



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
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Oral History Interview

with

Steve L Nelson

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Narrator: Steve L Nelson

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

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Summary:

Stephen L Nelson shares his experiences with Alexandria, Virginia's rapid changes, and his involvement with the Douglass Initiative Project.

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Steve Earl Nelson [00:00:01] Stephen Earl Nelson, 60 years old. The date is March 20th of 2024, and we are at the Lloyd House in Alexandria, Virginia.

Kerry J Reed [00:00:11] My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 27 years of age. It is March 20th, 2024, and we are at the Lloyd House. So, thank you so much for agreeing to do this Mr. Nelson. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you over the past couple of weeks. I suppose we can start from the very beginning. Where were you born?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:00:26] I was born here in Alexandria, Virginia.

Kerry J Reed [00:00:28] Alexandria, Virginia. Yes. Were you born at the hospital over there on Duke [Street]?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:00:33] I was born in Alexandria city hospital, right on Seminary Road somewhere. Yeah, back in 1963.

Kerry J Reed [00:00:45] Terrific. What are some of your earliest memories?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:00:47] Wow, that's a good question. I remember when my dad brought me home. My mom told me my dad brought me home in one of his job cars. He worked at a drugstore called Timmerman Drugstore here on Washington Street. We lived in the public housing here in Alexandria. He worked there, and he brought us home, woke me up, brought me home from the hospital, and we lived on Montgomery Street, 1004 Montgomery Street. And that was probably my earliest memory of, my childhood. He worked several jobs. He worked for the post office. He worked for the electric company. He did several jobs, and he was all over the place. I very seldom saw him growing up because he was always working. But he was a great provider. We played sports a lot growing up. I have five other siblings. We all were busy playing sports. He would make our games when he could, but he very rarely made them because he was always working. When he did make them, you know, we had to show out a little bit because he very, very rarely made them. But when I saw him on the sidelines, I like, "Oh, my dad showed up!" So that was probably one of my fondest memories when he showed up to one of my ball games.

Kerry J Reed [00:02:31] Absolutely. Can you describe the neighborhood where you grew up?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:02:35] Oh, yeah. Very close-knit neighborhood. In public housing, everybody knew everyone. Everybody was very tight knit. Everybody had a responsibility to discipline you if you were acting up. Everybody was your parent, you know. If you wasn't doing what you were supposed to be doing, they would tell your parent, or they could spank you back then. Even if they weren't your parent. So, they would tell your parents. They'd spank you only a little behind. "Go home. You're not doing right." And they would tell your mom, "Stevie wasn't doing right," and your parent were like, "Good. Did you spank them?" And they said, "Yeah I spanked him." And they send you home. And of course, you get another spanking once you got home if it wasn't doing right. You have a very close knit, community. We would play outside, and we had one bike in a whole neighborhood, but that bike was everybody's bike. And the bike would stay outside in the middle of the street or in the middle of the alley. Wake up the next morning and ride the same bicycle, you know, if you got lucky enough to ride it that day. Yeah. Very, very close-knit neighborhood. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:03:54] So you mentioned that you and your siblings grew up playing a lot of ball, [and] a lot of sports. Do you remember where in the neighborhood you all would go to play football?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:04:03] Oh yes. We like a little field in the projects and public housing. It was actually two fields we would call one Away Field, and one was the Home Field. It was two different public housing areas. And we would play football there in the very small little field, but you know,

we were too. We would play football and we would throw the ball for touchdowns. But we break windows in the process. And once we break a window, the game was over, we would run away, come back the next day and play again once the window was repaired. And of course, the people that lived in the house, "Who broke the window?" Nobody would own up to it. Yeah, we would play in the field that was available and a lot of times the other kids was playing in the same field. But you know, if you were big enough you would say, "Look, we're big, you guys have to move out the way. It's our turn to play in the field." But that was our field once we got there. Ad, we was always playing that one field, man. It didn't have a lot of grass. Yeah, it was just mostly dirt and rock. And you fall down, you get a band aid, or you go home, get a band aid, you come right back out and play again. Every day without fail, we would go out in that field and play, man. Had a good time. I mean I had bruises on my head, knees, you know, you name it. We didn't go to a doctor. We go home, get bandaged up by mom, go right back and play again. Break another window, run away, and come back the next day. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:05:33] Do you know where exactly the field was?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:05:36] It was on the corner of Montgomery and Patrick Street.

Kerry J Reed [00:05:50] Can you describe what your home looked like?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:05:53] Oh, I can't remember. Like two-bedroom, three-bedroom, public housing with six siblings, total of eight including my mom and dad, [and] one bathroom. I still can't I can't fathom today how we did it with one bathroom, but somehow, we did it. It had to be tight. But, growing up in that house, there was a lot of love, of course. But I can't remember if it was a two bedroom or a three bedroom. I know my mom and dad had their own room. I know we had bunk beds for my other two brothers. My sisters probably had a room. So, it must have been a three bedroom. Yeah, but it was tight. I know we only have one bathroom, though. So, I don't know how it went with the bathroom situation. I know it had to be real tight, man. But we managed somehow. But it wasn't a very big house at all, growing up in that little project house. But we did it somehow.

Kerry J Reed [00:07:01] Where do you place in the order of your siblings?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:07:04] I'm five of six.

Kerry J Reed [00:07:05] 5 of 6. A younger one.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:07:07] Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:07:09] What was that like, growing up with four older siblings?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:07:10] Well, it was tough. I had to grow thick skin real quick. You know, my older siblings were tough on me, you know, because I had five, seven years ahead of me. And they was always trying to, you know, make me tough, you know? But I had good upbringing. They made sure I was taken care of, you know, because once you go out the house, they made sure I had everything I needed. They looked out for me. When I played sports, they taught me everything I needed to know. We had a ball, a basketball, football, baseball. They took me out and showed me how to throw, catch, kick, everything I needed to know to learn the sport. So, I had some good

training from my brothers, especially my brothers, and even my sisters played sports. So, we would kick the ball around, throw it around, and they looked out for me in that aspect. Yeah, that was good. Good upbringing. A lot of love man. A lot of love. We were a tight knit family. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:08:18] When you would go out to play with all your friends and your siblings, do you remember in your mind where the boundaries of your neighborhood where? Where would you describe that as?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:08:29] Oh, we couldn't leave the block. We had to stay. And my mom would say, "Don't leave this block. Stay right in this area!" We didn't have a boundary set, but we kind of knew where we can go. We couldn't leave this, you know, certain area. And we had to be in before of the streetlights came on. We didn't have a set time or anything, but we knew when that streetlight came on, you had to be in the house. So especially during the summertime. We knew school nights where, you had to be in the house a certain time, but during the summer, the streetlight came on, you better be in the house. So that was our boundary. When that streetlight was on it was, "Hey, you get in this house, or suffer the consequences." You know, so that was our boundary, so to speak.

Kerry J Reed [00:09:21] You mentioned that your father worked at several Timberman drugstores here in Washington. As an example, do you remember what businesses that your family would frequent while you were growing up?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:09:33] Yep. We used to go to G.C. Murphy's right down the street here. Of course, we went to Timberman drugstore to get all medicines and stuff because, you know, he had discounts and stuff. Gallon Camp Shoes was like the shoe store with discounts because, everything we put on layaway, we didn't have a lot of money back then. It was a grocery store; I forget the name of the store. So, they used to be a store here on Duke Street, everybody used to go get their chitlins and hog malls and all that stuff. I'm sure everybody used to go there and get the stuff for Easter and Christmas dinner and stuff. We used to go there and get our stuff all the time. It was owned by, I want to say, a guy. He was a Greek guy.

Kerry J Reed [00:10:36] Did it start with a S. Was it like, Stefanos or something?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:10:42] No. That wasn't it...Santullos! There it is. Everybody used to go there. And everybody was from Alexandria used to go there and get all their chitlins and stuff like that. And that was the store everybody went to. Yeah. Matter of fact, that was probably the only store back then that was available. And he used to give everybody deep discounts because that was probably the only store available at the time in the 60s and early 70s. Santullos! He may have been Italian. I said Greek but he may have been Italian. I think I met him a couple of times. I was a little guy back then. So, yeah, used to be right next to Herbie Ford, who was a car salesman. Herbie Ford next door.

