

A TEI Project

Interview of David Cunningham

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (April 3, 2009)

Jefferson

Hello. This is Alison Jefferson today on Friday, April 3, and I'm here with David S. Cunningham, Jr., for our first session of the UCLA Oral History Project interview on black elected officials post-World War II. We are sitting in my home office in Los Angeles, and we're starting this interview at around ten-twenty a.m. Here also is Robin Charles, our videographer.

Jefferson

Mr. Cunningham--

Cunningham

Do you insist on calling me Mr. Cunningham?

Jefferson

I can call you David or Dave.

Cunningham

Okay, thank you.

Jefferson

All right, Dave. We're going to do a comprehensive interview with you, comprehensive oral history, and today we're going to start out talking about some of your formative year experience. Where and when were you born?

Cunningham

That's a good question. Where was I born? I was born on the floor of a beauty shop in Chicago, Illinois, in 1935, June 24, 1935. We were living with my Aunt Felicia, Aunt Felicia Wells, at 5406 Calumet [check spelling]. By the way, my son's--University of California Riverside played Northwestern this past season, and my wife and I went to Chicago, because, you know, Northwestern University is in Evanston. So I went by to see my oldest sister, who was almost ninety years old. She's living in a senior house on Calumet. So I told my wife, "We're going to go by and see if my old house is still there, and if they've made a shrine out of it yet." We went by, and 5406 Calumet was still there. It was the house I was borned in. My aunt had her beauty salon in the house, and I took a picture of it, because it's--to the north of it the lot is empty, so my sister was saying, "Well, they're tearing a lot of these places down because they're going to do some redevelopment."

Jefferson

Did you live long in Chicago?

Cunningham

I was born in '35, and then in 1939 my dad [David Surmier Cunningham, Sr.] got an assignment to Freeport, Illinois, and so we moved from Chicago to Freeport, Illinois.

Jefferson

Tell me a little bit about your parents and your family's background, your parents' background, and then talk a little bit about what your dad's employment was after you talk about their background, where they came from.

Cunningham

First of all, my dad was from Memphis, Tennessee. His family was from Hollis Springs, Mississippi. His father's name was John Spicer Cunningham, and his mother's name was Pearl, Pearl Rucker Cunningham. My father had spent

quite a bit of his time in Memphis, Tennessee. His father had been a dairy farmer in Memphis, but my grandfather was sort of a wayward sort of person in terms of his time with the women, so he created some problems with my father's mother and him, and so they eventually were separated. Then my father and his mother wound up in Kansas City, Missouri, where he went to school. Then he decided that he did not--well, I think they returned to Memphis. But anyway, he decided he did not want to stay in the South, and he went to Chicago, where he worked for a--[as a chauffeur].

Jefferson

Where did he go to school in Kansas?

Cunningham

In Kansas City I know he went to Crispus Attucks Elementary School, but after that, I think my dad dropped out of high school somewhere around tenth grade or so. He was born in 1989, so, you know, times were tough in those days. But he went to Chicago, so he got to be a big-time stepper in Chicago. He was selling insurance for Supreme Liberty Life, if you've ever heard of them. Then he went into the ministry, and that's when his life turned around to a great degree.

Cunningham

My mother was from a little town called Greenville, Texas. She was the baby child of [12 children].

Jefferson

And when you say "the ministry," I'm sorry, before we move on, what church did he become a--

Cunningham

He became a Methodist, a Christian Methodist, because it was Colored Methodist Episcopal [Church] in those days. He became a minister, and he decided that if he was going to devote his life to that, then he would go out and live the faith, which he did.

Cunningham

My mother was from Greenville, Texas. She was the baby child of Nancy Jean Donaldson Lawson and William Benjamin Lawson. They had twelve children. Probably can't name them all, but my mom said they had twelve children.

Jefferson

What was your mother's name?

