



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



# Oral History Interview

with

## Steve Johnson

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**Interviewer:** Kerry James Reid

**Location of Interview:**

Lloyd House, 200 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA, 22314

**Date of Interview:**

Part 1 – March 5, 2024

Part 2 – March 13, 2024

**Transcriber:** J Orisha

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**Summary:**

**Part 1:** *Steve Johnson reflects on growing up in Alexandria, Virginia and the impact his career had on the community.*

**Part 2:** *Steve Johnson shares his journey of discovering his connection with Douglass Cemetery. He emphasizes respecting and preserving its history while highlighting his advocacy efforts.*

## Part 1 Table of Contents and Keywords

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<b>General</b>	Firefighting; 1960s; 1970s; 1980s; 1990s; 2020s; Childhood; Segregation; Integration; African-American History; Sports; Football; Sports; African American Neighborhoods; African-American Cemeteries; African American Elementary Schools; Racism; Public History; Television; Cemeteries; Funerary Rites; Child Rearing; Historic Sites; Family; Community; Public Initiative; African-American History
<b>People</b>	Steven Johnson, Michael Johnson, Stephanie Johnson, Jeffery Johnson, Gregory Johnson; Andre Johnson; Agnes Randolph; Tyrone Clout; Steven Haney; Michael Haney; Peyton Johnson, Coach Boone; Joe Cronin; John Molten; Jim Gower; Gerald Joe Watson; Charlie Webb; Byron Andrews; Mike Shafer; Mike Garcia; Gary Harper; Bill Bankee; Derek Pinney; Willy Bailey; Benny Edward Evans; Awanda Djore; Wallace Jack Johnson; Peewee Banks; George Richardson; Warner Johnson
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### Part 1

**Steve Johnson** [00:00:01] I'm Steven Johnson. I'm 66 years old. Today is March 5th, 2024, and I'm at the Lloyd House at Queen and Washington Street.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:00:12] My name is Kerry James Reed. I'm 27 years of age. It is the 5th of March, 2024, and we are at the Lloyd House. So, thank you so much for doing this, Mr. Johnson. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you. This is going to be a fascinating interview. We're going to start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

**Steve Johnson** [00:00:28] Okay. I was born here in Alexandria, Virginia. Alexandria Hospital, which would be a couple of blocks south and one street over.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:00:42] What are some of your earliest memories in your life?

**Steve Johnson** [00:00:48] I grew up at 1321 Queen Street. In a one-bedroom duplex with five other siblings. It was five boys and one girl, and we all slept in one room. My sister's bed was to the end, where a railing comes up the steps. My parents slept downstairs in the dining room, slash, kitchen. It was a pretty dilapidated house. I remember it being battleship gray in color. And my dad was always fixing things. He was a maintenance guy where he worked at. So, he was always fixing things, and trying to [00:01:39] shore [0.0s] things up to keep us at least warm and dry. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:01:48] So you said five siblings, right? I can imagine that there were a lot of a family squabbles around things like the bathroom.

**Steve Johnson** [00:01:57] Oh man! My oldest two brothers, Andre, who's passed away now, he was a marine in the Marine Corps, but not back then. Andre and Greg, my parents trusted them. It was a store around the street from us, and they would grab me by the hand and take me to the store. And me and my twin sister, I have a twin. Basically, we were tight knit. You know, back in the day, because, like I said, we all was in the same room, and, we had a lot of fights. Good Lord! We had a lot of fights. But, I learned a lot from my older siblings. There's was a high school across the street. If we came out of our house, you had to go to the right towards West Street. It was a high school there that we were not allowed to go over to. Near the playground we were not allowed to go out and play. So, we had to play in the neighborhood.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:03:17] Why were you not allowed to go and play at the playground across the street?

**Steve Johnson** [00:03:20] One, it was crossing West Street [which] was fairly busy for a street. Even back then it was fairly busy. Because my little brother, [00:03:31] Jeff, [0.0s] got hit by a car there. But we couldn't go to the playground over there because it was Jefferson High School across the street, but it was all white. It was segregated. So, we weren't allowed to go over there and play during school hours.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:03:56] So you mentioned that your older siblings would take you down by the hand and lead you to various places in the neighborhood, play with you and things like that. Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

**Steve Johnson** [00:04:08] The neighborhood was pretty quiet. A lot of larger [houses]. Our house was the smallest house on the block. It was a tree lined street. Most of the houses was in pretty decent shape, and good size at that. My mom and dad knew all the neighbors. At times they would go somewhere and the neighbors would make sure that, even without my mom asking, they [would say], "Hey, we'll watch the kids while y'all go and do what you got to do." You know, because my family didn't own a car, so either you walked or you called a cab. You know. But the neighborhood itself was pretty quiet. It was clean, actually, pretty clean too, because it was - I forgot the gentleman's name. It's been so long ago. Every day he went out and picked up trash. Every day. Every day. He had either a trash can in his hand or - wasn't trash bags back then - he would have old grocery bags. [He would] pick up paper and put them in the old grocery bag and put them in the trash. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:05:25] Interesting. Do you know how he did that?

**Steve Johnson** [00:05:27] He just didn't like [trash]. Because if he saw you drop something, he'll tell you to pick it up. You know. He wanted that part of 1300 block of Queens Street either side clean.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:05:43] So would it be fair to say then that the community took a lot of pride in their neighborhood?

**Steve Johnson** [00:05:48] They took a lot of pride, you know, considering that nobody on that block was rich. You know, I mean, the houses were good size, you know, back then, but, nobody on that block was what we would call today, "well off." You know.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:06:08] Can you describe any of the local businesses in the neighborhood or right outside of it that you would frequent?

**Steve Johnson** [00:06:13] Okay. On the corner of Queen and Payne Street there was a grocery store. Mister Shapiro, I think his name was, and everybody in their neighborhood would go to that store. [The] local corner store. And if you didn't have any money, he would let you get what you want. And then at the end of the week my parents would go pay him. You know, so if they say, "Hey go up to Mr. Shapiro and get a loaf of bread," or "Take this note up there," and he'll look at and go get the items and then write it down what you owe. And then that was that. You know. And I don't know if he was white or Italian or something like that. I know he had dark hair. He had real dark hair. Really nice guy though. God, he was really nice. And he knew everybody. From the oldest to the youngest, he knew everybody.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:07:24] You said Mr. Shapiro?

**Steve Johnson** [00:07:27] Shapiro. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:07:31] So you mentioned that you weren't allowed to go to the playground across the way. So, were there any other spots in the neighborhood that you liked to hang out or play in as a child?

**Steve Johnson** [00:07:40] We either played in the alley. It was a basketball court further up the street. Actually, they had a playground on it also. So yeah, a lot of neighborhood kids would go there. Either my mom will take us up there. Sometimes my dad would take us up there, until we were old enough to go ourselves. But, the basketball court actually still there. It's still there, and it's a church on the corner that used to be a theater. I remember going in there [to] watch [movies]. We watched so many movies. And it was only like \$0.10 to go to the movies then. Father gave us a quarter each. We could get in a movie and a bag of popcorn for \$0.25. Yeah, that place is now in a church, but it's still there. And then all the barbers were on the block over where the church is. That whole row was either barbers or beauty salons. And across the street was the infamous [00:08:58] Sarge's [0.0s] restaurant across the street from the church.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:09:05] What made it so infamous?

**Steve Johnson** [00:09:06] Oh, Sarge, he had it going on. I was a young boy, but it [had] Go-Go dancers in there. And it was a bar. I don't know if it was all day bar. I know he ended up selling food and stuff. It was a restaurant, so he sold food, but at night it turned into like a Go-Go club or something like that.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:09:28] Oh, that's pretty cool. Where was this?

**Steve Johnson** [00:09:32] Sarge's on Queen Street. Queen and Fayette. At the corner. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:09:37] That's really interesting. I've never heard of that.

**Steve Johnson** [00:09:38] Yeah. So right across the street from there is that church I was talking about that's there now. It's hard to still there, too, but it's named something else now. Yeah, but it was quite the thing up there.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:09:56] Yeah, I bet.

**Steve Johnson** [00:09:56] Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:09:57] Restaurant slash Go-Go club. Yeah. That sounds awesome. So, what were some of the favorite aspects of your neighborhood besides from Sarge's restaurant?

**Steve Johnson** [00:10:11] You know, they had so many alleys. So, we ran up and down, and in and out the alleys and, you know, we played tag, hide and go seek, and all that stuff. We had like six alleys we could go and run in, you know, from West Street to Fayette Street. We played in the church yard a lot. I can't remember if they had [swings]. At one time I think they did have swings at the church cause my mom was a devoted member to that church. [It was] Mount Jezreel Baptist church on Payne Street. And she took us to church every Sunday. Every Sunday. All six of us. Took us to church every Sunday.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:11:04] What denomination?

**Steve Johnson** [00:11:06] Baptist.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:11:07] Baptist. How was that experience for you?

**Steve Johnson** [00:11:10] At first, I didn't understand it, you know, for a long time. Because they did prayers and song and then they do Bible school for the youngsters. Cause my mom was a Sunday school teacher. All the people that went to that church we knew. A lady named Agnes Randolph, it was two Miss Randolph, Agnes and I forgot the other Miss Randolph. One of the Miss Randolph worked at the school we went to in the cafeteria. I think Miss Agnes Randolph worked in government somewhere. But, yeah, we were in church all the time until I would say once we got to about 13 to 14, Then she didn't enforce it as much as she did when we were growing up, I mean, a little younger. But I got a lot out of it, not even realizing how much I got out of it until later on. I got a lot out of it, you know. Because I thought I one time it was just her way of keeping us from going to the playground. In essence, she was trying to teach us something about life.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:12:41] Yeah, absolutely. So, when did you realize then how much you had gotten out of it?

