



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



Oral History Interview

with

Jeffery Johnson

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Narrator: Jeffery Johnson

Location of Interview:

Charles Houston Recreation Center, 901 Wythe St, Alexandria, VA 22314

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Transcriber: Sadiya Quetti-Goodson

Summary:

Jeffery Johnson reflects upon growing up in the Queen Street neighborhood of Alexandria, impact of recreation centers on youth, and neglect of black cemeteries and communities in Alexandria.

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General	Childhood; Family; Education; Gentrification; African American cemeteries; Systemic Racism; Youth Empowerment; Community centers
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People	Johnson Jeffery; Jones Noah; Chucky; Harris Craig; Jones Jeffery; Peterson Junior; Peterson Rodney; Williams Reginald; Smith David; Mojo Spencer; Mojo Gilbert; Man Dwayne; Richardson George; Boo; Ross Carlton; Sharp Andrew; Terrell Dwayne; Terrell Calvin; Reed Andre; The Webs; Elliot Larry; Johnson Michael; Irwin; Rose Pete; Sloan W.J.; Lloyd Earl; Miss Hazel; Mother; Father; Aunt Lily; Johnson Stephanie; Johnson Steven; Coach Dennis; Holloway Frank; Davis Reginald; Jackson Lou; Jackson Willie; Richardson Bill; Ali Muhammad; Lowe Sidney; Wittenberg; Johnson Greg; Ford Gerald; Ford Steve; Weber George; Mr. Williams; Mr. Wilson; Jared Glen; Turner Dennis; Mr. Smith; Shakur; Koroma K. Coach; Fontaine Darnell; Rocky; Coach Smitty; Smith Fred; Ledbetter Fred; Coach Steady Eddie; Porter Dennis
Places	Queen Street; Duke Street Hospital; Jefferson Houston High School; Boys and Girls Club; Princess Street; Payne Street; North Patrick Street; Charles Houston Elementary School; Ice House; Fayette Street; Hobo Jungle; Tulane University; Patrick Street; First Street; The Burg; Old Town; Washington Street; Madison Street; Fort Hunt Park; Shitty Creek Dump; Giant Grocery; Henry Street Consignment Store; Regal; Miss Blue's Pharmacy; Alfred Street; JC Penny; King Street; Lerner Street; FedEx; Trader Joe's; Johnson Store; Power Tower; Goodwill; Cameron Street Fire Department; Queen Street Barber Shop; Queen Street Movie Theatre; The Reid Theatre; Johnson Swimming Pool; Parker-Gray School; Pendleton Street Recreation Center; Montgomery Street; Tulsa; Georgia; North Carolina; Dixie Pig Restaurant; Atlantic Research; Old Town Book Club; G.C. Murphy's; Green's Funeral Home; Woodrow Wilson Bridge Gas Station; Frederick Douglass Cemetery; Coleman Cemetery; Bethel Cemetery; Mount Comfort; Coleman Cemetery; Fort Hunt; Minnie Howard; George Washington High; T.C. Williams; Grovington; Hatfield; Washington D.C.; Arlington; Del Ray; Chicago Institute of Art; CMP Bill Atlantic Phone Company; Florida State; Community Business Center; Park Potomac; Huntington; Virginia LBC 12, Norfolk; Tidewater; Wichita; Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery; Whole Foods

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:00:00] My name is Jeffrey L. Johnson, senior. I'm 64 years old. Today's date. April 30th, 2024. And I'm in the Charles Houston Rec[reation] Center of Alexandria, Virginia.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:14] My name is Kerry James Reed. I'm 27 years of age. It is the 30th of April, 2024, and we are at the boxing gym at Charles Houston Rec Center. So thank you so much for agreeing to do this, Mr. Johnson. It's been a pleasure getting to know you over these past couple weeks. I suppose we can start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:00:31] I was born here in Alexandria, on Queen Street, July 19th, 1959.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:41] July 19th, 1959. So, were you born in the home on Queen Street or?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:00:45] In a hospital. I was born at the old Duke Street Hospital.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:51] Duke street?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:00:52] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:54] What are some of your earliest memories from growing up on Queen [Street]?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:00:59] Well, one of the biggest thing, I think, we left here when I was about 6 years old. So I didn't have a lot of years like my siblings did. But the one thing I know that stands out is the Jefferson High School that used to be directly across the street on West Street, which is now Jefferson Houston Elementary Middle School. Did they change that? But yeah Jefferson Houston is on that property now. And I do remember it, it was an all white school. And we would sometimes go over and slide down the hill on cardboard boxes and stuff like that. Didn't venture out the neighborhood too much. Again, I was young, I could only go around the block pretty much, like the Boys and Girls Club. That's on Princess Street, Princess and was that Payne? Yeah. Princess and Payne [Street]. So yeah, I didn't do much there. I had a few friends that I played with at the time from when I was there. And again it's just everyday stuff, just come outside and go in the house.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:19] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:02:20] Yeah, pretty much. So my first 6 years was spent on Queen Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:24] So where did you all move after Queen Street?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:02:27] To North Patrick Street, which is approximately quarter mile, 4 blocks. Yeah. 700 block of Princess Street. So I moved here when I was, you know, 6. That's when I was able to go to school at that time. Kindergarten. So from kindergarten all the way to 6th grade. I attended Charles Houston Elementary.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:57] So what was the neighborhood around North Patrick Street like then?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:03:00] No. Patrick Street was just a one way street. One lane, one way and one lane. The area where we live, it was predominantly African-Americans. I mean, we were pretty close knit. Everyone was pretty close knit. Within 2 or 4 blocks, you knew everyone. Everyone knew you. They knew your parents, you knew their parents. Yeah. It was a close knit community.

Kerry James Reed [00:03:39] What was it like growing up in such a close knit community?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:03:42] It gave you a sense of pride. You know, I mean, even though you didn't have much - no one was wealthy. We're surrounded by projects. But it didn't bother you knowing that you didn't have anything. But some of the memories I have is when we used to venture out. I guess I was about 8 years old and we can go a few blocks down at that time. And we go down to the Ice House, that we call it, the "Ice House," it's a place where they had like ice cream trucks, the big block ice, the dry ice. They had stuff like that there. And that was over here off of Fayette Street on the north side of 800 block of Fayette Street. We'd go there, we'd go [to] what we call the, "Hobo Jungle." That's in the 400 block of Payne. It was just all woods. There's an apartment there now, and it's probably been there probably 40 years. But yeah, we would go. We would disturb the winos. They'd be in there sleeping, you know. Just for fun. That's how we had fun back then. And you know, going down to the river, learn how to fish, actually learn how to swim as well in the river. We didn't have a swimming pool. So, everything it was, it was great. It was just great man. Just knowing that you had these close friends. They was so close that they were almost your brothers, you know. So yeah, it was really, really great back then.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:39] Could you describe some of your close friends or any or any neighbors that you can remember?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:05:43] I can remember almost all of them.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:45] Can you give me any names?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:05:46] Yeah, well on this side of the 800 block of the projects it was Noah Chucky Jones, Craig Harris, Jeffrey Jones, the Peterson brothers - Junior and Rodney. Reginald Williams, David Smith, all the brothers. But David [Smith] and I was the same age then. Who else we had on that block? We, this is where we actually go play sports. Craig Harris was probably the one of the biggest name that come out of that side of the project. He made the Metro All-American in basketball, the year T.C. [Williams] went with 28 and 0. And we actually thought that he would make it into the NBA [National Basketball Association]. But he was injured. He went to Tulane [University], and it pretty much ruined his career after that. But in the 700 block, on the Patrick Street side had Spencer and Gilbert Mojo. Dwayne Man. George Boo Richardson. Who else was over here that was my age? Carlton, The Ross's. Carlton Ross. He was my age. He was a bad boy, he grew up to be a bad boy. And then you actually had the First Street side, and we didn't journey to First Street that much. We didn't do First Street that much, but my father, he was from the Burg that's down what they call Old Town now. He was from that area. So we would go down there and, this is a few of those guys I remember Andrew Sharp, Dwayne Terrell, Calvin Terrell. That's just a few that we dealt with on that side, of course. And that's across Washington Street. Down by the river, just like a block from the river.