Kerry J Reed [00:11:39] Do you remember any other businesses that you would pass by or that you would see around your neighborhood or around the city?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:11:44] It used to be a little store called Johnson Store up on Bashford Lane that we used to frequent a lot as a kid. There we used to go to get Penny candy all the time. Johnson Store right off Bashford Lane, going out towards the parkway. If you go straight down Washington

Street, you run right into it right before you get on the parkway. We used to go there as a kid to get Penny candy. There used to be this thing called squirrel nuts. We used to get it all the time. You can still get it if you go to one of those fancy stores, every now and then. Yeah, that used to be my favorite, squirrel nuts. You can find it if you go to one of these little novelty stores every now and then. The bazooka bubble gum, stuff like that. Yeah. Johnson store. That was the one of my favorite stores to go to as a kid.

Kerry J Reed [00:12:42] What are squirrel nuts? I'm not familiar.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:12:44] It's a little square little piece of candy. It's caramel. Had little nuts in it, but the name of was called Squirrel Nuts. Yeah, you can probably find if you go Google it. You may be able to find it. You probably can get it off of Amazon or something like that now. Yeah. Good candy.

Kerry J Reed [00:13:04] Can you describe your father?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:13:06] Oh my God. He was a hardworking man, dedicated to his family. Like I said, he worked several jobs, loved his kids. Wasn't a perfect man, by any stretch of the imagination. But he was dedicated to his family. Loved his wife. And he was never home. You think we was the family without a father because he worked so much. Like I said, we grew up in the projects and public housing, and then we moved to 1021 First Street. We was one of the first families to move out of the projects over to the townhouses up on First Street. He was able to move us out of the projects because he worked so hard for us, man. And I remember that day back in 19, I want to say 73, 72. They did a newspaper article on us and everything. We moved out the projects. Man, that was one of the proudest moments in my life. Growing up as a 10-year-old kid, I remember that to this day. And, yeah, he was such a hardworking guy, man. I can sort of remember the look on his face when he was able to move us out the projects. We didn't have a U-Haul. All the people in a neighborhood kind of helped us move out the projects. They were grabbing sofas and beds and everything to help us move. We was right across route one. Because it wasn't far right across the street, helping us move our stuff out and moving to the new house, man. Everybody was so happy for us. Kind of like we were moving on up like The Jeffersons, you know? Yeah, that was a proud day for us. Yeah, my dad was pretty awesome, man. He was a hardworking guy, you know? He had faults. You know, he had a lot of mental issues. I mean, he was struggling, man. He was just trying to provide for his family. But he was such a hardworking guy. And this awesome father man did the best he could. Yeah. He was he was pretty awesome.

Kerry J Reed [00:15:12] You described your mother?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:15:14] Oh, my gosh. My mother was a homemaker. She raised six kids. Loving mother. She held it down. I remember one day I had some issues with some of the neighborhood kids. They wasn't from my neighborhood. They was from an adjacent neighborhood from, we called it New Projects. Still, to this day, they took some stuff out of our yard that didn't belong to them. My mother walked over to the New Projects and confronted those kids. They were some pretty bad kids. And she said, "This stuff doesn't belong to you. Give it back." You see, she had held my hand and took me over there with her. And those kids gave that stuff back to us, man. My mom. This is 1968. Maybe. Took us over there and confronted those kids, man. And those kids like, "I can't believe she's doing this". And they gave her everything. It wasn't much, but the fact that

they took it and that it didn't belong to them. Because back then you didn't lock up nothing. Everything was like on the front porch, you know. But they took it. I didn't belong to them. She was a strong-willed woman, man. Like I said, she was a homemaker. Never learned how to drive. Never drove a car in her life. Never had a driver's license. Oh my gosh, she was such a sweet woman. She was dedicated to her family. Loved us dearly. Loved us so much. And we loved her back so much. She was such a sweet woman. Miss her so much, man. Think about her every day. Every day I miss her so much, man. She was an amazing woman. She was from a small town in Virginia called Galax, Southwest Virginia. And she moved here from Galax to Alexandria. She graduated from Parker Gray High School. That's where she met my dad. My dad graduated from Parker Gray as well. That's where they met. And that's where that union got together. But she could cook! I would notice in the kitchen she would cook, and she would never measure anything. Like she would bake, she would never measure anything. I say, "Ma, how do you even know how to whip up stuff?" Never had a measuring cup. Never had nothing. No teaspoon, tablespoon, nothing. She just [makes cooking sounds]. She'd say, "I just got a feel for it." Until this day, like I get my baking skills [from my mom]. I'm not saying I'm a great baker or anything, but I can bake cakes and stuff. I know I don't measure anything, and they seem to turn out pretty good. My wife seems to think so. My daughters think so. I bake my daughters' cakes for their birthdays every year for them. Chocolate cake. Turns out pretty good. I think they seem to like it. Never measured anything, especially cakes and stuff.

Kerry J Reed [00:19:19] Much braver than I am. I could never do that. [both laugh]

Steve Earl Nelson [00:19:22] I get that from my mom. She was...man! I mean, I know everybody says about their parents, man, but my mom...six kids, man, growing up in the 60s, I mean, dealing with, you know, what we had to deal with. Oh, man. She was the salt of the earth. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:19:44] So you recounted that amazing memory of your mother confronting those kids from the New Projects. Then you mentioned your father as someone who was constantly trying to provide for his family. So, what kind of life lessons or values did they try to teach you and your siblings?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:20:02] One takeaway I would say is just kind, [and] to be always respectful to people. One lesson that I always keep with me today, and I know at the time I didn't understand what [my dad] was trying to tell me. When you talk to somebody for the first time always look them straight in the eyes. When you shake somebody's hand always talk to them straight in the eyes. You don't look down at them, respect them. You know, you shake their hand. You look them straight in the face. I didn't know what that meant back then. Didn't mean nothing to me back then, but me means everything to me now. My mom would always say, "Always hold the door for a woman." Back then it didn't mean nothing, but now it means everything. Hold a door for a woman. Hold the door. You know, back then, what that mean? You know, I do that all the time now, without even paying any attention to it. And I look behind me if I'm going into a public building or whatever. I look behind to make sure nobody's behind me, especially with a woman, you know, because I'll hold the door for a lady and let her in first without even thinking about it. You know, so those little things like that, I just kind of take with me. Yeah, just respect people, man. All people. No matter who they are or where they come from. So, stuff like that. Just respect folks. Just be kind and just try to just live your life respectfully. And know you'll get it back in return, hopefully. Not always but

sometimes you know. And it doesn't cost you nothing just being nice and respectful. That's the takeaway I got from my parents.

Kerry J Reed [00:22:07] So you mentioned that your mother came from Galax.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:22:10] Yes.

Kerry J Reed [00:22:11] Did either of your parents ever tell you much about your family history growing up?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:22:17] Well, on my mom's side, she didn't really talk much about her dad and her mom. I didn't really know much about her mom. Her dad was a Caucasian man. But I didn't know much about her mom. She didn't talk much about her mom, but her dad was a Caucasian man. So that's about as much as I know. His name was Jake Goins, but she never really talked about her mom to be quite honest with you. I don't even think I've ever questioned her about her mom. But her dad was named Jake Goins, and he was from Galax. That's a good question. I never even questioned her about her mom. My dad's parents were from Fredericksburg, Virginia. We just had a family reunion last year. Yeah, so I don't know too much about my mom's family, though. Be honest with you. That's an interesting question. My baby sister, she's passed away. She was like the family historian. She would know everything, and she would know so much stuff. She would try to school me on stuff, but I just never really got to that question about my mom's mom. So, I don't really know about that part, but I just know my granddad. But I never met my father's parents because they passed before I was born. So, I don't know too much about that.

Kerry J Reed [00:24:20] So did your dad's family moved from Fredericksburg while your father was young?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:24:35] I think they did move to Alexandria. Yeah. As a family. Yeah. They lived, I think, on Payne Street.

Kerry J Reed [00:24:46] Because he met your mother at Parker Gray. Interesting. Did you ever visit any cemeteries growing up?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:25:01] I visited one cemetery when my aunt [died]. Probably one of the first funerals I went to. My Aunt Katie was buried down here. I don't know the name of it. It is right off where you start walking where the bridge is at.

Kerry J Reed [00:25:17] Oh, it's not Coleman?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:25:21] No, not Coleman. I don't know the name of. It's right where you start the bridge walk. Aunt Katie's buried there. That's the first cemetery I visited because she was buried there when I was very young, but I don't know the name of that one. Oh, my parents are very buried right next to Frederick Douglass.

Kerry J Reed [00:25:49] Bethel.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:25:50] There you go! I can never remember. That's where my parents are buried, and my sister. They're buried at Bethel.

