



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



Oral History Interview

with

Michael Johnson

Interviewer: *Francesco De Salvatore*

Narrator: *Michael Johnson*

Location of Interview:

Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

Date of Interview: *11/22/2022*

Transcriber: *Abby Scheetz*

Summary:

Michael Johnson reflects on his life in Alexandria, living on the 700 block of North Patrick Street. Mr. Johnson discusses experiences and interactions with police in his neighborhood and his time serving in the Marine Corps. Mr. Johnson also discusses returning to Alexandria after serving and the changes he saw in his neighborhood. He then reflects on his work in the community, particularly with youth in the community, through The Untouchables, the city school system, the rec center, and, most recently, working in community outreach for the City of Alexandria.

Notes:

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
00:01	3	Introduction
00:24	3	Childhood on Queen Street
02:45	3	Life in the neighborhood and moving to Prince Street
12:30	5	Childhood experiences with racism
13:59	5	Growing up during the Civil Rights Movement
16:35	5	Racial tensions in Alexandria
19:40	6	H. Rapp Brown in Alexandria
25:22	7	Shooting at Gibsons
28:01	8	Police violence and teenage years in Alexandria
42:14	11	Enlisting in the Marine Corps
46:22	11	Basic training
50:41	12	Time in Correctional Custody
56:52	13	Serving in the Marines
1:00:26	14	Returning to Alexandria
1:06:34	15	Time with The Untouchables
1:16:05	17	Working in the school system
1:21:19	18	Community outreach
1:33:56	19	Brother Andre
1:34:59	20	Interest in history
1:37:47	20	Memories of Thanksgiving
1:39:49	21	Closing

General	Childhood; Marine Corps; The Untouchables; Police
People	Michael Johnson; Andre Johnson; Robin Gibson; H. Rapp Brown; Teddy Jones; Ronnie Haskins; Kevin Hillary; O.C. Jones; Hashim Ascue; Mr. Dawkins; Sheila Whitey; Kirk Kincannon; William Chesley
Places	Queen Street; Prince Street; Parker-Grey; Charles Houston Elementary School; Parkey-Grey Middle School; George Washington High School; 7-Eleven; Crisis Resource Center; Paris Island

Michael Johnson [00:00:01] My name is Michael Elvin Johnson. I'm 66 years old. Today's date is November 30th, 2022, and The Lloyd House is the location.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:18] Thanks, Mike. So why don't we start with this - Can you maybe tell us where you were born?

Michael Johnson [00:00:24] I was born in Alexandria, Virginia, a couple of blocks down from here, matter of fact, 1321 Queen Street, back in 1956. And I have five brothers and a sister that was born from my mother and father's marriage.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:44] Great. Take us back to 1321 Queen Street. What did it look like? What are your memories?

Michael Johnson [00:01:00] I remember as being a grey frame house, very small yard, with a black gate. And as soon as you came in the front door, there were stairs right there with no railing and it had about eight steps and you could go right up to what most people would call a loft room today, but that's where me and my five brothers and my sister slept. And my mother and father slept in the kitchen because it was only a one bedroom house and they had six kids at the time. But it was a place of a lot of good memories, because as a kid, I didn't know anything about some of the challenges I might have to face as I, you know, got older. The community was everybody looked out for you. You knew everyone. As a matter of fact, I had a godmother by proxy and what I mean by that is there was a lady that lived close by us that didn't have any kids, named Ms. B, and she kind of like attached herself to me as her kid and she would take me everywhere she went. The people on that block that I grew up with, everybody knew everybody, you know. It was fun times and when we moved from Queen Street to where we at now, I guess I was a little bit depressed, you know, because I would go back in that neighborhood every day, you know, until I got adjusted to my new neighborhood, because that's all I knew, you know, was that neighborhood.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:39] When did you move?

Michael Johnson [00:02:40] Moved in probably 1965.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:43] So you were there for ten years?

Michael Johnson [00:02:45] Yeah, right. And it was right after I remember John F. Kennedy being killed. We were in school, I was in the first grade, so they let school out early that day. And right across the street on the west street side was an all white high school, Jefferson High School. I think at one time it was called Alexandria City High. You know, and I remember just looking over there and seeing no black kids whatsoever. You know, we used to ask questions. And even though it was like ten feet away from us, we couldn't even walk over there. But my dog Bullet, Bullet had a great time because Bullet used to run over there and snatch their lunch. He was so quick, that's why we named him Bullet. He was a Shetland sheepdog. He would run back and they would be chasing them, you know, and he would be gone. So he would get a free lunch that day, you know. Not too many other things that really stand out except for like going around the corner to the Fayette Street side. It was a laundromat and a Goodwill. And every time my mother went to the laundromat, we would ask her because she buy us some out of the Goodwill. And if you try to today, you know, these kids will be like "I don't want nothing from Goodwill", but to us, the Goodwill was like, oh, Macy's department store, you know, it was like new clothes to us. Even though it was somebody else's hand-me-downs, we were proud, you know, just go to Goodwill and get everything from t shirts to socks to underwear to shoes, you know? And suits, I have a picture of myself in a suit that my mother had purchased from the Goodwill. We had a store on the corner called Mr. Pairo [inaudible]. He was a white guy, a real nice guy, knew everybody name and community, you know. Then there was the bicycle shops, Snedling's [inaudible] bicycle shop that was on the corner of Payne and Cameron. And that guy taught us how to change or

fix flats on bikes. [pause] Pool room. We had a 25 cent movie theater called King Palace that's on Queen and Fayette. We used to beg our parents, you know, at the time for like 50 cent and sometimes they didn't have it. But back then. I mean, looking at it now, 50 cent you can pick up anywhere. You know, but back then, that was a lot of money, you know, and I didn't understand why we couldn't go to the movies sometimes. So my father said, "Well if you want to go to the movies you need to get a job". And I was like nine at the time. So it was a bootlegger, and the bootlegger had a house round the corner, on Payne street, name Mr. Mars. It ain't no secret because everybody knew it was bootlegger. But I went around and asked him for a job. He knew my dad. And these were what we call the old gangsters back in the day, you know. Today they would be looking at being gangsters and criminals like mafia type, right? And he had a wagon. He said, well, every Friday after you get out of school, come over here, get my wagon and go up to this market. It was called Sunshine Market. That was on Henry Street. And he would say, "Load the wagon up with orange sodas, Coke, Pepsi, RC". Royal Crown Cola was a big, you know, a drink back then, and I would get all these drinks and bring them to his house, put some of them in the refrigerator. He had a little bucket, he put some others in. And then my other job was on the Saturday morning after they gambled all night long to come in and clean the little kitchen up where they gambled at. So I was making like 20 bucks, you know, which was a lot of money back then. But I was helping my parents out, and I didn't know because I only kept about \$2 of that money. But it didn't matter to me. It was just that I was making some money, you know? And also on Queen Street, back in that time was the black metropolis. What I mean by that is like that's where all the prominent black people hung out at. The American Legion, that's where they went to dance at. Sarge's restaurant. I got my haircut at a barbershop called Dancing Barbershop, which is still there but under new ownership, and they had a couple of poolrooms. I never went into the poolroom because it was off limits. My father did tell us about a guy being stabbed in a poolroom at one time. Once we moved up to Patrick Street, it was a whole different world for me, even though I was used to Patrick Street, you know, the 700 block of Patrick Street, and that's right next to the housing projects. And all my cousins lived in the projects. My mother's sister had 11 kids, you know, and they would come over to our house. We didn't live in the projects. We lived in a single family home, but every Thanksgiving everybody would congregate at our house, you know? And my cousins liked coming to our house, I liked staying in the projects. It was more freedom to me, you know, because my aunt, my mother sister, was very lenient, you know, I could get away with just about anything with her, but her other sisters I couldn't. Growing up there and seeing where we're at now you know, the struggle that we actually went through because the house we moved into didn't have any heat. So in the wintertime, we had to like wrap up like coats, three or four pairs of pants, you know. All the boys did have their own room at that time. My sister had her own room. But my cousins, them, I always look at them as being lucky because even though my mother and father only had six kids, their mother had about 11, Christmas time they would have more presents under the tree than we would, but I never thought that it was more people living in the house, too. I was just thinking like our parents aren't buying us everything they get, and you know, like that. But that neighborhood was a tough neighborhood. We could stay out and play basketball all night long. And this in the Charles Houston neighborhood, the Parker-Gray neighborhood. I went to Charles Houston Elementary School and [pause] I think I got one of the best educations, not only from the teachers, but from the people in that community and the teachers and everybody who was in that community, because we didn't know we were poor. We didn't have all these incidents like we have now. You know, when I first moved up there, there would be occasional fist fights over a football game or basketball, but the violence I see now in the community, we didn't have all that. Pretty much everybody knew everybody again, you know, and hung out and did our thing. I think it toughened me up because I also didn't learn my history until later on. Then another part of my history was that I didn't know what transitioning we was making from Parker-Gray or Charles Houston Elementary School to Parker-Gray Middle School, where we first had our experience with white teachers, you know, and you could just tell that someone just didn't care about us. And then there was a couple that really cared. You know? Mr. John Porter ended up being principal at a T.C. Williams, a lady named Ms. Rebecca Bugbee, who I fell in love with because she looked like Marlo Thomas. You know, a lady named Ms. Dolan. They took a special interest in not only me, but just in the people. So that transition for us coming through, it was like it was a big transition, you know? And I think it set the