Kerry James Reed [00:07:48] So what is it like to reflect on all these close friends and neighbors that you had now?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:07:54] Well, you wonder the ones that you haven't seen. What are they doing now? A few have passed on, you know. Like my friend Andre Reed, he was on, he lived on the Madison Street side. He passed away. And we had other friends on the Madison Street side. The Webs, of course. So yeah, it was, it's just you, you wonder where they are. You see them from time to time, like when we have the Charles Houston reunion. Down [in] Fort Hunt Park every year. In honor of Larry Elliott, who coaches us in sports. So every year we go there. And you get to meet most of them that played and you see, who's, you know, who's fat, who's bald and stuff like that, you know, but it's a fun time when we all get back together. Yeah. So yeah, fun time.

Kerry James Reed [00:08:56] So you mentioned briefly some of the, some of the places that you and your friends would hang out at, the ice house and hobo jungle. Were there any other places in the neighborhood where y'all would play sports or anything like that?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:09:07] Yeah, we played basketball right out back of Charles Houston. They had the basketball courts there and pretty much we lived there. You know, we were in the summer. Before we got the swimming pool, we might go on a basketball court, 11:00 in the morning, and stay till 5, 6:00, 7:00 at night. Because, you know, back then you had to be out the house. Your parents tell you, "Go outside and play." You couldn't stay in the house, you couldn't stay in the house and sleep. You actually had to go outside. After you clean your room and everything, it's outside you go to. They really don't want to see you. It was see you less as possible during the day. My mom, she worked at night, so you know, we didn't see her much, you know, growing up. Only on Tuesday that's when we really saw her. But for the most part, yeah, we played all the time, you

know. We made go karts. We made bicycles when we got older. We used to go down to the dump down there by what we call the, "shitty creek." Excuse my language, but it was where the sewage used to actually run into, it gets to the water treatment plant, but it used to actually run through that. And yeah, we used to go down there after we played in that, but we would get our bicycle parts from there. Build your bike, you know, like I said everybody couldn't really afford bikes then. So you built one. Yeah. It's, it's great.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:43] That sounds really fascinating. Did you build the go karts as well from parts?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:10:46] We built the go karts from wood. Of course we stole all the shopping carts we could from Giant [grocery] and we'd take the wheels off and yeah we weren't we, we learned how to, to do things. I mean, we was nothing like today's kids man, you know. I think we probably had one of the better generations is growing up. The guys in my age group. Because after that even the kids that's, 10 years younger didn't do half the things we did. Yeah. So we grew up in a great time. The ones that's little older than me pretty much the same, like my brother Michael [Johnson] [00:11:26] Irwin [0.0s] and Andre [Reed] and them, they experienced the same thing. Just you know we're about 6, 7 years different from the oldest to me. So yeah. Yeah, you know. A lot of things man.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:40] That's true.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:11:41] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:42] So you mentioned the ice house. Were there any other businesses in the neighborhood that you can remember now?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:11:49] Yeah. They had, on the corner where the Ice House, if you came around the corner over to Henry Street side, it was an appliance store was there. So you had Parker-Gray. Parker-Gray was on the other side. We had the store on the corner, what we call a neighborhood store. That's where you could get consignment stuff. And we had Regal, that's been there forever. Miss Blue's pharmacy was down Alfred Street. I think that's the 500 block, 400 block of Alfred [Street]. Grocery store. Mr. Pye Rose, who we used to go to a [00:12:39] same [0.0s] consignment stuff when we lived on Queen Street. So yeah, back then we just basically [had] small mom and pops [businesses].

Kerry James Reed [00:12:47] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:12:48] You know, a few mom and pops, no major business. But the reason why we didn't know about it, because we couldn't afford to go there. Yeah, JC Penney, well, down King Street, once you cross over to Washington. That was, it wasn't the head company, it was Lerner's. I think with W.J. Sloan, on Lerner [Street]. Huge department store. What's over there now? Right where they have that would be where the Fedex, the Trader Joe's, that block.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:26] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:13:27] Yeah. That block was, what was there back then? It took up that whole block. And what else we had that we actually went to? Like Johnson store. There was a power tower. And that's pretty much it. We didn't have a lot of business. Because when I was really young, from [the] time I could walk, till about maybe 8 years old, we used to shop at the Goodwill. Well, my mother got all our clothes from the Goodwill secondhand store. So, yeah, that was a big store to us, you know, the fire department on Cameron Street, we could go play there. They allowed us to play back then around the fire department, and even Queen Street they still had the barber shop. That's pretty much [it]. Well, we did [have] a barber shop until I, was almost 30 before I lost my hair. The same barber shop on Queen Street, the movie theater was on Queen Street. We went there. It was only like \$0.25 to go to the movies. We didn't go to the Reed [Theatre] until later on in my life. The Reed theaters down on King Street, right across from the whatever, by the King Street Metro is on the other side of the street. But we'll go there once I got in my pre-teens because other movies had closed back then.

Kerry James Reed [00:15:24] So if you had to pick a favorite aspect about your neighborhood from when you were growing up, what would it be?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:15:32] I guess it would be togetherness maybe. We were, I mean, we were like, we were all one, you know. I could, if I was really hungry, I could eat if someone's mom cooked. And like we had 6 kids and so if you was hungry you could go other places just to get a little bite to eat. And, and if we had more, just the same thing, you could get it, you know, a portion, something to keep the hunger off. But yeah, I think it would be more of that, that togetherness that you don't see anymore. Like this neighborhood now, I don't know anybody. I don't even know what people live next door, you know, so.

Kerry James Reed [00:16:16] And that really quick, when did the Johnson swimming pool get put in?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:16:25] Johnson is down, was down Parker-Gray. That was there, I guess, I don't know if it was during my father's time or what. But they closed it because a kid had drowned in there. So we went when I was able and old enough to go, it had always been closed.

Kerry James Reed [00:16:46] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:16:46] They built the one in the back. Probably around [19]70, 1970. Somewhere in there. I think I was about 10. Yeah, it used to be right behind school, in basically, in the parking lot. Yeah. And you're talking about you had to go in sessions. It was so many kids, and they were because everybody in the neighborhood had that one little pool. Yeah. And, you know, we always try to get the first session because we live across the street, so we're closer than anyone.

So we'll run across the street and, and when that session is over, you had to, everybody had to exit. The new group come in. So you might do that all day. This. Go in. Wait. Come back. Go in. Wait. Come back. Again, you had to be out the house all day. And that was part of it. Going to the swimming pool or playing basketball. We had the Rec Center Pendleton Street Rec Center. That was probably one of the biggest hangouts for the community. You went there according to your age, we could go at 3. Our time was like from 3 to 6. And what we called the big boys back then, who was probably 16 on up, they would go at 6 to 9. The whole center was probably no bigger than this boxing gym. With full court basketball. But most of us were good at shooting pool and playing ping pong, you know. A lot of us got, we were really good in those areas. And then of course basketball and football, you know, we were, we were basketball, football, little city, small city. But we were pretty powerful back then. And a lot of talent came out of the city. Of course nobody really realizes it, but Earl Lloyd, first African American player in the NBA came right from, up the street on Montgomery Street. So, so yeah, we were yeah. We was a striving community man. I mean, it wasn't Tulsa, Oklahoma. But we just, it was a striving community. A lot of people from the South settled here as well. Georgia, got Georgia, North Carolina, here. So, so, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:28] Absolutely. When did the Pendleton Rec center close?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:19:37] Guess I was, no because I played in Pendleton street up until I was 17. Right. So like '70, roughly '76, '77.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:52] '76, '77?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:19:53] And they, and they open this okay back then. Yeah. About '76 somewhere in there.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:58] Okay, interesting. So you just started to talk about a little bit about the history of Alexandria. I know that your mother is from Georgia. Did she ever describe or tell you about the family history on her side growing up?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:20:15] My mother only talked about, and not much, she would just say things about her mother and father, you know. We knew all her siblings. I mean she would say some things. And that was, my mother has the southern complex. As far as we were not allowed to speak to white people in a manner even if it's cause, even if you're defending yourself. Right. She used to tell us, you can't say this, you can't do that. And you know, as a kid, you don't know until you get a little older that that's how the South was. Yeah. Where she was from. Where she's from, there's the train tracks. On one side of the tracks were white folks, on the other side were poor black folks. And you couldn't cross the tracks, you know. Yeah. So, she didn't talk much, but it was. It was really, she tried to, you know, really make you understand the difference between black and white. My mother probably had an 8th grade education. My father had a 6th grade education. So they weren't the, you know, the most educated people, but they were hard workers. My father at one time worked 2 jobs. My mother worked 3. She would go clean up for a white lady, Miss Hazel. I think her name was Miss Hazel, but she would go clean up their house in the morning, you know,