**Steve Johnson** [00:12:55] My mom always talked about God. And, I got severely hurt. I mean, I was the only one getting hurt in my family for some reason. When I got hurt, I got hurt. I was riding on a bike with a guy named Tyrone [00:13:11] Clout. [0.0s] And we were riding around, you know. It was a bunch of us. I didn't have a bike of my own, so Tyrone rode me on his bike. And we were playing tag on bikes, and we came around the corner from West Street to Queen Street, and Tyron was flying. And then somebody was standing on a sidewalk with a water gun and shot him in his eyes with water, and he hit the brakes on the bike, and it flipped forward. And I'm sitting between the crossbar on the bike and near the handlebars. So, when it flipped...boom! I hit my head. And I had a humungous knot. But know I know that knot is actually called medically a hematoma. And, I had to go to the hospital, and I think I stayed two days in the hospital. And then once I got home, I can really, to this day, remember, the doctor told my mom, he said, "He might throw up a couple of times during the week. But that is to be expected from a head [injury]. His injury was pretty severe, but we'll keep an eye on it. And I remember for 3 or 4 days everything I ate just came up, you know. So, yeah. Like I said, I was injury prone. That was the first severe injury. I had more. I have more, man.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:15:08] Could you describe your mother?

**Steve Johnson** [00:15:10] Yes. Man. [Long pause]. Wow. Hard worker. Fairly young. She was maybe 28, 29 with six kids. And she worked two jobs. She worked a job as a housekeeper in the morning. [She] caught a bus to the [00:15:51] Haneys. [0.0s] It was a family called Haneys. They were really good, you know, white family, but they were really good. Steven Haneys and Miss Steven and Michael. Matter of fact, the Haneys is how my mother named myself and Mike because they had a Michael, the Haney's did, and they had a Steven. So, my mom named us after two of the Haneys kids. And, they were really nice to my mom considering the times.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:16:28] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:16:28] Yeah, they were really nice to my mom. And then my mom ended up going to DCP that was down on Route One, and she started off as a short order cook down there. And then they found out she could really cook [chuckles]. She did a lot of the heavy duty cooking there. I'm thinking she got \$28 a week. I can vividly remember her saying that she got a raise. And she ended up getting a raise to \$35 a week. Between my mom and my dad, I don't think their paycheck equaled to \$120 a week. Because my dad worked at Atlantic Research Corporation. That was my first real job too there. Yeah, my mom was very religious, didn't curse, [and] didn't drink. Did the best of her six kids. She had 8, but two of them...she had 6 by marriage. When she lived in Georgia she had my oldest sister and my oldest brother before she came here. She followed her oldest sister up here from Georgia. So, yeah, she was hard working. Man. God! I don't know how she did it, man. But that was my mom. She had no quit in her. None. None at all. But she was a very tough lady. Small, very small lady, too. You know, I'm probably the smallest in the family. And I was a runt for the longest time. I was a twin, but I was the smallest one. I was the smallest baby she had. You know, the rest of the kids were either 8, 7, 9, [birth weight], and I was 5 or 6, something like that. But she made sure, even if it wasn't a lot, she made sure that we got something.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:19:00] Yeah, absolutely.

**Steve Johnson** [00:19:01] Yeah. I mean, like I said, I didn't even know we were poor and I really didn't realize how hard we had it. You know, I really didn't until we moved from 1321 Queen Street to Patrick Street. That's when I realized that. You know, because I thought living in the projects was cool. My aunt lived there, her sister lived there, and had another sister live there. And then I thought that living in the projects, we could never get there. And then when we got up there thinking that we were going to the projects, we went to the house that we own right now. And like I said, my mom, she persevered because that house we moved in from Queen Street to Patrick Street, a lady that attended her church, the same church saw that my mom was struggling with 6 kids in one bedroom. First, she rented the house to my mom and dad. Three bedrooms, and at least my sister had her own room. And, parents had their room, and all 5 boys slept in the same room, you know. And 2 of us to a bed until we could get more beds and stuff. So, the oldest one has a bed to himself, but the other two, we had to [share]. So, myself and my baby brother slept in one bed. And, brother, Greg and Mike slept in the other bed. But it was rough man. And I tell anybody, my mom was strong. Yeah. She was real strong.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:21:03] So you mentioned that she had moved up to Alexandria from Georgia following her older sister, was it?

**Steve Johnson** [00:21:08] Following her older sister, yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:21:10] Growing up, did your mother tell you guys a lot about her family history back in Georgia?

**Steve Johnson** [00:21:18] Woo! Yeah, yeah. Georgia was not the place to be if you're Black, -and they came from a real town in town called Barnesville, Georgia. And to this day, it hasn't changed that much. She came from a family of 8 sisters and 2 brothers. Yeah. One of her brothers was killed. They were on a Boy Scout camping trip. And this is true story. They were in the woods and members of the Klu Klux Klan saw them out in the woods and just opened fire on them, and killed

her oldest brother. They killed him. And the other brother, Walter, we call him Bud, I don't think he was old enough to go on that camping trip. But, yeah, they killed Bernie. Bernie and a couple of other guys. And it was nothing in Georgia to, stay for. To this day I got older brother down there now. And to this day, every time I talk to him I say, "I don't know how y'all made it down here, man." Because, you know, my mom left - let's see there were eight of them. So, my Aunt Margie left. My mom left. Aunt Tila left, and Liz. So, 4 of them came this way. And Aunt Tila ended up going to Chicago. And it was still Doris, Louis, [and] Julia. Yeah, but those 3 stayed. And all of them gone now. All of them died. All of them passed away. It's crazy. Mother's Day 2018, my mom and her sister, for all intents and purposes, passed away almost the same day. Okay. My Aunt Liz was real sick, I hadn't seen her in six months. And I went to my mother's house every Mother's Day. I cook for my mother, and I do grocery shopping for my mother, every Mother's Day. And Mother's Day 2018, I went over there. And she normally is up on Sunday and I thought she was going to church. So, I got there, and she was still there. I'm calling her name, calling her name, and calling her name. And she finally answered me. I said, "Now what are you doing up late? Getting up late?" And she, "Well I was up all night." I said, "Do you feel okay?" She said, "Yeah." [I said], "Are you sure?" She said, "Yeah." And then she told my sister [that] Liz had been in and out of hospital for six months, and she was finally home. I said, "I'm going over there to see her and come back. You know I'm going to cook for you today, and I'll go to grocery store." She said, "Okay." So, I went to see her sister Liz. And just by me, and my medical training, and background, and all that stuff, once I saw her that she wasn't right. You know, she didn't recognize her husband or their daughter, but she recognized me. And I got to question and talking to her, and she was out of it. I told my cousin Isaiah, "Call her doctors [and] see if y'all can get her back in hospital. Let them look at a her because she ain't quite right." You know, and I can just look at her eyes and tell she wasn't quite right. So, we did that. I talked to my uncle and told them, "Let's just build a wheelchair ramp, you know, because she's not going to be able to go up and down." He said, "Okay." Long story short, I went to Lowe's to get some wood. I did measurements and all that so I could build a wheelchair ramp for her. So, my cousin called me, Roslyn, who's my aunt's daughter, and she said, "Hey, the paramedics here. Going to take my mom back to the hospital." I said, "Okay, cool." So, I said, "I'll tell mom when I get home." I left Lowe's. I went to my mother's front door. [I] saw her purse at the top of the steps, and I turned to the left. Just like that, [she] passed away on the sofa. Just like that. Same day. But the good thing about it is I'm glad I found her instead of any one of my other siblings. Yeah, she passed away on Mother's Day. And I had just talked to her. She had many, many, many, many friends! Where in the world did she have time to meet all these people, good Lord! When we were at the funeral, it was just people everywhere. White, Black, whatever! Everybody was there, you know. She died at 88 years old. But she was determined [chuckles]. She threw herself a party the month before she died. And she's never had a party in her life because she didn't believe in it. She didn't drink or none of that stuff, and she threw herself a party. And I said, "You know something I don't know?" She said, "Nah." Now she asked Mike, he'll tell you. She told Mike, "Imma have a party." And he said, "Where?" She said, "At the Rec Center [Charles Houston Recreation Center] and you gonna get the Rec Center for me." He said, "All right." So, he did. A month before she passed away, she had a party. She knew something, man. You know, that was a strong lady.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:28:20] Yeah. She sounds like an amazing woman.

**Steve Johnson** [00:28:21] Yeah. She was. She taught me how to cook. Oh, boy. Yeah, I can cook.



**Kerry James Reed** [00:28:27] What types of things did she teach you how to cook?

**Steve Johnson** [00:28:30] Everything! I mean, stuff I don't even eat.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:28:32] Everything. [Laughs]. Okay.

**Steve Johnson** [00:28:32] You know, I'm not a macaroni and cheese guy, but I can make it. I'm not a gratin potatoes guy, but I can make it, you know. Greens, string beans, meatloaf, you name it I can cook it. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:28:49] Okay. Where was your mother's funeral held? If you don't mind me asking.

**Steve Johnson** [00:28:55] It was at Mount Jezreel Baptist Church. It rained to beat the band. That's the thing, man. It was raining to beat the bands, man. It was like a typhoon almost. And all those people were there.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:29:11] Was she buried at a cemetery?

**Steve Johnson** [00:29:13] Yeah. She's buried at Mount Comfort. Her and my father, they're buried in the same place.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:29:29] Can you describe your father?

**Steve Johnson** [00:29:31] Yeah. You see Mike, you see my father.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:29:33] No, really?