stage for the racial fights that we had when I was in G.W. Middle School, because Alexandria was still at that time, we didn't know it, a very racist city, even though I had experienced a couple of name calling. One incident was living on Queen Street, to go back to there, I was young right before we moved off. This guy fell asleep. He was drunk, fell asleep with a cigarette, and a cigarette fell in his chair in his house, and his house was on fire. So, he didn't have a phone, so we got him out and ran the other two blocks to the fire station on Cameron Street. And I was telling the firemen that it was a fire. I was knocking on the door and he was like "Little nigger, what you want?" I'm like, wow, I said "It's a fire down the street". And I guess the man's house almost burned up, because by the time they saw the smoke is when they came around the corner. That was my first experience with any kind of racism, and I really didn't know what it was.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:12:30] How old were you?

Michael Johnson [00:12:31] I had to be around nine, about nine years old, and I really didn't understand it. Then it was an incident with us moving from Queen Street to Patrick Street. We were supposed to move into a house on the corner of Queen and Payne that was newly built. And one of my father's buddies on his job, I think had made the call for my father then to purchase the house and everything was a done deal. My father told us to start packing up stuff and we started packing up stuff. From 1321 Queen Street thinking we was getting ready to move to 720 North Patrick Street, and the owner of the new house found out we was black and he said, I'm not selling my house to blacks. So we had to stay another extra month or two. And there was a lady that went to church with my mom and that's how we got the house at 720 North Patrick Street. Mrs. Coates, Viola Coates.[pause] So those kind of, experiences, I guess, shaped me the way I am now. As far as coming through that transition of the Sixties, you know, civil rights, voting rights, women's rights.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:55] What's it like just thinking about those moments right now?

Michael Johnson [00:13:59] Well, I never put myself in a place of people of greatness, but I know the door of opportunity is the same. And I walked through to the right opposed to walk to the left. What I mean by that is that I was in the moment and didn't know I was in that moment. It's just like speaking with Mr. Earl Lloyd, the first Black to play in the NBA. He was in the moment, but didn't know he was in that moment. Martin Luther King, he was in the moment, but didn't know he was in the moment. You know, Malcolm X, you know, same thing. And these are some of my idols. I think the Black Panthers, because a lot of people have been misinformed about the Black Panthers and what they were really trying to do and what they were really doing in their community. But I've seen all that. Now I can say I lived it, and just didn't know that it was shaping to me to do the work I'm doing today and to put me in the place I'm in today. It's almost like a time tunnel to me now, that I came through that. And then when I look back and reflect on it, because no one ever asked me a question like that. You know, how was that moment for you? It was where I gained my sense of being, who I wanted to be. My militancy, my boldness. Me feeling more that I could accomplish things without someone telling me, you can't do this, you can't do that, because that was that period. You know, my parents would tell us we couldn't walk down to King Street after 6:00. We'd say, "Why?" You weren't supposed to be down there, Blacks weren't supposed to be down there. So, you know, as you come through that, you're like, "Wow, wow." Then you hit the seventies with the riots. You know, we had riots here in the city. I had riots in my school. Racial riots in school. And that's when everything started manifesting itself that, you know, something's wrong here. Something's wrong with the people. Everybody supposed to be treated equally and fairly. And you start seeing it, you start seeing that that's not really what's going on at all.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:35] Could you maybe talk a little bit about, since you brought it up, just like maybe describe some of those racial tensions you're bringing up. So like riots outside in the street or in the schools.

Michael Johnson [00:16:50] We had fights in the school.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:16:57] And this is was at G.W.?

Michael Johnson [00:17:02] At G.W. During that period when the guy Robin Gibson was killed and when Martin Luther King died as well, you know, it was black rage. You know, a white person came through our neighborhood, they threw bricks through the windows, you know.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:17:15] So, this happened on the 700 block of Patrick Street?

Michael Johnson [00:17:20] Yes, this happened right there by the public housing.

Michael Johnson [00:17:24] And on down from the 700 block to about the 900 block.

Michael Johnson [00:17:29] And that was a neighborhood that basically, stood up for a lot of things. Then we had the racial fights in the schools and we had people that were living right around the corner from Charles Houston, that could have gone to G.W. They bussed them all the way up to Hammond to a predominately, all white neighborhood. So that's where the power of the white community really was at the time cause that's where most of them lived. So we had to, you know, go up there and help them out, you know, and at the same time some of us was on the same football team together, I mean, black and white, but that separated us. But when it came back to playing the game, whether it was football or basketball or what have you, we went out like nothing had happened, you know, and I think it opened up a lot of our eyes. I did have relationships, and what I mean by that, I'm talking about friendships, with people of different color, even though my whole world, up until me getting to G.W., well Parker-Gray really, had been black. You know, all us saw, ate, and smelled was blackness. And like I said, we would venture out occasionally. I do remember also asking my father why he would be saying "sir" to somebody that was younger than him that was white. He just looked at me and said, "Boy, you trouble maker, you know?" And I just wanted to know, you know. Robert E. Lee's home was bombed and burnt during those racial tensions.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:15] Can you walk us through, because you're talking about like protests and riots, right? So walk us through your memory of when those started? What was happening?

Michael Johnson [00:19:32] At the time, The Black Panther was just coming on the scene.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:37] Here in Alexandria?

Michael Johnson [00:19:39] No, nationally.

Michael Johnson [00:19:40] My first encounter with someone of that nature was a guy named H. Rapp Brown, who was a black activist. And H. Rapp Brown had left out of Maryland, coming through Alexandria and somehow I think, if I remember correctly what my dad told me, the Maryland police called Alexandria and told them that he would be coming through here. So they arrested H. Rapp Brown right here on Washington and Princess Street. That was a federal courthouse at the time. And I remember everybody in the community like, "Hey, we got to go down on Washington Street." And my dad, who was a very low key guy, took me with him and I seen these other people once we got down there. So I'm trying to figure out what's going on, well they was collecting like 50 cent, 75 cent, whatever you had, to pay the bond to get H. Rapp Brown out. But I remember this guy specifically from Washington, D.C., coming over in a black van, in those old type of vans, those roaring 20s type vans, and it had a Panther emblem on the side and had Black Panther on it. And I'm like, "Whoa, what was that about?" You know? So that was my first induction into what was really going on. You know, I'm seeing it firsthand. And then even though my parents were the type that wouldn't want us involved in anything that would jeopardize our lives at the time in their life, that was something that I was