Cunningham

My mother's name was Eula Mae Cunningham. My father was David Surmier. That's interesting. I don't know where they got the name from. My father's first name growing up was Surmier, and he said that they would always call him "Surmy, Surmy." He became somewhat embarrassed by the name, and so he took the name David. His first name was David, but he kept the Surmier. You know, it's a unique name. I mean, I don't know of anyone other--there's only a couple of other people with that name, and most of them are from our--it's my son and my grandson. We're the only ones that I know of that have the name Surmier.

Cunningham

But anyway, my mother came from Greenville, Texas, and grew up basically in Greenville, Texas, and Dallas. She grew up in Dallas, Texas. She went to I think it was either Lincoln--she went to one of the high schools there in Texas, because I still have friends, church members, who knew her and who come from Greenville, Texas, and Dallas, Texas. A couple of her sisters were schoolteachers, so they taught at Lincoln--I think it's Lincoln High School was one, and George Washington was the other, and then they've combined them. But that's where she came from, and she wound up going to Chicago because she was trying to escape the South, too; probably thought that opportunities were better. She spent a couple of years at Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas. She used to like to tell us about that. But she and my father met, and they had three children.

Jefferson

They met in Chicago.

Cunningham

They met in Chicago, and they had three children.

Jefferson

So at that point your father was in the ministry.

Cunningham

Not when the children first came along. No, he was--

Jefferson

He was still selling insurance.

Cunningham

--selling insurance, and my mother was being a mother. But then also he ran into the difficulty of unemployment in the thirties because, as you know--in 1935, we used to go watch him shovel. He didn't have a job, so he was shoveling sand from one side of Chicago to the other to help build Brookfield Zoo. He was on WPA [Work Progress Administration], if people know what WPA is.

Jefferson

Yes, yes, the Work Progress Administration.

Cunningham

Yes, yes, yes. That's what he was doing.

Jefferson

So you remember Chicago?

Cunningham

I do vaguely remember Chicago. I mean, you know, a four- or five-year-old kid only has vignettes of certain things, you know.

Jefferson

Where did you all move next?

Cunningham

Well, actually moved to Freeport, Illinois, which is [west of Chicago, near Rockford].

Jefferson

And what was your father doing when he got there?

Cunningham

As you know, in the CME Church they have bishops. Bishops make assignments, and a bishop gave my father an assignment to this little church in Freeport, Illinois. The bishop was somewhat taken aback by the fact that he took his wife and three children out to this church, because the church only had about thirteen or fourteen members, and the parsonage was in somewhat of a disrepair. We moved in. There was no indoor plumbing, no central heating, one small pot-belly stove. I guess it was, if I recall, a three- or four-room house, a couple of bedrooms, shotgun living room and dining room all the way to the back, and if you needed to use the restroom, at night you had to either use a slop jar or get up and go outside in the cold, and it gets very cold in Freeport. Also, when the spring would come, because you're right off the Kankakee River, the snow would melt, and we'd been rowed out many a time, being flooded in.

Jefferson

How long were you there?

Cunningham

We were there from 1939 to 1941, '42, I think it was, '41, '42. Anyway, yes, it had to be to '42, I'm sure, because I remember very clearly December 7, 1941, which those of us who were alive at that time do remember, because it was a very, very scary time.

Jefferson

And that date is--

Cunningham

The day that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I remember Gabriel, because he--because at that time Gabriel Heater was the man on radio, and my dad would listen to him. We sat there all aghast at what happened. You know, we thought the world was probably coming to an end, you know, and there we were. So we did not leave there till I guess it was the fall of 1942.

Jefferson

Since you were a very young child there in that area, what would you say was the most inspirational thing about that area that you remember? You've told us a lot about the living situation that you remember.

Cunningham

Well, that was the time in which--my sister had started kindergarten in Chicago, and when we moved to Freeport, they went to school to enroll her. Well, my sister was two years older than I was, and of course, around my house we always had books and stuff to drag around, and we had a children's edition of the Bible, so we learned to read, you know. I mean, I was reading before I went to enroll in school. So being born in June, which is a difficult month for the school year, at five years old I went to school with my sister and enrolled in the first grade. So I'd been in the first grade for, I guess, two weeks when I get this call that "You need to go see the principal."

