just being at that point in time, I guess that's about the time we were African-American.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:40:43] When was this?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:40:46] Oh, I'd say when I was in my twenties and so forth.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:40:50] Like the sixties. The sixties around?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:40:52] Yeah, yeah. But our culture or our life lesson taught us to deal with it and take that situation, and if society was requiring that we be twice as good to be acknowledged as half as good as our coworkers, we did it, we did it! We didn't whine about it. We did it. If you had to work twice as hard, that's what you did. Because you know what caused you to do that? Pride. Pride in being who you are and what you are. Pride. I got pride today. I'm proud of who I am and what I am. I don't regret that I'm black. Don't regret it at all.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:42:15] Have you always felt that way? Have you always felt that way?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:42:18] Always. Always. I've never felt that I was denied anything. Let me restate that. I've never let the fact that I was denied rights and privileges that I should have affect me. I accepted those challenges, made the best of them and moved on. There's an example that just showed you.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:43:00] Can you describe what what you're pointing at?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:43:03] I'm pointin at my photograph in the fifties where I'm pictured with a hot rod group called The Igniters. I guess, what is it, 30 people in that picture? I'm the only Black African-American colored man in that picture.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:43:30] Can you describe who the Igniters were?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:43:33] Oh, yeah. The Igniters was a group of men with interests in cars. Hot Rodders we were called in that day. We had a common interest, having the fastest car and the best looking car. And that group of men that's right there in that picture. We're just a perfect example of being a part of what's going on. Every one of us had a fast car.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:44:19] How did you get so, backtrack a little bit from that photo. How did you get into car racing? How did this all happen?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:44:29] Good story. In the fifties, I was part owner of a gas station at the intersection of Manassas Park and Sudley Road. There's a car wash there now. I've got pictures around here right now of that gas station. And I just had a knack for working on cars. And that location, that gas station, my gas station became the meeting place of guys that had nice cars. We formed that club. People that are in that picture. The Yankee brothers were very much a part of the Chevy dealer. And they came out of the woodworks to hang around that gas station.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:45:39] Wait. Who? You said. Yankee brothers. Who? What do you mean by that?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:45:47] Oh, that was their family name. They were Yankees, there's three of them.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:45:51] Okay.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:45:52] One of them was a mechanic at the Cherry dealer.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:45:55] Okay.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:45:56] I don't really know what the other two did, but one of Leonard, Larry Yankey, was a big time mechanic at the Chevrolet dealer.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:46:08] Good.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:46:10] We had fun. We had fun.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:46:14] Yes. Yeah, maybe tell us more like so what were some of your fondest memories of car racing?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:46:19] Oh, there were good ones and bad ones.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:46:24] Because you raced for 12 years, right?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:46:26] No, I raced for about 15, 17, 18 years.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:46:29] Yeah like yeah what were some of your fondest memories from those years?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:46:34] Fondest memories? When I won the championship. I won the championship in Roanoke, Virginia. Now, let's talk about most people just can't relate. National Hot Rod Association. National Hot Rod Association is a group of men who join the club. And it's a national group. It's a national group. Now, when I say I was the East Coast Champion. The association consisted of members and chapters say from New York to North Carolina. So when I won that championship, I competed against cars from that region, that part of the United States. I beat cars from New York. I beat cars from North Carolina. I beat cars from Maryland for the Champion. How do you get to be a champion? It's no different, say from baseball or football. You shoot, you have a series of events that covers a certain geographical area. And then you come to the East Coast. Division, the East Coast Division of the NHRA. No different from the Super Bowl or the World Series. Now, the difference being in auto racing there are many classes depending on the degree to which your car is souped up. There's a term people can relate. I was in E Gas category and the East Coast Championship race, the World

Series or the Super Bowl, is run somewhere in the geographical area. Like I say, the years that I won, it was run in Roanoke, Virginia. It was sponsored in Roanoke, Virginia; Elizabeth City, North Carolina; and York, Pennsylvania. So it's no small achievement to win the East Coast Champion.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:49:31] Were you the first black man to win?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:49:34] That's what that plaque right there tells you. I was the first African-American to participate in organized drag racing on the East Coast.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:49:50] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:49:51] There's a plaque right there.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:49:52] Yeah. Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:49:57] Yes, sir. Very proud of it. Very proud of it. Now, that's the high side. Let's talk about the low side for a second sir.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:50:08] All right.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:50:12] I was enjoying my status as a Champion. They opened a brand new track. In HRA opened a brand new racetrack in Louisa County, Virginia. The Igniters, that bunch right there and we had a line of cars. We probably had about ten race cars. Others were just good looking cars, fancy cars. But we went to the opening of that racetrack in Louisa County and our president, Jimmy Phillips, you know, he always led the caravan. And he, we pulled up to the gate, and Jimmy went on in because you had to pay to go in. And for whatever reason, I was right behind Jimmy. And what you did when you went in, you got in the gate, you just kind of pulled off to the side and wait for the rest of the guys. Well, I pulled up and the guy said, "Where are you going?" And I said, "I'm with them," pointing at them. He said, "No, black people can't come in here." The very first time I had experienced that. And the man was explaining to me that their contract with the man who owned the property, where they were renting it and building the racetrack, that was a stipulation that no blacks would race on that track. So, Jim, Jim sensed that something was going on because I didn't come right on in behind him. He walked back there and he asked guys, well, "What's going on?" He said, "This boy can't come in here, boy. Boy can't come in here." And Jimmy said, "Why?" And he said, "No blacks are allowed in here." Jimmy said, "This man is an East Coast Champion." "He can't come in here." Jimmy walked back down that line of Igniters. About eight or ten of