attracted to, activism, you know, because I wanted to know why, why I couldn't do this, why I couldn't do that, why blacks couldn't do this. And I think my dad's generation was very docile, in a sense that they took more S-H-I-T [spelled out] than I could even bear. Looking back at that, every time I looked at my parents and the older I got, I started figuring out that they weren't given the opportunities that I had been given. My dad was left handed. And I'm left handed. But I remember being in Charles Houston in first grade, second grade, we used to write our names on these big cards with a big black magic marker, and a teacher would have it either covered in plastic or laminated. I had to learn to spell my name. Every time I got to my name, I kept messing up. Like missing a letter, you know? Cause I didn't really know my alphabet. And the reason why I didn't know my alphabet is because we didn't, or my parents didn't, have the money to send us to preschool, which is kindergarten, which is free now. They didn't have money for that. That came afterwards. So, my father only having a sixth grade education, which I found out later on because he couldn't go no further than that in Alexandria. Then my mother coming out of rural Georgia had about an eighth grade education. You know, they weren't equipped to teach us, but I didn't know that at the time. So every time I would mess up spelling my name, my father would kind of, like, smack me upside my head. You know? Till I got to the point where I'm like telling my mother, "Why he keep hitting me?", "He just want to make sure you learn". So I didn't understand that real drive, you know? What people may see as being child abuse now, that was a way for them to toughen us up to get us ready. And he told me, "You gonna be able to read, you gonna be able to write." And it wasn't until we became, I think I was around about 18 or 19 that one of my older brothers said, "Hey, you know I've signed all the bills for Dad because he can't really read or write," and I'm like, "What?" But you're looking at a man that you think can run through a brick wall. You know, he's Mr. Everything. I'm like, "Wow." So things like that, you know, push me, you know? And I wasn't always on the track of being someone that wanted to learn and help people. I probably did my share of wrong in the community, you know, at times. And people would call and tell your parent, "Hey, you better watch your son. You know, he's doing this, that and another, and he hanging out with the wrong people." But all of us just was a little different from our parents. So we were a little bit more vocal. You know, we were going to take. You know, you calling us out of our names who are saying we can't go into a certain building or do something, who's very rebellious? I guess that's what you call it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:24:48] So you said H. Brown, right?

Michael Johnson [00:24:48] H. Rapp Brown, yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:24:48] What year was that?

Michael Johnson [00:25:00] That had to be in 1969.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:04] Okay, And so you mentioned also --

Michael Johnson [00:25:09] No, no, no. Excuse me. I think that was before King got killed in '68. It was around the time, yeah Ks- 70s.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:22] And so that sounds like that was a big moment for you. And then you also mentioned the shooting at Gibsons, right?

Michael Johnson [00:25:31] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:31] Can you maybe describe what happened and then what was the response to it?

Michael Johnson [00:25:37] He had gone into a 7-Eleven out in Glebe Road and the store guard accused him of stealing, him and a couple of other guys. And from what I heard later on is that him and Robin had exchanged words a couple of times.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:58] What was his name?

Michael Johnson [00:25:59] Robin Gibson.

Michael Johnson [00:26:00] Yeah. His father owned well, I think his father either owned King Cab Company or he started it. That was one of the local cab companies here. So he went in there that day and it was an altercation and the guy shot him and he planted a knife on him. And he tried to say that Robin Gibson drew a knife on him, which he really didn't. And some of the witnesses that was in the store with him said that didn't happen and he didn't have any kind of, you know, knife. And so that sparked a lot of racial tension and then riots here in the city. I mean, burning, all that, protests, you know, and that might have been the biggest unrest that we've seen here in Alexandria in ages. You know, I know they had race riots back in the day, way back in 1700, 1800 whatever it was. But that was something new, but this was something that was happening around the country at that time as well. You know, it was uprising in communities where blacks have been killed and evidence had been planted or evidence had been changed to make them come out guilty. So those are some of the things that we had been learning and listening to, you know, even though they tried to shield us from that. We never talked about it in school, even when I had black teachers. But in the community, we would talk about it, you know, because you always saw a guy with a newspaper. Somebody was always reading the newspaper. So somebody was always sharing information. You know, so nationally we jumped right into that. As a community, we'll stick together we'll rebel.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:27:50] Did you participate in the unrest?

Michael Johnson [00:27:54] I will have to take the fifth on that one.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:27:55] What are your memories of what happened during the unrest?

Michael Johnson [00:28:01] I say rock throwing, bottle throwing. We would see white people just walking down the street and just jump on them for no reason. I mean, the person ain't done nothing to you. You'd see things like that. It was always us against them, you know? It was some troubled times when you look back at it. Yeah, people got hurt, you know, on both sides. The only death that I can remember was that of Robin Gibson, but I know the police department back then would give you a good whooping, for no reason at all, because I received one of those whoopings just coming out of my house, going across the street to the rec center. And it was a windy day and the alarm went off and I was stopped by this other officer. And his other officer, I guess, was his backup showed up and I talk with my hands. So the guy said "You got I.D.?" I said, "Sure" and gave my I.D and this guy told me, "Stop moving," I just said "You didn't stop me, he did." And then the next few seconds, it was a tap on my shoulder and when I turned around the officer took some handcuffs and used them as brass knuckles and just start punching me all in my face. And I was with my girlfriend, my oldest daughter's mother, at the time. And the other cop that was on the scene told her, "Don't get out of the car," because I kept yelling for her to go get my brothers. Right. And so I start fighting back. And then once I was charged with assault and battery on police officers, I went to court. They threw it out. And the judge at that time told me to get a lawyer and file a lawsuit, because he also told the officer, "I don't really believe your story, but since you pressed these charges on this young man, I'm going to have these charges dismissed, as long as he don't get into anything else in the next 3 to 4 months". I had a stipulations placed on me and he didn't. So, that really turned me against the cops.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:30:21] How old were you when this happened?

Michael Johnson [00:30:23] I was like, 17 years old. And I remember in the old jail, down here on Pitt Street, whatever it was at, yeah Pitt Street. Everybody from the community came in and started just tearing the lobby up. And the chief, his name was Strobel, I believe, at the time, he said, "Get him out of here! Get that kid out of here! Let him out," because they said if y'all won't let him out, we're going to burn his jail down. You know, and they didn't really have me in a jail cell, but they had me in a room. That was my first time, like, you know, having handcuffs put on me. Being taken and put somewhere you where you don't want to be. And, you know, at that age, everything running through my mind is the stories that you hear about jail. You know, what happened to young guys coming in jail and all that. So that was running through my mind. I'm like, Whoa, wait a minute. That derailed me from everything I wanted to be in life for about four or five years. Well, I can't really say I hated white people, but I ain't give a damn about the police. I didn't. It's funny because everybody looks at me now and you know, I do a lot of programs with the police department and they say "How can you do it?" Well, my brother told me, because he was in law enforcement, my older brother, he's two years older than me, Greg. He said, "Either you're a part of the problem or you're part of the solution, which one you gonna be? But if you keep doing what you're doing, you won't live to be 21 years old." Because that's how rebellious I was, that's how much hatred had built up in me after that incident. And that's why in my travels now, I tell guys in law enforcement how important that is, that first impression can go a long way with a kid. I wouldn't harbor those ill feelings, I grew out of them, you know, and like I say, even though my brother was in law enforcement, I didn't care about any other law enforcement guy but him, you know. And then it was another guy who came along after that, Herman Spring, a black cop. And he was different type of cop. He went to the skating rink, he knew all of us. And back in the seventies, you know, that's when people were smoking pot. So I had me a little bag of pot and I went into the skating rink bathroom and I thought I was gonna roll me one up. He walked in there and saw me with it, took it out my hand, poured it in the toilet, and then said, "I'm going to have to pay your mother a visit and tell Mrs. Johnson what her son is out here doing." And I didn't even know he knew my parents. So one Sunday we were sitting there. He didn't knock on my door, of course it's a "Hey, go answer the door." I answered the door. It's Officer Spring. So, you know. Of course. I turn as white as a ghost in the face, because I thought he was there to tell my mother what he caught me doing. And he came in and she offered him something to eat. He sat down and ate and the whole time he said stuff like, "How's your day going, Michael?" You know? And I was just look at him, right. And my mother said, "Don't you hear him talking to you?" I said, "It's going okay." She said "Sir," because she always made us address people by, you know. Sir. No, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. You know. He never told me, though, but he also told me that I had to change the things I was doing because I was better than that. He saw me go from just a happy go lucky kid to this guy that was just full of rage. I didn't even want to graduate from school and some of my classmates dared me. They needed a person to speak at a black history program. And they chose me for some reason. And I went up against some older black, that was in their thirties and forties, but he was talking about how arrogant we were and how we didn't seem to respect authority, you know? So they had really set me up because it was like, it was anybody that's going, kind of what they're saying is going to be Michael Johnson, right? So I went up and did the speech and it was a black history teacher named Mr. Webber who just looked at me and said, "Hey, you know what? I'm not going to give you a grade for you not to sit in my classroom. I'm going to give you a grade when you do sit in there." Because I did it. He knew about this white teacher. It gave me a D not to come back to his class because I was so disrespectful and so disruptive. Right. So I took the easy way out, and I took the D for the semester. Mm hmm. But Mr. Webber said, "Mr. Johnson, you had a C before you left. Why would you leave and get a D when you had a better grade?" You know, things didn't dawn on me, you know? So those are the lessons that I learned, you know, the hard way. I'm like, wow, you know, you got a point. So he kind of, like, spearheaded me into, liking history because he would tell me about these storefront preachers and those apostles, and he said, it can make you jump out a window. You know, sometimes somebody's scribble and they can touch him and heal them, you know? And I was just fascinated by those stories. I'm like, they can't be true. You know, he said, "No, no, they really do, they're staged." He said, "But it happens." And as I grew older and got a lot wiser and, you know, then going into the Marine Corps, I think that really helped me mature. You know, because I was a young man and probably could've ended up selling drugs, in jail, or dead. Because those