would leave us our \$0.10 for lunch, and she would go clean up. And then when she get off that, she actually go, she would come and she would prepare lunches at the school, at Charles Houston. She would prepare meals, during lunch and she'd get off work, she would go cook at Dixie Pig restaurant down in Richmond Highway. My father got up early in the morning, went to Atlantic Research, where he was his maintenance guy. And then, he did a little part time at the Old Town Book club, the Old Dominion Book Club, they called it. And at times he would take us with them and, you know, we would clean up just to earn a dollar or two, you know, so we have some money in our pocket. He would give us like a dollar to go there a couple of days.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:10] So it seems like your mother really tried to instill in you an understanding of segregation. Is that fair to say?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:23:18] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:23:19] Did you, I mean, how do I say it... Did you have an opportunity to see her teachings in action a lot, I guess?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:23:28] I guess it's once that I can really remember. And I was young, I was. I'm maybe 6,7. And she took me to get some shoes. I needed corrective shoes because my feet used to go in the opposite directions, and she wouldn't allow, she didn't allow them to break my legs to straighten them up. It was you know, it's going to be a long process but you put these shoes on them. You don't have to break them, but he's going to wear them for a while. And I wore those shoes probably like 12 years old. But we went down King Street. And we went, bought the shoes and she went to G.C. Murphy's and I didn't understand, and she didn't never say anything, but she never sat down. And I remember her ordering a halfsmoke. I mean it's like it was yesterday. It just a thing that stays in my mind. I remember her ordering a half smoke and there were 2 white individuals sitting and there was an empty seat but she wouldn't sit down. And she stood up until she was finished. And then we went down because [G.C.] Murphy's was upstairs, downstairs, 2 floors, then went downstairs and she did whatever. And we left. And it never dawned on me until I one day at my old age, not this old, but I was much older. And then it hit me, you know, not that I didn't know about segregation too, you know. Growing up in my early teens, about the sit-ins and stuff to the poor man's march [that] actually came down Henry Street after the assassination of Doctor King, but you know, and one day it hit me. That's why she didn't sit down. Because in the South you couldn't. So that came with her.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:40] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:25:41] You know, you be talking about 1964, maybe '64, '65. Yeah, yeah. I was about maybe 6, 5 or 6 years old. Yeah, and that's the only thing that really stuck out. But again she always, I was wondering why when a white person was much younger than she is, she would say [to] a white person, "Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Yes, sir. No, sir." And that's what we had to do or we had to do that regardless of your color. We had, that's what we had to do.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:21] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:26:23] But it's like, why's my mama saying, "yes ma'am, no ma'am, yes, sir, no sir," to these people? They are about the same age or younger.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:35] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:26:37] Yeah, 'cause it was in her. It was, it is in her, you know, it was just. Because their whole thing was to keep your kids safe, you know. Because in the South, I mean I can only imagine what was going on in the South. That's something she probably never discussed. And that's, that's the only thing that I kind of like, I fault us for it, as far as communication amongst family. They never really talked about their family. My father either. Because I didn't know my father's mother was confined to a wheelchair until later on in life. And it would just be my mother say, "Oh, yeah. You know, your grandma was in, your father's mom was in a wheelchair. And now I get older, I see why, because we are pretty much having the same issues, you know. Now had you known it maybe could have did a little more about it, you know, to defend against it. Because like, you know I had my hip replaced. I need another hip replacement. So back then they weren't replacing hips, if your legs were hurt, you couldn't move, you was confined to a wheelchair or crutches, and other means of walking. So yeah, and I, I just wish they did. My father's sister, we call her Aunt Sister. She had all the history, and her, Michael [Johnson] and Stephanie. That's why they have so much. She used to talk to them all the time. But my aunt Lily, that was my father's aunt, And she had a lot of history, so even though my father and my mother didn't have it, all the information came from those two, you know. That's why again, why Michael and them know so much because they used to spend a lot of time with her, you know. I'm pretty much at that age it doesn't matter anymore.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:48] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:28:49] You know, but yeah I think the black culture as a whole never really discussed it. Never really discuss stuff like that. Yeah, you know who your cousins are. But you don't know your grandfather, you know, when he was born, me, I'm talking about this, me. I know what time he was born and what time he died because there's a grave marker when we go to Georgia. But how did he live? We talk about Deep South. What went on with him? And then what was his father like. Because it's more likely my great great grandfather [on] my mother's side was a slave. You know they were dark skinned people you know, so more likely he was but you never know, you know. Maybe my cousins in Georgia, they may know, the older ones, you know, the ones that's older than me that's probably in their 80s now. They would probably have a lot of history. But I just don't, you know, I mean I wish I did because you know, it's like it's the what if now you know, what if I had that knowledge back then you know. Was able to sit down with my grandparents, my mother, I mean, my grandmother, my grandfather on either side and just talk or see how they lived and experience that. Because I don't remember my mother's mother and she was still living when I was born, but she died shortly after because I remember my mother went to her father's funeral.

She left us with my dad when we was living on Queen Street. So I remember her going to his funeral, and she took us to her when her mother passed, she took the four of us. Me, Michael, Steven, Stephanie and left the other two with my father. So she took four of us to Georgia. And I, I don't remember. I don't remember because they said oh yeah, you know when they had a funeral grandma was in the living room, the body was in the living room. I don't, I don't remember that. You know, so like my oldest brother that's still down there he, you know, he got a lot of information. Because he's been around all his life, yeah. He never came up here only to visit, but he lived there. My mother had him in Georgia. He was born by midwife if I'm not mistaken. Yeah, so, so yeah, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:52] Was that funeral that you attended in Georgia? Was that the first funeral that you ever went to?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:31:58] Probably, but I didn't.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:59] Right. Can't remember.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:32:01] Can't remember it. So didn't matter.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:03] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:32:03] You know.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:05] Do you remember what was the first funeral you attended that you remember?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:32:11] It was either my mother's brother or my aunt's daughter. She died, I think she did have to be 2 years old. And she was what they call what they call a mongoloid babies or something like that.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:31] Yeah, they used to call them that. Yeah, yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:32:33] And it was either one of those, yeah. First one at Green's Funeral Home.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:41] Greens funeral home? Do you remember how old you were when you experienced these funerals?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:32:47] Yeah. So I had to be, I probably should, I was in my teens. Early teens, maybe. Let me see Antonia, okay. I'm 10 years old, Antonia so they was born the same time. So if she was 2, I was 12, so I was about 12. Yeah, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:13] Do you remember your thoughts? I know that's a very specific question. Just your feelings when you were going to this funeral?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:33:19] Eerie. Eerie, you're just like, well, why all you got me in here?