**Steve Johnson** [00:29:34] Yes! Yes. And they act almost the same to me. But my father could either make you laugh or make you cry. Yeah. But he was a tough guy, man. To me he looked so big. He seemed larger than life until I got a little older and a little size on me. And [he said], "You're muscular." But I was like, "I ain't so big," you know? But he's good, man. He was pretty strict with us until we started getting a little older, you know. I was the last one to leave the nest. My younger brother was partying before I was, you know. But my dad always appreciated me being around, and he was a diabetic. And as it started taking this effect on him, you know, I kind of kept my eye on him, even though I had moved out and had my own child, and ended up getting married, and stuff like that. But, I saw my dad every day. He used to keep a lot of stuff in. He was the type of guy [that] if you didn't know, you didn't know how to approach him because he had this reputation. He had a gruff with him, you know, but I didn't pay attention. "Man, your father's mean!" "Nah, he's not mean. Just try and talk to him. You'll see. He's got a certain guard he keeps up." Yeah, but he was a good guy, man. He's a real good guy. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:31:25] Did he ever talk about his family history?

**Steve Johnson** [00:31:28] Yes, his family was from here. As you went down the line, my father's family complexion- wise could pass for white. A lot of them. Oh, yeah, a lot of them could. They

were from, Peyton Johnson's family, which is originally out of Culpepper, Virginia. Michael knows a lot more about it than I do because he's been researching that. But, yeah, my father's family was fairly light. You know, for a long time, people thought my dad was white until he got a little older, and then you, could see that he was just a light skinned Black man. But he was a hard worker also. You know, like I said, he had diabetes and that didn't take him away from here but...it's crazy! You know what, man? Both times that I talked to my parents - like my mom. When I talked to my mom, I told her I'll be back and I came back and I found her passed away. I talked to my dad the day he died. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I'm walking down the church." He had joined a church. He was reluctant to go to church for a long time, but he joined the church long time ago, and put a lot of heart and soul into keeping the church right and all that stuff. And I talked to him one day. I just get off work from the fire department. I had to go renew my license. And Kerry I'm telling you the truth, I got in the line to give the lady my cards to redo my license, and I got this crazy feeling, like, I actually dropped to my knees. What in the world going on with me? And I had just talked my dad and I told my dad, "Hey, look, I'm going to the DMV and once I get back I'll come by and holler at you. You need to go anywhere?" He said, "Nah, that's alright. I'll come and see you." And I left out the house, went home, and my wife called me. She said, "Your father got hit!" And I was like, "What?" She said, "Your father got hit." I said, "What do you mean he got hit?" She said, "He got hit by a car." And I was like, "What do you mean? I just talked to him." So, come to find out, it's on the same block that we grew up on. A car ran a light at Wythe and Patrick by the center [Charles Houston Recreation Center]. The car ran a light right there. Hit a dump truck, not the full-sized dump truck but a mini one, but it still was a big sized dump truck. Hit that. The dump truck fishtailed. And luck would happen, my father was just walking from down the church like he said. And the dump truck jumped the curb, hit him and pinned him to a pole. The pole is still there with the dent in it right today. It killed him. It didn't kill him right there, but he died the next day, you know. Because I was reading the reports and all that. And my mom then was like praying and saying, "He'll get through this." And I read the report and I'm going "No," but I didn't tell them that, you know. But from my training, and looking at the injury report, and the people I talked to at the hospital, they were telling me [00:35:33] that's his last night. [0.2s] And I said, "I'm not going to tell them. Just let them hold on to hopes." But me personally, I know my dad wasn't going to make it through the next day. And he didn't. But like I say, he was strong. He was a strong guy. And he died. What's really crazy [is] my dad's father died when he was 69 years old. And my dad was 34. My dad died at 69 years old. I was 34! Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:36:27] Did you know a lot about your father's father? Did he mention him a lot?

**Steve Johnson** [00:36:39] I don't remember him. I think he had passed away before I was born. I'm not sure. I know Mike kind of remembers him, but I might have been born. I probably was an infant. I don't even remember my grandmother, his mother - yeah, I do, yeah, I do. She was in a wheelchair. At 60 years old, she was in a wheelchair. She died at 60 years old. My father's mother did. Back in the day when you got arthritis in your hip, you know, there was no hip replacement. They put in a wheelchair, and that's where you were. But, yeah, I remember her vividly. I mean, not vividly, but some. I remember the lady in a wheelchair and I knew that was my grandma because she would pick us up. But my grandfather Shaq, the other Shaq, I don't remember him at all. Like I say I was probably a baby.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:37:47] So you mentioned to me earlier that you and your friends would play around in alleys growing up and things like that. Did you ever play around in any cemeteries in Alexandria growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [00:38:07] We did play in cemetery before - I'm trying to remember. Oh! I wasn't supposed to be there, but it was the one on Washington Street. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:38:26] You mentioned your mother making you all go to church from a young age. Did you ever visit any cemeteries with your mother in Alexandria?

**Steve Johnson** [00:38:36] Only doing funerals, you know. Other than me running around with my friends to them cemeteries there and there. I wasn't too crazy about doing it because the ghost that can come get you if stand on somebody's grave. So, I would always try to go the other way. We were running and stuff, but I was trying my best not to step on anybody's grave. The only up close and personal stuff I had with cemeteries was for the first time was when I was a pallbearer for a classmate of mine - classmate's brother.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:39:33] What was that experience like?

**Steve Johnson** [00:39:34] God, man. It was different, man. I must have been 7, 8, 9 years or something like that and never seen a cemetery in that light to where you can see the hole open, the open hole. And it was classmates and friends that were pallbearer for our friend Spencer's little brother. And that was the very first time that I was up close and personal for going to a cemetery other than ducking and dodging out of the one up there on Washington Street. And a lot of time I was chasing my brother and them anyway. And they would always duck through the cemetery to lose us, you know, cause me and my couple of other brothers would be running, trying to catch up with them, and he always would duck us. And I always knew he's going to the cemetery. I know they would go there because they end up going down the river. And they'd go that way, you know, and they'll duck us at the cemetery and hide behind headstones and stuff like that. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:41:02] So did your family have any special funeral rites or traditions? So, when you would go with your mother to these funerals, did you always bring a certain dish or anything? Were there any traditions, anything like that?

**Steve Johnson** [00:41:14] Would take dishes to where they had the repass. My mother would make something, and she'd take it to the repass. But, I had this real crazy superstition until I was really old enough to say this nonsense. I wouldn't go after playing in them and then getting up close with it. I had a superstition about cemeteries as a whole of I could be next. Of course, I could, you know. But I didn't realize at that time. I don't want to push my luck. So, I stopped playing around in cemeteries. And like I said, the only time I really got up close and personal when I started attending funerals, you know, and go to the gravesite and all that kind of stuff because, back in the day, I was not for it. But then as I got older, though – I was on Braddock Road out in Fairfax, Burke or something like that. And, I attended a funeral where it was totally different. You didn't see headstones. You saw plaques in the ground, and I thought that was way different. You can see that the whole landscape of the cemetery itself, because you didn't see headstones. I was trying to figure out why that cemetery was different than the one with the protruding headstones. You know. Not until recently

that I'm going, "Okay. Was it from zoning or whatever?" But, I mean, it looked neat. But I thought that it would be harder to find a plot when the thing is on the ground instead of sticking up where you can just look up and read it. You gotta really know where you going. You know? But, I didn't really, to this day, I still can't navigate, other than the graves where I know they are. You know. Because I know I got friends and other relatives buried all over the place. But I go to Coleman's a lot now and just to try to navigate through and see how they're set up, like Frederick, almost, and one across the street Bethel. Now there's a rhyme and reason, because at first, I didn't know anything about cemeteries. It is a purpose to everything. And I was like, "Wow!"

**Kerry James Reed** [00:44:45] Where did you go to school growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [00:44:48] I went to Charles Houston Elementary. Parker Gray Middle. I went to Howard Middle T.C. Williams.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:44:59] Did you play any sports growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [00:45:01] I played sports, but I was playing football for T.C. Back then you had to have a card signed every week before you [played]. You know, if you didn't get your eligibility card - that's what it's called, eligibility card. If you didn't get your eligibility card signed, you couldn't play. And if you didn't get homework done in certain classes, you couldn't play. Well, I was notorious for that. And the bad part about it is, I was good! [Laughs]. So yeah. Needless to say, Coach Boone didn't play that.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:45:53] Yeah, absolutely not. What position did you play?

**Steve Johnson** [00:45:56] I played wide receiver [and] running back.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:46:00] You must've been fast then.

**Steve Johnson** [00:46:00] Oh I could run. I could run. Anybody around here could tell it to you. I could run.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:46:07] Why didn't you do your homework then?

**Steve Johnson** [00:46:09] I don't know man. I don't know. Got lazy. Being around wrong [people]. "Man, you don't need to do that. They won't let you play anyway." No, didn't happen that way. Coach Boone was not like that. And now he was strict. And he [say], "Johnson! You're one of the best I got out here, but I ain't letting you play." You know I'll skip classes not knowing that the teacher going to go tell Coach Boone. And Coach Boone would say, "Did you go to English today?" No. "Yeah I went!" "No, you didn't." He's right, I didn't go. But I ended up playing semi-Pro football. And I played [in] a flag league that traveled the country. I played on that. Yeah, I played in the Silverdome when we went to Detroit. Played up in Allentown, Pennsylvania. We played a team that had Miller highlight sponsored and had these beautiful uniforms. It was nice. I played a lot of football, but I just wasn't...and then I tried out for the Dallas Cowboys back in 79. Yeah, it was their first, open trial camp. Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:47:47]

**Kerry James Reed** [00:47:49] So while you were going to school growing up, was this during the period where Alexandria was trying to integrate all the schools?

**Steve Johnson** [00:47:55] Yeah, it was tough too man, because they had the 6K22 plan, where they started bussing Black kids to schools that were predominantly white. You know, so kids that used to go to Parker Gray now got bussed to Minnie Howard, and Hammond and GW [George Washington]. You know, because GW was predominantly Black because of location, but they wanted more mixture, you know. So, yeah. It was in the 70s, early 70s, mid 70s and it was the 6k22 plan. Meaning sixth to kindergarten. Instead of like you walking to school right across the street, instead of you going to that school, you went on a bus somewhere else. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:49:09] That sounds pretty disruptive.