were the three choices and that was easily to do. And that's why so many young men got caught up in those trades because they were very visible in our community. And why should I go work at McDonalds for \$1.50 when I can make \$500 out here on the corner. See, that's the economic part, but we had to change that. And the other part of it was, as I got older, to start learning was how did the drugs come into a black community? You know what I mean? Like, that was strange.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:37:09] What was this? To go back for a second. Do you remember the officer's name? Who?

Michael Johnson [00:37:14] Who hit me?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:37:15] Yeah. Who brutalized you.

Michael Johnson [00:37:16] Oh yeah, his name was Junior Bowling.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:37:18] Junior? [clarifying]

Michael Johnson [00:37:19] Yeah. Junior Bowling. Bowling. Junior Bowling. He ended up getting fired. Years later, I was in the Marine Corps because I came home, and I was just, like, hoping I would run into this guy, because if I got in trouble out here, they still had to turn me over to the military police. To me that would be worth a month in the brig. You know what I mean? But I never saw him. But I did find out that he had a big stain on steroids and he was one of the officers that got caught up in it. I mean, he was using steroids. He was a big guy. Weightlifter. But you could see as he came on the force, as he got bigger and bigger, we could see that, you know? Mm hmm. But I knew nothing about steroids back then. Later on, but yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:38:04] Well, I mean, were there other instances of police brutality that you like that occurred to your friends or people?

Michael Johnson [00:38:13] Yeah. I've seen one kid, and I'm still trying to figure this out. We had to be around 16 years old. They had just built the Post Office on Wythe Street and a guy named Ray threw a bottle at a car. And everybody took off running. But there's one guy named Fred. So they guy caught Fred, and Fred was accused of knocking the guys window out. Right? Fred had to go to court. And Fred's parents were very poor, but I think they had to pay about \$100 for the cab window or something like that. And we had to come in as witnesses. I did, anyway. The guy that actually threw the bottle. I told the judge, I say, like, "Fred didn't throw it." So the judge was like "How, do you know?" And I was like, "I was there." But anyway, when the cab driver called the police because he was holding Fred, they came and they beat him up. You know, he was, like, beaten, you know? But his parents were so scared that they wouldn't even try to challenge that. You know, you just whooped a kid, I mean, two cops literally beat this kid. And then it was a cop named Callahan, and he beat a kid. And I remember him vividly, because he used to ride through the neighborhood and throw the finger up at you and call out your name. That's just what kind of cop this guy was. But he beat a guy, and I can't think of the guy's name off hand, but he beat a guy up bad for no reason, and the white community held a dinner in his honor. This was in the newspaper, too. I mean it's something you can look at right now, I just can't think of what the title would be, but yeah, he actually beat the guy up, and Callahan was a cop that everybody feared. And don't let him catch you out at night. Don't let him catch you out of your neighborhood, because ain't no telling what he would do, you know? And it might have been other incidents, but those are the ones that I myself saw, you know, personally. I heard about a lot of other incidents, but I'm going to the one that I saw, you know, and what happened to me. And then, you know, you had cops calling you out your names. You know, the black cops. I remember seeing the first black police officer's name was Beverly and they put him in that neighborhood, but it was like he really had no backup. You know, if something happened and two people are fighting, he would pretty much be there by himself. He had to break it up. You know? Alexandria's come a long way. You know, we've

come a long way, but we've got a long way to go, but right now, we haven't had any real incidents of police, you know, just jumping out of cars, beating people up for no reason. Not under my watch and not under the chief watch that's there now. And some of the other officers, because I am friends with several of the police department officers now, the low ranking and the high ranking. And that's one thing that they know that I've been telling them the history of, what Alexandria was at one time, you know. And like even sitting down here with the Lloyd House here, if we was caught down here after dark, they'd have stopped us, white area, you know? And you might live two blocks away. But that's how it was.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:42:14] So you mentioned, right, the incident happened to you. And then for about five years, you mentioned how it kind of took you off track, but then you went into the Marines, correct? Can you talk about what led you to join the Marines?

Michael Johnson [00:42:30] Oh, I needed a job. I was having my first child. My girlfriend and I had just came out of high school together, and she was pregnant. I searched everywhere trying to get a job and back then you either didn't have skills or you was overqualified, that's what they would say. So I went into the Marine Corps. I was just walking paths one day in a Marine Corps recruiting depot, recruiting office right on Washington Street. Washington and Princess on the corner. And I just walked in there one day and I said, "Look, I need to get out of here." So the guys said, "When you want to leave?" I said, "Before Christmas." And they had a platoon picking up around December the 20th. But the reason why I wanted to go before Christmas is because I didn't have a job and I had a young daughter at the time and I couldn't get a Christmas present, you know. So my parents, after I told them I had joined the Marines and when I was leaving, they said, "We'll get her something for Christmas," you know. And I went in. And I spent Christmas Day away from my daughter and me being a new father, you know. Plus, I was getting pressure from my girlfriend at the time, [inaudible]. You know, they didn't really think that I was good enough for her, you know, in a sense. And they didn't hold back telling me that either, you know. So when my daughter was born, I had an incident with them where, when my daughter's about three or four months old, and my parents had never seen her. And I was like, "Hey, why don't we take her to see my family?" And her mother kept dictating, my daughter's grandmother, kept dictating when my family will be able to see her. So since I had borrowed my dad's car, I just grabbed my daughter in her knapsack and got in the car and drove her to my parents house. So about 5 or 10 minutes later a police car is rolling up, you know. My daughter's mother, and her brother, and the cop. And that's one time I had a good experience with a cop, too, because he pulled me to the side to ask what was going on. I was like this is my daughter. I want to be a part of her life, but it's like they're trying to keep it from me and they don't want my family to see her. I said they can keep my daughter from me, but I want my parents to be able to see her right. So he said, "All right, you're the father?" And asked my daughter's mother, you know, "Is he the father?" And she said, yeah. So he said, "Well, I don't know what to do with this." You know, but that was what really drove me into the Marine Corps. You know, incidents like that. And again, you got to remember that I was coming through this what we call "don't give an F" attitude. You know, I just didn't. About anything. Anybody. That's how tormented I was. I was just mad, you know, and me going in the Marine Corps. First month was hell. And I am also a part of Marine Corps history, and I'll get to that in a few minutes.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:46:13] Well, hold up. So you had this "don't give an F" attitude, but why join the Marines?