Cunningham

So I go up to see the principal, and I'll never forget the principal, because her name was Mrs. Cruise. Mrs. Cruise says, "Son, you're too young to be here. We're not sure you're mature enough to be in school."

Cunningham

So I was dejected. I started crying, and she said, "Well,"--and the irony of this--"Well, if you can read--here, take this book. Let's see if you can read." So, you know, it was "Run, Jane, run. Skip,"--you know, the dog Skip or whoever--you know, all that very easy, repetitive stuff. So I read the book completely. She said, "Well, now, it looks like you might be able to stay. You go back to that class, and don't you create any disturbance, because if you do, we're going to put you out."

Cunningham

Now, just an aside, the interesting thing is, if I could not read, she should have insisted that I stay, and since I could read, she should have sent me home, because I was taking a seat that somebody else could use. Apparently, I was doing very well at home and able to read. So I started the first grade at five years old, and went along with the program from then on.

Jefferson

Then from Free--

Cunningham

Freeport. Freeport, Illinois. Let me tell you what's interesting about Freeport.
That is the town that Bob Johnson comes from.

Jefferson

I know who Bob Johnson is, but tell us who Bob Johnson is.

Cunningham

He's the richest black man in America.

Cunningham

And he used to be the head of--

Cunningham

BET [Black Entertainment Television]. So he comes from Freeport. Quite a few
years difference between us, but we both went to the same elementary
school.

Jefferson

So then from there you all moved to--

Cunningham

Decatur, Illinois, which is a few miles south of Freeport. You have to go
through Peoria and Champaign and eventually get to Decatur. Decatur was
known for soybeans, Staley Mills. They were growing soybeans in Decatur, and
around that time is when the Chicago Cubs were originally--I mean the
Chicago Cardinals--the Chicago Bears originally came out of Decatur, Illinois.
They were called the Staley Bears.

Cunningham

But Decatur was quite a city. My father pastored St. James CME. No, no, St.
James was in Freeport. I forgot what the name of the church was in Decatur,
Illinois.

Jefferson

So you all got there about 1942, end of 1942.

Cunningham

Yes, about 1942, yes, and went to school. Enrolled in school there. Very interesting time. You know, this was in the middle of the war, so, you know, gas rationing was going on.

Jefferson

This was World War II.

Cunningham

World War II, it was. Those of us of my generation, when we say "war," we mean World War II. Everything else was a little skirmish. But hey, you know, World War II. But we knew what sugar rationing was, meat rationing, gas rationing. We never understood why you had to ration these things, but I guess they told us because the troops need them, but we understand the troops were eating baked beans and other kinds of stuff. But you could drive no faster than forty-five miles an hour. No cars were being manufactured in those days. The last car rolled off the assembly line in--I think it was in 1942, and they started making tanks and guns and jeeps and war material. So my dad had a old raggedy Chevy. Well, I guess it wasn't that raggedy; it was a '41 Chevy, and we used to ride all over everywhere. Never were allowed to go faster than forty-five miles an hour. Guess they didn't want people to get killed because, you know, it's a war, wartime.

Cunningham

Interestingly enough, you know, one incident that comes back to mind. You know how you grow up; you're shielded to a degree about the racial thing. We were not subjected to--necessarily, that we could remember--subjected to the insults of separate toilets and riding in the back of the bus and that sort of thing until--well, down the street in Freeport there was a merchant who used to be on the corner who we'd go in and buy, you know, jelly beans and stuff like that. We were trying to buy something one day. The owner was white. He seemed to be distraught with something I was doing, and he kicked me in the butt. I went home and told my father, and my father came back and made it

clear to him that that was not the kind of treatment that he should subject his children to, and that if he had any concern, that he knew how to reach him, and that he, my father, would take care of it. My father assured him that because of his conduct that they were going to put him out of business, and they did boycott him, and in six months he was out of business.