**Steve Johnson** [00:49:12] It was I'm trying to think of what their reasoning was [or] their rationale behind that plan, but it took some getting used to, especially from parents. I really didn't care where I went. I mean, I did actually, because Parker Gray was within walking distance. You know, GW was walking distance. I ended up still going to GW ninth and tenth grade, but seventh and eighth I went to a school that I had to get on a bus to - Minnie Howard, instead of going to Parker Gray. I went one year to Parker Gray and then they changed everything up. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:49:54] So when you got bussed to these new schools, did you experience any animosity or any racism from your white classmates?

**Steve Johnson** [00:50:05] I wouldn't call it animosity. I would call it both sides being a little apprehensive, you know. Because you're forced to get used to something, and you know, just introducing people to something new, they're not going to take to it automatically. I mean, it ended up being okay, but it was it was a rough couple of years. It was a rough couple of years with that 6k22 plan. It was. You know, I'm not going to sit here and say, "Oh it wasn't no problems," because it was. But it was more parents than students, you know. It was more parents and students. The students could probably care less you know, but depending on where you were brought up and how you brought up, you know, it was a problem for some. You know my mom always told us, "Sometimes you got to beat people with a long-handed spoon," and she always used to say that, you know, "Everybody live and breathe the same air." You know so that's the way I looked at it too. Because the only white friend I had [is] when I moved up on Patrick Street. There were only two white families in that neighborhood when I moved up there. It was the Masseys on our block and Bruce. What was Bruce's last name? They were in Columbus Street, exactly two blocks over, because we were 700 block of North Patrick Street and they were 700 block of North Columbus Street. But it was only two white families in that whole area, because otherwise you had projects. Until recently, I've never seen a white family in projects, you know, not in Alexandria anyway. But yeah, that 6k22 plan, it just kind of put everybody in a different way because, you got people from the projects now going to schools that had more affluent people in it, you know. That's where all the problems arose. And a lot of people didn't care. But like I say, it was more parents than just the kids themselves, you know? A lot of it is what you're taught, you know. My mom was never about that. She used to tell us, "If somebody call you the N-word, it's okay. Just go on about your business. It's a work." I

never had a big problem with it. I mean, I know people use it to be vicious. But I didn't really hear that much in school. Everybody was there to have fun and get along. The white kids I went to school with. They come from affluent families. But, you know, they wanted Black friends. You know. So. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:53:44] Did your parents place a big emphasis on school growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [00:53:50] Yes, actually, my mom did. My dad only went to sixth grade, and that was because it was designed for them to only to go to sixth grade. They didn't have -

**Kerry James Reed** [00:54:10] Where did he go to school?

**Steve Johnson** [00:54:11] Here in Alexandria.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:54:12] When would he have been in elementary school?

**Steve Johnson** [00:54:20] 19...I would say 30s or 40s.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:54:37] Wow. Okay. I did not know that. So, it was your mother then that placed a lot of the emphasis on [school].

**Steve Johnson** [00:54:39] Because my mom didn't have an education. My mom only had in Georgia - God, if you saw this place, you go, "Well how can anybody learn anything here?" But in Georgia, they only went to sixth grade, and if you wanted to go any further, then you'd have to either move out of the town they were in, or you knew somebody, you know. And back then you knew affluent white people, but you only knew them because your mom or dad worked for them, you know, and they weren't gonna put in a word for you, you know. I mean, that's how it was back then. But yeah, because my mom I think [had] a sixth-grade education. She might have went to ninth grade. Nah, she might have went to ninth grade down there. Now that I think about it. But I know my dad went to sixth [grade]. For a fact. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reed** [00:55:53] So when did you know that you wanted to be a firefighter?

**Steve Johnson** [00:55:56] Man! We were still living at 1321 Queen Street. Here's how it started: there was a laundromat behind the 75 station. Every Saturday, my mom took us to the laundromat with her, you know. If this is the first station there on Cameron Street, you either went around the back parking lot this way or you went to back parking lot that way. When they got the bay doors up I used to look in and just look at the fire trucks. I went in there one day and the guy told me to get out real quick, "Hey, get out of here!" So, I left. They had this public address system siren that once they got a call, you can hear it throughout the city, right. It had this crazy siren with it. It seemed like every time I was at that laundromat it would go off, and I'd run to the back of the laundromat and look out and see what they're doing. I see them coming down the pole, and jumping on the fire trucks and going. That seemed so exciting to me, and I said I would do that when I get older. I used to go in there and I used to get called all kind of names. I didn't know they were being racially insensitive, you know? I mean, until one of the guys said, "Don't be calling him that. Leave that kid alone. That kid has nothing to do with it. Leave the kid alone." I remember vividly, because they

almost got in a fist fight over it. The guy's name was Joe Cronin. And there was another dude, John. What was Joe's last name? He was good too. Anyway, those two would see me coming. Because I didn't know. I thought the fire fighters was always there. The same ones all the time. But they had different shifts. I didn't know at the time. Molten, John Molten, that's his name. But I used to go through there and then we moved from Queen Street to Patrick Street. So, I didn't get to see those guys for a long time. So, I started growing a little bit. But the fire department would come to Charles Houston. And, you know, if they get there, we're going have a fire drill. They had the fire drill and they observed you coming out, how orderly was it, and all that kind of stuff. You know how the teachers are. The teachers would always say, "Don't run, do this, do this." And it was pretty organized. And then I met this firefighter. Like I said, his name was Jim Gower. Jim Gower. [0.8s] I think he was a captain then. He wasn't that much taller than me, and I was like in the fifth grade or sixth grade. And I told him I was going to be a firefighter one day. He said, "No. I don't think you can do that." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "You might can work sanitation." I was like, "What's that?" He said, "A trash man." "I won't be no trash man." He said, "Well, we don't have any Black firefighters." "You don't?" "No." And they didn't. But the next year they did. I think this was 1965 or 66. But they ended up getting one guy named Gerold Joe Watson, who was the first Black firefighter in Alexandria. Matter of fact, Gerold was the first of two things: Gerold was the first CNPC Telephone Company with Bell Atlantic indoor repairman or installer for the phone company. Then he ended up being the first Black firefighter in Alexandria. Yeah. I don't know what rank Mr. Gowler was, I think he was a lieutenant, because I know he was in charge, so I think he was lieutenant. [When] he told me try sanitation, I was like, "I won't be no trash man." And lo and behold, years later I applied. And who is in charge of the training in Alexandria Fire Department? Jim Growler. And he goes, "Little Stevie," cause some of the guys knew me when I was going in and out of the fire station when I was going to the laundry with my mom. And then he remembered at the school. And I said, "You remember what you told me at the school? He said, "I do." He said, "And I'm glad you didn't take my advice." And he told me, "Welcome." Yeah, he sure did. I didn't stay that long in Alexandria. I didn't know what fire training entailed. I didn't know it was that hard. Oh my God, I didn't know it was that hard. The people that made [through] the recruit schools, it was tough man. But it wasn't tough for the people that already had previous experience. And I was in a recruit school of just eight. And two of us were Black, myself and a guy named Charlie Webb. The other six were white, but they all had been volunteers somewhere. They knew how to give field, they knew how to SCBA, self-contained breathing apparatus and how that worked. We didn't. You know, so we struggled just trying to learn all this different equipment and, you know, and then they put us in this maze where you can't see anything, you know, and you had to crawl and find your way out. They put you in a hole. The opening was so small, you had to get on your belly just to get through the opening. And then once you get inside, it's pitch black and you can't use a light, and you had to find your way out. Well, I wasn't too good at that. So, I didn't make it through that recruit school. So, I was real disappointed. And then I said, "I'm gonna give it another shot." So, I went to Fairfax and I got to understand a little bit more. Fairfax is a little more tolerant of people that hadn't had experience. And the recruit school was larger. 8 there. 32 where I was at.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:04:03] Okay.

**Steve Johnson** [01:04:03] When I got to Fairfax, you know. And then you had people white, Black and everything. "Hey, man, we gonna get to this together," you know? Then we had to go through this maze, what they call a mask maze, and same thing you can't see. But you got to find your way

out. But see, with the guys over here in Alexandria failed to tell me is to use your ears and listen. Your ears got to be your eyes. So, you gotta listen to sound and feel the wall. Like if you go in to the right, you stay to the right. You'll eventually find your way out.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:04:47] And the people at Alexandria didn't tell you any of this?