Michael Johnson [00:46:22] Because I just felt as though I couldn't go into any other branch. See the Marines at the time, people were scared to go in there. And I'm thinking I'm a tough guy down here on the street. It's like, that's where I'm going, you know, because I don't want to be in the Army, I don't want to be an Air Force or the Navy. That was out of the question. But if I go in, I'm going in the Marines and what a lot of people don't know, once you get sworn in that day, they ask you, do you want to change to another branch before you basically take the place to become a Marine or whatever? And I told them, I'm staying Marine, but a couple of guys stepped across the line to like the Army and

the Navy. And I just looked at them. I'm like I'm going into the Marines. But yeah, that was that where tough guys went. If you thought you were tough, that's where you go. Yeah. My oldest brother was a Marine and, you know, he was Mr. Everything to me, just like my dad was. I said I'm gonna be just like him, you know. And I went into the Marines and about the first month of basic training and when you first come in, they ask you how you like your haircut and I said "Just take a little bit off the side." And then you notice that they took everything off and you tell the barber, "Hey, I didn't tell you to do that." And the guy tells you "Look around," and everybody got the same hairstyle, which is the bowl. That's what we call first phase. So I had to adjust to that, you know being a rebel and all that. And then it was making sure your bed is made. You got up early morning for PT, for drilling. Then you had a chore you had to do as a group. And if one man fell, we all fell, so we had what they call a "run drop". You know, a guy couldn't run that far or that fast. We'd make sure he we brought him along, because the Marines really believe in "don't leave not one man behind". And that's where that forms at, the basic training. So I'm seeing things like this happening. I'm seeing the transition of me evolving, like, this is something that I may have been off a little bit more than I could chew. Right. Because you have no freedom. They tell you when to sleep, when to eat, when to get up. And I started smoking cigarettes then. I was never a smoker, but for 15 minutes, if you were doing well during the week or that day, the drill instructor would say, "Candle light lit," which would mean that you can go out on the deck and smoke, you know. And then he would say, "Put the candles out." That means you put the cigarette out, you don't take another puff, nothing. Right. So I would do that because that would give you relief. If you wasn't smoking cigarettes, you had to be in there shining your shoes and, you know, making sure your uniform looked good. I remember the first time I went out there and I really went to smoke. I asked a guy for a cigarette, and I took a couple of puffs, and I was choking. So the drill instructor saw me. He didn't say nothing that night. He waited probably two or three days later. Then I went out there and he said, "You're not a smoker, are you?" I said, "Yes, sir, I am." And he said "No, you're not." So he made me smoke the cigarette, I would call it rapid fire. Which is puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff. You choke and only smoke comes out. That was quite a eye opening experience, and then we went into our actual training and then I had a relative pass that we were very close to. This why I got into part of the Marine Corps history. I'm the only Marine thus far that I know that served the longest time in what they call correctional custody. They normally would only give you anywhere from 5 to 14 days. I stayed 36.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:39] What's that? I don't know what that is.

Michael Johnson [00:50:41] Correctional custody. That means that you have done an infraction that caused what we call UCMJ, which is Uniform Code of Military Justice, meaning I broke one of those laws and infractions. And the way that I broke that infraction was: We were out in the field on a rifle range, and that's where they would feed us our rations. And you were not supposed to take any food back to the barracks, and I did. I had a chocolate bar, a little small chocolate bar, and I ate it. And this guy named Foncetti from out of New York told the drill instructor, snitching. So they're going to punish me, of course, but they're going to punish him because you just told on a fellow Marine. Right. But I didn't know it at the time, that that was the the outcome of everything. So they was talking about these penalties that will be applied to me that I could be recycled, da-da-da-da-da. I'm like a month from coming home. Right. So I'm like, "Oh, man. I ain't going through this." So I remember where I put my clothes at in the warehouse. They gave me an extra firewatch. That means when everybody asleep, you walk around the barrack with a flashlight making sure don't no fires start anywhere. I say, "I'm leaving this island, Paris Island." So I went out that night doing firewatch. You can really walk out, get your candy bar in another machine as long as the other guy that was doing firewatch with you wouldn't tell. So I said, "Hell with it. I'm going to get my clothes. I'm going home." Because I knew I couldn't leave in the training uniform that they gave us, right. So I broke into the warehouse, got my clothes, put my clothes on, my civilian clothes that I came down with on and hitchhiked out front gate. They thought I had drowned in the swamp, the one across the river. And a couple of days later, about 48 hours later, they contacted my parents and said that I was missing from basic training, Marine Corps basic training. That they feared that I had either drowned in the river or either in the swamp. And my

father said, "Neither one, he laying around the couch asleep." Whoever he was talking to on the other end said, "Don't wake him." Right. So, this Marine recruiter that recruited me, who I cussed out, showed up at my house and he wanted to take me over to Henderson Hall so they could have these two escorts take me back to basic training. But I said, nah, I'm only going if my cousin named Moose, who had a car, takes me and the guy said "Okay, well he can't come on base, but he could drop you off at the gate." So I said "Fine." So they drive me over to the gate and these two biggest frickin' Marines you could lay eyes on is who they had guard me. And I'm looking at this guy like, whoa, you know? But they were so enthused about how I got off the island. You know, you're the first person we ever heard of that left basic training and lived, you know? And I'm like, "Oh," so they was like "Hey can we have your autograph?" I'm like, "Autograph?" So I did it. But when I got back to Paris Island, I did 36 days in corrective custody and that was like making your bed. Well, this is what happened. Around 4:00 in the morning they get you up, you take your bed apart, you stack every part of your bed into a corner. Right. You get dressed, you go to the chow hall, and they might tell you you're either eating "duck", or you're eating a "sit-down". And a "duck" is just this: Everybody get in your lineup, and when the drill sergeant says, "Adjust!" you can sit. He'd tell you to take your seat. He'd tell you "Eat!" and once you stick your fork in, he can say you're done. You got to drop your fork at that moment. You don't take another bite. You get up and you go. Your meal is done for that day. And then when you came back around about 4:00 an afternoon, they let us take a shower. And then you go in the corner and you get your bed, your parts to your bed, and you put your bed back together, you know. So these are the type of things that taught me some valuable lessons in the Marine Corps. In other words, was that even though you're white and I'm black, you got to depend on me and I got to depend on you. So we didn't have white, black. We call it light green and dark green Marines. It was one or the other, you know. And to this day, I'm still friends with a couple of guys that I met when I was in the Marine Corps. But coming out of there gave me a sense of being on time, gave me a sense of mission. You know, I'm a mission oriented person. You know, once I get on a mission, I will fight it all the way through. I know there might be some bumps in the road, but I'm gonna stick to the mission, you know? But it was one of the greatest equalizers out, is going through the United States Marine Corps boot camp. People get caught up in cliches, but nothing's given. You know, each man count, but no one man count more than another. That's how it was. So when I came out, I came back here after leaving the Marine Corps -

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:49] Did you serve?

Michael Johnson [00:56:51] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:56:51] Where did you serve?

Michael Johnson [00:56:52] Oh, first I went to Lawton, Oklahoma as the FDC man, as a Fire Direction Controlman. Now, what a lot of people don't know about that is, when you score high on certain test that they give you, they put you in a certain job. So I scored high, and they told me I was a combat engineer, 1381. But I was what they call a Fire Direction Controlman. That means a person that's a forward observer and that's a person with binoculars. He would go out beyond enemy lines and he would start sending you coordination back. And the FDC guy, which was me, I would [inaudible] and once my two lines crossed, that's where I would tell the Field Artillery to fire or raise their guns to that radius in that range, and that's how they would fire. We would be in a tent with high command, like Captain, Generals, and all that. So I found out that during a time of war, they're trying to knock your artillery tent out, and you're trying to knock theirs out. You know, it is like a command center. And I'm like, "Whoa, wait a minute." You know? So after I finished there, somehow I ended up in recon, because of my, quote-on-quote "history as an escape artist", you know. That was the best time of my life. Hmm. California. I want a couple of other places. I went on a cruise. Well, it wasn't a cruise like a "cruise" cruise, we went on "float," they call it "float," to Nicaragua. I don't know if people can remember when they had a little skirmish in Nicaragua. Well I was on the detachment that was supposed to land, and we sat out in the ocean for a week before they said "Don't go." I had an opportunity to meet Oliver North and I was sharing with a buddy when that Iran-Contra thing went

down, that as a lieutenant colonel, he could not make the decision to sell arms to any foreign government without it coming from the top. And so my friend named Norman said, "Well, why would he do that?" I said, "He was the fall guy, he got something down the road." Somebody told him he was in the right place where somebody said, "Hey, look, you take this one for the team. We got you." That's what happened. Because you can't make that decision. In the Marine Corps they teach us if the top command go out, you better know something about his job and vice versa. They do teach leadership. That's where the leadership comes in. So I started in the Marine Corps. But other than that, I was always ready for combat, but never saw combat, you know. And I think that would have been my biggest test, because right after I got out, a couple of guys that were with me went to Beirut. And that's when one guy was from here, named Eric Washington, and they bombed the barracks over there. Had I reared up, which was resigned, that's where I would have ended up, because that's where they were sending our detachment.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:07] So what years did you serve again?