us. We turned around and went home. That's one of the lowlights. We talk about highlights. That's one of the low lights. But guess what? That track doesn't even exist today. And here I am, still a Champion. So, you take your lemon and you make lemonade of it. I'm gonna tell you about an experience I had at work. Real true story. Real true story. And that's something we may or may not cover while you're here. But I was working for the Army commissary at Cameron Station, and I was the first.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:53:49] And how. Maybe before you get to that story just really quick, like how did you end up because you ended up moving to Alexandria? Correct? And so what what what brought you to Alexandria?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:54:05] Move it? No, my son. My son was a member of the Titans.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:54:15] Right. Right. But you moved to Alexandria for Cameron.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:54:21] Oh moved? Oh yeah. I thought you said move it.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:54:25] Oh, yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:54:26] Why did I move? Yeah, well, my wife and I, of course, after we got married, we lived in a couple places as our marriage was cementing itself to become what is now 68 years of marriage. I was working at Cameron Station and I was driving from Sunnyvale to Alexandria every day, and it became clear to us that, that's still another story, how I got out of private industry and decided to come to work for the federal government. But I had come to work in federal government at Cameran Station. That was a long drive.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:55:20] So when was this? Was it the sixties or?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:55:25] 68

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:55:25] 68. Got ya.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:55:26] We decided to move to Alexandria to do away with that long drive twice a day. And she was working at the National Memorial Park Cemetery out on Lee Highway in Falls Church. So it was good for us to move to Alexandria. And life was good to us. Life was good. We were making decent salaries, both of us. So we upgraded. Moved into a two story Cape Cod brick house on Duke

Street in Alexandria, Virginia. Duke Street and Moncure Drive. We were in the shadow of the Masonic Temple. Living good.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:56:21] Yes. What did you call that area when when you were living? What?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:56:25] I don't think it had a name.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:56:27] It didn't have a name. Was it Landmark, was it?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:56:30] Well. If you are much too young now to even know what I'm talking about, if just think of Duke Street. All right, let's say you're at Duke Street and Diagonal Road. The overpass of the railroad track. You're headed out of Alexandria and you come to the overpass where Telegraph Road is. That brick house right there on the corner is where the house we bought?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:57:18] Yes. Well, can you describe what that area looked like when you were there, when you first moved there going into the seventies, like what did that neighborhood look like? What

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:57:29] I was only black there. Well. If that's what your question is.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:57:35] I mean, You know, it's so, so, so you were the first black family there?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:57:41] Absolutely. Absolutely. Quick story about buying that house. Wouldn't happen today in our world today. When we were, when we signed a contract to buy the house, the man that owned it was retiring as a pilot for one of the major airlines, and he was moving up to Winchester or somewhere. Fast forward. We moved into that house with then, there was no, no, nobody. We bought the house from him. No relator or anything. We made a down payment to him of \$25.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:58:37] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:58:39] No written contract of any kind. He didn't know me from Adam, and I didn't know him. But there was this trust that existed between the two. Not only did I move into that house without a written contract, would a down payment of \$25. We. I did. I say that we, the family. We wanted to be in by