Kerry J Reed [00:26:00] How old were you when your aunt died?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:26:06] I was probably 7 or 8.

Kerry J Reed [00:26:08] Do you remember much about that funeral?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:26:10] Very vaguely. I remember talking to my mom when I first went into the chapel. I just thought she was asleep, you know? And I kept tugging at my mom and dad. I said, "What's wrong with Aunt Katie? Is she sleep? Is she resting?" And of course, being the typical 7-year-old, I just didn't have a full understanding of what death was, you know. And they kept saying, "Just be quiet, just be quiet!" And I said, "No, she's sleeping! Let me go say hi to her. Let me wake her up!" But she was probably one of my favorite aunts, because she used to bring candy to the house when she came by. She used to bring candy all the time. I never forgot that. Aunt Katie, that's my dad's sister.

Kerry J Reed [00:26:58] Did you have many aunts and uncles?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:27:00] Oh, yeah, was a whole lot of them. Yeah, on my dad's side. He had 16 siblings. Yeah, he was the youngest, my dad.

Kerry J Reed [00:27:09] Were they all around Alexandria?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:27:12] For the most part. They was spread apart, but yeah. 16 siblings. And my dad was the youngest. And my Uncle Charles is 93. So, he's still around. He's down on the south side of Alexandria. And that he just turned 93 a couple days ago. Yeah. Charles Nelson. Yes. Quite a few of them. He's the only survivor right now. Yeah, my dad's Second Nelson. That's his nickname.

Kerry J Reed [00:27:42] That's a good one.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:27:43] Yeah, yeah. He was the baby of the family. Had a few die at birth, I believe. 1 or 2 that at birth, I think he said. There may have been more.

Kerry J Reed [00:27:59] Do you remember witnessing any particular funeral rites or any rituals that your family would do that stick out to you to this day?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:28:12] Well, back in the day, I remember when somebody would pass away, people would come to your house, they would bring a lot of food. That was like our repass. Not a full to your house, you know, just the comfort of family. Anything from hams, chitlins, chicken, you name it, they would bring it to the house, and everybody would just congregate to the person's house that they lost a loved one. That was like all the time if somebody would lose a loved one. I don't know if it was a ritual or whatever you call it, but that would happen all the time without fail. We always have somebody come to the house. It was always packed. I remember that if it wasn't at the church or whatever, it was it seemed to be at the person's that lost loved one's house. Yeah. Lot of food. And sometimes it'd be a somber occasion and sometimes somebody would try to get

people to laugh and smile because you know, back then you lost a loved one and nobody wants to laugh and stuff. But there was always that one person that was trying to get somebody to smile and laugh.

Kerry J Reed [00:29:28] Right.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:29:28] You know, try to break the mood a little bit. But yeah, I remember people always bringing food and stuff to the house. As we know it today is a repass. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:29:45] Did you ever visit Douglass growing up? By any chance you ever run through it?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:29:50] I have never and didn't know anything about Douglass until maybe a year or two. Yeah, I've just recently learned about Douglass due to Michael Johnson. Like I said, my parents are buried at Bethel. I just thought it was a wasteland. Be honest with you, I didn't know anything about. I used to peak over there and didn't think anything to be honest with you, because it was so unkept. Yeah. You know, I mean, I didn't even know that it was a graveyard. I just thought of the piece of land that was just forgot about. To be quite honest with you.

Kerry J Reed [00:30:39] Okay. Where did you go to elementary school?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:30:41] Oh, that's an interesting question. I started off at a school called Theodore Ficklin Elementary School in Alexandria way down by the water. My first month from kindergarten to fourth grade. And they bused me over to Stonewall Jackson right on the west end of Alexandria. From there, I went to John Adams Middle School, and from there I went to Hammond, and I'm with the former T.C. Williams High School. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:31:20] Why did you go to so many different schools?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:31:22] That is a good question. I guess they wanted to integrate the schools and so they started bussing us out of the city. I'm here in Alexandria because I didn't understand at the time, because I could have easily went to Parker Gray. It was within walking distance from where I lived because it took me two minutes to walk to school from where I lived to Parker Gray. I could have went to GW within walking distance, but they decided they needed to kind of integrate the school a little bit. So, I guess that was the decision they wanted to go with. I wanted to go to Parker Gray because my other siblings went to Parker Gray. But the I guess they decided otherwise. So, when you're young you don't know any better. So, you don't know any different. So, I didn't go with what they wanted me to do.

Kerry J Reed [00:32:18] How old were you when the integration program started?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:32:21] Oh, I was probably, oh, 10, 11,12 maybe.

Kerry J Reed [00:32:25] So you were going into middle school?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:32:26] Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:32:29] Did you have an awareness of the integration program? Did you know beforehand, and while you were in elementary school that racism and segregation were widespread in Alexandria?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:32:44] I didn't have a full understanding of it. I started to kind of get a feel for it because, you know, you start hearing people talk about it. So, you can't really run away from it because you can hear people talking. Some of the kids in school, especially to some of the white parents, was like, "Why are you bringing these Black kids over here?" You know, you still kind of don't really get a full understanding of it. But then the older you got, you kind of feel, well, "Why are we coming over here? Why can't I stay where I am?" But then of course, the older you get, you kind of get a full understanding of what was going on. So yeah. It was a pretty wild time. Why are they busing us over here? It was a tricky situation. I couldn't understand why in the world am I going. Is it a money issue? Seems like to me it wasn't the money issue. I could have walked. That seems like that's saving a whole lot of money. You put money in these busses, you got to pay for gas for these busses. You buying busses? I could walk to school, right? You know, but you can spend all this money for busses, gas, transportation, hiring all these drivers and everything. I don't know, to this day it is mind blowing to me. But then again, I could see what they was trying to do. It was trying to integrate you know, everybody through trying to I guess get together and get along I guess you would say. I don't know if it worked or not because some of the white parents didn't agree with it. I remember going to class and one white parent came in and told her daughter not to sit next to me. They don't know. "You sit over there!" Oh, like wow. Of course I'm still dumbfounded. I [was] young but I'll never forget that. Otherwise, why did she want her to move? You know. And then forget it. But at the time I was like, "Okay, well fine. She don't want to sit next to me, I don't want her to sit next to me either " You know, I want, another friend that I know wants to sit next to me. I don't know, it's crazy. But now I'm 60 years old I'm like, wow that was pretty crazy. Yeah. So yeah, this was our time.

Kerry J Reed [00:35:26] What were your white classmate's reaction to your presence?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:35:32] Well, back then, most of them, you know, was my age at the time and they didn't really understand either. But the parents. They were the one with the problems, you know. Of course, only you got to teach your kids hate. The kids didn't have a problem with it. It's the parents. So, the kids didn't have a problem with it. But as the kids probably went home, they was probably like the parents was teaching them, "You don't do this. You don't talk to them," you know, whatever. But I ended up having great friendship with some of those kids. You know, hate is he just taught. That was a problem of the parents not the kids. So, overall, I think it worked out well, as best they could, I guess. You know, that was their problem. And my parents, like I said, I wasn't raised to hate on anyone. So even though hate was thrown at me for whatever reason, I never really dished it out. You know, because I don't, you know, I don't hate anyone, man. I don't either. If you hate me, that's fine. That's on you. I'm gonna love you either way. I'm not going to lose no sleep on it at all. And that's the way I was raised. So, everything's good in my heart.

Kerry J Reed [00:37:07] Was is it like to reflect on your memories experiencing that level of racial hatred as a kid?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:37:15] It was, in fact, to reflect back on it, it was a sad man. It was sad, to be able to witness something like that, man, for somebody to have that level of hate in them, man. I

just, all I could do was pray for them, you know, because I don't understand why somebody would have that in their heart, you know? For what? You only got one life to live, you know, to have that type of level of hate in your heart, man, for what reason? Why? There's no reason to have that kind of hate in your heart, man. We all human, you know. Why would you hate somebody you don't even know? If you don't know me, get to know me. I'm gonna get to know you. You get to know me. We may have something in common. Don't judge me because my skin color is not the same as yours, and vice versa. I have some great friends that's not the same color as I am. So, it's sad. It's sad what racism is because my color's not the same as yours. It makes absolutely no sense to me. You know, I don't place the blame on the kids or the person that is racist because it's taught, you know? So, I just don't understand it. I really don't. If I had to say it a thousand times, I just don't get it. You know? But if you keep teaching it, it's not gonna ever go away.

Kerry J Reed [00:39:05] So you attended T.C Williams?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:39:08] Yes. Right.