Cunningham

So my father had begun to become highly involved in social protests and social activity at that time. Being in Freeport, my parents had been north of the Mason-Dixon Line so that their children would, they thought, have more opportunities. I can remember very clearly one year, I guess it was around 1940, my mother said she wanted to take her three children and she wanted to visit her mother in Texas. So we got on the Greyhound bus. Now, in those days, you know, that's a four- or five-day trip. We rode from Freeport, Illinois. Everything was just fine, you know. Sat anywhere in the bus. Stopped at some of the places to get food. We got to the Mason-Dixon Line. Guy stops the bus. Says, "Everybody get off."

Cunningham

I hope everybody knows what the Mason-Dixon Line is or was. It was the demarcation for where you could have segregated laws and where you couldn't have segregated laws. It was a compromise to allow the South to increase their numbers of southern states with new states that came into the Union.

Cunningham

The bus driver said, "Get off the bus," and he said, "I want all the white people to get back on the bus, and you sit from the front to the back. After you all have been seated, all you colored people can get back on the bus from the back, and make certain you don't take any white person's seat." So I think that was the first time we'd come into confrontation with that.

Jefferson

And you were about five at that time, six.

Cunningham

Yes, I was about six, maybe six. The funny thing about it, we'd stop at these places along the way, you know, when you get to Arkansas and places like that, and they'd tell you to go around behind the store and get your food, take your food out, which was humiliating, to my mother particularly. I mean, what do kids know? "We got to eat, though, Ma." So we came into that.

Cunningham

But we lived in Decatur from 1942 to 1945. We were still in Decatur when the war ended in '45. During that period of time my aunt, who was in Chicago, had moved to New York, so she came and visited us in Decatur and said, "I would like to have somebody to keep me company while I'm in New York," so she asked my mother and father if they would let me go to New York with her. So I went to New York with her, I guess it was '43--'44. I was in New York, '44. That was kind of a rough time, because I was learning too much too quick, you know, living at 156th and Amsterdam in the heart of Harlem, and my aunt had to send me back to Decatur.

Jefferson

You were eight, eight or nine.

Cunningham

Yes, I was eight or nine. But one thing my aunt did do for me, I had a chance to visit the Empire State Building, ride the subway, you know, do all the things that you do about New York. You know, Times Square. She took me to the theater that's so famous.

Jefferson

Radio City [Music Hall]?

Cunningham

No. Well, we went to Radio City, but, no, the black theater.

Jefferson

The Apollo Theater.

Cunningham

The Apollo. Saw "Pigmeat" Markham and all that. I've since been back to the Apollo on my own, you know, but she was very gracious about showing me around and showing me the sights of New York and what made New York tick and ride the subway. I went to school there, but, you know, I was really headed to nowhere at school. I was flunking out after having made A's and B's in all these other schools. So she sent me back to Decatur.

Cunningham

Now, when she sent me back, I don't know whether they still have it or not, but she put me on the train, the 20th Century Limited. I don't know whether you've ever heard of that. And they would put this pin on, you know, like you were being shipped. They would put a note pinned, you know, "This kid is supposed to go to Decatur, Illinois, and got to change trains here, so look out for him." So they had these people; they would meet the train and would train you. So, I mean, I rode all the way from New York back to Decatur, you know, big-time.

Cunningham

So when I got back, my brother and sister wanted to know, "What was it like?" So we spent a lot of time then, because they really thought I had really done something great, you know, riding the train all by yourself, you know. I guess they do that now on airplanes, right? Send the kids on the airplane?

Jefferson

Yes. Yes.

Cunningham

So I came back to Decatur. Interestingly enough, where we lived in Decatur, Illinois used to have something called the Sweet Sixteen, and the Sweet Sixteen was the state play-offs for high school teams, and Decatur High School's gym was right across the street from my dad's church. So we used to sneak in the gym, and we'd watch these guys play. We used to see Chick Hearn. You know, Chick Hearn was a good basketball player for Aurora, Illinois.

Jefferson

Oh, he played basketball?