Christmas and he wanted to be in Winchester for Christmas. There were two trucks sitting out in front of that house. Him moving his stuff out and me moving our stuff in. My wife and his wife were inside negotiating for things like the curtains. My wife, they made a deal that we would buy her curtains. It was an experience you wouldn't have today. Can you imagine?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:59:38] How did you know, though? Did you know? Did you know the owner?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:59:43] No, no, no. I didn't know him at all.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [00:59:46] Was it advertised for sale?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [00:59:47] Oh, how do we find the house? Oh, we've been looking all over Alexandria for houses. And we walked into that house and it had things that we were looking for and it was just perfect. And we decided right then and there, this house we're going to buy. How did you come up with that location? It was the result of shopping.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:00:16] Yeah. Can you describe the house a little bit more. You mentioned it was brick. And what did it look like for people who haven't seen it?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:00:25] It's a two story, on a quarter acre land. It's right there right now. Brick house. Beautiful garage. Nice backyard. Nice front yard. Corner lot. Corner lot. What do they call it? I guess they call those colonials or something?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:00:58] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:00:59] Single family. Single family house.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:01:04] What was your favorite part about the house? What was your favorite part about the house?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:01:10] Location.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:01:10] Location. Okay.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:01:13] I worked at Cameron Station right down the street. So the location was perfect and the neighborhood was perfect. Now, the across the street was in those, when we bought the property that building was a TV repair shop.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:01:41] Across the street from your house?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:01:42] Mm hmm. Now, you don't repair TV's no more. Your replace them. Now, I think a boat, they sell boats there or something. And then on the next on the corner was Calhoun's. Guess what? Speed shop, selling, racing parts and so forth. Now, he wasn't there when we moved there, but I was a happy camper when he moved there.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:02:11] Oh, yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:02:12] Oh, yeah. I think after he left that location, it became a bookshop. I don't even know that what's there now. But the neighborhood, the neighborhood, unlike many locations, they had not deteriorated after all these years. That neighborhood is still a nice neighborhood.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:02:37] Yeah. Who are some of your neighbors? Who are the people that lived around you, and what are your memories of them?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:02:47] Now, we knew the lady next door who to us, who was. Let me get the language straight here now. She wasn't easy to get along with and it wasn't prejudice. It wasn't that, she wasn't prejudiced. She was just hard to get along with. Single woman. Single elderly woman. But right in that neighborhood now were several families who worked down at Cameron Station. We got to know them.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:03:26] Were they all white families?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:03:28] I was the only black.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:03:29] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:03:30] I don't know of any other black within a quarter mile.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:03:35] For the entire time you live there or?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:03:37] Entire time. One of my coworkers at Cameron Station lived about five blocks up from me, and the homeowners association was giving him problems because of his lawn. He had crab grass. And, you know, they had a very high standard for for maintenance of your property. Homeowners. And he told them, it's green aint it. (Laughing) So that's how he justified having crabgrass in his front yard. But that neighborhood was then and still is. Uh, a good neighborhood. A damn good neighborhood.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:04:32] Were there anything else about the neighborhood that any park? Just for people who haven't been there before. Was there anything, any other features of it that you recall? Anything? Businesses?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:04:46] No, absolutely typical, typical. No different from. No different from.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:04:53] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:04:55] Where we are right now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:04:57] Could you describe like, what was it like being the first black, black family there? Like, what did you, were there any issue that you encountered or?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:05:06] You know. No. I didn't. We didn't let it be an issue. Just like right now. Right now? The only, the closest black family to us where we sit right now is my wife's sister who lives, as the crow flies, about a quarter mile. And let me tell you something. Let me be absolutely perfectly clear. The guy that lives next door to me, I wouldn't trade him for a gold mine.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:05:59] Right here?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:06:01] Right there. Good ole Ed from West Virginia. One of the best guys you'll ever meet in life. His wife, Barbara, one of the best people you'll ever meet in life. The lady on this side of us, she's had some unfortunate events happen. She's living by herself now. She and her husband. But she owns a sewing and tailor shop in Manassas. If I want my pants cuffed or the.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:06:50] They take care of you huh?.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:06:51] All I gotta do. I don't go down there to her shop. I take them next door. My wife was recently in a automobile accident. The lady next door to her sitting on that dining room table in there is a vase of flowers that she sent my wife. So what am I saying to you? What I'm saying to you is there ain't no blacks around me. But I tell you one thing. There's some damn good neighbors around me.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:07:33] Yeah. That's great.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:07:35] Perfect. I can use the word perfect.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:07:38] That's um, I'm glad.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:07:39] Yeah.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:07:40] Um, let's talk a little bit. You were start, like 10, 20 minutes ago, you were starting to talk about Cameron Station and your work there, and.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:07:50] Yeah,.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:07:51] And it sounds like you may have faced an issue there. You were starting to describe something that maybe, you were starting to describe.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:07:55] Yeah.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:07:55] Something that maybe

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:07:59] That happened.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:08:00] Something that happened.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:08:00] Yeah. We want to talk about it. His name was Woody Corbin. Woodrow Corbin.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:08:03] Yeah. So if you don't mind. Yeah. Like, walk us through what that experience evokes. But also, like, what did you do at Cameron Station? And

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:08:12] I did it all. Well, let's talk about Woody. Woody was. I was the, in my career, I was at Cameron Station for 35 years, but in the commissary, I was the head of the check out area. And Woody Corbin was my boss. Yeah, well, the system decided that I had earned a promotion. And Woody was the grocery manager, you know, commissaries are grocery stores, what it is, right? Sure. He was the grocery manager. Well, the system promoted me to be a team leader under him, responsible for stocking the shelves. Woody Corbin went to the Commissary Officer and complain that I had been promoted. And he didn't want me. He didn't want no black working for him.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:09:38] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:09:39] And of course, when I heard about it I said, "Don't worry about it. I'll go back where I was." Five years later. I had not only been promoted again and again and again. Woody Corbin was working for me.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:10:07] Really?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:10:09] Yes. Hey, man, don't worry about those little road blocks, rolls, those little bumps in the road. Because there's a, if you are a good man or woman, stick around. Good things are happening to you. Five years later, Woody Corbin was working for me. Now. Did I seize that opportunity to be vindictive? No, indeed. I treated him with respect for who he was and what he was because he was still the damn grocery man. Uh oh. He was still the grocery manager. I was the Deputy Commissary Officer.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:11:05] Uh. Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:11:10] And if I had taken those circumstances and used them to be vindictive, I'd be less of a man. Because I'll tell you what, I treated him with dignity and respect, and that bothered him more than if I had been vindictive. What is now with us today? Woody passed at an early age. I never did hear what happened to him, but I do know he's not with us.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:11:45] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:11:49] Cameron Station. I went to Cameron Station. February the ninth of 1969 because of a new law, a federal law. Back in those, at that time, they were using Marine, uh, non-coms to bag the groceries in the commissary. And someone filed a complaint that that was servitude and that a military person