Kerry J Reed [00:39:11] What was that experience with integration like? Because I know that you played a lot of sports teams. So, what was it like to play the same sports you had been a part of growing up with white classmates?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:39:25] Yeah. It was good. I had no problems at all with my white classmates playing football. If anybody was racist, I didn't know at that time. They may have held it in. Of course, you know, sometimes you never know. It could have been some on the team if there were. They never showed it towards me. On my own team that I played on 80, 81, never showed me that they were racist. And that's not to say that there weren't any playing. You had some great teammates on my team. I'm still friends with them today. Yeah. So, I don't know if they're racist or not, but great guys. Great guys on that team, football, and baseball. And, like I said, I still have a couple of them that I'm friends with today as we speak. So. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:40:37] Did you only play football and baseball?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:40:39] Yeah, in high school.

Kerry J Reed [00:40:41] What position do you play in football?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:40:42] Football, I played outside linebacker. Baseball, I played on left field.

Kerry J Reed [00:40:51] Do you have any particularly strong memories about playing sports in high school, or any special memories about high school at all?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:40:56] Football. I love baseball. It was my first love, but I was a decent football player. But baseball was my first love. Even though I played baseball mostly from literally all the way up to high school. And I even played when I was in the military., That was always interesting. When I was in military I played on the military team, intramural baseball. I played different branches. I got a chance to travel different teams, different states, different branches of services. Meet a lot of great service members through sports. Yeah. It was a great time in the

military playing different teams in baseball. It was a great time traveling the country. Awesome time. Yeah. Loved it.

Kerry J Reed [00:41:49] So you mentioned to me previously that you were being recruited to play baseball in college. So how did you end up in the Marine Corps?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:41:57] Well, that's an interesting story. I had some letters of intent to play baseball, but I had a lot of injuries. So, it didn't pan out with my injuries. So, colleges kind of just dropped me. They didn't want to deal with me no more. So, yeah, I understand back in the 80s we didn't have the technology, but what we have today to we know to repair different injuries like we have today. So, I just kind of fell through the cracks, so to speak. Yeah. That's why I joined the military. Because we didn't have a whole lot of money to go to school back then. So, I didn't have any scholarship offers like I thought I would come through.

Kerry J Reed [00:42:40] So what made you pick the Marine Corps?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:42:42] I thought in my mind at the time, it's the toughest branch, you know. I don't know if that was the smartest move. I thought I was tough, so I said, well, let me pick the Marines. And my buddy kind of persuaded me because he had already joined. He joined back in 79. And I saw when he came back out, I'm like, "Man, you made it through. I'm going join to join too," you know. So that was one of the main reasons I joined. Plus, they had sharp uniforms.

Kerry J Reed [00:43:12] Uniforms are like half the reason people do anything.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:43:14] I feel it's a great looking uniform. Yeah, but it was probably one of the smartest moves I ever made, joining the military, joining the Marine Corps.

Kerry J Reed [00:43:25] What was your MOS after basic?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:43:27] I started off as a what they call a 25-12, which is a field wireman communication. So basically, you got switchboards, you got field telephones, and you got to set up communications for floor observers, and you know, you got wire running all over the field and everything, tents, and everything so the CO can talk to whoever you need to talk to whoever. Yeah, that's in the field. Now, you can set up base telephone and all that stuff, too. But that's how I started. Started off as a field.

Kerry J Reed [00:44:06] Yeah. So, you weren't aware of the of the baseball team when you first joined the Marines? So how were you made aware of?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:44:14] Well, I was playing intramural softball. And then, I was just playing, and the guy was like, "Man, you pretty decent. You ever thought about playing for Marine Corps baseball teams" I said, "I ain't know they had one." He said, "I know a guy who can hook you up." And next thing I know, I tried out and he said, man, "Let's go try out for baseball team." And one of the guys that was kind of like the recruiter for the Marine Corps baseball team, I tried out, and made the team. Next thing I know, I was on TAD. That was my job to play baseball for Marine Corps, and I was just going around different bases playing baseball. That was it. Yeah. Pretty cool man.

Kerry J Reed [00:44:58] Yeah, I mean, when you first told me about this previously, I thought that was the coolest thing. I had no idea that was part of it.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:45:04] So they got baseball, basketball, and I think they have football too. I know they have baseball, basketball, and baseball. And you can go different bases. You can travel, and you can do it for up to maybe two years. Yeah. And that's all you do, for like however long you do it for. You can just play ball and that's your job. Yeah. Even though you're a Marine but your job with the sports and you paid for it. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:45:36] So, when you weren't traveling, where were you stationed so that you could practice?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:45:42] First I was at Cherry Point, North Carolina, Hawaii. Mostly at Cherry point when I was playing ball. From Cherry point you go to Camp Pendleton, you go to the camp Lajune. I went to Fort Bragg, played at different army bases. I went to some Air Force bases. I became Andrews and played against the Air Force people sometimes, you know, I was all over the East Coast. I got stationed in Hawaii, but I didn't play ball in Hawaii. I played when I was stationed here, but we used to [play] all over the East coast mainly. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:46:28] Do you have any particularly fond memories of your time playing baseball?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:46:32] Oh, yeah. I had a in the park home run.

Kerry J Reed [00:46:36] Oh, really? In the park?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:46:37] Yeah, I think I was fast, but I think the guy just fumbled the ball on outfield. I hit a gapper. We called it a gapper when it's between the centerfield and the right fielder. And he kind hit the wall. And the right fielder picked it up, but he dropped it, you know? I almost ran a second and I looked over my shoulder. He hadn't got the ball in yet. So let me go. And the third base coach was like, no. Nah, I'm going, I'm going. So, he got it into the shortstop and hand. I was almost on third. Third base goes, "Nah!" I said, "No I'm going." I was pretty fast. I was going to chugging along. It was a close call. So, he got it in, and I could see the ball coming. I was still running, man. Headfirst, did a P roll dive. [Laughs]. And I was safe. A home run. That's one of my fondest memories.

Kerry J Reed [00:47:39] Did you only play for your fellow servicemen, or did you ever play in front of civilians or in military?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:47:46] Yeah, it was all service ball. Army. Navy. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:47:57] You're still playing left fielder?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:47:58] At that time? Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:47:59] If you were an outfielder, you must have fast then.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:48:01] Oh, yeah. I thought I was fast. In my mind I was fast.

Kerry J Reed [00:48:07] I played catchers, you know. I was slow as a rock. When did you leave the service?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:48:14] 2002.

Kerry J Reed [00:48:15] 2002. What was your rank when you got out of it?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:48:18] Master sergeant.

Kerry J Reed [00:48:22] Yeah. Master sergeant. Okay. So, did you immediately come back to Alexandria once you left the service?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:48:31] I was down in Stafford, Virginia. Hung out down there for a while, got remarried, and I moved up here to Alexandria.

Kerry J Reed [00:48:44] So what were you doing for work when you got out of the service?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:48:48] I worked for this telecom company for 17 years. And got retired from that to then I'm doing what I'm doing now.

Kerry J Reed [00:49:06] Presumably you had been coming back [to Alexandria] during your service, right?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:49:10] Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:49:11] But when you first came back after leaving the service, what did you notice about Alexandria?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:49:18] Well, it's just the change. Alexandria seemed like it was a whole different world. The knock down of the public housing. You had a lot of different buildings being built. People changed, obviously. I mean, that's not a bad thing. People moving in, coming from different parts of the country. You could probably count on your hand people that was born and raised here, you know that's no longer here anymore now because they passed on, of course. So, yes, it was a big change. Obviously, for whatever reason. So, yeah, that's probably the biggest thing I noticed. The biggest change is a different outlook altogether. It just wasn't the same Alexandria as I knew it growing up. I mean, change is going to happen. I get that, but that probably was the biggest thing that I noticed. Everybody was just totally different. I've noticed that was the biggest thing that I've seen. People from all walks of life, which is cool. I got lost when I first got here. What's going on here? What street is this? I don't even recognize the street going down North Patrick Street. I said, "What is this? I don't know this this place here? What's this new building and stuff?" I almost got lost because I didn't recognize it, you know?