**Steve Johnson** [01:04:50] No, they didn't. They didn't. It was a lot stuff they didn't do that compared to what Fairfax did. Charlie made it through only because they had to keep one. See? Just like right now, Fairfax County is still under the Justice Department ruling in finding on their hiring practices way back in the day. They are still under that same ruling to this day, and Alexandria didn't. I'm not this, "woe is me" guy, you know. Bad things happen to white people just like bad things happen to Black people. But the racism in those kinds of departments and in fire departments as a whole were near the top of the chart for us

**Steve Johnson** [01:05:56] as far as most racist places to try to get into the fire department. Wasn't number 5. It was probably number 3 on the list. But Fairfax was pretty good at it. They ended up having more Blacks in their fire department than anywhere in this area, you know, and they were allowing people to do stuff and. It was still hard. Oh, man, it was still hard. But it was more tolerant of, "Okay you've never been to this before." You know, as in Alexandria, the only ones they weren't less tolerant was the ones that already had experience. Those guys know what a masked maze was. They knew what it feels like to breathe [and to] have an air tank on. We didn't. So, when I got to Fairfax, it was a whole different ballgame. It was a whole different training, you know. They had more than one trainer. They had like 3 or 4 training officers go over your application. [They asked], "Okay, you were in Alexandria. Well, what happened?" [I said], "The maze. I wasn't too good with the maze. I didn't understand how to use the breathing apparatus. [They said], "Ah, we'll teach you how to do that. Yeah, some people are impatient like that," you know? So, like I said, it was hard, but I got a better understanding of what and why? Because they never told you the reason why breathing apparatuses was so important. Alexandria didn't. Fairfax told you why it was so important to keep that thing on. The more we did these evolutions, the more confidence I got, to where I ended up leading people. "Come on, let's go!" And [if] somebody was scared [I'd say], "Naw. Come on. I'll go with you!" I put my stuff on [and] go on through that little hole. It was a big old building and it was cut up to where you had to crawl, go up a ladder, come down, crawl again, crawl, crawl, crawl, crawl [to] find the way out. If you start on your right hand side, stay on your right hand side. I got to where I was good at it and wasn't afraid anymore, and then came out. And the fellow recruits, I helped them out [and] they helped us. We all helped each other out. And it paid dividends, man. Because unless you know the dangers of stuff that's burning, like anything that burns gives off gas and stuff like that. It's real harmful to you. Then you appreciate why those masks and that air was so important. But in Alexandria we never got that from those two trainers that they had. It was more, "We only have ten weeks to get this right, blah blah, blah, blah, blah." Fairfax County [had] 16 weeks. You know and that made a difference. That made a big difference. We spent a whole month just on getting used to the breathing apparatus to actually going in fires with them, and having the confidence to say, "I will be okay."

**Kerry James Reed** [01:09:48] So why do you think Alexandria's training was so different from Fairfax County?



**Steve Johnson** [01:09:53] Well still at that time when I went to Alexandria, I was the 11th Black hire, and Charlie was the 12th. I'm saying I'm 11th because my last name was Johnson, his last name was Webb. So, Miles before him, I'm 11th, he was 12th. And that was the 11th and 12th Black firefighters ever in the city of Alexandria, you know. Then one time they almost had a recruit school that was almost all Black, [because] they had to catch up because of the quotas. Back then, it was always quotas. You had to meet certain quotas, you know, and then Fairfax County got in so much trouble that the Justice Department said, "No, I can't do that." When I went to Fairfax, I got hired and didn't go to recruit school for six months because they had no recruits to go to. I was called a pre-hire. You know, so I got to know a lot of people there and it worked to my benefit. But I got to know a lot of people and all that. But the history they have the Justice Department - I was working for a guy that worked in recruitment who asked me, "Hey, you got spare time? Can you straighten that file cabinet up?" I said, "Yeah, I'll straighten it out." It was two file cabinets. And both of the file cabinets [had] drawers pointing to the wall so you can open them. I said, "I wonder why he didn't want to do this? Okay, I'll do it because he asked me to do it." So, I turn them around, and Kerry this is a true, one file cabinet had nothing but Black applicants. The other one had Hispanic and women. And in that file cabinet was my brother's application. I got [01:12:09] Lani's [0.0s] application. A dude named Chris Thompson, he was in the fire department, him and his brother Bucky and Kendall, but he had another brother that tried to apply. But all of those [were in] one file cabinet. Four drawers were all Black male applicants. And that was part of the Justice Department, you know, because those applications, some of them were really old. And I was sitting there and then I showed the recruitment guy, JT Harrison. I said, "Look at this JT." He goes, "Where'd you get this?" I said, "It was in the file cabinet." So, he brought it to their attention. And then one day I had to go upstairs. If you go upstairs, [it's] the administration. It's either you in trouble or you going to pick up the paperwork for recruitment. So, I went up there, and who did I see? Jim Growler from Alexandria! And his mouth dropped. He was like, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm working." He goes, "How long you been here?" And I told him. And we talked for a little while, and all that. And, he was trying to apologize for the situation in Alexandria, but he said they just didn't have time to dedicate special training to me and Charlie. Charlie made it through though, but Charlie didn't last long once he got through. And I told him that just wasn't something I was used to, you know. Like [he] said, [he] didn't have the time or the patience, you know? So, it is what it is.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:14:16] Something seems to me at least paradoxical about that because they wanted people that have more experience, but were you ever given the opportunity to get that experience growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [01:14:29] No. It was going in blind. You know.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:14:34] But you mentioned the other applicants had experience.

**Steve Johnson** [01:14:37] Yes. Every one of them. They volunteered somewhere, you know. Byron Andrews, Mike Shafer and Mike Garcia. It was eight of us in the class. A guy from Frederick, Maryland. But all those guys, except myself and Charlie Webb, had prior [experience]. Matter of fact, two of them worked in Alexandria Fire Department as dispatchers. But they were volunteers. Like one was volunteering in Sterling and one was volunteering somewhere else. But all of them had previous experience as far as knowing how to wear the gear and all that stuff. You know, all that heavy gear and all that stuff was new to us. You know, and you talking about going from, at that

time I weighed about 160, [to wearing] all the gear, [and weighing] close to 200, you know. And it's summertime training. You dropped 10 pounds a day if you weren't watching yourself. You had to hydrate and eat. But yeah, the experience was, oh man, it was like, "How can anybody know this and do well?" Well, I mean, how can anybody not know what they were going through and then have to do this, you know? I talked to Chief Godwin when he came through. He was a chief. He came to our Fairfax County for a meeting. He saw me, and he told them guys, "Yeah, you're going to have a good one right here." And I was like, "Why you tell them this?" He said, "Because you didn't give up." I had a good career. Yeah, I got promoted. I was on the captain list when I left. But yeah, it was different.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:16:40] Where did you do your first tour after graduating from -

**Steve Johnson** [01:16:43] I went to Fire Station 14 in Burke.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:16:47] Okay.

**Steve Johnson** [01:16:48] And it took three tours. We worked three days, and then we were off four. So, we worked every other day, and after the third day you're off four days. I did that three times before I even got one call. And I was like, "Man. When are we going to run a call?" The guys said, "Man, we don't want no calls right now." And I was the only Black on my shift at station 14. And the other two shifts. I was on A shift. B shift had one Black and C shift had one Black. So, in that whole station there was only three Blacks I worked at out of 15 people on each shift. Yeah. Had had little run ins when I first got there. This one guy, you know, they had this thing where they haze rookies and stuff. I ain't gonna forget, I got to station 14. I met the captain. He said, "Who you are?" I said, "I'm Steven Johnson." He goes, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I just graduated from crew school. They told me I'm assigned 14." He said, "Oh, yeah, okay." So, he had these other guys, one guy [named] Schaefer. Instead of introducing himself, he said, "Hey, rookie! Your job is to go get the newspaper, go to 7-Eleven across the street [and] put up the flag, [your] new name is Rodney." I'm not joking.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:19:01] Wow.

**Steve Johnson** [01:19:02] So I got on the PA system because I was told by other people [that I'm] going to a hard station so don't let anybody run over [me]. You get that out of the way. Okay, so he did that. So, I got on the PA system. Beep, beep, beep. I said, "Everybody to the kitchen," and everybody came in. And this dude named Gary Harper, he was a former PG County cop, he didn't look like a firefighter. He was a big guy, slobby, lobby looking. And he said, "Hey rookie. Who told you how to do that?" I said, "He did." And then Schaefer said, "Yeah, his new name Rodney, blah, blah, blah." And Gary said, "Don't do this, man." So, when everybody came in, even, even the lieutenant was running shift then, the cabinet runs the shift now, but the lieutenant ran the ship then. And when they came in I said, "Look, I just came in through Harvard Crew School. I'm 30 years old. I have a family. It's been a long time since I had a paper route. I ain't that patriotic. And my carried me for nine months and she named me Stephen. So out of all of that, I just want you to know, put up your own goddamn flag."

**Kerry James Reed** [01:20:36] Yeah, absolutely.

**Steve Johnson** [01:20:41] And Gary said, "Way to go rookie. I told you quit that." And he looked at the shift leader which was Bill Bankee, and he said, "Bill, we done been through this before. I told you got to quit that." Because everybody was laughing. Then he said, "Uh oh, he's going to be a problem." I just spoke of myself, that's all. But that was a good career. This letter this lady wrote me reassured me that I made the right choice.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:21:17] So we talked about the letter before the interview started. Could you describe the story behind the letter again?