Cunningham

Yes, he was. He was a pretty good basketball player, and we used to sneak in and watch him, because we lived right across the street from Decatur High School.

Jefferson

With these early experiences in your life, New York, small towns in Illinois, were there any kinds of things in terms of your family values that you could see that carried through to all those places?

Cunningham

Oh yes. Well, you know, being a PK, a preacher's kid, you know, your values are honed in pretty clear. Then there are certain concepts that they have about how you should live, you know. I mean, all of us had to go take piano lessons. I mean, from the time I was ten years old until I was twelve and got tired of it, they had me at the Milliken Conservatory of Music. I used to could really play the piano. But, you know, at that day, time, age, you kind of feel like, well, you know, playing the piano is kind of a nerdy sort of thing to do. We used to do concerts and all that, but, you know, after I was twelve years old and I could make some other decisions about being athletic, I got away from the piano. Many a days I regret it. I probably should have stuck with the piano. Music is a good thing to learn. But I wound up doing a lot of singing by the time I got to high school in St. Louis.

Cunningham

My dad got assigned, I guess in '45, '46, my dad got assigned to St. Louis, Missouri. The interesting thing, I was in the sixth grade. I was in the sixth grade, and in Illinois at that time junior high school was seventh and eighth grade. Seventh and eighth--and ninth-- nine, ten, eleven, twelve--seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. And I was getting ready to go to junior high school. Then I would have played basketball in junior high school. But when I came and told the teacher that I was--that my dad was moving to St. Louis, Missouri, the teacher asked me to stay after school, and I did. She talked to me. She says, "Do you have to go to St. Louis? Is there any way your parents could let you stay here in Decatur?"

Cunningham

Well, I didn't understand what she was implying. "No, I'm going with my parents." Well, I found out later on what her concern was, Decatur schools were integrated. St. Louis' schools were segregated. I had always been a good student, except for that small time in New York when I went astray, which I never did again. But her concern was what it would do to my education. But off we went to St. Louis, and that's where I principally did the major part of my growing up.

Jefferson

In terms of your home life, you said there were a lot of books.

Cunningham

There were a lot of books, a lot of things to do. I mean, my dad would take us on vacations.

Jefferson

Where would you go? What kinds of things would you do?

Cunningham

We would visit other relatives. My dad liked to drive. He also had to go to a lot of conferences, because he was a minister.

Jefferson

So in all of those vacations and conferences, where are some of the places that you went that you remember, that made an impression on you? Since your dad liked to drive, you were driving to different places.

Cunningham

We would go to lakes. We'd do some camping out. We did some fishing. For a while there I didn't like that river fishing, because, you know, you'd have these bamboo poles. You know, in those days bamboo poles--we didn't have these rods and reels, you know. We couldn't afford that, so we just had bamboo poles. You know, you've got to sit there and wait forever for the fish. I thought that was just a waste of time, but later in the years I became a deep-sea fisherman and enjoyed it; didn't mind waiting. But we'd go to a lot of picnics, a

lot of outings. It was the kind of things that my dad liked to do, and my mother. But then, of course, by the time we got to Decatur, my brother and I became paper boys. We used to carry the--I don't know whether you remember the Kansas City Call. We used to carry it.

Jefferson

It was an African American paper.

Cunningham

It was an African American paper. Pittsburg Courier. These were national papers. As a matter of fact, there's a lady here in Los Angeles who's ninety-some years old. She used to be a beautician in Decatur, Illinois, and she used to do my mother's hair and all the ministers' wives' hair. Her name is Willata Bradley. Every time we get together, she always reminds and lets people know that, "This is my paper boy, and I always knew he was going to do well." Because my brother and I, we'd ride our bicycles, and we'd throw our papers. First of all, we had to convince people to buy the Kansas City Call, so that means you had to find a black population who would buy the Kansas City Call and wanted to read the Call, wanted to subscribe. We had a fairly good paper route. We collected money, and we used to put it in a sugar jar, you know, and then that's what we would use to buy Christmas presents and things like that.