should not be bagging groceries in the commissary. He joined the service. The Marines did. He joined the service to serve his country, not bag groceries. Whoever filed that complaint, they were right. So the government decided that they were going to replace them with civilians. I was the first, the first civilian to be hired to replace those Marines bagging groceries at a Cameran Station. \$2.39 an hour.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:15] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:18] Making good money. \$2.39 an hour.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:19] So that was your first job there?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:26] First federal government job. Yes.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:30] And you mentioned it earlier. How many years were you working there total at Cameron Station?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:36] 35.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:38] 35. Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:42] Gold, gold letter of retirement. You hear a lot about silver letters.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:50] But you got a gold one. Good.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:51] I got a gold one.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:52] Good.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:52] 50 years.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:13:55] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:13:56] Two months and four days of federal service.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:14:00] What?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:14:01] This right here? Uh, there's all kinds of stuff that recognizes my time in the federal government. Well, what did I do?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:14:11] Yeah, well, so what were the other jobs that you had at Cameron Station?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:14:16] You name it, I did it. Really? My federal career. What's. How do you say this with humility? Good Damn ood. Darn good. I went there, as I said, as the grocery bagger at \$2.39 an hour. I left there as the Chief of the Operations Center. Well, the Operations Center is commonly referred to as the War Room.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:15:05] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:15:06] You know what they are?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:15:09] What are they?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:15:10] When, when, it's kind of a control center. When they. My job. I was over seeing the security and handling all of the classified matters for the agency. I went from \$2.39 an hour to what?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:15:45] It's amazing.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:15:46] My retirement ceremony held at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, because we left Cameron Station when when they closed Cameron Station, we moved to Fort Belvoir. In fact, we built, they built a building for our agency down there. Defense Logistics. Logistics Agency. Beautiful. Beautiful. Got pictures of it out there and I got promoted. Held several jobs, loved every single one of them.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:16:32] Mm hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:16:33] I was in supply. Where, oh, and let's talk about my division was the Defense Fuel Supply Center. We bought the fuel. Whether jet fuel or gasoline for the federal government, for the world. Right there. And it's another story but my agency, the agency say went from buying fuel to providing all energy products, natural gas and everything else. That's what they do today. But when I left the Commissary and I went to supply where we were buying pencils, trucks. Whatever the federal government used, we bought it. I'm still at Cameron Station. And that's what I was doing when we relocated from Cameron Station to Fort Belvoir. At Fort Belvoir, my field changed, and I went from supply to security. And I

had. it didn't happen as soon as we went to Belvoir. But after we left to Belvoir, my career for you changed from supply to security.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:18:18] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:18:20] Wow. And that's why I left there is the. I was working with the Chief of the Command and Control Center, and we're not going to talk a lot about that. Okay?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:18:33] Yeah. No worries. Um, I want to pivot away from your work hours, you know, your 9 to 5 Cameron Station because you've done so much in the community, right. In Alexandria in various different ways, being part of different boards and committees and commissions. And so I kind of want to cover, you know, all all of those different ways in which you gave back to the community. And so I want to start with, you know, you were involved with the Departmental Progressive Club, Right. So can you walk us through how did you get involved with the club and and yeah, how did you first get involved with the club?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:19:20] I had moved. I became involved with the Departmental Progressive Club because I got to know people who were members of that club while I still was living up here in Centerville and the Departmental Progressive Club was to. In Alexandria, being a member of that club for a black man was the equivalent of being in the Boat Club in Alexandria. You were at the top if you were a member of the Departmental Club. Well. Some of my coworkers at Cameron were members there. I think of Charlie Rice. I think of Walter Simmons and all of them. And I started going to the club as their guests. And believe me, believe me, being a member of that club back in those days, you were hoity toity. You were big time. It took me years to get into that club. Years because their membership were frozen at 100 men and the only way they could take in a new members if somebody quit or passed or something like that. It took me two years. Departmental Progressive Club is an icon in Alexandria, was and still is, was and still is, because one of my our members had a little saying there is "no place any place like this place." You got your fraternal organizations, you got the Elks, you got Masons, you've got the Eagles. You've got other fraternal and social groups. But a Departmental Progressive Club is not a part of any organization. Seven young men who were all 17 years old on September the 27th of 1927 formed that club. They were just seven guys who all worked for the federal government. Lawrence Day and Green and that, those seven young men had a dance. And they decided, they were going to split the money, the profit, from that dance. Well, those seven young men decided that instead of splitting this money, "Let's form a club." Now, there were already black clubs in Alexandria,