**Steve Johnson** [01:21:24] I ran a call when I was a lieutenant on truck 11 at station 11 downtown up there in Fairfax. Our heavy rescue ran a call to Groden apartments for an inside gas leak. So, when they got there, they found out this family was trying to use the stove and couldn't cut it off. So, the heavy rescue had meters that they can read the gas levels and all that. So, after they found out that the levels were safe, they called my unit in with the truck and we had the big fans that could blow, you know? So, they called us to assist them. I went there to air out the remaining gas until the meter to read zero and made it safe for the family to be in. So, while I was there, I seen all these boxes around. I was like, "Y'all just moved in here?" Then the lady said, "No, Katrina sent us here," and I was like, "Whoa." So, like I said, it was December 23rd. I seen two weeks earlier people, Dallas Cowboys Redskins game, and I saw people just everywhere from Hurricane Katrina. And it was it was sort of surreal. So, when I talked to this lady, she told me that they had been there 4 days [and] didn't know anybody. I mean, they're from Louisiana, they get sent to Alexandria, Virginia, Fairfax County, and don't know a soul, don't know where to go, [they] don't know where the stores are or anything, and they gave [them] 50 bucks. So, after talking to her, and I saw her daughter with her grandchild, I said, "So how long are you going to be here?" They said, "Well, we know we'll be here past Christmas." I said, "Wow." So, I didn't tell her what I was going to do. I went back to the fire station, talked to the whole shift. I said to George, "The family that we just ran. Did you know they were from New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina? He said, "No." I said, "What I'd like to do as a shift is see if we can pitch in and give them a little spirit for Christmas." A lot of the guys said no. I said, you know what? Okay. There's one guy named Derek Pinney, he said, "Stevie J," he called me Stevie J, "Stevie J what's the address?" I gave him the address. He said, "I'm going to stop by there in the morning." I said, "Okay." So, I walked over across the parking lot to Rite Aid, and they had this one Christmas tree with everything on it, decoration bulbs, lights, all that. And I said, "Can I buy that tree?" And I was in uniform. And they guy said, "I got to call my manager to see if that's okay because Christmas Eve was tomorrow and, we probably weren't going to use it anyway. I mean, the important part of it is we've had it up for almost a month. So, I don't see any harm in it." So, he called his manager and the manager gave me a price. I said, "Okay give me the tree." So, I got the tree and I said I'll pick it up in the morning because I'm at the fire station but I paid for the tree and then. When I got up that morning, I went over there and got the treat. Went to Bank of America, got \$150 cash out, and went down to the apartment. So, I knocked on the door and the lady said, "You was here last night." I said, "Yeah, I was." She said, "what's wrong?" I said, "Nothing. I got something for you. Stay right here, I'll be right back." I brought the tree back. [It was] a big tree but it was light, you know. So, I brought her that, and I gave her the \$150 cash. She said, "There was a guy here a little while ago. He said he work with you." And that was Derek Penny, and she said, "He just left. He gave me \$100." I said, "Okay, cool. Here's 150, and I said, I got somebody coming to bring you - you know Willy Bailey?

**Kerry James Reed** [01:26:43] I've heard the name.

**Steve Johnson** [01:26:44] Yeah, he you've big time. He used to be a counselor down here, and he worked in the fire department with me in Fairfax. And spearheaded a toy drive, him and my brother Mike and Officer Benny Edward Evans. So, I called Willy to said, "Will I got some people down here at Groves Garden that was forced out of their home by Katrina. I'm just leaving them. I ran the call there last night and just wondering if you could possibly help them with some toys [because] a little girl is here. I just dropped a Christmas tree off. Derek Penny dropped some money off. I gave a Christmas tree and some money. Just to brighten their spirits a little bit." And he did. Two weeks later I was going in 7 Eleven right by my station, but I had just gotten off work, and I said, "I've seen this lady' before." Then the daughter said, "This is the firemen that came." And I said, "Oh, yeah! How y'all doing?" And she sent this card. And when I read it, I was like, wow! You want to read? Did you read it?

**Kerry James Reed** [01:28:06] No, I will, yeah. I just wanted to get it on tape, you know.

**Steve Johnson** [01:28:10] Yeah. She read it.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:28:13] Would you like to read it?

**Steve Johnson** [01:28:14] I'll read it.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:28:15] Yes, please.

**Steve Johnson** [01:28:17] Whew! It says, "Our family has been through a lot. Leaving our homes behind in New Orleans, and not having a place to return to. [Exhales]. Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity. Thank you for the wonderful toys, my oldest grandson will enjoy and play with them for years. It's reassuring to know that [tearfully] there are people in the world who care. Thanks for protecting our community. All of you are true heroes. [Emotionally] May God bless you this year. Awanda Djore, one of them New Orleans name and family.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:29:34] That's absolutely incredible.

**Steve Johnson** [01:29:35] I'm sorry.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:29:36] No, it's perfectly okay. It's incredible that you did that.

**Steve Johnson** [01:29:47] And every day. And even before that I would see somebody like in the store. And I'll buy them something, [01:29:56]and then I went with the like count out of chocolate. I got the ladies coffee out at the gym and I got this. I do it every day. Girl I'm on the moon. [10.4s] You have to be thankful. every little thing we had, we didn't have much. So, if I can assist - I need a tissue. If I could assist people any way I can. I didn't do that for recognition. I didn't do that for fame or nothing like that, but that's what I do every day.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:30:40] Absolutely.

**Steve Johnson** [01:30:46] But that touched me because they had been through a lot. And I say a lot. She told me how rough it was to get from New Orleans to here and not know anybody!

**Kerry James Reed** [01:31:06] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [01:31:07] I mean, not know anybody. And they told I got some mail. When I read it, I did the same thing. I cried, because like, God! How can anybody even have that kind of spirit in them because they lost some folks [and] they lost some relatives in that flood. And I just wanted to reassure her, you know, there's people out there that care, you know. Yeah, I didn't mean to get mushy, but I knew I was going to do that.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:32:01] So what do you think the role of community has been in your life? Because it seems to me that, you know, coming from your family and then your role as a firefighter seems to have a huge [impact].

**Steve Johnson** [01:32:12] We've all been givers in my family, or teachers actually. Because my sister taught dance, I coached football, and I taught fire department related subjects to get people promoted free of charge. They come to my house and we'd go over. And it took weeks and weeks and weeks of this. And people were charging \$1200 \$1,500 a session. I did it for free. I got 38 people promoted from firefighter to lieutenant or from lieutenant to captain. And that's a given. And Mike's stories...wow! But, Mike ended up starting The Untouchables group, and he ended up meeting President Clinton [who] gave him some kind of honor.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:33:28] Really, I didn't know.

**Steve Johnson** [01:33:29] Yes, he did. There's a picture of somewhere it with Clinton invited him to the white House. And he gave him an award for his community work with the Untouchables. Like I said, my sister Stephanie taught modern dance. I taught the fire department. Michael J. did the Untouchables, my brother Jeffrey coaches and teaches boxing to this day at the Charles Houston Rec center. He has some good fighters. My brother Andre, he's passed away, but he was a marine who once he got out, he saw a lot of kids that were borderline in trouble and stuff like that. He talked a lot of them into going in service, which changed their lives. My mother was a Sunday school teacher on top of everything else. And my dad always tried to show some kind of gruff that he had. But inside he was soft as tissue. He did a lot of stuff for kids in the neighborhood too, as far as donating to certain programs to get kids Thanksgiving dinners and stuff like that. So, we all, you know, we come from a family of givers. Like I said, we came from nothing.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:35:17] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [01:35:17] Yeah, we came from nothing, man.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:35:21] So we've been talking for a little over an hour and a half now. I know that you have somewhere to be pretty soon. So, would it be possible that we could talk about Douglass in another interview? Would you be okay?

**Steve Johnson** [01:35:34] Yes.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:35:35] Terrific. In that case, I guess we'll close on a final question. Thank you so much for being here again. Your stories have been truly touching and an absolute pleasure to hear. So, the last question I would have for you is if you could hold onto one memory forever, what would it be?

**Steve Johnson** [01:35:59] My mom. How strong she was even in very hard times. I mean, I haven't even described through very hard times, she kept everybody together, you know. And coming up back then it was hard to do. So, a lot goes to my mom. A lot.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:36:31] All right. Well, thank you so much again, Mr. Johnson. It's an absolute pleasure.

**Steve Johnson** [01:36:36] I'm sorry for this man.

**Kerry James Reed** [01:36:37] We will do this again, sir.

**Steve Johnson** [01:36:38] Yeah.

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<b>General</b>	Historic Sites; Douglass Cemetery Advisory Group; US Army; Childhood Memories
<b>People</b>	Wallace Jack Johnson; George Richardson; Warner Johnson; Michael Johnson; Jack Johnson
<b>Places</b>	Alexandria, VA; Coleman Cemetery; Bethel Cemetery; Norton Factory; The Berg

**Kerry James Reid** [00:00:03] So we've talked, earlier on about your memories of Douglass, growing up. So more recently, when did you find out that you had more family members interred there?

**Steve Johnson** [00:00:18] I found out, probably 3 or 4 months ago. Because some of our older relatives had died. I honestly forgot where some of them were buried. And, then when this Douglass thing came up, we looked and, found out that we had several members buried there, and one being like a favorite aunt that we didn't know. And I didn't know where she buried because I didn't attend the funeral for some reason. So, I didn't know where she was buried, but she's buried down there, too.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:01:03] So in total, how many family members do you have buried at Douglass?

**Steve Johnson** [00:01:07] In total? I would say between 6 and 10.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:01:13] Wow.

**Steve Johnson** [00:01:14] Yeah. Between 6 and 10.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:01:16] That's a lot.

**Steve Johnson** [00:01:17] Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:01:17] What is it been like to rediscover this part of your family?

**Steve Johnson** [00:01:29] I wish I had known more about the relatives that are interned there. Of course, most of them died before I was even an adult. I think my uncle Wallace Jack Johnson was buried there and I was just reaching adulthood. I guess I was in my early 20s, maybe mid 20s or something like that. But, I knew my dad's father was somewhere around. I didn't know he was there. I'd search Coleman a lot from going to a lot of funerals there, you know, internments there. And I had just recently found out where my grandmother was, my father and mother were, and that hadn't even been about a year now. Yeah. But as far as Douglass I didn't know we had as many internments there until got involved with this.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:02:39] Yeah. So, you mentioned that you went to a lot of funerals at Coleman. If you had to compare how Coleman looked compared to Douglass when you first saw them or more recently, how would you do that?

**Steve Johnson** [00:02:57] Honestly, I went to Coleman, several times before we rediscovered Douglass, and Coleman was in pretty bad shape. Matter of fact, the caretaker there, we grew up together. He coached all the sports leagues. Basketball. Football. We call him Peewee Banks, but his name is...what's his real name? Peewee's real name? Ah! But he was the caretaker there, and I got on my truck and I said, "Hey, man." And, I remember telling him, "If you need any help trying to take care of this place, let me know. You know, because you can't do this by yourself. It's too big, you know." Because I could sense frustration coming from him, because it was overgrowth in some places, you know, a lot of head markers down and, I had just got, like I said, not interested in Douglass, but I had just gotten a sample of Douglass, you know, through actually the program now, and I offered to help him. And then from there, I just kept going back to Douglass. Like when I left you last time, I went straight to Douglass, and did some research.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:04:28] When I got your email last time, you mentioned that you were, you had gone to Douglass and that you were really shocked to see that the ages of some of the people buried there. Could you describe what how it was to see those ages on the head markers for the first time?