Kerry J Reed [00:51:05] How did it feel to come back to the city of your birth to the neighborhood you grew up in and see so much change?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:51:11] Like I said, change is good sometimes. I'm glad to be back because the city gave me a lot. You know, I grew up here, born and raised. I always want to give back, because I can see a need, especially for our youth. As far as why I do what I do, as I'm here mentoring young folks. I'm the only Alexandria City gang task force doing what I can to give back. I think it's important. I love Alexandria, and just like I said, this is where it started for me. And it's what I want to do. Just give back to the city. There's always work to do. Always something to do here that I can impact somewhere in a positive way. But I'm here to do it. So, whatever I can do to help somebody out, I'm here to do it.

Kerry J Reed [00:52:14] When did you get involved with the gang task force?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:52:17] A little over three years now. I just put a new application in. I think it's a ten year max that you can do it. So, I just put in a new application now to stay on the task force. I just had to redo the application. Because they sent me an email saying, if you want to stay on, you've got to redo your application. So, I just did that. Yeah, I enjoy it you know, because I go around to different sites, we call hotspots. Like one of the areas is up here by the Bradley Shopping center and McDonald's. I don't know if you heard a couple of years ago, they had a stabbing up there. A kid got stabbed and died from, I don't know if it was from gang activity, but may have been a click up there that had issues and killed a kid. And so, I go up there. I frequent that area a lot. Kind of just canvas the area. I kind of like just getting away, you know. Because if they see an adult sometimes, they just they scurry off, you know, so if they see somebody there, they won't do what they normally would do. And I just kind of go up there and just talk to the kids and see what's on their mind and, have a conversation with them sometimes. What are you doing? What's going on? How's school? They look at me [like], "Who are you?" "If they talking to me, they're not doing any of the mischief. So, I just try to get in the way sometimes.

Kerry J Reed [00:53:46] What made you gravitate towards helping out youth programs with the gang task force?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:53:53] Because there's a need for the kids. Sometimes these kids don't have an outlet, you know. I don't know, sometimes the programs here in the city don't have enough. They don't have an avenue to go to. So sometimes these programs don't benefit them. Sometimes the rec programs are not good enough for them, sometimes they're boring. I've even heard from the kids that these programs are boring. And I said, "Well what do you mean by boring?" They say they don't do enough. You know, I don't know if that's true or not. I don't really know what's going on with these programs. So, I said, "Well, what do you want to see happen?" And they may tell you this and that. I say, "Well, describe boring to me." "Well, they don't have this, they don't have that." And I say, "Well, you know, you gotta give it a chance, you know." So, I'll talk to them. I'm just out there trying to be an outlet for them. I said, "Well, how about if I come, we go and chat and talk. I'll give you out, get you something to eat. We hang out, go shoot some hoops. I ain't going to run up and down the court with you or nothing, but I might go and shoot a few hoops or something with you." Somebody to talk to, sometimes that's all they need. Just somebody to talk to. Like I gotta guy I'll see tomorrow. Just go hang out with him. You know, a little kid that goes to one of the elementary schools here. I'll check him out tomorrow. I see him every Thursday. Good kid, you know, just needs some guidance, and I don't have a problem with that. I get it. I enjoy spending time with him, and that filters down to his siblings, you know, so maybe he can, you know, talk to his brothers and sisters, you know. Just a little bit helps. So, I'm glad to do it. And I will continue to do as long as the

need is there. But, Alexandria, man, it's always a need to do something here, man. You know, any little bit I can do to help. So that's where I am.

Kerry J Reed [00:55:52] Absolutely. So, growing up, did you did you go to church?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:56:03] You know, I was kind of force fed to church.

Kerry J Reed [00:56:06] Force fed to church?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:56:06] Yeah. Like, you know when you're a kid, you don't know nothing about church. Your mom is always like, "You going to church, boy!" Went to Beulah Baptist Church right down the street here. We call it Bulow, but it's called Beulah B-E-U-L-A-H.

Kerry J Reed [00:56:31] So you must have resisted a lot every Sunday then.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:56:34] Yeah. Columbus Watson. That's the pastor's name. So, yeah, I went as a kid. My mom encouraged us to go with a stern hand. God bless. It was interesting to me. A kid you don't really understand, you know, going to church. Your mom make you go, right? You go. What you going to do? Everybody has to leave the house. My dad's at work, and, I mean, we lived up on First Street, but as we know, that's a good little walk, right? I think my mom used to hail a cab for us, and then Beulah had a bus, and I can still remember my mom put us on the bus schedule. So, the bus used to pick us up. Before that, I think she put us in the cab. But the bus picked us up, and I used to hate getting up on Sunday morning because I just liked to watch Sunday morning cartoons. And my mom says, "The bus is out here!" I would say, "I don't want to go to no church." And the bus picks us up. And the bus would wait! Ain't even got no clothes on yet! So, I put on a little pants or whatever. Bus picked us up. We go to church. You know, they put it down on the bottom of the church, was like where kids go, you know. I guess the Sunday school, or Bible study, or whatever they call it, and teach us about the greatness of God, which is, you know, as a kid, you're not there paying attention. You just there eating donuts and cookies the stuff, drinking juice. But, you know, as you got older, you kind of understand why your parents did stuff for you. You know, just want you to be a human being. Yeah, I appreciated that. Now I appreciate it now because then you 8, 9 years old, you just want to stay home, play football, and ride a bike and on a Sunday because you know, next day you gotta go to school. You know, my mom used to make us go to church, man. Yeah. But it's great lessons. You know, we learn about the goodness of God. He is good. No question about it.

Kerry J Reed [00:58:54] Was your father Baptist as well?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:59:00] I guess you can call him Baptist. He was a bedside Baptist.

Kerry J Reed [00:59:06] That's funny.

Steve Earl Nelson [00:59:08] You know. Oh, Dad was something else. If he wasn't working, yeah, I guess you would call him that. My dad worked seven days a week, man. He was always working. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [00:59:25] So you mentioned that, you know, not appreciating going to church as a child. When did you start to have that appreciation for going to church?

Steve Earl Nelson [00:59:36] I guess when I got into my teens. A little older maybe. You know, I started really understanding how great God is. You know, started understanding how prayer really works. You know, how good and great God really is, man. Because even in my heart, you know, and I'm not trying to push anything on anybody, I just know how great God is in my life. Yeah. So those teachings as a kid, you know, even though, you know, I didn't really understand it at the time, and how people prayed for me growing up. Yeah. It works. It works in my life. You know, people may have their own little theories about it or whatever. They may have their own beliefs. But in my life, God is good man. God is great. Yes, indeed. Thank you, momma.

Kerry J Reed [01:00:28] Do you still go to Beulah Baptist Church?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:00:30] No, I don't go there anymore. I go to Landmark Church here in Alexandria. Pastor Elwood Jones. Yeah, it's more of an online church. We don't really have a building, but we meet online every Sunday.

Kerry J Reed [01:00:51] So I'm curious, before we get into questions about Douglas Cemetery, as someone who has lived, or grown up, and then lived in Alexandria for so long. What physical changes have you seen in Alexandria that sort of separate the Alexandria of your youth from the Alexandria of today? So, you mentioned, like, growing up on Montgomery Street. So, are those projects still there?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:01:19] Those particular projects are still there. I don't know for how long now. The ones across the street are gone. Yeah. But one of them, Montgomery Street, is still the ones that I grew up in. They're still there. I think they may be gone here in the next couple of years, maybe next 5, 6 years from what I understand.

Kerry J Reed [01:01:37] What about the New Projects?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:01:40] So they're there and they've been there for 50,60 years. They still can't New Projects, which is funny. That's what Parker Gray's Park Road was right across the street from there, which is no longer there, but these buildings there now. I don't know how long they're going to be there either, but I'm assuming I could be wrong. They may be gone here soon too. I'm guessing, and I may be wrong again. There won't be any more projects here in the next ten years. I'm guessing they're going to be all gone. I can't really see the projects now. They're going to have to have affordable housing regardless of whether they knock them down. So, they're gonna have to have affordable housing. They just can't just displace people without having to have them have a place to stay. But in the city's eyes, in my opinion, they can't have projects here. Because they're building all this new stuff. And of course, you know, they're trying to get the stadium here and all that stuff, too. So, yeah, I can't really see them having it in their eyes. An eyesore with the public housing here. They could probably knock them down and build something else. Can't have that there. The city is not going to have that. This is my opinion. I think I'm pretty good opinion. They're not going to have that. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [01:03:07] So what do you think that developing these new properties where the projects used to be, what do you think that does to the community, because you mentioned before how close knit your community was growing up?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:03:20] There's not going to be any more community. Everything's, like I said, you're gonna have new people moving in. The community that I'm used to is not going to be anymore because you're not going to know anyone. It's going to be people moving in from all walks of life. And like I said, it's going to be a new era. People are going to come in from who knows where. It's going to be new jobs. People are going to get new opportunities. You know, it's going to be totally different. Times have changed man. And that's not a bad thing you know, because people want to have an opportunity to find new opportunities to have new jobs. And it that's just the world we live in now. I mean you can't turn the clock back right. So, and I get it. I mean I can't go back to the 60s, 50s and 70s, and stuff like that. You got to move on. So that's where we are now. I totally understand it man. And I wish we can, you know, stop the clock sometimes. But time doesn't stand still for anyone. So, it's going to be interesting to see, and it's going to be very interesting to see how this new wave comes through and how the city is going to respond to this new wave of employment people and how everybody's going to get along because it's going to be very interesting to see. I just want to see how it's going to pan out because like I say, people going to come from different parts of the world, country or whatever. And your neighbor is not going to be your neighbor, you know what I mean? And they're not going to be like, "Hey, how are you doing?" You know, it's like, now I don't even get along with my neighbor. They come from Wisconsin somewhere, and they look at me like, who are you? Like, I've been here all my life! It's crazy man. And I'm just as friendly as you want to be. You know if she'd only give me a chance. Looking at me like I'm from Mars or something. Why? It's crazy. She just moved in.