Kerry James Reed [00:33:24] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:33:25] I don't want to be in here.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:27] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:33:27] Yes. It was just eerie. I was a kid that was petrified with funerals. But I couldn't stand to go in a funeral because the first time I went I know we going, but I never experienced this, so I don't know what to experience until I got there and I'm like oh no open casket and stuff.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:50] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:33:51] It took me a while to come around to getting comfortable. Because after you do it a few times, you get a little more relaxed and comfortable with it, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:34:05] Yeah. So what would you say you overcame that reluctance to go to go to funerals?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:34:11] Maybe my early teens, 14, 16 somewhere in there. I remember I was 19 when a friend of mine, he burned up in a car accident. He burned up. And that was kind of horrible, just the idea. Yeah. Only a few of us was allowed to look at him, his closest friends. And that was like oh man it was the worst of the worst day. You know to see him like that and knowing how much life he had. Right. Yeah. Yeah. He was younger than me, you know. You know, he was probably 18. So. Yeah, I was probably 19, maybe 20 at that point.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:01] Do you remember? If your family ever visited any cemeteries in Alexandria growing up?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:35:09] I don't know. I mean, you like go and see people that's passed on. That's not what they did. And once they was gone, they was gone, you know. It's like, it wasn't like now, it's a little different. Like I'll go to my mother's gravesite, my mother's and father's gravesite, you know, Mother's Day or Father's Day or if I'm really feeling stressed about something. I go there and just sit and just talk, you know. Me, because I'm comfortable with it. But no, they don't go to lay flowers, they never went to lay flowers down for like Mother's Day, Veterans Day, whatever the occasion, the birthday. We just didn't do it, man. Some people say when you're gone, you're gone, what difference does it make? You know, but I still, I do, you know. Whether it means, whether it's meaningful to anyone or not. I still, I go to theirs, I don't go to a lot of other ones, you know. Like

some of my friends that were my age that passed, I don't even know if I know where they're buried, but I don't know where the site is, you know. And if I'm down there and I see another friend, hey you know, they've buried over there. Okay, that's cool, we walk over there. Then I'll visit that way. But no I think that we should and we should have. Because when you look at the black cemeteries, because we don't. We'll, we're pretty much disrespected in the sense, you know that who cares, you know. They was building, when they was about to build that apartment right there on Washington Street. All these years it was a gas station there. They tore up the gas station, right across from, I don't know the name of cemeteries, right there at the Woodrow Wilson bridge on Washington Street. Before you go, you know, before you go to the other side starting the Mount Vernon Trail, but on the right hand side, it was a gas station. On the left hand side it's a white Cemetery and you can see it nice, immaculate, well-kept. But what we didn't know was where that gas station was where there's slaves and African-Americans were buried. And they didn't find it out until they'd begin digging. Then they stopped it and made it a memorial site down there. And I just like, wow, you know that, you know, and no one ever said a word or did they? And it was one of those who gives a shit.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:18] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:38:19] You know, and it probably was something to say because somebody had to know. What used to be there because those particular gas stations weren't, [they] were built in the 70s.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:28] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:38:29] You know, I mean so people that like, again, my great aunts and uncles, they had to know what was there. And were we ever told? No.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:43] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:38:45] I mean stuff like that. You know it could be our relatives down there as well. As long as my father go back in the city. And it could have been his grandfather or somebody down there. You never know.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:58] Yeah. Okay, so it seems to me like you're describing a pattern of neglect towards black cemeteries in the city. When you see the, you know, the physical state of Douglass [Cemetery] or Coleman [Cemetery] or Bethel [Cemetery] now, how does that make you feel when you compare it to some of the white cemeteries that you see around the city.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:39:20] It's, and I know it's, we're dealing with economics right. White folks had everything. They had the money, they had the resources. We didn't. Right. They put us in a box, put you in the grave unmarked. Who cares? And it's just, not just Alexandria, but society itself. Why would you mistreat a people that never done anything to you? They never done anything to you.

You brought them here, you made money off them, you profited off them. And you can't even have a decent burial, right? If you go down to Coleman, then that's down in Fort Hunt, I think it's called. My aunt and other people from Alexandria are buried there because they didn't want to go in this raggedy place. Well that is not that great either.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:25] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:40:27] Falling apart, sinking ground, the whole nine, you know, and this city, especially this city. You mean to tell me they don't have enough money just to, you know, make it look a little more presentable because all the people that's basically there, the majority of the people, probably 90%, if not more, were born here and died here, you know. I mean and that's probably why I don't go to these places. Coach Dennis, they buried him down there, and I was telling them, I said, "Oh man out of all places, they're going to bury him down there?" And they was like, well its just our headstone there, and this is going on down there and that's going on down there. And I said hey man, that's why you don't have to worry about burying me. I told my son, don't bury me. You throw me in the river, I don't care because I mean, 50 years from now, that place probably be underground.

Kerry James Reed [00:41:43] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:41:45] You know.

Kerry James Reed [00:41:47] So, I'm sorry, where did you say Coach Dennis is buried?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:41:51] Down in Douglass [Cemetery].

Kerry James Reed [00:41:52] Down in Douglass. And then where are your parents buried?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:42:01] Kings Highway. What is that called? Mount Comfort. That's a nice imagery, yeah. They did well kept.

Kerry James Reed [00:42:17] Where did you go to school in Alexandria?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:42:20] I started Charles Houston in kindergarten through 6th. 7th through 8th I went to Minnie Howard. 9th through 10th, I went to George Washington. 11th and 12th I went to T.C. Williams.

Kerry James Reed [00:42:44] Did you play any sports? During high school at GW [George Washington] and T.C.?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:42:48] No, I tried.

Kerry James Reed [00:42:49] You tried?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:42:51] I should have made freshman, okay. It was where the coach at that time remembered one of the players when we played 10 and under ball. And he kind of like did a favor and let him stay on the team because we were both guards. It was 3 of us actually. And between the 3 of us, he not the worst, but he wasn't as talented as us by that time. But, yeah. Because I figured if I were made freshman, I probably could have stood a chance at least to do well on the varsity level. And that's how it went, if you made freshman then you were more likely to become the sophomore team.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:44] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:43:45] You know, and then you may make the varsity. But T.C. was so packed with talent, we could have, they actually could have divided T.C. up and had 2 teams. That's how much talent was in the hallway. That's why you saw guys they were leaving. They were going to Grovington, they were going to Hayfield, they were going to D.C., they were going to Arlington. They said okay, you know. Because them guys play their 10th grade year, you know, going into the 11th. Well, I stand a better chance going elsewhere. And most of them did. They played elsewhere. But yeah, we probably had 2 basketball teams. Easy.

Kerry James Reed [00:44:22] That's really interesting. What was it like going to school with so much athletic talent?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:44:26] Man all the talent came from out back. All the talent came off the blacktop back then.

Kerry James Reed [00:44:31] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:44:31] The 80% of the talent came from off the blacktop round here. The other 20% came from Del Rey. Well, 19%, probably 1% came from somewhere else. But yeah, 80% came from here. When you look at the T.C.'s 28 and 0 year, 2 guys came from Del Rey. That was Frank Holloway, Reginald Davis. But then the remaining 3 characters who I mentioned earlier, Lou and Willie Jackson, Bill Richardson, we all came from right here. And then, you know, everybody behind that didn't really matter where you was from because they only played 6 people most of the time. So yeah man, it was a, man I mean, coming here after school, you know, especially when you was able to come in at 6:00 because you couldn't wait till you got old enough to come in at 6. All the talent was in here. The guys, the older guys, the guys that that were in their early 20s, like 22, 23, still playing and still good, or in college. We all play here. And yeah man, if you lost, you got to go home because you couldn't, you couldn't get back on.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:00] You're not getting back on the court.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:46:01] You're not getting back on the court. There's just too much talent.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:03] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:46:04] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:04] Oh man. Sounds like some great runs.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:46:06] Oh my God, it was. I mean, anytime you got guys from D.C. still come in here, big names. Sidney Lowe, Wittenberg. Those, all those guys played with, end up going to Georgetown and North Carolina State. Yeah, they would come over here and play. It was just, oh man sports was everything to us. You know sports came before girls. Yeah, it came before the girls man.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:39] So did your parents place a lot of emphasis on education in high school? Middle school?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:46:46] Not really. My father, you know, in a roundabout way would always say, you know, if the teacher called or some you did something minor, you know, his term was, "You go to school, get your lesson." He didn't say education. It was lesson you know. And so you know, because they were able they were like I say again uneducated. It wasn't, you know, real press thing for education. My brother, Greg, the second oldest, you know, he was pretty bright you know, he ended up going to the Air Force. But he hung around with President Ford son, that group. Gerald Ford son, Steve. They were all friends up at T.C. Williams. So yeah, he was pretty bright, out of all of us he was probably the brightest. But our education wasn't, we wanted it you know. But I remember my art teacher. He saw a little talent in me, you know. I could draw pretty good. My brother Greg could draw really good. That's why I picked it up from him. And so he would come to me one day, its my senior year and a couple of months before graduation. And he says, "Hey Jeff, I want to show you this." So he shows me a brochure and he said, "I think it'd be nice if you when you graduate, go here. Chicago Institute of Art." And I said, "Nah." And he was like, "Why?" I said, "We can't afford it." You know if I go there how'd I eat? My parents can't afford to feed me, you know. Their thing was I'm the last one you know, pretty much out the house at that point. I mean things were better, but they couldn't afford if I went to college you know. I mean we didn't know about how do you get grants and all that stuff. We didn't have the education. Now, maybe if it was where I could have talked to my aunt's sister you know, who was very educated. She was a librarian, so she read a lot. And even at age 92, she was really sharp, you know. Maybe if things were discussed in her present, she probably would have knew what we could do, you know. Because like I said it was, you didn't look forward to that. All you did was look forward to try to get out of high school, and maybe get a job at CMP, which is Bill Atlantic, which is Verizon. In today's term the phone company. Lot of people were just working just to get out of school and go there because it was a decent paying job back then, you know? Yeah. But only ones that was going to college were the athletes. Not nobody was really good for academics.