Michael Johnson [01:00:10] I went in in 1976, and I got out in August of 1980. Four years.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:19] And so in 1980, you came back to Alexandria?

Michael Johnson [01:00:22] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:23] So how did you find Alexandria when you came back?

Michael Johnson [01:00:26] Oh, it was different. Some places and buildings that were here when I left, weren't here when I came back.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:00:36] Like what?

Michael Johnson [01:00:38] One building was the Safeway, which was located at where Braddock Road Metro is right now. What else was built when I came back? They started working on the waterfront where the Art Factory is now, but it was a torpedo factory. I remember them having a little skywalk where it was two buildings that connected and it was great, you know, when they were tearing it down at the time. The whole city had just changed. The kids, the people, the rec center, the neighborhood, it changed. I mean, the houses had been knocked down. It was a lot of changes when I came back. Drugs. Crack was just starting to hit Alexandria, or Alfred Street. And I'll always remember my mother walking to the 7-Eleven, and I was afraid that somebody would do something to her, and I would have to go out and hear something about it. And we're talking about 150 people, 200, on one or two block radius. Open air drug market. Then they have what they call the "jump out boys". I didn't know what they were. It was a special unit of the police department that would jump out on drug dealers back there. So I would walk through the alley, because you can cut through the alley at the time to go to the 7-Eleven. And you know, it was guys out on the town waving, "Het what's up man? Ain't seen you in a while." This guy named Lala Ellis, he was talking, I was eating potato chips. So I got through eating the potato chips and I threw the bag on the ground. And the next thing I know, this black guy runs up hat on, a bandana, camouflage pants. And I had never seen him before. [He says,] "Hey you, pick that up." So I'm thinking he's crazy, Right. Dude, I'm not picking S-H-I-T [spelled out] right? So he was talking, "No, you gonna pick it up." The other guy ran up and he said, "Hey, check that bag. See if there's any drugs in here." And I'm looking at the guy, Lala, saying, "Who is this?" [Lala says,] "Oh, they jump out." So they're laughing right, Lala's laughing trying to tell the guy, "Hey, man, this guy just came home from the Marine Corps, right?" So I'm, like, I'm not picking up nothing. So, you know, I pull my I.D. out and all that. They said, "Where you living?" I said, "Right across the street, da-da-da-da." Once he saw who I was, [he said,] "Oh, okay. Well, you know, I'm a Marine, too." I said, "Okay. But you can't approach me like that, you shouldn't be approach anybody like that." I said, "Because everybody don't know that you're a police officer undercover." He [inaudible] on a regular

basis. We would always talk but, you know, seeing things like that and how crack tore up so many families. You couldn't trust anybody. We used to literally leave our door open all night long. You didn't have to worry about nobody coming to your house, taking nothing. But when that crack hit, man, everything changed. And it was a big eye opener for me. I mean, we heard about freebasing, you know, and that was people, quote-on-quote, with money or entertainment, they would freebase cocaine. But we found that crack was about the same as that. I mean, it just devastated communities. You know, it did. Then you saw more violence. That was another thing I was seeing. You would hear gunshots in neighborhoods where you normally wouldn't even hear that. You know. A lot of different guys hanging out I had never seen before. So because I had been gone, I was like, you know, maybe they moved here. You know, while I was gone. Cause I used to always get out and run, I had those habits, you know, I would get out, exercise, do something, run, you know. And, you know, the guys would always say, "Hey, man, that guy a cop or what?" And they say, "No, that's Michael J. You know, he lives over there." Then the guy says, "Oh." So I'm like, "What's going on all that?" They said, "Man, these guys come out of New York and other places. So they're selling crack." [I said] "Wait a minute, selling crack? What is it?" So when I found out what it was, I was like, "Wow," you know? And I just saw the neighborhood going down, down, down. I mean literally going down. A young man named Teddy Jones, they were starting a little group talking to guys and the group formally became the Untouchables. And at the time we were trying to put our heads together to see how can we save these young black men from what they saw outside their door? And that was my calling, because I took that and ran with it pretty much. We ended up being with first black governor, Governor Wilder. We went on a fishing trip with him, myself, and now police chief Don Hayes, who was just a regular officer at the time. And the very first officer, that really came into that neighborhood and worked with us with those kids, in uniform and out.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:06:34] So how did you get involved with The Untouchables?

Michael Johnson [01:06:38] I was really the volunteer coach of rec basketball. They needed a coach. And I said, "Well, I'll do it." And the guy looked at me and said, "Hey, man, those kids listen to you, where are you from?" I said, "I'm right across the street, grew up in his neighborhood." He said, "Well, they got a group back here to try to do something for the kids in the neighborhood." And when he took me back there, I was like, "Oh, man." We called him Tee-Todd, his real name, Teddy Jones. I said "Man we know each other, we grew up together. You know, we used to play together, hang out together." So he was telling me what he was trying to do and the need that we needed to make sure that so many of these young guys didn't die because it was getting shot back then, killing. You know, it was a drug war, hooked on drugs and all that. And we said, we can't save the parents because they were already gone, in a sense. But the kids, we wanted to save. So we started, you know, with them, going into the schools, the home, in the neighborhoods where they weren't supposed to be, you know, right there telling them "Hey, now, come on, you go with us." The drug dealers in the neighborhood knew that these kids were off limits. Matter of fact, these same drug dealers, they caught them in one of those areas they weren't supposed to be with, a lot of them would get on them. These guys that everybody else saw as being criminals and bad. We took off. We went from visiting General Colin Powell. I have pictures with him at the Pentagon. I've got a picture with Bill Clinton at the White House that came from us being in The Untouchables. Governor Wilder, we were with him. And it just took off and that's when I really found my calling as working here in the community. And it was through The Untouchables that we saved so many of those young men, that it saved my life as well. You know, and one of the guys came out of The Untouchables, Rodney Haskins, he just passed, a young man, probably a year ago. He got his Ph.D. He was our first president, went on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Right. Spoke very well. He was the Martin Luther King Drum Major for Justice Award and they select this out of all the youth organizations in the country. We won it, our guy that we mentored. Damien Jackson played basketball at Georgetown. John Thompson [Georgetown University basketball coach] came to see somebody else, saw him, boom. My son, Jason Ingram. My daughter, Dawn Ingram. Well it's, Dr. Dawn Ingram, excuse me. You know, I say that and she gets mad. But these are kids that came through this program, you know, and the kids, you know, neighborhoods that didn't have a chance, and

150 came through there. And I know for a fact, out of the 150, only about three actually went back and either were arrested or was killed because of something involving drugs. You know, but our motto was, "We're not trying to save one. We're trying to save every kid we come into." So we were doing some real positive in the neighborhood. You know, and then at the same time, the guy Keith Burns was playing football before he became a two time Super Bowl champion and a coach in the NFL. You know, I used to watch him and say, "Man, you know, you're going in a different direction than your friend." Somebody told me this. I'm telling you this. You know, and he changed his life up. You know, the LaChina Robinson? She's an ESPN sports commentator. Got her own contract with Fox Sports, you know. That's an honor. Corinne Ree. She's a photojournalist. You know, these are some of the kids that I've had the experience of working, starting with The Untouchables and then coming into the community. The hardest part about the changes that we've made in the community is that people always want to put labels on people. Either you're a troublemaker because you speak up or you're somebody that they can trust. So, human skills are learned in what we call the hood, because on any given day, you would have to adjust your attitude because somebody either was beating you, could beat you, or you could beat them. But, it was almost like it was a respect of everybody, you know, and being in this community and working, seeing the changes when I came back, it was needed. All these changes was needed. Now a lot of these young black men and women, people in general just don't know what's out there for them, you know, we don't have the same passion that we had.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:11:57] What are some of your fondest memories with working with young people, whether it was The Untouchables or...?

Michael Johnson [01:12:03] One of my fondest memories. We took a bus of 49 of us to Atlanta and Jimmy Carter had just stepped down as president, but we have what they call The Untouchables Day in Atlanta. And that was an honor because there was honor bestowed on us. And that's how Oprah Winfrey and all them got to see our kid who actually got one of the Martin Luther King Drum Majors for Justice Award because they saw us and we were wearing these shirts, you know, with the shield on it and the pencil and all that. And everybody was like, whoa, different, you know? So I think it was just getting kids out of this city.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:13:01] Where did you first get the name Untouchables?