**Steve Johnson** [00:04:44] Okay. Well, what really brought my attention to it Kerry is that I saw multiple names on headstones. And I'm going, "Let me check this out." So, it didn't take long to. I saw the first one which was the one of the, Raymond, I forget what could I get in my bag? But I saw that one first, and then I just wandered around and saw more, and it's kind of by me just paying attention to it. I looked and I said, "Wait a minute." This guy, you know, his age was, I think he was over 60. He was 65 when he passed away. But like I said, and I saw these two additional names under his, and I was looking for maybe a spouse name because his name was there, but didn't have a spouse name there. But it had what looked to be two offspring's name, or, you know, two children's name. And they were children because one died at a little over a year old and one died five days old. And then I checked a couple of other ones, and it was almost the same thing. It was a parent, and then there was a child and another child and, you know, a lot of them I wish I could have kept count but a few, I'm not gonna say a lot of, but 5 or 6 didn't make [it to] two years old. I'm going, "What in the world happened back then?" You know, then I'm thinking, because I had some medical training,



well the medicine itself, it's come a long way since that time. And I'm thinking that, well, I know the flu back in the day was just killing people left and right. But then I'm thinking that these people, you know, because Black people have a history of high blood pressure and, which leads to heart ailments and all other kinds of respiratory ailments and all that kind of stuff, you know, from not actually knowing or, just by a lot of them worked so hard that they never took time to go to the doctor. And a lot of times when they went to the doctor it was like, "Hey, you're sick. And you're real sick." You know I'm pretty sure there's a lot of cancer victims in there because this place had a place called Norton that sat on the river every evening. Even I can remember there's a chair every evening. You could smell they reprocessed animal fat and animal parts, you know, horses, everything, any animal. And it was in the air. And it was sickening to smell, man. And then I had an uncle and 1, 2, 3, 4 buddies and all my uncles and his 4 buddies and 4 or 5 of his buddies, and they were friends of mine. The kids were, all of them died from working down there. So, I'm thinking that, you know, these guys weren't old people. You know, I feel bad, especially for our buddy named George Richardson. We called him Boo. That's the first time I actually experienced a classmate, a buddy, who lost a parent. And then another one, and then another, and then another one, then another. And then it was like in succession. And all these guys knew each other, even my dad, all these guys to hang together and all that stuff. And we kind of attributed that to the Norton factory. Now it wasn't proven, but people dying within years, some within even not even years of each other, some die like six months after one, you know. So, I was thinking that that's why my mindset was on how Madison was even back then. We're talking 30, maybe 40 years ago, but it was not shocking to find out people was just dying. And then people were getting cancer and they smoking cigarettes and drinking and all this stuff, you know, and a lot of people down in Douglass and then Coleman and a whole lot of places that if it was today, you would think that they would still be living from I mean, not to 100 years old, none of that, but they probably would have had a better chance of not being where they are now because of modern medication and all that.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:10:33] I think you bring up a really fascinating point is that by looking at the headstones at Douglass and then Coleman as well, we can learn a lot, not only about the Black community here in Alexandria, but also about, you know, the environment at the time. Right, with the Norton. I think it was a tannery. If I'm not mistaken. If that's what they call it.

**Steve Johnson** [00:10:51] Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:10:53] So when, when you were, you know, seeing these headstones, had you gone there to look for your own family members?

**Steve Johnson** [00:11:01] Yes, yes.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:11:02] Did you find any of them?

**Steve Johnson** [00:11:04] I found an aunt. Actually, I found two, but one of them was my great-great grandfather. His name was Warner Johnson also. My dad's name was Warner Johnson. His father was Warner Johnson. So, there's three of them. I found that and an auntie. But I stopped because of what I found with the, multiple names on the headstone. Now that just fascinate me to the point where I told Mike [Johnson]. And Mike drove by, he said, "What you doing?" I said, "Man you got to see this." And also, I learned the way they buried people down there was by the year. You

know, because I went from the 1950s section to the 1945 section. And it's headstones with multiple names on a lot of them. You know, and I was trying to do the math. Okay. These people died fairly young!

**Kerry James Reid** [00:12:19] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:12:21] You know, and I was like, "Whoa." And that's where I got the thought of, "Well I know medicine back in the day wasn't as good as it is now. And medicine now probably not going to be as good 50 years from now." Man, you know, it was a lot of young people. You know, under 50. I'm gonna call them young under 50. You know, it was a lot of them.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:12:49] What has it been like to learn all this information and history about Douglass?

**Steve Johnson** [00:12:54] It's intriguing to me and it's interesting. It's something I would have never thought about. I don't know why, but I know that once I got involved in it, I was like, "Whoa, wait a minute," you know? And then, you can almost put together history by just looking at, especially when I tied histories together, you know, tried to put familiar names together and, you know, if there's a Jackson, or a Johnson, or whatever the last names were, you can almost tie it to, "Oh, I know that person's relative," and probably do. You know it's a lot of them down there, you know, they're relatives, too. And it's really fascinating me now. I was telling Mike the other day that, I wish I had gotten involved in this earlier than what I did, man, because I probably be a lot more versed on what to do and what to look for now. You know? But it's different. It's special.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:14:05] When did you join the Douglass Advisory Group?

**Steve Johnson** [00:14:11] It was last year - It was something they did. It was community thing and I helped out. And then they ended up having to have the meeting at Douglass, and that's when I said, "Whoa." Okay. I used to play in this graveyard not knowing, you know. And then I said, "Okay." And I've been down there several times, like I said, I've been down there a few times. Since I've been involved in there, I've been there at least 10, 12 times by myself, just walking around looking. And then I go across the street to the other cemetery, Bethel, just to try to put the differences together. You know what I mean? But these over here are welled paid plots. I guess you would call. And the ones over at Douglass would like, seem to be, I'm not sure. But the ones across from Douglass, like, okay, this is the \$500 plot and these are \$200 plots. I really didn't know. You know but I'm just saying. But you could tell by the upkeep, as to the concern, the lack of for the cemetery. So. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:15:40] So in the time since you joined the advisory group, what has your experience been like? What has it been like going to meetings? You know, going to Douglass more often? What has it been like for you?

**Steve Johnson** [00:15:53] It's been rewarding for me because I'm learning things that everyday people don't do. You know, I mean, because I talked to a friend the other day and I told him, I said, "Yeah, I got this meeting to go [on] Tuesday night across the rec center for the Historical place." "What are you doing there?" And I told him about Douglass. He said, "Well everybody when we

were young we went down there playing and all that." "Yeah," I said, "Everybody used to play in it. But stop and go there one day and just look." You know, I said, "But just don't look. Walk it. You know, when you walk it, you're going to see a problem, you know, and you're going to notice there's something. You might not see it right off the bat, but you're going to feel if you're there for more than a few minutes ago, you're going to say something not right about this place." And I can't blame anybody for it and I wouldn't. But it's just the way it looks. You know, like I said, Coleman is not there yet, but if, if, if Coleman is not - if the wearing is not [like] Coleman as it is the same as it is at Douglass, because, you know, then Coleman is going to look like Douglass in years. Maybe not in my lifetime, whichever I got left. But it's going to look like that because you got toppled headstones. You have, overgrowth. You got sinking plots. You know, you can see them sinking too, you know, some of them like this and some of them like this. And this is the same way at Douglass. You know with Douglass it's probably a lot worse. That's what I was looking for when I went to Coleman. I say, "Okay, I see the ground shifting over here, and it's either shifting or sinking."

**Kerry James Reid** [00:18:13] So you mentioned talking to your friend about going to the Douglass Advisory Group meeting. When you describe the Douglass Initiative or your work with the advisory group to your friends or, you know, just people you happen to be talking to, how do you describe it?

**Steve Johnson** [00:18:29] Well, because a lot of times when I describe it to them, I have to describe it in a little more detail than just it's just a cemetery. You know, because, that was one of the reactions I got, "Man, why you messing with a cemetery?" I said, "Nah man. It's more different than just a cemetery it's a final resting place for everybody that's there." You know, and I said, "Me personally, I visit my mom's grave every week. Like I'll be there today and it's important to know where they are." It's kind of hard to find graves in Douglass because of the headstone issues and all that, you know. It's a lot easier to go to Coleman [because] it is a lot more easier to find plots than Douglass. And the place my mom's buried in Mount Comfort that's easier to deal with because it's there, you see it, you know. And it's apples and oranges in comparison as to, "Hey, I can find that grave. I know where my mom's grave is right there." Whereas in Douglass it's like, well, the graves used to be right here, but either the ground shifted, the headstone fell over, [or] overgrowth over the top of the headstone. You know, and I told him, I said, "Man, it could be, not tedious, but it could seem to some people that, you know, uninteresting and all that. But if you take the time like me, because I was like, 'What in the world?' But once I took the time and really like sat down with the groups and all that, I said, 'Whoa.' And then I got a different appreciation for it." Because like I say, at one time I was thinking it's just the cemetery, but it's more than just a cemetery. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:20:47] So how would you say your relationship to cemeteries in general have changed since you've -

**Steve Johnson** [00:20:52] Oh, a whole lot. Now I pay attention. You know, I was driving from Richmond, and got off the road and I got on 301 for a little bit, and I saw the small cemetery. I couldn't tell you the name of it, but it's off 301 in the Southern Virginia part. It wasn't a very large cemetery. It might have even been a personal, family, you know, plot. I mean, just for families or something. But it wasn't really large, and you can see some headstones to know and all that. And I was like, "Man, I hope that doesn't end up like, you know, Douglass," because, you know. I mean 60 years from now our kids and my kids - my kids almost 60 now anyway, but it's something that to

me, everybody should, I mean, they don't have to take an interest in it, but they should look into it. You know what I mean?