The Cavaliers. And the name of the other club escapes me right now. But they wanted their own club, so they started the Departmental Progressive Club Incorporated, where that name came from? Department? They all worked for what was then call the Department of the Government. Progressive? They chose that name because it implied what they wanted to represent, a progressive group of young men. Club? And in 1930, they became a club. They joined, they formed the club in '27. In 1935, they filed and was given a corporate status. They are incorporated. In 1935, they applied it to the state of Virginia and got it. That club was, and that club still is the premier organization for black people on the East Coast. Now there are people. There's a group in Norfolk that is similar to us. That you know, is not affiliated with any fraternal group. We visit each other but then we don't. You're not a part of us and we're not a part of you, other than the common. What we share commonality is we're blacks., bunch of blacks. I've been. I joined in, in, in 19. Let me get my days straight, my years straight. '64, I believe. I believe. When I joined the club. I hit the ground running. I joined in August. We had an election of officers for the club. Now I'm a brand new guy in a group of 100. Upper middle class I guess people and I make. I had made myself known in the club, joined in August, December for election of officers. I was elected as the financial secretary. Served 17 years. There's a plaque up there somewhere. I served 12 years as the president. I've been a member of that club for. 50, come August will be 56 years. I've been elected by my peers as a member of the Board of Governors. 56 of those 56 years.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:26:28] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:26:34] What we have to learn in life is, let's talk about leadership, being a leader. What we learn in life is being a leader. Nobody. You weren't elected for the people to serve you. You were elected to serve those people as a leader. The biggest and I know I'm off track here now, but I'm going to say it. The best characteristic that a leader can bring to his job, whether you be the leader of the United States of America or the leader of your chapter of your fraternal, of fraternity, is knowing how to authorize and delegate your staff. A good leader is not somebody who does everything himself. A good leader is somebody who knows how to authorize and delegate to accomplish the mission of the organization. Let me repeat that. A good leader is someone who not only knows, but knows how to delegate and authorize his people to achieve the mission of the organization. (Pause) Yes, sir.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:28:27] That's great. Can you tell us more about, you know what, what were some of the, some of the things that that the club worked on? Well, what were. Yeah. I mean, you've been there you've been there for a long time.

So I'm sure there's a number of things. But what are some things that stand out to you that that the club has worked on?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:28:47] Well. I'm very proud of the reputation of the Departmental Progressive Club for being a supporter of the City of Alexandria. Now, let's define it a little bit. We have historically been strong financial contributors to people like the Red Cross, the Boys Club, YMCA and so forth. Are we as strong as we used to be? No. But we still are. That's one of the achievements of the Departmental Progressive Club. Do you know where the club is and where it's located?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:29:40] I do, but for those who don't, can you tell where it is?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:29:42] Okay. It's located in Old Town, Alexandria, right in the middle of million dollar homes, a club. A sort well, a club that has a lot of social activities. As well as, you know, being, participating in the city of Alexandria. But we enjoy a good existence right in the middle of those million dollar homes. We maintain ourselves physically and operationally in a way that makes us acceptable in that neighborhood. We're not noisy and rowdy and we maintain our property in tip top condition. Yes, sir.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:30:55] Are there any other things that you're proud of about your time with the Departmental Club? So you mentioned fundraising for all these organizations and the community. Was there anything else that you're proud of your work and club's work?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:31:09] Well, for example, this year was the first year that the club has not had a unit march in the G.W. Parade. They had when George Schumart passed, that group suffered some administrative challenges.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:31:33] Can you talk about who he who he was?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:31:36] He was the chairman of the George Washington Parade Group. That's I'm told that that's one of the biggest parades for, in honor of GW on the East Coast. And I have reason to believe that it is. Well, he passed recently and they got a new group running it and they don't, George Schumart, believe me.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:32:05] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:32:05] And I say that publicly.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:32:07] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:32:08] Because I was a member of the planning committee.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:32:14] For the G.W.?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:32:16] Parade.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:32:16] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:32:17] And. And they just dropped me like a hot potato. I didn't even know I was no longer a member of the committee until I found out that they were planning the 2023 parade and I wasn't getting information. So that that's an entirely different subject. But the Departmental Club has, I remember the, when Dr. Martin Luther King spoke in Washington a bus in route to Washington from South Carolina broke down on 95. The Departmental Progressive Club provided them funds to get their bus repaired.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:33:02] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:33:02] And there are many, many instances where the Departmental Progressive Club has been a part of what's going on. Let's take, let's take a look at the events that we sponsor, Mother's Day programs, black history programs. We've got members of the club who are very active in the city of Alexandria, doing a lot of things. Right now we have, as members of the club, 1, 2, 2 members of city currently sitting city councilman. Jim Banks, who was the city attorney, is a member of the club. We had Lawrence Day who is deceased, was the first black magistrate in the city of Alexandria. You got Ferdinand Day, who I'm sure you've heard of. Matt was a member before he passed. Melvin Miller was a member before he passed. Chris. Christopher. Oh I'm having a brain freeze here. Well, the president of the NAACP is a member. I have and I can show you downstairs where I was the chairman of the EEOC, Economic Opportunity Commission. So. We could go on and on to name people who were and/or are members of that club that are movers and shakers in the city of Alexandria.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:35:24] Yeah. Well, let's talk about the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. You mentioned it, your involvement. What was it? Can you explain what it was and what was your involvement?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:35:39] It was a group. It's a city group who was responsible for being. Let me get the word straight here. We were to identify and take appropriate action if there was a complaint about racial bias in employment in the city. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission does not get the recognition that it used to. And that's because there are folks who feel like we as blacks have arrived. No, we haven't. So that commission was very active and very, back in the seventies and eighties, that commission had a mission. Well, we don't have one now. So