Kerry James Reed [00:50:16] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:50:17] You know, it was only athletes going you know, so and not that they were brighter. They just played better in sports that people give them a chance. Whether it was a small college. I could say Craig Harris, probably Frank Hallaway got the biggest scholarships. Frank [Hallaway] went to Florida State, but he went to Florida State to play football, not basketball. And Craig [Harris] went to Tulane, you know, so both those schools were pretty big in the [19]70s. So, yeah and other than that, nobody was going to college. That came along probably mid 80s, when going to college was a big thing. The mid 80s, definitely early 90s. Everyone was trying to go to college, but 70s nah.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:10] So you said your art teacher tried to get you to go to the, was it Chicago Institute?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:51:14] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:14] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:51:15] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:16] Interesting. Were there any teachers at T.C. or GW while you were going there that taught or talked about black history at all?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:51:27] Mr. Weber.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:30] George Weber.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:51:31] Everybody loved Mr. Weber. Everybody wanted to be in Mr. Weber class and they made that an elective. So if you took it you didn't really get any credit. But everybody was in that man's class. It was just packed. Everybody loved the man. He was the dude, he was the man up in T.C. Williams. You could go to Mr. Weber and ask him. Yeah, he had it all. He had it all. Really love. And Mr. Williams, he was the assistant principal. He was black. Yeah, he would tell you stuff. He would give you the real deal on what's going on in the school. Yeah. Yeah I remember they put me out of school and so I leave and I needed a half a credit. Right? So I say okay do I go to summer school or do I go back? So I wanted to work. So I didn't go to summer school because I wanted to work which was kind of crazy. And I go back to school and then one day he saw me and I didn't have a way home. And Mr. Wilson, the white principal, was just like, "Didn't I tell you I didn't want you on school property?" I said, "I don't have a ride home. He said, "Get out." What do you mean get out? "I don't want you in here, get out. You're suspended." And he put me out. And I saw Mr. Wilson. I was downstairs by the cafeteria, saw Mr. Wilson. He said, "You know why he put you out?" I said, "No." He said, "Because your brother. Michael." He didn't like Michael, because Michael was you know, a little radical as they say. You know, it was all black power in his generation, everything was black power. So he was kind of like there, you know, as meaning that.

Okay, you can't walk over me. I have the right to protect myself verbally, physically, whatever, you know? And yeah, he told me, said, "No let me tell you why he put you out. Because your brother." And I was like, wow. You know, and that's when it's hitting you, you know. It's like you know, we talk about 1977. You know what I mean so yeah. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:18] So then when did you first start boxing?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:54:23] Probably '79.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:25] '79?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:54:26] I was about 19? Yeah, I started late. I was about 19.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:29] So what drew you to boxing because you grew up playing you know hoop and football and everything. How did you get into boxing?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:54:37] Well, like I say, we all love Muhammad Ali. Who didn't love Muhammad Ali? It was Muhammad Ali, then it's everyone else right?

Kerry James Reed [00:54:49] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:54:50] And we used to what we call a slap box a lot. So we didn't have boxing gloves or nothing so we could smack each other, you know, and we just, that's what we did. And so in '79 when the guy came. My friend, one of my best friends, Glen Jared and I and he asked, "Hey, man, what y'all think?" So we kinda like both agreed. Glen [Jared] was a little more talented with his hands than I was because I was, you know, I just wanted to do it. And then, once Coach Dennis Turner came and from his teachings, you know, it was like, oh man, that's what I want to do. Not knowing that nobody really starts at 19 years of age. So I did that for about 3 years, only had like 5 fights and something like 3 years. So that's how I got into being an assistant coach after we brought Mr. Smith in '82, '82, '83. And we brought him in. So I became assistant then I just stayed in the gym helping out all the way up into, I mean to now. And even when I came back, I was only coming back to help, wasn't coming back to coach, wasn't coming back doing other stuff. I just came back to help Dennis because [00:56:28]Shakur, [0.0s] course he was starting to make his run with Coach K., and I said, "Okay I'll come back." You know, then the rest is history. I'm still here.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:38] Yeah, absolutely. So were you practicing, was the gym here?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:56:43] No, it was in the other center.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:46] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:56:46] Before they rebuilt this in what, 2001?

Kerry James Reed [00:56:50] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:56:51] So they knocked the other center down like I say, 70s. They built that in like 'round '76. So yeah, in about 2000, they knocked that down and built this but we used to have a small room in the center. It was very small like a kitchen 9 by 10 like that. But you know, a lot of talent came out that little teeny room.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:16] Yeah. Absolutely.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:57:17] They did not have the things that we have now. The luxury of things we have now. So yeah a lot of talent came in. Like I said 2015, '14? Things got better, got real good.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:35] So when you started it was Coach Dennis that was here.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:57:39] When I started it was Rocky Fontaine who started it, yeah. What's Rocky real name? Darnell. Darnell "Rocky" Fontaine. He lived down in what we called new projects, just down the street. And he lived down here, and like I said, everybody hung out here. This was a big hangout at that time, the whole community business center. This center was never dead like it is now. Never. We utilize every inch of that center to be maximized every day. Even on the outside, we would just hang out or hang in. Either way, you came here, you see every kid in that age group from probably 16, 16 to 20, after 6 we're here. Even some of the younger ones used to come just hang out, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:37] So what do you account for the sort of decline I guess, in the utilization?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:58:44] Gentrification. Gentrification, that's definitely the number one factor.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:53] So, just for the sake of developing a timeline for myself. So first it was Darnell "Rocky" Fontaine who was the coach, and then it was.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:59:05] Dennis Turner.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:05] Then it was Dennis Turner.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [00:59:08] And it was a short stint, maybe 6 months, maybe. Like 6 months, something like that, I guess. It wasn't long, but he was really good. He taught us really well. "That's a pretty good time for me." Yeah, that's what really, when he used to say, "Once you begin to have these dreams, that means it's in your blood. That means this is what you want to do." And I began to have those dreams. And I said oh man, I can do it. I could do it because I was really good. I was

really good. And then he left and then I cried like a baby. I cried like a baby. Yeah he went away man I was like, God I was so, all the discipline went out the window.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:05] Yeah. So and then when you came back, who was the coach of the gym then?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:00:15] Dennis Porter and K. Koroma.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:22] You said K. Corona?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:00:22] Koroma, yeah, K-o-r-o-m-a.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:35] So you said you had 5 fights?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:00:36] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:37] What was training for those? Like when you were fighting, like a typical day of training. What was that like?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:00:44] 2 hours. You start with your running backward. The biggest thing that we missed was sparring. They never took us out to spare and everyone invited, everybody put everybody in. And so you may spar one of your buddies that don't really know much that may be smaller than you, maybe a little bigger than you. But I think if it was like now, where I am now with it, you know these kids, I take them everywhere. I take them everywhere. Even spar to fight whatever. But yeah, Coach Smitty, it was Coach Smitty came after Coach Dennis. Fred Smith, Fred Ledbetter. They kind of came at the same time. I think Fred Ledbetter actually came about a month or 2 before, so things got a little better. But again, what did we lack? We lacked sparring. Outside sparring, you know, yeah. So that's the typical day was run, you hit the bag, calisthenics, and hit the bag, calisthenics, every day. Every day. And I became a avid runner. After that, I mean it was nowhere in this city I have never ran. I've run from here to Park Potomac on either side of the bridge. I became a heck of a runner. It probably what wore my hips down, I don't know. But yeah, it was nowhere in the city, that worth running I didn't run in that time. I ran all the way up until 2013. Yeah. That's when I had an injury that sidelined me then right from that, I went from that to hip surgery. So I kind of like went on the decline after that. Yeah, but I was in great shape up into, 53. I was in great shape for 53 year old. A lot of guys now in my job, they're like man you know what, you inspired me, you know because we remember when you know he was like the guy. People we know would look at you and say, "This guys in his 50s, he's in this kind of shape? And it inspired them to work out. Yeah. And they're still doing it right now. Right into today. A few of my coworkers, you know, that's a little, you know, late 40s, 50s early, early 50.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:37] So then what year did you come back to start helping out?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:03:41] 2014. I came in spurts all throughout that time, you know, I would come stick my head in the door, help out. Right. It wasn't where I had to commit to anything. Because they had it. I did a short stint at Huntington for kids. And that was around 2012. That was down there, then I, when I came back here in '14. Yeah, I've been back ever since.