Cunningham

But it was in Decatur when we finally determined who Santa Claus was. Now, my younger brother--we're only seventeen months apart--he was much more probative than I was, in that sense, so he found the hiding place for the toys, right? Toys and gifts and stuff. And I kept saying that, "Man, don't blow this thing. You know, you don't want to tell people--okay, so we know, right? But we're not going to tell." So the first year it worked all right. Then the second year he opens his big mouth. "Yeah, I know, we're going to get a train." So Santa Claus is dead after that, you know. But that was an interesting little vignette with my brother, my older--younger brother.

Jefferson

So your experiences in Illinois, were you aware of your community around you?

Cunningham

Well, yes. My dad had always been involved in the community. My dad was a member of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. He had various strange characters to come to the house, you know, whether they were ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] or whether the NAACP. Many a time they would accuse some of the people of being Communist, you know, but it didn't bother my father. He was a minister. But he was heavily involved in the community. He was part of the Decatur chapter of the NAACP. Everywhere my father was, he was involved with the NAACP, and later on we'll talk about his experience in Memphis, because he was the president of the NAACP when Martin Luther King came to Memphis, and the role that he played in that and the role you'll find--if you go to the Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Hotel, you'd see my father's picture at the museum.

Cunningham

He was very heavily involved in community activity. He had to be. I mean, if you're a minister, you're one of the leading lights in the city, you know. So we came up with the understanding that we would be involved in community affairs. But it became much more daunting in understanding once we got to St. Louis, because by then, by the time I got to St. Louis, I was--I was--

Jefferson

About eleven, ten, eleven.

Cunningham

Ten or eleven, yes, because I went to high school when I was twelve.

Jefferson

Oh. You started the tenth grade?

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

Wow.

Cunningham

I graduated from high school at sixteen; could have graduated sooner.

Jefferson

What was the high school?

Cunningham

Charles Sumner High School. My locker mate all the way through high school was Dick Gregory. A tremendous number of people--

Jefferson

Dick Gregory, I know who he is, but say who Dick Gregory is.

Cunningham

A social protestor comedian of some sort. He has grown wizened in his old age. He's considered a guru of sorts. But he's a friend, and we usually see each other once a year. We were together at our fiftieth class reunion, and we had a ball. Thirty-fifth class reunion, we were a little bit younger in those days, so we could move a little swifter then than we had a few years ago.

Jefferson

So you graduated at twelve years old.

Cunningham

I graduated from high school at sixteen.

Jefferson

Oh, high school at sixteen, okay.

Cunningham

Because, see, what happened was, first of all, I started school early, at five, you know, first grade. And we went from Decatur to St. Louis. Well, when I got to St. Louis, I mean, the subjects they were studying I already knew, so, I mean, half the time, you know, there was no challenge. So they skipped me a couple of times. Matter of fact, they even skipped me into the graduating class. Let's see. High school was tenth, eleventh, twelfth.

Jefferson

Yes, that's usually what it is. Sometimes it could be nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

Cunningham

It was ten, eleven, twelve. Yes, it was. Or was it four? No, they didn't have junior high school in St. Louis in those days. What you did is you went from kindergarten to eighth grade. They skipped me into the eighth grade to finish grade school, and at twelve years old I went into the tenth grade, Sumner High School. Pretty young age, you know. So which meant most of the time I was in high school, I couldn't play sports, because they had an age limit on your being able to play sports. I think you had to be fourteen, fifteen, something, to be able to play sports; you know, to play varsity sports. So that meant I never-- you know, I'm graduated at sixteen.

Cunningham

Plus then I worked. You know, I worked while I was going to high school. Shined shoes in the Union Station. Learned to press clothes right there at the cleaner's there in Union Station. I also worked at Fred Harvey's, A. Fred Harvey's, in the restaurant.

Jefferson

Oh, really.

Cunningham

Busboy, and then sometimes I had to be a waiter. I remember one year the Yankees were playing the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series, I think it was, or the Yankees were going to play the Browns, because they were still the St. Louis Browns in those days. And Joe Paige and Joe DiMaggio came into the restaurant for lunch, but they sat them back in the private part of the place.