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:36:47] When was this commission put together?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:36:49] Oh, I'm talking to seventies and eighties. I have the records downstairs.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:36:57] Got it. So the commission existed for 20 years. But like, when do you think like, roughly like how long did the commission

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:37:09] I don't even know that it still exists in the city of Alexandria. But back in its day, it was a part of what's going on, back in its day. I don't. I don't even know if it even exists now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:37:22] Yeah. So what are your memories from serving on the commission? What? What were the things that you had said that the commission worked on?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:37:30] I can't name in a specific thing that we worked on. Uh, how effective were we in the city of Alexandria on a scale of 1 to 10? I'd say 5 because.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:37:58] Why do you say that?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:37:58] I think the existence of the. Commission was to have a group with a mission that was popular to have. All right. Checking the box. "Do you have, does your city have a EEOC?" "Oh, yes." "Are they busy? Are they doing anything?" "Oh, yeah." You know what I'm saying?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:38:41] Yeah, I do. I do. Okay. Why do you think it couldn't have the effect that like why couldn't it have a bigger effect? What do you think was.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:38:52] Oh, I think by the standards that existed in those days, we were effective. What I'm saying is the need for EEOC is not as great now as it was then.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:39:11] Yeah. Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:39:12] You know. Ah somewhere and I'll make a comment that speaks to what we are saying right now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:39:23] Mm hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:39:27] Our, how our society has changed when it comes to identifying and dealing with racism. How our society has changed in the way that we acknowledge and deal with racism. Ugh, I wish I had it because I can't repeat it verbatim. In 1970, a maid, I spoke to my agency, my D.O.D. agency for Black History. I can't remember the exact words, but I'm going to do my best to remember them. Something I said during that speech and this talks about the need for the EEOC.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:40:27] Hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:40:28] Or even in the NAACP?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:40:30] Mm hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:40:34] Racism has moved from the man with a practicing and promoting segregation. Has moved. from the man riding around in a pickup truck with a rifle in his back window to the limousine. It has moved from a group meeting in the woods out in the country somewhere with sheets on to our corporate boardrooms. It's become sophisticated. It's become ingrained as a part of our society that is not as identifiable as it used to be, but it's there. It's there.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:41:44] Hmm. Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:41:47] So, the need for the validity of the effectiveness of groups such as the EEOC is not as visible

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:05] Mm hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:06] as it used to be, but it's there.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:08] Yeah. Do you remember any cases that you?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:11] Oh, no. If I did, I wouldn't talk about 'em.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:14] You wouldn't dare? Uh. Okay. Okay.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:17] That would be privileged information.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:19] Right. Privileged. Okay. Great. I want to make sure we have that. I want to make sure we have some time to talk about the Elks.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:30] Elks.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:31] Because I know that you're, that's an important organization to you and.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:36] Absolutely.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:42:38] So, yeah. Can you describe your involvement with the Elks?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:42:42] Yes, sir. I joined the Elks in the '50s. In the '50s, I joined the Elks. I've always had an interest in promoting the success of children. Whether it be physically or mentally, I think children should start getting ready for adulthood early in life. So one of the things that I do, and I used the term "do" because I did it from when I joined the Elks back in the '50s to right now be involved with scholarships for children. I am as we speak, the State Director for the Virginia State Association Education Department awarding.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:44:05] and the Education Department is part of, it's part of the Elks Lodge?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:44:10] Oh, yes. Oh, a big part. Okay.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:44:14] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:44:15] The Education Department of the Elks is the department that keeps us tax exempt.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:44:25] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:44:26] If we didn't have that department, we would not be tax exempt. Right now, I'm serving as the state director of the Education Department for the Virginia State Association. I have served at the grand large level, the worldwide Elks. No, I was the regional director of the Education Department with responsibility for planning and executing oratorical contests for Delaware. West Virginia. Virginia. District of Columbia. What am I missing? Maryland. Virginia. West Virginia. Delaware. That region I was responsible for that entire region. And there came a time I was serving and I felt it was time for young people to come in and get involved because hey man, I'm 92 years old. And I'm sitting here now fat dog and happy talking to you. But. and that's the left side of my brain functioning.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:45:59] Yeah,.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:45:59] The right side of my brain is realistic. Am I going to be here in the next three, four, five, six years? Possible. But not probable. I'm old. But anyhow, getting back to do our subject, the Elks has several coed departments.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:46:31] Mm hmm.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:46:33] You got athletics who is responsible for planning and executing the athletic activities of the organization. You've got a youth who do the same thing for youth in a different way than the Education Department does. You got civil liberties. You've got all of these organizations within the Elks that are responsible for making the Elks a part of what's going on in the world. Our worldwide leader, his title is Grand Exalted Ruler. The man who just who left that position five years ago was featured on the cover of the Ebony magazine as one of the most influential people, black people in the world. Stop and think for a minute. That man, that individual is responsible. He is the leader of Elks all over the world to include Bahamas, Puerto Rico and Barbados. We used to have chapters in England, but they went away. That man is responsible for over 1500 lodges. Well, four years ago, he was challenged for that position by a young man. And as is very popular in our society today, and I'm a supporter of it, take your gold watch and go home and let these young people come in and bring their technology and their energies into these jobs. Don't sit in these jobs all your life. He was challenged for his position to be the