Kerry James Reed [01:04:18] So how did you get the nickname Coach Steady.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:04:21] Well, the coach part came from teaching boxing.

Kerry James Reed [01:04:25] Okay.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:04:25] It was the name Steady stuck with me, throughout my childhood. Early, early childhood. 10, 12 years old. Yeah. My name was Steady Eddie. I don't know why everybody thought my name was Eddie, but yeah, yeah, I was. It was a mix of Eddie Munster and a commercial. The kid name was, nobody could be steady Eddie. I think it was something like that. Yeah, something like that. And then it stuck. They dropped Eddie and everything became steady after that. So it was a fitting name actually.

Kerry James Reed [01:05:26] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:05:27] Yeah, it was a fitting name because people, you know, they see me now and then when they put the coach on it, you know, everybody know. Oh, yeah. You know, the guy coached Eddie over and now he's name it. Yeah. Because everybody knows about this team. So yeah, it helps these kids get along. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:05:54] How have you seen, you know, the boxing program, here at Charles Houston sort of empower the black youth in Alexandria.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:06:08] They're, the youth, the black youth, and it's very few, right? I don't know what to do to get them in. I try. The door is always open for them. I have what we call beginner classes. My last one for this particular group ends tomorrow. Then I'll wait a couple of weeks and I'll start another one. Out of 25 that I have at beginners, 2 of them come from the neighborhood. But they're not going to stay because they've been here before.

Kerry James Reed [01:06:48] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:06:48] When they were much younger, 10 year olds, I start look at them, like one of them is like 16. 6 years, you know. And they don't get it right? Most of them are being raised by single parents, their mom. And so they don't get it. They don't have anybody there to give them structure like we had. So you have the women raising a male and it's not working. It's not working because now they don't even just, they don't even respect each other like we did. We'll get in a fight and that's it, we'll be friends in no time. But now, because they lack real advice, real

structure, that they're not really interested, you know and that is it. The door has been open and I try to encourage them, you know. They'll be at 5:00, 5:30 whatever and I can come over here and you see a gym full. Playing basketball in blue jeans. Who played basketball in blue jeans? We never did. That means, you know, you're not even serious about pick up basketball, you know. And then that's it, you know, they play a so-so type of game and then they just go —now it's getting warm— they're just gonna hang out. As to where, when we were here and got this thing started, almost every kid that couldn't play basketball or wasn't really good at football, was in boxing. We had a lot of kids back then, but we had a lot. But now, you open the door, you say, okay come in. And this is like I've had, this is my 3rd show since I've been back. They hadn't had a show here in 20 years, over 20 years.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:10] Oh wow.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:09:11] And I've had 3 in 3 years. And I do it only because to give them a chance to see how it is you know. They think they're going to get knocked out, they'll get embarrassed, but they play this tough guy role. And what you're trying to do is just humble them a little bit. Right. Come on in here, you want to teach you this and then you'll see, you really you get to see how tough you really are for one, not to get them hurt, but you get to see how tough. And hopefully it humbles you as to where now you want to be a productive citizen, not a statistic. I talked to a little kid yesterday. Moms came in and he was outside or something. So I'm talking to her, and I say, "Okay, why? Well, why do you want him boxing?" And she [said], "Well he need to box because he lost his father, him and his father was close, his father was murdered." I said okay. Same old story. Same old story. So I say, "Okay where is he?" "Well, he's outside charging up his ankle monitor." So I said, "Not again." She says, "What'd you mean?" I said, "I had a kid in here before that I had him when he was 8. By 11 you could see he was going the wrong way because of family issues, what was going on inside his home. Did everything we could to prevent it. He comes in one day with a ankle monitor." See, I tried to tell you that was going to go, that's how it was going to go. Now you in the system? So his mother called me one day. "He's locked up. And this, this, and this. If he would have been in boxing, this wouldn't have happened." I said, "No. You can see it coming. Everybody in the gym can see it coming." I have one of my kids father's a D.C. cop. He used to say it all the time, "That boy going to jail." And it's sad, it was the sad truth, because you know this where you going. So the kid yesterday, I'm talking to him, I think he's 14. He's kinda a tall kid for his age. So I'm talking to this kid. So I asked him a simple question, "Okay, do you want to box?" So he says, "No." I said, "Oh, so your mother wants you to box, not you?" He says, "I don't want to box." I say, "Well, what do you want to do with your life?" "Nothing." I said, "Excuse me." "I don't wanna do nothing." "You don't want to work?" He said, "That don't matter, none of that matters." So I had to try to dig in deep to this kid, you know, and you know, they heard it a thousand times. "The obstacles the way you had it, you know, you got to have two choices, I mean, every time you wake up, you know. You got a choice and a chance every day. So you have to make the right decisions when you wake up in the morning. Your choice and your chance. You got a choice not to follow your friends, you got a chance to live, right?" "I don't care." And I just like, I mean like, I wanted to give up right there. But again, I stayed there and I talked another 15, 20 minutes and just finally I say, "If you ever want to come, the door's open. If you ever decide you

want to come, the door's open." And it was, it was a complete turnaround for one of the kids that lives over there. And I asked him one day, "What do you want to be?" He said, "Oceanographer." I said, "Where'd you find that word, somebody told you that." He said, "No, no, I really want to be that." And I never met his mom until a couple of weeks ago. This kid been coming here about 3 years. And we were speaking and I said, "Well, I say I thought he was pulling my leg when he told me what he wanted to be, and I said he said, I want to be an oceanographer." She said, "Yeah, he does." I said, "You don't hear that, especially coming out the projects." You know what I mean? So at least he's prepared to go that way. Whether you don't do or not, he's at least prepared to go that way. And I say, I wish I had to more like him. He comes in and I let him in. Come in anytime you want. If you want to put on headgear and spare, he gets to do that. I don't put him out like I do most kids, if you say you coming and you don't come. I say, "Okay, you need to stay out for a while because you're messing up the ones that really want to learn. You know, I can't have you mess them up. I do a private thing with just you if you want, but you can't come in here with them because it's a distraction. You know I got kids that's on a national level, and want to compete, I can't have you distracting them." Yeah. So yeah, yeah man. I mean, so we've seen hundreds and about a thousand kids come through these doors in over 40, 45 years. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:01] So you mentioned that you have kids competing on a national level. And I know when we first started talking, you showed me how successful that the gym has become in recent years and before that as well. So given all of the success that the gym has earned, has the city taken notice of the work here that you've done here at all?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:15:23] I don't think so.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:24] No?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:15:26] I don't think so. When you look at, again, when you look at where we are and you compare. I can't compare city to city, but I could compare you know the county. Like we in Virginia LBC right? So I'm pretty sure when you go to Norfolk and the Tidewater area, they get funded a little bit by either the state or the city itself. I could go to Maryland. And if they're there, most of them are private gyms. D.C. is. fund all their boxing gyms. All of them. Even where the guys is in there teaching boxing has a salary, right? Whenever they need equipment, DC buys it. Yeah, yes, federal money. But they're able to tap into their resources. We got to go through Fight for Children, and hope they have it in the budget, right. I mean if they don't then I have to say okay well I guess I have to pay for it. I guess I have to pay for it out my pocket. Fight for Children give me a small stipend I guess, but most of that money go to the kids, goes right back in. So you're loaning it to me really because it goes right back in.