Kerry J Reed [01:05:53] Where are you living at now?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:05:54] I live in the West End. Right by the police department. It's crazy man.

Kerry J Reed [01:06:02] Interesting.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:06:03] Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [01:06:05] How many native Alexandrians do you know there still? You know, that are still living in the city?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:06:16] I can probably count on my hand, man, to be quite honest with you. I mean, I can't give you an accurate count, but I wouldn't be scared to bet you, it's probably no more than maybe 15. Yeah, I mean, that'd be a safe bet. Oh my gosh, [sighs] pretty much man it's Native Alexandrians born and raised? Wow, bro. Off the top of my head I can't even think...me? Oh, man. Harold Hughes. Does Harold still live here?

Kerry J Reed [01:07:01] I think he lives in Fredericksburg or somewhere like that.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:07:05] Yeah. So, he's gone from here. Michael Johnson lives in Maryland. May not even be 15. That ought to tell you something.

Kerry J Reed [01:07:22] Absolutely. Wow.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:07:27] And you have it. And you probably can say, I probably can't afford to move out of here, you know, and trying to move back home because the cost of living here. You know, it's crazy. I mean, you get houses that go for \$2 or \$3 million here, man. My parents bought that house on First Street in 73 for \$25,000. Know what that house is worth now?

Kerry J Reed [01:08:09] What is it worth now?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:08:11] You ready?

Kerry J Reed [01:08:11] Yeah.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:08:15] \$1.2 million.

Kerry J Reed [01:08:16] Oh my word.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:08:21] Is in there. Isn't that something?

Kerry J Reed [01:08:25] Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:08:26] And it's a townhouse! [laughs]

Kerry J Reed [01:08:38] We've been talking for about an hour and ten minutes now. Mr. Nelson, it's been an absolute pleasure. Before we move into questions about Douglass, is there anything else you would like to discuss or talk about?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:08:49] I think we pretty much hit on everything, man. I can't think of nothing right off the top of my head.

Kerry J Reed [01:09:03] So you mentioned to me earlier that you don't have any memories of visiting Douglass as a kid.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:09:11] Sure.

Kerry J Reed [01:09:12] When was the first time you remember seeing Douglass, then?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:09:16] Probably, I guess going over 3, 4 years now. First, I was introduced by Michael Johnson. Because, you know, he took on this project of restoring it because of the flooding. And now that the organization that I'm involved in, the Social Responsibility Group, you know, he's involved in as well. And the flooding took place, and I looked over there and like, wow, I didn't even know that was a cemetery. And he brought it to our attention that we need to get involved in it. So that's 3 years ago, I guess.

Kerry J Reed [01:09:55] The first time you laid eyes on Douglass, what did it look like?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:09:58] It was a mess. It was flooded. It was overgrowth. It looked just like an old, abandoned field. I didn't know it was a cemetery. I just thought it was just a field with a bunch of weeds. Yeah, that's what I thought when I first saw it.

Kerry J Reed [01:10:24] So I know that a big part of the of the Douglass initiative has been doing biographies about the people who are buried there. Has being involved with the SRG and the Douglass Initiative made you do any of your own research into your family history?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:10:37] Yes, it has. I've been talking to my uncle. You know, like I said, he's 93 and I ask him on occasion. Sometimes he don't remember a lot. I say, "Do you know if we have any family members buried over there?" And he said, "No, I don't think so." I said, "I'll keep asking. I'll find out more. But I talk to him all the time. And, last time I talked to him, he said, "I don't think we have any family members buried there." "Do we have any cousins, any nephews, nieces that you may know may be buried over there?" He said, "No, I don't think so." But if I get them on a good day, you know, he may give me more information. But being 93, he's pretty sharp. But I don't think we have any family members, per se, buried there. There's a Nelson over there, and I brought it to his attention. I got a picture of a tombstone. He said he didn't recognize the name. He would now be 93 years old. He didn't say no. I don't know that name even though it said Nelson.

Kerry J Reed [01:11:41] So how often do you go to Douglass Cemetery?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:11:44] I try to go there at least once a week just to take a look, especially like after a bad rain, just see how much flooding it is taking on.

Kerry J Reed [01:11:55] Well, when was the last time you went?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:11:56] I was there 2 days ago.

Kerry J Reed [01:11:58] Two days ago. Can you walk me through the entire process of going to Douglass 2 days ago?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:12:04] Yeah. I drive down on Fayette Street and park my car. Just walking around and I look at some of the headstones and I just canvas the area, and I just think about those souls in it. And in a graveyard, it's looking at the graves sometimes. Some of them I can read, some of them I can't. I just try to reflect, and say, "Wow." I don't know what they went through, how they got there. I don't know [if] they [were] slaves. Were they sharecroppers or whatever. I just pray for them and their families, man. And I thank them for whatever they did. Like I said, I don't know who they were or what. I just have a little moment to myself sometimes. Yeah, that's what I do. I was there a couple days ago. Every time I go down there, I just do my same little walk. I walk around the perimeter. Sometimes if I see something different, you know, I may go a different route. Sometimes I may miss something. You know, something might catch my eye, you know. Did I see that tombstone last time? You know. But last time I saw Nelson on one of the tombstones. And that's why I questioned my uncle, and I took a picture of it. Yeah. I think Steve Johnson pointed that out to me. Nelson's tombstone.

Kerry J Reed [01:13:42] So even if the Nelson that you noticed at Douglass is, or is not related to you, what does it feel to have that level of uncertainty?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:13:53] Oh, it just makes me want to keep searching. I want to keep searching. And maybe even though he has my last name, there's a possibility still that I may have some root connection to it, you know. So, I want to keep searching somehow. I don't even know where to start, you know, because I'm going to one of my sources that has probably all the knowledge that I can probably muster up right now. And that's my uncle. You know, he's 93. How much longer does he have here? You know, I probe him all the time. You know, while he still can communicate that to me. I don't know where else to go. But I'm trying to get as much information as I can from him. He's a wealth of knowledge. Yeah, he's still got his wits with him. When he's talk I gotta suck all that in while I can, you know. Yeah, that's where I am with that. I don't know, man. I'm not through with it. You know, I'm not sure, but I'm not giving up on it. You know, this is quite possible that I have some there. Somebody there from my lineage that's there. But, you know, my parents are right across the road from [Douglass].

Kerry J Reed [01:15:38] So you visit Bethel as well?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:15:40] Yes.

Kerry J Reed [01:15:41] So you see your parents and your sister. How does Bethel look in comparison to Douglass?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:15:49] It's like night and day. It's well-kept, you know, because they got a keeper there. Mr. Click, you know, keeps it up. Everybody knows Mr. Click. You know, he's the guy that keeps the everything intact. And, you can go there and talk to him, and he can tell you exactly where everyone is over there. And he's like a walking almanac, Mr. Click is. You go to Mr. Click, "Where is so-and-so buried?" He'll point right at it. Boom! And he don't have no map and nothing. Boom. "He's right there." He's amazing guy. Former Marine too by the way. Yeah. It's like night and day over there, man. Like I said, I didn't even know that cemetery existed, man. I ain't even paid attention to it. I just thought it was an abandoned field or whatever recently to a few years ago. But Bethel is a well-kept cemetery. It's like it's not even a comparison to Douglass right now, but our goal is to get it that way.