worldwide leader. And he lost. There was an election at our national worldwide conference. And a man beat him. Guess where he lives. Here in Vienna, Virginia. Our worldwide leader lives right here in Vienna, Virginia. He installed the officers for 2023 at the Departmental Club in January.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:49:57] Hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:49:58] Nice young man. Going places and going to take us places. Because instead of you sitting in this room with a bunch of legal pads and lined paper, sitting in here with this stuff. I ain't gonna let them leave me behind.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:50:24] Uh, that's great. What? What what led you to join the Elks? Like, why? Why did you decide to join them back in the day? Back in the fifties?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:50:35] (Laughing) Black people didn't have nowhere to go. I couldn't go to the, I couldn't go to the hotels for parties. I couldn't go. We didn't have no dance hall. And the Elks had it. Not only, there were dual interests there. I wanted to be a part of progress and new things.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:09] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:10] But also there wasn't anywhere else for me to go.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:13] Right.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:16] Yeah. The Elks and you had the American Legion.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:18] (Laughing)

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:19] And I wasn't a vet. I'm not a vet. So.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:22] So did you. Did you join the lodge in Alexandria?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:26] No, no, no, no, no, no. My. I was initiated as an Elk right here in Manassas.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:33] Manassas. Okay. Cool. And did you end up when you move to Alexandria?



**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:38] I moved my membership.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:51:39] You moved membership to the lodge there, right?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:41] Yes.

[01:51:42] So, can you describe what are some of your favorite memories from being a part of the Elks in Alexandria? What was, where there events? Was anything that sort of happened during your time? Were there any favorite moments?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:51:54] Yes. I got pictures right there of No, no, in there. I was. The Elks marched on, down the boardwalk of Atlantic City for the first time that blacks did it back in the 70's. I was one of them.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:52:17] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:52:19] That's a fond memory. A fond memory. Being selfish, I'm proud of the fact that I have been an. active member of the Elks all of these years. I know. Yeah. You want to talk about what I remember? I got mad at the Elks in the late 60's and threatened to quit. Not be a member. because I didn't like what was going on. I was not pleased with what leadership was doing. And then I looked at that guy in the mirror. And he said to me, "You can either be a part of the solution or you're going be a part of the problem. If you quit, you are giving up."

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:53:32] Hmm.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:53:33] And Lawrence Percell Robinson is not one to give up. I decided I'm going to stay here and I'm going to be a part of making this the organization that I think I want it to be. And I've been a success.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:53:59] What did you do that helped be part of the solution?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:54:05] Worked. I became very active getting back to the education. I'm right now, right there on that computer is a list of things to do. I think there's about 20 items on that list. Five of them are related to getting ready for our state oratorical contest in May. Right now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:54:38] Wow.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:54:40] But I also do other things. I am the photographer. For several of the groups here in the state of Virginia. But guess what? I'm also the photographer for the Grand Lodge of the world in the Elks. That's why you see. You see all those smart cards right there? Those are Elk events where I have, where I have taken photos?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:55:20] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:55:20] Those three ring binders right there are full of CDs of events where I've done photography work for them. I travel too much. Yes. Ask lady out there would say, what the Elks doing photography. But I enjoy it.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:55:51] Any other favorite moments in the Elks?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:55:55] In the Elks, yeah, there's a hundred thousand of them.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:55:57] Sure..

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:56:00] I think. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I was recognized for the entire state of Virginia, I was recognized as the Elk of the Year.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:56:13] When was this?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:56:16] Where was it? Where was it? Roanoke.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:56:16] I meant when. When were you there?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:56:22] Oh, 2000, 2000. I was the Elk of the Year. I said Roanoke, it was Charlottesville. That day, when I was recognized as the Elk of the Year at our state convention. Cause, people are there from all over the state of Virginia.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:56:52] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:56:54] And what I did. I arranged for two limos to pick up people in Alexandria and bring them down to the ceremony. We were at the Doubletree Hotel in Charlottesville, Virginia. And the. I was in contact with the limos