Kerry James Reed [01:17:12] Right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:17:13] And the past years they took care of a lot of stuff. But now they want you to be more independent, raise your own money, stuff like that. That's why I have got to

have a fight. Because in June I want to take these kids to Wichita [Kansas] for the Junior Olympics. So I'm trying to raise money now through people. The businesses, they don't want to talk to you, you know, you go to them, they say, "Yeah, we'll give you this for a discount price." But why you can't just donate that? You know what? This place was all about donating. And I know I need more help to do that kind of legwork because I work a full-time job, then I come here. So, it's a little hard on me, you know, to make everything happen. But I would think, have thought because if you look at a gym that 3 Olympians came out of, and a possible one, he just fought his internationals. It's 2 of my brothers. He just bought his first international fight. But at one time they all were here. And I guess they look at why they're not giving back, and that is something that you should be looked at as well. Oh yeah, why not? Why don't they give it back? Because they're not born and raised here, right? They was born somewhere else, they just happened to come here. So they do more for where they're actually from, their childhood. They go back to their childhood, where there was up until 10 years old. If they got here when they was ten, they still go back to where they were born and raised. So, but yeah, it's a battle trying to keep these doors open. And we've been in city council since I've been here at least 3 times, you know. One time they want to just close the doors. They had Channel 9, Channel 7, somebody that came in and did a story on the gym, you know, trying to help keep your doors open and they give a year, 2 years at a time., You know, contract. But, if I was leave here today, what'd happen? I don't think it, I don't think it'd, you know, exist. I really don't think it would exist, they was like okay good, and the city would take it over and make it a cash cow. Because everybody wants to be into boxing. Yeah, what more the city bringing their own people down, you'd rather bring in somebody and pay them. And you have all the talent that grew up in here that had, you know, real attachment to the gym teach it, but they'd rather not do that.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:14] Yeah. Why do you think the city is so reluctant to support the program?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:20:23] Right, I can only assume, I don't want to speculate, Has something a little bit to do with color. Any time you wouldn't let the kids swim in the pool for free, but you let the dogs swimming in the motherfucker. Come on man.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:45] So we've discussed gentrification a little bit during our conversation today. But I was curious because, you know, you've been at 720 Patrick [Street], for a very long time and the neighborhood has very much been altered around you. I just wanted to ask, what sort of changes have you seen in Uptown or Parker-Gray in the sense since you've lived there?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:21:11] Everything that, most things that we were accustomed to seeing, you know, it's not like we had a lot, but it's no longer here, you know.

Again

like I said, you have neighbors that don't speak, if you come outside, you want to say, "Good evening, good morning." They walk right past you like they don't see you. And I understand its a younger generation, a younger demographic, but when you see what is being done that I know a lot is to be dealing with tax dollars, right. And that's all this city wants, it's pretty much overpopulated. There is more dogs in this small area then there are black kids.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:22:17] I'm telling you, these people got 1 or 2, 3 dogs. Almost every household has a dog, and this is more dogs here than black kids. But for places to go that's why I don't frequent Old Town. I don't spend my money in Old Town. I'll go across a bridge to spend my money if I want to spend it. I don't even go to restaurants in Old Town. A lot of people do, I don't. Why? Because once when I went there, they treated me like a nigger. Excuse my language, but that's what they treated me like. And I say I never, and that's probably 30 years, 30, 40 years ago. I don't remember when he did it, you know. Well because, I mean, I thought all money was green, but to some people, it doesn't matter, you know, it just doesn't matter. So I'm not one of those that's gonna make you rich, and you're going to treat me like crap, you know. But yeah, a lot of history has gone.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:33] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:23:35] A lot of it's gone, and there's no recovering it. You could try to talk about it. But again, these kids are not interested in that. You can't talk history to these kids, you can't talk African-American history to these kids, you can't talk culture to these kids, because they don't know it. Their parents don't know it, you know. Their parents, a lot of these parents are early 20s. They don't know anything, they don't even, I don't think they really know how to be black. They don't. What y'all doing, it's not what we did. So, yeah man, it's sad. It's just, it's a down feeling, you know, if you care. If you don't care, it don't bother you, it don't bother you at all. But someone like me that they grew up here and my recreation was in the middle of the street sometimes when we race up and down Patrick Street. Man it's like, you know, just memories jumping. Trying to wrap those swings around the pole, see if you can hang on, or jumping up off the swing to see how high you can go, just to see how far you'll land, this rough stuff, man. These kids don't know this stuff man. Everything, everything is wires, you know? It's tech. Y'all got parents that bring their kids in here because they're waiting for one of the other kids. They on tablets the whole time, as soon as they come to the door, you gotta tablet in the hand. That's what they've come to. They don't want to play, you know, they don't. And I mean, I've had a good life. It wasn't the best. I'm not the wealthy guy, I never wanted to be wealthy, I wanted to be okay. I never really want to be wealthy because why? My family is not, if I had it, I would actually give it to, probably give most of it away to make sure they okay, you know? And I think that's sometimes I look at that, I shouldn't think like that. But yeah, if I can't take care of everybody, I take care of nobody.

Kerry James Reed [01:26:01] Absolutely.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:26:02] Yeah. That's right.

Kerry James Reed [01:26:07] Absolutely. Well, Mr. Johnson, we've been talking for almost an hour and a half now. I don't want to take up too much of your time. I know you have to get the gym opened here pretty soon. I just have a couple closing questions about Douglass [Cemetery], if that's all right.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:26:18] It's fine.

Kerry James Reed [01:26:20] So when was the last time that you went to Douglass Cemetery?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:26:30] It was a funeral. Oh, who funeral was that? I can't remember, if I didn't make it to Dennis, Dennis Porter's because I was at one of the tournaments. Whose funeral was that? I can't remember. It was maybe 3 years ago, something like that. It wasn't that long, maybe 3 years ago. I just can't remember whose funeral it was. I remember we parked on the street and it had hailed getting out. I parked on the street I said I'm not going in there. Yeah, I can't remember whose funeral that was though.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:14] Do you remember what the cemetery looked like when you went there? Like the physical state of it?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:27:20] It looked like crap! It looked like crap. I think I was trying to find either my grandfather, one of my father's uncle's, like my great uncle. You know, you walk around. I think we did find one. I don't know if there's a real map that you know, could show you who's here, who's there like, most of these cemeteries had. So I don't know. But you know, we're not, when you go places like that, it's like a lot of people. When the cemetery is that old, you're looking for the oldest one that you could find, the oldest headstone, you know. You want to see something, you know, during the slavery time, if you can. Again, I don't think they really mark graves in the 1700s, I don't know. So yeah, you'd be looking for the oldest one, and you normally could find the oldest one because it's the one that's decayed, falling apart, where you can't really read something on it or something like that. Yeah, but it's interesting. I think on the other side of Douglass is a white side. If I'm not mistaken, if you come up by the Whole Foods, I think that side is a little better. I don't know the name of that street right there, but it looks a little better. I don't know if it's two different cemeteries in one, or is a white side, black side? I don't know, I really don't know. I know one side look better than the other.

Kerry James Reed [01:28:55] Yeah, that's true. So when your brother Michael [Johnson] told you that he was starting this initiative, with the city to try and fix up Douglass and get it recognized by the city. What was your initial reaction to that?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:29:11] Well, I was trying to figure out, you know, you kind of like the thought process and why, but then he's been pretty much active in the community for a while so it don't surprise me. But I think it was a good gesture because yeah, somebody needs to do something, force something, somehow and try to save it. Because otherwise, like I say, it's not going to be there that much longer, everything's gonna be down. Or they may dig it up. Who knows? You don't know what these people do. You know money comes first in this town.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:02] So how do you feel? Because Douglass [Cemetery] has been neglected for so long. And we've talked a little bit today about the disintegration of the black

community here in Alexandria. So I guess, in that same line of thought, how do you feel that forgetting about black cemeteries or, you know, the people who have passed. What does that do to a community?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:30:29] Well, it's like you don't have a past, you know, there's no past, there's no history, you know. All you know is you are here. It's not what came before you, which is very important. We all know that is very important. Like yes I know my mother, I know my father, I know of my grandparents, stuff like that, you know. But when you're looking at history and black culture, you know, because black culture is very important to these United States. It always has been. And just to see that go away, just like, you know, when you pass. It means nothing, you know. When you a Caucasian, they pass, but still everything lives on. You know we're like, what's next, what's new? You know we went from R&B to rap to gangsta rap or whatever you call this stuff, that's killing kids, you know. So I mean, that's because the influence, the negative influence. And this is why these kids are constantly killing kids. Where are you going to bury all these kids? Where are you going to bury them?, you know. If it keeps going at this rate, where are you going to bury them all? You're going to be looking at tombstones. 'Oh, this kid died when he was 14, this kid died when he was 12.' And you're going to see a lot of that. So where's the questions gonna to come from? You know where's the younger ones, the new generation. If they look down and say oh he was 12 when he died, why, what happened? Is somebody going to be there to explain it to you? Is there gonna be a lesson in that? I don't know.