Kerry J Reed [01:17:08] So you mentioned not knowing about Douglass until Michael Johnson introduced you to the cemetery. How have you seen the black community and Alexandria sort of come together around the Douglass initiative?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:17:24] Well, it seems like it's starting to gain traction now. It seems like they're starting to gain some traction. Even with the city officials, I think, now we're starting to get some funding and get some people that gets in the way behind it. I don't know if it's, by design or now as they start and get a little push behind it. Now people are starting to get interested. So now we're starting to get in people really interested about it. Now, I don't know if that's a political move or whatever, but yeah. So, I think we're starting to get a lot of a lot of traction behind this thing now, which is a great, but it's going to be interesting to see moving forward. How does things pan out? But I think we got some key players on this thing now. So, you know once you start getting a lot of players involved, you'll start seeing a lot of a big push. You start seeing a lot of more people getting involved in this thing. So, Michael Johnson has really put his best foot forward on this thing,

man. He got a lot of passion with this. So, we're going to back him the best way we can. And you're going to see a lot more key players, heavy- heavy hitters starting to put their weight on it too.

Kerry J Reed [01:18:48] So you join the advisory group right after Michael Johnson introduced you to that?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:18:52] Yes.

Kerry J Reed [01:18:55] Why did you join? What was the importance in your mind?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:18:59] I just saw a need for it. It was very easy for me because I saw a passion. Michael Johnson have been doing stuff like this for years for the city of Alexandria. He just has been just an awesome leader of things, man. I just always wanted to be part of his team. He's been part of Alexandria for as long as I remember, even when I was younger. I mean, I was in the Marine Corps and came back, and he was a former marine, too, by the way. He's always been passionate about things, man, for the right reason. So, because a lot of things have been lost in translation here in Alexandria. So, he's been spearheading a lot of things in Alexandria. And I always want to be a part of anything he's involved in. I'm always a supporter with him because he's doing it for the right reasons. So, anything Michael Johnson is part of, and I can help out, I'm on board with it. Because he's a standup guy, and he's doing everything for the right reasons, man. And this project needs to be completed and needs to be seen through the lens of the people here in Alexandria.

Kerry J Reed [01:20:17] So you mentioned that things have been lost in in translation. Do you mean Black history when you say that. [01:20:23] [0.0s]

Steve Earl Nelson [01:20:24] Yes.

Kerry J Reed [01:20:25] Were you ever taught Black history growing up in Alexandria?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:20:28] No, in history class we were never taught Black history. It was always, you know, Christopher Columbus, you know, stuff like that. Never Black history. I don't know if that was by design. But we had this Black history guy called George Weber in high school. This is in the 70s, like 75, 76. He was a substitute teacher coming up. And he was substitute for the regular history teacher in school. And when he would come to substitute, everybody would go to his class, and he would just teach Black history. And the class would be packed. And because that stuff we wasn't privy to, because everybody flocked to class, George Weber. And this stuff wasn't on the curriculum. Black history was like taboo back then. Only thing in Black history you hear [was] like Martin Luther King. You wouldn't hear stuff about Crispus Attucks. You wouldn't hear stuff about, you know, the founders of Black history, stuff like that. Just the very basic stuff. But he would go in depth of Black history. Kind of like, pique your interest, you know? So that was kind of like, kind of got the wheels going to learn more. Back then you know, all you hear about was George Washington, and Jefferson Davis, and stuff like that. That was history. That was being taught, you know, a whole lot more to it.

Kerry J Reed [01:22:29] Was this was in high school?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:22:30] [01:22:30] [0.0s] Yeah. He was a teacher at T.C. Williams. And like I said, everybody would come to his class, man. And even if you weren't assigned to the class, he wouldn't stop you from coming in there. He says, "I don't care if you assigned to it or not. Come on in here." And it was standing room only.

Kerry J Reed [01:22:48] Did he ever explain to you why he decided to teach Black history whenever he could?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:22:55] It was never needed to be said. He just come and nobody stopped him because it needed to be taught. Everybody would congregate to class, even the white kids. There were some of them in there, but some was opposed to it. But you know, he couldn't be stopped. And it wasn't on the curriculum. George Webber was an amazing guy, man. And once you got in that class, that opened avenues to other stuff. It got your mind going like, hey we got this now we can do this. We can learn other stuff. Got you motivated! You know, once you started to learn that history, wow! We can start learning other stuff. That was him. He was that dude. Mr. Weber was pretty awesome.

Kerry J Reed [01:24:00] So would he teach about Black Americans in the United States broadly or will he teach local Black history?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:24:07] Both. Yeah, he would do both, man. He covered the spectrum. He was all over. Yeah. George Weber.

Kerry J Reed [01:24:19] Interesting. That's really fascinating. I've never heard that before. That's really cool. Okay. So, in sort of a similar vein, how do you feel about that forgetting about the dead or about a cemetery? What do you think that does to a community?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:24:47] Well, that's the thing. That's why we're trying to resurrect, so to speak, for lack of a better word. We want the city to know. We don't want them to be forgotten. You know because they belong to someone. Whether it's an ancestor. They may have kids that's alive today that they don't know about. So, we want them to know that they're not forgotten. We may have people that may visit Alexandria one day that may have somebody buried there that they don't know about. They may come from a different state or whatever. It may be on a tour, and they may see one of their relatives buried there. That's one of our goals here. Once we get everything situated here at Douglass, they'll have this as a stopping tour. To have that somebody may come from a different city or whatever. They see one of their relatives. Once we get all the gravestones, and names, and stuff engraved or whatever on a placard or whatever, they may see somebody put their last name on there. And they may have a question about it, and they say, "Oh I didn't know they were buried here." That's one of our goals to have that, you know, have that person say, "Well that's my great-great grandmother, great-great uncle, or whatever, father or whatever," you know. Everybody has a history, you know, so they may come in and say, "Hey, my dad's dad or great uncle was buried here, right? You know, I heard my somebody was buried in Alexandria. I didn't know till now." Like I said, somebody may come on a trip. So that's one of our goals. Always want to keep the history alive, you know? That's our mission. It's important. Keep it alive. Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [01:27:00] How do you describe the Douglas Initiative or the Douglas Advisory Group to people who aren't familiar with it?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:27:11] Oh, well, I would say, we just want to keep it for the people that are not familiar with it. If you're not familiar with it, it's no different than a graveyard that you're familiar with. [01:27:40] [0.0s] You know, I don't know. If you go to a graveyard that your parents are buried in, you want that to be nice and upkeep, right? That's the way we want Douglass to be. Okay. You want it to be nice and neat. You want to be able to visit. Have a sit down. Just like any other graveyard. You don't want to go somewhere, and it is all unkempt and grass is not cut. You know, you may want to sit down and have a little lunch. You may want to sit down with your loved ones. That's what we want Douglass to be. You want to be able to relax and enjoy it. Nobody wants to go to a graveyard and it looks like it's a barren wasteland. You know, you don't want that. You want it to be nice. It's an eyesore right now. You don't want that. Just like any other graveyard. You know here in Alexandria, you just want it to be nicely kept. When you're walking around any other area in Alexandria is nicely kept for the most part. That's what we want it to be. Same thing.

Kerry J Reed [01:29:07] Have you seen the work that the city archeologists have done?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:29:10] Yes.

Kerry J Reed [01:29:12] What has it been like to observe their work?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:29:16] Oh my gosh. They unburied a foot stone one of the last times they were there, and that was pretty awesome. They're very meticulous. They are very professional. They are serious about their work. And they understand the importance of it. Which is important to us. They get it. They not just digging. They really understand why they're doing this work, which is, you know, and we appreciate that. Yeah. When they found that foot stone, they called us up right away, and called us down there and took pictures and everything. And that was a very moving moment for us because we was making some headway that we now know that there was something there and not just dirt. They called Michael Johnson, and we ran down there right away. Michael Johnson, he said, "he must have found some bone or something!" We thought we were gonna see some bones, but it wasn't bones. But we found a foot stone which tells us that there's really something there. So now they kind of got a map of what they need to do now to keep furthering their project. So, it was a very exciting moment for us.