on the way down. I went into the hotel and I told, I said to the manager there, I said, "I've got two limos coming from Northern Virginia, bringing people to my ceremony today, where can they park?" His answer was, "Anywhere they want to." Good. It was a heck of an experience. Heck of an experience. Anywhere they want to.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:57:55] It's great.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:57:56] My wife, she's not as active in the Elks as I am.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:58:03] Yeah.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:58:04] But for that ceremony, that day, one of the things that happened is your, the members come up and give you a love token or whatever. Now, my wife went to our leader, Leonard J. Pope and told him, "I know that there's going to be a lot of people in line to give Robbie gifts and so forth, but nobody's gonna be in front of me." And that's when she put this bracelet on me.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:58:41] Well.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:58:44] The writing's gone now.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:58:45] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:58:46] But being in Elk has been a terribly rewarding experience for me, a lot of life lessons has come out of being an Elk.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:59:02] What do the Elks mean to you?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:59:05] Where?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [01:59:05] No. What? What do the Elks mean to you?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [01:59:12] What does it mean to me? The Elks have been a challenge to include back in the 60's when I was ready to quit and decided to stay. And we can go back to my Daddy right here. My Daddy taught me, "Don't quit. Don't quit." And I just, those kinds of life lessons helped me decide to stay here, and it helped me. Let me tell you, sir, this. If I thought we had challenges to maintain our existence back then. Hah! Try it now. I don't know what you belong to. But you can go to any organization in the world right now. They have the same challenges to keep up their existence: declining membership; declining financial stability. Because today,

my son, my son, Warren and his children. We don't, the Elks don't offer young people that source of entertainment and so forth that they offered me. I joined the Departmental Club. I joined a Departmental Progressive Club for three reasons. Number one, they had a color TV. Number two, they had a space where I could have a party. Number three. What was number three? It'll come to me. But guess what? You sitting in that right now? Right there. There's. There's one of seven color TV's in this house. Air conditioning. That was the other know. I want to have a party now. Come on downstairs. I got the space. So the reasons that our social groups now are having problems especially people who look like me. We got so much that we can do. We don't need. The Elks aren't as much in demand now as they were back then. I can go out, get in my car right now and I can go to any restaurant, I can go to any dance facility that I want to. I couldn't when I joined the Elks in the '50s. So we don't offer young people and, and doesn't know it. Young people nowadays are not as, as much in need of social activities as they used to be.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:03:00] Yeah. You mentioned young people and you know, you were obviously part of the Education Department with the Elks, but you also did other, you also gave a lot of time to other things in Alexandria related to like young people. So you were on the advisory board for Charles Houston, right?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:03:22] The first one.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:03:23] The first one, yeah. So can you talk about your involvement with, with the Advisory Board?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:03:28] Well, yeah, the Advisory Board of the Charles Houston Rec Center are, I don't even know if they have one now, I'm sure they do. But we were instrumental and very much involved in getting that facility up and running. Oh, yeah, early '70s, I believe.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:04:00] Yeah.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:04:01] But anyhow. Our job was to see. And one of the key things that we were responsible for was to make sure that racism or prejudice or actions did not become a part of what was going on in the rec center. Was it? Was it in writing or any where that that was our job? But no. But it was. It was. We had a good time. We had meetings and talked about how to become what we, that rec center become what it's supposed to be for the City of Alexandria, a place for children, youngsters to come and participate in sports or or physical activities. And we did it. We did it.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:05:16] That's great. Is there is there anything else I haven't asked you about regarding your, like, just the service you did in Alexandria? Is there anything else you want to mention before we close out?

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:05:34] No, but it's been a pleasant journey to be a part of the City of Alexandria. I've had the pleasure and opportunity to do a lot of lot of things in this city. To include, as you see on a poster nominated as and recognized as a living legend of the city.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:06:01] Great.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:06:02] I have made it. I want to go out. I'm not going to use a past sense, I am on a mission to be a part of the success of the city. Yeah, I live up here in Gainesville now. Heck, I can go out there and start my car and, it will go to Alexandria because one or two days of almost every week, I'm down in Alexandria doing something because I have still got my obligations in the city? Hey, talk about project discovery. I was on that board for years.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:06:49] Can you describe what project Discovery was?

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:06:50] Project Discovery was responsible for identifying young people who were Seniors and help them become college students. Suzy Spacek \_\_\_ was our leader, councilman's wife. Good lady. Good lady. Very busy. Did a lot for that organization. You know. There's just. It's been a journey. To be a part of Alexandria. Alexandria offers a lot of opportunities for people. To be a part of what's going on. And you just got to get yourself out there. Make yourself available. Not just to have a dues card or a, your name on a roster, but gosh darn it, do something. Do something. If you're going to be a member of the Departmental Club. You're going to be a member of the Elks. Do something. Don't just be a name only. I could sit here, sir, with you for hours. And if you read my bio, it tells you about all these things, just like there's not a lot of people right now that even know I was a member of the EEOC let alone that I was the chairman. But that's all right. I didn't put myself in a position to be that chairman for credit, personal credit. I did it. And did the work that I did for the credibility of the organization.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:09:19] What's great. That's great. Well, yeah. No, it's. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, everything you've done in Alexandria, it's very inspiring, Robbie. So I want to thank you. Thank you so much for all that you've done already and continue to do.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:09:37] Yeah.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:09:38] So. Yeah. Thanks so much for talking with me today.

**Lawrence P. Robinson** [02:09:42] It's been my pleasure, young man.

**Francesco De Salvatore** [02:09:44] Great.