**Kerry James Reid** [00:22:14] Yeah. Absolutely. Have you seen the archeologists working at Douglass?

**Steve Johnson** [00:22:17] Yes.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:22:19] Describe how that felt to see -

**Steve Johnson** [00:22:21] Man! That was fascinating, man. Because, oh. I seen this on TV before, but in real life is way different. You know. It's tedious. And it's not hurry up and go, it's not hurry up and now. It's, you know, brush this window and then they take their time. It's amazing what those folks know, you know. As if somebody come over there with a shovel and they start doing stuff. It's really amazing that they go, "No, no, no no no no no no." They'll see something and go, "Don't. Let's leave this one alone." And it's the knowledge. I mean, I guess you had to go to school for it. But the knowledge they bring with that, man, that was fascinating. And when they found that, what was it a beer bottle they found down there?

**Kerry James Reid** [00:23:18] Yeah, yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:23:19] I was like, "What?!" And, you know, I was expecting it to be broken. It wasn't even broken. I was like, "Wow." Then they knew that they found another spot. What was the spot that they found? I think the girl found it and they stopped the process there for a minute. And that was interesting too. Very interesting, man. I was like, "Damn." I would have just come in with a shovel or something. You know, and there's a lot more to it than that. Wow.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:23:52] So how does it feel now that the city, you know, has done something to make sure that the final resting place for these people, for your family is, given the respect that is due.

**Steve Johnson** [00:24:03] Oh, man. It's a start. You know, I'm not one to honestly, throw the city under the bus for the things for things that happened years ago are out of their control. But once it's brought to the attention of people, I'm glad that they're doing something about it. You know, because a lot of times people go, "Ah, it's not our problem." But I'm glad that the city of Alexandria is doing something about it.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:24:40] Yeah, absolutely. What do you think that forgetting about the dead does to a community?

**Steve Johnson** [00:24:54] What was that again?

**Kerry James Reid** [00:24:54] So Douglass for a long time was not forgotten per se, but out of sight, out of mind, is possibly a good way to put it. So, what do you think, you know, forgetting about ancestors does to a community?

**Steve Johnson** [00:25:12] Oh. It actually robs the community. You know, because it's history in that cemetery. And if one took the time like me, myself, take the time and start doing research, you'll find it's some real important people in there, you know. And the thing about Douglass, it used to be surrounded by business. There were businesses all over the place right there in Douglass. Where the apartment buildings or the condos are now, there were train tracks, and a lumber yard, and a creek further down. And it was a place where the trains came in, picked up coal, dropped off coal. And it was a hustle and bustling place. I honestly didn't know there was a Black cemetery at all. I mean, I seen other ones, you know, but I didn't never know that was a cemetery that, meant anything other than it was a cemetery, you know, but they all mean a lot. And I got that [from] appreciating every cemetery means a lot.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:26:39] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:26:40] Everyone one of them. Whether white, Black, whatever. Every one of them is special, you know, because history is in all of them. You know, some history is well known and some not, you know, but, because of the people that's in, you know, in those graves. But it's very fascinating to me.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:27:07] So I'm sorry. How many times did you say you had visited Douglass since he joined the advisory group?

**Steve Johnson** [00:27:12] Oh, man. It's been about 12, 10 to 12 times.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:27:18] And the last time we went was after we spoke at -

**Steve Johnson** [00:27:21] After we spoke.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:27:22] Spoke previously. So, after we spoke previously and you went down to Douglass could you describe, you know, step by step what it was like walking through the cemetery?

**Steve Johnson** [00:27:30] Yeah. When I got there, I parked near the condos, actually off the street, near the condos. Then [when] I walked I went straight towards the - not the gazebo. The gazebo was maybe 15 to 20 yards away. That's where I started. And then for some reason, I went to my left and I said, "Okay." And I looked at the headstone and it had 1948 on it. So, then I looked at this one over there it had 1948. So, I looked at this one, 5 feet up, 1948. So, I start going, "Wait a minute. These rows are all 1948." I walked about ten of them. Ten graves. All of 1948. And so, I said, "Let me go over to another row." And it was in numerical order. It was 50, then it went down in numbers. So, if you're coming from that way and then once you get to cemetery, the 50s are going to be here. And as you go in, what I've learned is numerically, the numbers go down. So that's how I found the - I don't know what made me look at the three names, but once I saw the three names I said, "Okay." You know. And that was in 1940s or 50s. I've forgotten now. The way they number them fascinated me, too, because I'm going, "Wow." So. You got a row of 1948 for 100 headstones, I don't know. I was throwing that number out there. I was just trying to figure out how they kept track of, you know. So, 100 people died in 1948. What happens if 115 died in 1948. Where do you go? You know. And the answer was simply, they started a second row. And then when those

numbers ran out, they started another year. That's fascinating. And I was like, "Wow." I wouldn't want to do the job myself, because it's confusing to me. For some reason, it got me to say, "Okay, let me do a little research myself and I ain't even nowhere near finished with the research I want to do. Because I want to go all the way back to the other gate where the other cemetery is that has the tall gate. Because I don't think that's Douglass, right? As you go towards [the] fence.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:31:18] I can visualize what you're talking about. I want to say I think that's still Douglass.

**Steve Johnson** [00:31:24] Yeah, but Mike said something about a lot of the kids are buried in the back, near the back of it, you know, at the top part. Maybe today or tomorrow I'm going to go back there and see what he's talking about. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:31:41] So on your visits to Douglass, have you ever seen anybody else visiting the cemetery that isn't a part of the advisory group?

**Steve Johnson** [00:31:54] No. I saw dog walkers, but I didn't see anybody. Oh, yes, I did! I saw a lady with, I don't know, it must be a relative of hers, an older lady. She was holding the arm of a much younger lady, and they were where gazebo is. They were coming back toward the road. I guess they walked down and then they came back toward the street, and then they stopped and they were talking. They pointed to something, and they were talking. But normally when I go down there I'm the only one. I was surprised because when Mike saw me, he said, "What you doing?" I said, "I'm checking on something." You know, and that's the day I left you. And I had been in there about two hours then. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:32:54] How much do you know about the family members that are buried at Douglass that you have?

**Steve Johnson** [00:32:58] My family members?

**Kerry James Reid** [00:33:00] Yeah.

**Steve Johnson** [00:33:00] All I know is that I had uncles, aunties and two grandfathers. I think it's two of them.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:33:09] Did you hear any stories about them growing up?

**Steve Johnson** [00:33:12] They were so hard working. Not a lot of stories. I don't remember my dad's father at all, because my dad's father died fairly young and, you know, like at 69 years old and. I never met - it's three Warner Johnson. My father, his father, and another one, and my father's father. It's three of them. And then my uncle Wallace Jack Johnson. But I have other uncles. There was one that fractured his skull and died from a skull fracture. I didn't know much of him. Then I had other uncles that, we had one who lived to be 100. I think it was 101 or 104. Smoked and drank every day, and rode a bicycle though, every day. I don't know if he's buried down there or not. I don't think, because he was military too. And he was also military. My dad was military. He went to the Army. A lot of those guys were either actual slaves or descendant, as I can remember. Mike knows better than

I do, but, it was one that fractured his skull. He lived. There's a plaque down at the building, down on Pelham street, where they built the new apartments at. It used to be rooming houses down there. And that's where one of my uncles that's in the cemetery is buried. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:35:25] So if you had the chance to talk to young Mr. Johnson when you were running around the cemetery as a child, what would you say to him now that you know so much about Douglass Cemetery?

**Steve Johnson** [00:35:40] Oh, man! I would first say to him, "I know the struggle. I can imagine the struggle. It paved the easier way for myself. You know, but all of that sweat and all the other stuff they went through came off their backs for me, for everybody else that came about after them. So, they opened up a different avenue for their surviving siblings and, you know, future siblings or, not siblings, but their future, relatives. And I know the struggle was real, I can tell you that. I mean, I did, I used to hear about my uncle. Because the pay was nothing. You know, the one that fractured his skull? I think his rent was \$147 a month. Yeah, something like that.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:37:02] When would that have been?

**Steve Johnson** [00:37:07] There's a plaque down there. Now I need to go down there and look at it. I would say this in the late [19]20s or early 30s. Something like that. It might have been a little later. It might have been mid-30s. My day was born in 1923 and they all used to talk about the Berg. I thought it was the bird, but it's called the Berg. And that river was so important to all of the down there at one time or another, you know? Yeah, I will tell him first, I thank them, but I can imagine how they struggled. I can imagine how they struggled. Me. You know, because like I said, they didn't make very much money. I mean \$5, \$10 a week was money. You know.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:38:14] Absolutely. So, before we close, thank you so much again for coming back. Is there anything else you would like to say about Douglass?

**Steve Johnson** [00:38:26] Yeah. Now that there is a lot of attention to Douglass, hopefully, I mean, once it gets back to better condition, then I hope that people take it upon themselves to make sure it stays that way. You know, and that it's not forgotten. And not only Douglass, but all these cemeteries. Hopefully they don't get to that point again. You know, because there's a lot of history in Douglass. There's a lot of history in any and every cemetery that you go to. But I just think it's, I'm not going to say disrespectful, but I'm going to say it's kind of a shame that we, and I include myself on this, don't take better care of the ones that passed on. I mean, as far as their resting place. Yeah.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:39:41] Yeah. Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Johnson. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

**Steve Johnson** [00:39:44] Yeah, man. Appreciate it.

**Kerry James Reid** [00:39:46] Thank you.