Michael Johnson [01:13:08] It was made by a guy named Ronnie Haskins, a guy named Kevin Hillary, and a guy named O.C. Jones. We thought we had to have a name. You know, y'all want to do a group? Got to have a name. Yeah. So they came over to dinner here, and a guy named Hashim Ascue, he's down at the principal of a charter school in Washington, D.C.. He was very creative because he wrote a creed and all that, but the pen and the pencil was that we all make mistakes, but at the end of that pencil was an eraser on that emblem on that shirt. You could always erase your mistake and start over. We have what we call we a pie theory. And that was believing in everybody, physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs. And that's what we tried to cover in The Untouchables. And that's what I use as a blueprint, just working with kids, but the fondest memory has to be The Untouchables because that's when I really stepped out of the box to start giving back to my community as opposed to taking from it. So I would have to definitely, definitely say that.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:14:23] And how long were you with The Untouchables?

Michael Johnson [01:14:30] About eight years. I first started with no pay. I worked about four years without pay. Then we start getting grants coming in and all that, so I would get a little bit money, but I gave most of the money back and everybody thought I was a fool. But we needed, like, video equipment, TV, you know. We set up one of the first mentoring programs in the city with The Untouchables, and we set up what we call tutoring. And we were tutoring kids in the neighborhood, you know, and when we came in, most kids would tell you. "What you do today?" We make them tell us what they did and "What kind of grades you got? What you want to be?" You know how kids get,

everybody go holler, "I want to make A's. I want to be a doctor, a lawyer, cop." And we said, "No, be whatever you want to be, but be the best." You know, because everybody isn't A students. We've got to understand that, too. But, put your best in it. So we had things like that. We were basically bringing, from a Black Panther perspective, knowledge and wisdom and culture back to the black community, because that's what we needed at the time. We still do need it, but it's so dissipated, now, you know? That's what we were looking at.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:16:00] And when you left *The Untouchables*, what did you end up doing?

Michael Johnson [01:16:05] I went to work in the school system. I was offered a job working with kids with behavior problems, and they were either going into the detention center or coming out. Nobody else wanted that job. But before I got there, I worked with kids with autism, that was my very first job matter of fact. Working with the school system, working with the kids with autism. And I worked there for like two and a half years before they moved me over to work with kids in the Crisis Resource Center. But what I learned from kids with autism was that you could catch them on days that they were very high functioning. You would never know they had autism. Like one kid, this little black kid named Dejon Man, that's his name. And he would always run out of the classroom and take his clothes off and nobody ever tried to follow him to see why he was running out the classroom and why he was always taking his clothes off. These were, quote-on-quote "educators" with masters and PhDs. I allowed him to run out of the classroom because he did it so much, I said, "Let me see where he's going?" He would always go to his one room and in that one room, he would open the teacher's drawer and it was candy in there. And once he got that candy, he would start taking off his clothes because he was conditioned at home and when his mother gave him candy, he would automatically take his clothes off. So the way I broke him out of that was, I would tape his pants leg to his tennis shoes, and I would allow him to go down and get the candy. He would get frustrated that he couldn't get his clothes off and he would just sit there and eat the candy. Right. And then what we had to do with him was doing what we call fine motor and gross motor skills conditioning. Well, one thing I found out about Dejon [Man] is that he had a photographic memory. So whatever you took him and showed him, he knew. So we would move the candy around to play a game with him, but he would know what place to go look at. And then there was this little white kid, redhead, Daniel. I'll never forget him. His father called us and said that he unhooked the air conditioning unit in his house. I'm like, "What?" So we went over there, he not only unhooked it, but he hooked it back up the right way. And if you saw, that you were like, "Wow." But the kid had autism, but, you know, things like that prepared me for where I went next. And then I went into working with kids that, like I said, were either going to detention center, or coming out. And those kids had real strong behavior problems, but they had nobody that ever told them, "No, you ain't gonna do this" or "You ain't gonna do that." These little guys was just my first introduction to learning about how drug dealers, at the time young guys, sold drugs. So this guy told me that somebody stole his glove, right? So me being so naive, I said, "Well, what color are your gloves?" He looked at me. He said, "I thought you was hip." I was like, "What? I just asked you what color was your glove?" Well, it wasn't that he had an actual glove on. His glove was his drug products that he hid somewhere and somebody stole them. I didn't know that, you know. So these are the type of kids I was working with. And then I had one kid say, "Hey, Mr. Johnson." He was supposed to be the school bully. Not knowing I had been in the Marine Corps and all that. The principal at the time and a couple of teachers were a bit scared of him. But we had a little assembly and on this day I focused in on him because he was acting real bad, you know, and wasn't nobody saying nothing to him. All I said was, "Tony, you know, you need to chill out like that." So Tony goes and says, "F-you, Mr. Johnson! What do you do if I punch in your face right now?" I said, "Tony, I'm gonna lose my M-F-ing job today as soon as you touch me. Believe that." And he said, "Mr. Johnson's crazy." And we had no more problems out of it. The teacher's coming to me like, "Oh, Mr. Johnson, I wouldn't have said that, but it worked." I'm like, "Somebody should have been told him that because he's not the person you all think he is, right?" So those type of experiences. Then, I came to work for the rec department and I started off as a part time person with the rec and I was just -

Francesco De Salvatore [01:21:19] For the city, right?

Michael Johnson [01:21:21] For the city of Alexandria, right. I was just passing out basketballs and stuff like that and Mr. Dawkins then was forming an organization called Hoop Academy. And I knew Mr. Dawkins from way back when I went out for this Beltway Football Team, he ordered to cut me from the team. But he told me, "You got a good football player," he said. "But you could do something else in life, right?" And that stuck with me for a long time. So anyway, I was working at the rec and I knew Mr. Dawkins throughout the years. He would be doing things in the community, you know, always for the kids. You know, he got a bad deal also, but after going in and working with the Hoop Academy, we started exposing kids to different venues, like taking them out, playing basketball, but it was about academics with us all the time. And so Mr. Dawkins found out I was up at Patrick Henry Rec. And he told [inaudible] the director for the rec department, "Y'all got a guy that's just passing out basketballs, playing games with kids when he could be doing a lot more, be more effective out in the community with some of this stuff that's going on in these neighborhoods." So they said "Who is it?" And he said, "Michael Johnson" and they said, "Michael Johnson?" He said, "Yeah, y'all better get him because..." I had been offered a job in Washington, D.C. I just didn't want to go over there. I was a little leery about working in Washington, D.C. I'll put it that way. So they pulled me out and told me, "Hey, this is what we want you to do." But nobody had a blueprint. So, I started talking to Mr. Dawkins and people in Washington, D.C., a guy named Harold Bill. They have what they call Roving Leaders over there and these guys were going to the troubled neighborhoods because they knew the neighborhoods, and the people knew them. And they were going to these neighborhoods and tried to squash some of the beefs or the tension that might be in the neighborhood. Diffuse, might be a better word for some people to understand, because I speak three or four different dialects. But I went in and started sitting down, talking to these guys and these guys were giving me insight on how they would handle certain situations, certain neighbors. I said, "Okay," but they said, "You got to have your own touch, you know, to what you do." And that was the job that I have now and I'm proud of writing the blueprint, you know, and setting the bar high because a couple of people wanted me to fail, and then I started noticing relationships. You know why the police department, when they when they come to this neighborhood, is always for some bad? They never just come through and say, "Hey, what's going on? Let's do this. Let's do this." So I started with a young lady named, Sheila Whitey, through our director, deputy director at the time, William Chesley. He said, "Mike, what can we do out in the community?" I said, "Maybe a little cookout." He said, "Okay." So we get two cookouts: We did one at Atkins Homes and we did one at Ruby Tucker. When we did the one in Atkins, a white neighbor that just moved into the neighborhood, he called the police and said, "How can they just have a cookout and people over there without asking us?" And the cop told him, "That's a city agency. They could do outreach." Because he wanted them to tell us to stop. But when a cop came over to speak to me, white cop, I said, "Wow. That's what's missing." I said, "You all got to come out here." I brought in the police department, sheriff department, and fire department to do our community cookouts. So we went from one agency. We're at about 35 right now. Every time we do a cookout each year for the last 12 years, it's grown. And the purpose of these cookouts, so that we can interact with one another, engage one another. Say what resources is in the community. You know, if I need assistance with housing or I have a mental illness, somebody interfering with a mental illness or somebody with a drug addiction or I have somebody need a job. So we're bringing all these resources together. You know, I normally never took credit for it, but then I said, "You know what? Everybody gonna claim it if I don't. So, yeah, I'm the one who started that." That was because of some of the help that people entrusted in me. You know, like Mr. Dawkins, like Kirk Kincannon, like our mayor at the time [inaudible] and others. who said, "Hey, you know, Mike, we want you in this job." And I had forces working with me, working against me. You can understand that. Meaning I need this, but I can't get it. So I start asking for favors because I work for Nike as well. So we hooked a basketball tournament, me and Mr. Dawkins, that was free. AN1, I don't know if you're familiar with that, but AN1 was a real big popular streetball thing that hit the nation. Well, we did one and they would normally charge people to come in. Mr. Dawkins told them, "No we ain't charging nobody." We had about 3000 people with no incident and that's because we knew the people and we knew the neighborhood. So those are the type of things that once I