Kerry James Reed [01:32:52] Right?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:32:53] You know, I guess we could go and look and say that we're becoming our own worst enemy in a lot of facets, you know. And you don't have to try to straighten it out and it's going to take off, it's going to take a lot of work. And the 30 somethings, and the 47 year olds, maybe even the 50 something was the one you got to touch because they can go back in touch and then maybe we can get to the younger ones. And say hey we need to clean this up. Like I say now so many influences in the city. They don't really care about Douglass because most of them don't come from here, they come from somewhere else. Oh even the black kids, you know. Their parents come from somewhere else. Did they place them here because of the public housing? They're temporary because it's gonna be temporary, they're going to knock it at all down in a few. So they really don't care, you know, they don't have the same caring that we have, you know. Again, we lived through all of this and t, we're in our silver and golden years.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:17] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:34:18] You know what I mean? So I don't know what happens when we done. That's what I say. My last day is my last day. But my son, maybe he might object to it, I mean, but I told him hey man look, don't put me there in the ground because people are gonna forget about you. People won't forget about you.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:49] Absolutely, so moving on to our closing questions, before I do I want to thank you so much for speaking to me today. It's been an absolute blessing hearing you talk. But before we move on to our closing questions, is there anything else you would want to discuss or talk about?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:35:09] No, not really. I again, I'm not like my brother as he talks a lot, talks more than he should sometimes. No, I'm sort of the quiet one. Unless I'm in here. But other than that, I won't say much. I observe, but I don't say much.

Kerry James Reed [01:35:31] So you've spoken about this a little bit today, but what are your hopes for black cemeteries in Alexandria moving forward?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:35:42] Well for one, I hope the community, what's left of the black community to get involved. And you know, and try to get these, you know, the people here to understand the importance of making that place a nice place to visit, you know. Even if it's a memorial park, you can make it look better than what you're doing. And maybe people would take the time to go and look and get connected with their peers, you know, because that's what's there. If you came from here, that's where your past is. Yeah, majority of us, that's where your past is laid, you know? But again, it's going to take a lot of work. A big voice, you know. And a strong push. I don't know how the City Council views on this. The past city council, I mean, why aren't they doing more? You know, yeah you retired so, you know the connections. You know how to connect with these people. Why are you not lending your voice, you know, instead of just letting people like my brother try. You know, you people benefited, you know, greatly from the city, you know. Had good lives working for the city, and now you're not even giving back. Yeah, I mean how hard is it to give back? It's not hard, it's not money, it's time, you know. Time is running out for us, you know. So I mean, I do what I can. That's not my forte to things like that, but it's not like I don't care.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:38] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:37:38] You know, it's just not my thing, you know. I'll help and I'll support, you know, as much as possible, you know, when I can. I mean, a couple of times they had something down there and I couldn't attend because I'm always gone. I'm always gone. You know? So yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:59] Okay. And then how would you like to see this city treat black history in Alexandria moving forward?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:38:10] What, why we can't have a day like Saint Patrick's, right? Because you come in the city of Saint Patrick's, you can see white folks walking up the street drinking beer. Nobody said anything for a black man walks street drinking a beer, he's gonna get locked up. So why you can't, you know, at least do more. We got a little Hall of Fame, black history, Hall of Fame down in the halls. If any center should do it, it should be this center. This is pretty much where

everyone came in my father's time, you know, that was the dip and the hump. Because if you come into practice, you see a kind of like, see it goes like this.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:06] Yeah.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:39:07] Used to be a little deeper than that. The street used to be a little deeper before they got all that new stuff. But this is where everyone came. This where they came. There was no stores on the south side of town, everything was down here. So everybody walked here, you know, wasn't a whole lot of cars, they got around by foot. And I guess that that made a difference, you know, it made a big difference because that's how you got to know everyone, just through walking. You know, then you get your car going, you know? There's no communication, you know? So, so yeah, I'd like to see a change. Just even, like I say Black History Day. Make it more than, "Oh, its Black history day." That's all you doing, that's nothing. How the kids gonna learn? Would you give them a day out of school or something? I don't know. No. Learn to take the time, as big as that auditorium is, you never had a Black History Day, you know. You come in and somebody say, oh, let's play music on Fridays for the kids. They don't want to participate in that half the time, but what good is that? They're not getting educated, you know. When we was growing up, we would go over there to that center and they would take us on trips, you know. I don't know if it was funded by the city, probably was, but it wasn't a lot of money, but they would actually take us places, you know. Museums, like take us to D.C., [01:40:50] **Collarburn**, [0.1s] learn how to grow vegetables and stuff like that, you know. Yeah, we did all that, we did all that. But yeah, I wish they would, just do a little bit better when it comes to at least that one day, you know, if not more. Why should it be one day anyways, you know, it should be something that we experience, through Christmas, through the New Year, not just February, you know. Juneteenth, they don't really do anything for Juneteenth, you know, people don't even know what Juneteenth is, what is Juneteenth? They don't know. So, you know, yeah. They're going to have to dig a little deeper, you know, and I know it's not the staff responsibility, it's the downtown people. They call all the shots to make the decision, you know, but somebody down there need to open their ears and say, okay, you know, we're dealing with this, you know. We can live besides y'all, but y'all don't want to live beside us. We can live with you, we can exist. But y'all don't want us to exist around you. That's sad, that's the sad part, you know. I mean again, I've seen my mother cry many days, man, many days, you know? So yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:29] Absolutely. Then what are your hopes for the boxing gym moving forward?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:42:35] Well, hopefully it can go another 10 years. Hopefully. Or hit the 50 mark, but I don't know. Because like I said, I tell the kids all the time, I don't know how much more time I have doing this, you know. Whether you know God's choice or my choice, you know, I need to live a little bit more too. I don't live enough. This is life. I come here every day, sick, whatever. Not feeling good, I still come, you know. So I don't know. Hopefully I reach 50, and beyond, but yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:43:22] Absolutely. And then lastly, if you could hold on to one memory forever, what would it be?

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:43:30] One memory forever? I don't know, because this is definitely the biggest thing, it became the biggest thing to me. But just the memory of my childhood probably. Yeah, my childhood was great. Being poor was good, it taught you so much that when you fall from grace, you're still strong, you know what I mean. Yeah, when you fall, you know how to deal with it. I see people don't know how to deal with it because they never had a chance to experience it. Yeah, but I had my ups and downs bro and you know, I've always been sort of humble, and then to have to get to where I am in my late part of my life, and pretty much everything was taken away because of a person, but I was still strong because of my past and what my parents taught me, you know I mean. That's inside of me, you can't take that, you can take material shit, money. You could take all that. But my past, you can't take that. You can't take what's inside me and that is like I have to truly say, thank God for my parents, you know. Because I saw the struggle, I saw a real struggle. I mean, it's ten million more, you know, with the same story. But I saw the struggle, so it makes me, it made me a better person than what I am right now. So, and that's why you see me give back so much. That's why these kids tease. Oh, he love those kids. Yeah, yeah, somebody's gotta love him. Might as well be me, you know. That's pretty much it.

Kerry James Reed [01:45:55] Absolutely. Well, thank you so much again, Mr. Johnson. It's been an absolute privilege to hear you speak today. Thank you so much.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:46:01] Thank you for having me.

Kerry James Reed [01:46:02] Of course.

Jeffery Johnson Sr. [01:46:03] Yeah.