Kerry J Reed [01:31:00] So how do you feel now that you know the city has taken an interest in and put funds towards the restoration and ultimately the respectful upkeep of Black Alexandrians.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:31:17] It's about time. Yeah, it's about time. It's been far too long, and. And I'm not going to go into why it took so long, but I think we all know the reason why. They knew that the graveyard was unkept and is totally unsatisfactory. They know that they knew that. Why it took so long, and all this red tape they had to go through. It's just totally unsatisfactory for us to go through all the stuff that we had to go through to get them to understand the importance to get this graveyard up to par, while not up to par yet, but get to get it to going in the right direction, to finally get it moving in the right direction. And why did it take so long with the funding and things of that nature? I mean, I know it's a political thing and I understand that, but it shouldn't have took this long. You know who owns it or whatever and all this stuff, all this red tape. And I try not to get into all that political stuff, man, but it's crazy. It's no excuse, in my opinion, why it took this long. Now, on the flip side of it, had it been another type of graveyard, somebody else had been crying

about it or complaining about it, probably wouldn't took this long that's just my opinion, and I think my opinion is pretty strong about that. But here we are now. We finally got it going in the right direction. Balls rolling, not rolling uphill anymore, it's rolling downhill. And it's going in the right direction now. So, we're happy about that. Just got to keep it going. That's not going to stop now. Like I said, we got the key players in place. Everybody's aware of what's going on with Douglass, and they can't just jump out the way now. They can't say, "Oh, we didn't get this. We didn't know about this." They can't complain. They can't say, "Well, we don't have the funding. We don't have the right people in place. So and so retired. We didn't know that letter came through." We can't say that now. You know how sometimes people [go], "Oh we didn't know that." Nah. We don't care who was out of office, we don't care who was in office. Who cares what funding didn't go through, or whatever. The time is now. Get this thing going and get it completed. This graveyard needs to be completed right now however long it takes. Yeah. This graveyard we have, which has people's family members buried there, and they need to be treated with respect and dignity. No graveyard should be flooded like that. I don't care who's in there. It's a [inaudible]. So that's where we are.

Kerry J Reed [01:34:42] Absolutely. So, you mentioned that you visit Douglass pretty frequently. Have you seen anyone there besides yourself or any other members of the advisory group?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:34:56] I see Michael J. down there almost on a regular, man. He's always walking through. I may see his sister down there, Stephanie, and his brother Steve walk down every now and then.

Kerry J Reed [01:35:13] Any people unaffiliated?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:35:15] I've seen people walking through, but they're not affiliated with the group. I see people down here with their dogs, which is a no-no. We've been trying to keep them off the property. We have signs down there. They're just totally disrespectful. When I do see them, I tell them they're not supposed to have the dogs on there. We have signs down there. No dogs, no pets allowed. And they just totally disregard it. I don't know what else to do about that. Yeah. You know it's like they don't care you know. And I know they probably see what I see. Is this a raggedy graveyard. What else. But we're trying to get it right. You're not helping by having your pets defecate on the doggone grave site. Yeah. Have some respect. You know your dog don't know any better, but you do. So, I see that sometimes. But they don't seem to get it, man. They don't care. Your dog's going to go where you lead the dog.

Kerry J Reed [01:36:22] So what do you think that the city can do, or the advisory group or, or the initiative can do to make people realize that when they're walking their dog?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:36:34] We just need probably some type of fencing or something. Yeah. You know, some kind of fencing, like to kind of have over there at the big graveyard. They got like a little metal fencing over there. It's across the street from...not Coleman, but -

Kerry J Reed [01:37:03] It's not Freeman.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:37:04] Freeman, yeah, I think it was Freeman. It's like a little metal fencing, goes up kind of curves a little bit. It's not a big fence, but something to kind of deter people from taking their pets in there. You can still go in. And then I think more big signage, you know, not like

something this small that, you know, they're not going to see that or something. I think we'll get there. I think right now they just don't pay attention to the little, small signage. But on the same aspect they just don't care. It's a graveyard and they probably see what I see. It's just a regular old dirt mound or whatever. They just don't care. They just going in there and walking through, and letting the dogs do whatever the dogs do. I've seen it a couple times. And I confront them about it. And then they look at me like, "[mumbles]." No. Have some respect, you know. You can't tell it to the dog. The dog don't know.

Kerry J Reed [01:38:21] Oh yeah. Absolutely. So, before we move on to our closing remarks, Mr. Nelson, I realize that I neglected to ask, your father and mother's names as well as your siblings. Could you tell me their names?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:38:37] William Noel Nelson senior. My mom's name was Lila Nelson, her maiden name was Gowens, Leila Ann Nelson's maiden name was Gowens.

Kerry J Reed [01:38:51] I'm sorry, you said Leila?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:38:51] Leila. L-E-I-L-A. Yes. Leila Ann.

Kerry J Reed [01:39:00] Then your siblings names?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:39:04] My oldest brother's name was William Noel Nelson Jr. My sister, Carrie Ann Nelson, and Michael Anthony Nelson. Cheryl Wynette Nelson. And my baby sister's name was Lynn Joanne Nelson.

Kerry J Reed [01:39:27] Hank you.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:39:28] Yes, sir.

Kerry J Reed [01:39:32] Like I mentioned a moment ago, it's been absolute pleasure talking to you today. Before we move on to our closing remarks, is there anything else you'd like to discuss talk about?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:39:45] Oh, no. I think we covered just about everything.

Kerry J Reed [01:39:55] Okay, terrific. We touched on this briefly, but what are your hopes for the Douglass Initiative moving forward?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:40:08] Well, ultimately, we've got everything moving in the right direction, and that was going to take some time to get the Douglass initiative completed. I don't know how long it's going to take, and I don't know what it all entails to get it restored, get the gravesites, all the headstones, get the names on it, or get some type of placard set up with the names on it or, you know, on the stand or whatever. Get the flooding under control. Get some greenery in there. You know, have it looking decent. You know, I don't know if we can actually get it fully restored to a perfect green gravesite or whatever. I don't know, but we just basically need to get that flooding under control. I think they have a plan for that, to get the flooding controlled, because that's the biggest thing. It's just a very unsightly site especially when it rains real hard. If we can get that under

control, I think we can do some things with that. And I think they can do something with that gazebo that sits in the middle to get that restored. Give some people a place to sit down, enjoy it. Get it redone. But ultimately, I think once we get that flooding controlled, that's going to be a great starting point to do bigger and better things. I think Michael Johnson wants to get a big old placard with however many names we can muster up, I guess, and go to the archives or whatever and get the names on there so we can actually identify some of the people on there. So yeah, that's going to be our main goal once we get that flooding under control. That's going to be great to have that.

Kerry J Reed [01:42:18] Then how would you like to see the city treat Black history moving forward?

Steve Earl Nelson [01:42:23] Just like any other history. Just like when they have these walking tours, I hear the ghost tours and all that other stuff treated the same way. Included in it in their tours as well. I mean you got these other tours going on here, I mean bring it up to Douglass as well. And he talks about it, have a, you know its history. Included in all the other stuff. Yeah. You know it's part of Alexandria as well. I mean you can't just have, can't have history without talking about black history. You know, it's, it's the mainstay here in Alexandria. I mean, we've black folks been through some stuff. Yeah. So, we got to include it. Can exclude it. Like I said, you got all these different tours going. I see it all the time. These ghost tours. I don't even know what that's all about. But, you know, ghost tours and, you know, okay, it is what it is. But how about having some, black history tours? You know, I'm sure we got a lot of curators down here and give me some black history, you know. You know, I'm sure you have a good following behind that. So that's included. Councilman Chapman, he has a manumission company and he's doing great work with that as well. So, and that's great. You know, I think you can once you include, Douglass a cemetery, Douglass cemetery involved. Get that get that involved in that as well. And then that to kind of, get you get that included in it that that'll help as well. Yeah. Yeah. I think the sky's the limit. I mean, you want to tell the whole story, right? You don't want to, you know, be incomplete with this thing, you know, want everything included. So, I think we, you know, we got a lot to do, but we've come a long way. But there's always a story to tell. Yeah. So, there's always work to do. Yeah, there's work to be done.

Kerry J Reed [01:44:29] That's definitely.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:44:29] Yeah.

Kerry J Reed [01:44:30] Then lastly, if you could hold on to one memory forever. What would it be? Wow.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:44:39] One memory forever. It would have to be for my mom. My mom always told me, "Never quit being happy." My mom told me that.

Kerry J Reed [01:45:12] That's beautiful.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:45:14] Every day. Never quit being happy. Thank you, ma'am.

Kerry J Reed [01:45:26] Thank you so much, Mr. Nelson. This has been an absolute blessing listening to your stories today. We appreciate it so much. Thank you.

Steve Earl Nelson [01:45:34] Thank you brother. Appreciate it.