stepped out there to see could happen and we made happen. For me, it's about relationships. In Alexandria, me seeing some of the racist attitudes that still exist and some of them that have existed here, my feeling is like, let's sit down and talk because we should. I'm not going to fault you for what your forefather did. But if you're still doing it, then hell, we got a problem. Because I knew that my parents instilled in, not only me, but my other siblings, that we're gonna judge you as an individual. Now, we can put a skin tone to it. But does that justify who you are inside? And my mother again only had an eighth or ninth grade education. My father had a sixth grade education. But this is how I looked at things and I still look things. So us doing some of the things that I assisted and helped do and put together for the community, it was because I saw as a kid growing up that was lacking in the community, even though it was more of a community. You know what I mean by that? It was like there wasn't all these problems, we looked out for each other. But this generation, somewhere along the way, we parted ways and we're not doing and we're not treating people as human beings. We treat them as either objects or people that don't matter, but if you're born, you matter. That's my philosophy. So that's where I'm at with that, but my transition came from being [pause] a black person that had a wound that nobody would clean. Nobody would clean that wound, till somebody cleaning my wound and in bandaging me up and making sure that what they saw on me that I could go on to fulfill some of their dreams as well. And I'm not a dream killer. I'm a dream maker. And I want to see those behind me learn about the history, I want them to learn to get along with each and everybody and judge not about what a person look like on the outside and continue... And I share this with the police department. A lot of the law enforcement agencies today are being judged about what the guys did before them. In this city, and in cities across this country, a lot of people are being judged about what somebody did before them. Not by where they're at now and who they are. It's a weird philosophy, some people think and weird, but that's how I feel and that's our thing. The other part of it is that I went to college one time, didn't finish. And about a year or so ago I went back, and I'm just so excited about what I can accomplish. Focus. Then, what I couldn't see or do when I was unconscious and unfocused, you know? So everything that we do now for me is geared towards community and people. I'm a consultant with the National Drug Court. One of the first strong supporters of Alexandria getting a drug court. And people would say, well, why? Well, first of all, in the black community, I saw too many people addicted to drugs, hard drugs. I saw that a lot of people was devastated. I saw that a lot of people were getting sentenced on marijuana that shouldn't be. I mean, long periods of time. Nonviolent crime. So, by me getting involved with that really, it came from my brother that was in the Marine Corps. Oldest brother who never, ever smoked a joint to my knowledge or use any type of drugs. And then when he turned about 50, about 51. He died. He had aneurysm. [inaudible] And he was smoking crack, and his whole demeanor changed, you know, because he was somebody that you could entrust to be where they said he is going to be, when he said he was going to be there. And if you needed something, he would take care of you. I remember one time my mom sent him to the store because him and my mother was living together at the time he was. He was the only kid still living with my mother at the house. He had been married a couple of times, didn't work out, so he came back home and she sent him to the Giant to get some food for them to eat. Well, he didn't show up for about two, three days. So she called me. I went into the hood where the crack dealers were looking for. And me and one of the biggest drug dealers at the time in the city got into a verbal altercation. You know, to where I pretty much told him, "If you sell my brother anything else, anything else, I'm going to show you what type of man I really am," because those are the things that I saw destroying the neighborhood. Fast forward. It made me want to just help others that were on drugs. Because this was a guy you went hiking, fishing and he taught you how to swim. You know, he was a big brother. You know, he was a big brother.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:33:55] What's his name?

Michael Johnson [01:33:56] Andre. Andre. Could fight. Oh, man. Didn't want to fight, but nobody messed with him, but if he fought, it was like, you might not win, you know? So he was that type of guy, and we didn't need no one. But my brothers, I had five brothers and I had five cousins that were boys. So we was up here together and that's how we hung out. That drove me, you know, trying to do

something all the way around the board. And that's why I'm always volunteering and doing stuff that's something community-oriented. You know, that's why I do it, really.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:34:41] That's great. So before we close, I have some closing questions, but is there anything that you want to mention before we close those out?

Michael Johnson [01:34:59] Just that, you know. I always had an interest in history, especially my history, but nobody ever taught me my history. I started learning about my history, I think I was around about 44 years old. Not only history of African-Americans. I knew a little bit. But I'm talking about "history" history. You know, of all America. And then of course, my family tree. Those things have always been puzzling to me because I never met my grandparents, on both sides. I think I remember my grandmother. I was so young. She died a year or so later. And I met her because I went to my grandfather's funeral. My mother's mother in Georgia. And then I have a very vague recollection of seeing my grandmother in the casket. She died in 1963. I was born in 56. Her husband, my grandfather, died in September of 1956, two months before I was born. So every time I saw somebody that was talking about their grandparents, I would just lean in like, wow. You know, I ain't have that. And that's why I spend a lot of time with my grandkids, because I want them to have that experience. I know why grandparents are who they are to us. You know, I'm seeing that. Me being interested in learning history and getting involved in history and telling the story, good or bad, making corrections along the way because it depends on who the researcher is. You can get your answers, I found that out, but a lot of researchers are on the same page, you know. Alexandria just interests me because of the history that it holds that a lot of people don't know, and the history that not only to Alexandria, but throughout the world, because a lot of those founding fathers came through Alexandria at one time or another. Either stayed overnight at the inaugural party like Thomas Jefferson did here. Just learning it as an adult, I mean, I felt like a kid in a candy factory, you know?

Francesco De Salvatore [01:37:32] Yeah. That's great. I'm just curious this is more of a general question, but if you could hold on to any memory in your life, what memory or memories would it be?

Michael Johnson [01:37:47] It would have to be Thanksgiving. When my mom, my father, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, all of us around the table, you know. Because those day was the best days. I mean, we had fun. You know, you have 30 people in your house. You got three beds. So we would take sheets and make tents to sleep on the floor. We swear to God we was outside camp. But that's the fun that you had. Your cousins came over and your drunk aunt, and your drunk uncle, they're arguing about little stupid things, you know? And we were like [tch]. But you sit right there and I used to be right up in it, you know, because I look like my father, who looked like his father, who looked like his grandfather who was buried over Douglass. But I never got a chance to meet those people. But I know the fondest memory would have been if I could have met them, even if it was for two years of my teenage life, I would remember. But the memories of Thanksgiving, man, you can't beat them. The house that we still own looked so big at the time. But then you go back and it looks like, "All of us just be up in here you know?"

Francesco De Salvatore [01:39:18] Yeah.

Michael Johnson [01:39:19] I mean, but we had good food. because my mother could cook and bake, you know, because she worked at Dick's big restaurant, the Icon Restaurant. But a lot of people didn't know that she did the cooking and baking from scratch. She said to me, "You have everything." But you know, that's my best memory, my childhood, early teens, early childhood.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:39:45] Yeah, that's great. Well, Mike, thank you so much for doing this.

Michael Johnson [01:39:49] Oh, thank you.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:39:49] Thank you.

Michael Johnson [01:39:50] And I know there's more that might cross my mind, but yes, it's good just to get it out.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:39:55] Yeah.

Michael Johnson [01:39:56] Mm.