Jefferson

Now, Fred Harvey's is the restaurant that was in the trains.

Cunningham

A. Fred Harvey's was the chain of restaurants that were in many train stations.

Jefferson

And the St. Louis train station, do you remember the name?

Cunningham

Yes, Union Station. Union Station, and now it has become a tourist attraction because it is the location--they have a hotel, kind of a convention center kind of in the old train station, and our shoe shine stand was right in front of where Dan Dierdorf's Restaurant is, so they got a little plaque up there about the shoe shine stand, you know. Then I brought my brother in. We shined shoes together. I shined Ezra Charles' shoes.

Jefferson

Whose?

Jefferson

Ezra Charles.

Jefferson

Essex Charles.

Cunningham

Ezra Charles, the boxer. Shined Joe Lewis' shoes. They'd come through. You know, a lot of people would come. We shined a lot of GI shoes. You could make a nice little piece of change when the GIs came through, because in those days a shoe shine was fifteen cents, basically, and then they'd tip you, and maybe they might tip you fifty cents, you know. So, you know, you could make twelve, thirteen dollars as a kid in a night's work, because we worked after school. We'd work from four to eight. Sometimes we would extend it till ten because we wanted to make the extra money. Mr. Epps would close up the shop; would close up the stand and then let us have the money that we made after he closed up the stand. So my brother and I would do that together, and then we'd catch a cab and go on home, because cabs were practically cheap in those days. We didn't have cars. We could ride the jitney or we could ride the streetcar or you could take a taxi. Taxis were fairly cheap. If you're making twelve, thirteen dollars a day, it doesn't sound like much today, but it was pretty good money. We saved. We saved it.

Jefferson

Now, in St. Louis, because that's a formative part of your life--you were there all of high school, and comparing that living environment to living in Decatur and Freeport, did you live in neighborhoods that were integrated or neighborhoods that were segregated? Or is that even a way to describe the living environments? Because it may not be.

Cunningham

Well, the living environment was somewhat segregated.

Jefferson

In St. Louis.

Cunningham

In St. Louis. In those other cities it was more integrated, but we lived in neighborhoods that were predominantly black. But, you know, we were in predominantly a black community in St. Louis. We lived at Cook and Spring. Also, I mean, you did not ride on the back of the bus, but you couldn't go to the movie theaters. They used to have the Fox Theater in St. Louis, you could go on Tuesdays. That was the day they allowed black folks to go, on Tuesdays. Now, there was no such thing, you know, in the South; you could sit up in the balcony. But they just didn't let us in the movie except on Tuesday. You could go to the other black movies. We couldn't go to the Y [YMCA, Young Men's Christian Association]. You had to go to the black Y. We couldn't go to St. Louis University. We couldn't go to Washington University. We couldn't go to Harris Teachers College. We went to segregated schools.

Cunningham

Of course, one of the things that Dick Gregory did--let's see. One year we were there, and the school was crowded. Sumner High School was built to hold, I think it was, seven, eight hundred students comfortably, and we had over three thousand students. Our classes were overcrowded. But we were learning. We had tremendous teachers, and we had a tremendous principal. He was called G. D. Brantley. Old man Anderson, who eventually--Ed Williams. Old man Anderson used to walk the halls. We were so crowded, we used to have three lunch periods.

Cunningham

Dick Gregory was--we started out trying to run track together as young guys, freshmen in high school. Dick and I couldn't do anything in the hundred-yard dash. We couldn't do anything in the two-hundred-yard dash, but we were running at the stadium, and we were running around the stadium, and the teacher went wild because we had a pretty good stride. So Dick went on and became a cross-country runner and a miler. I quit track and went to work.

Cunningham

They had this Philadelphia Inquirer Mile. It would always occur around Thanksgiving. Dick wanted to go back there because he wanted to try to get a turkey for the family, because, you know, they gave turkeys and goose, etc., and he thought it was a pretty good idea. But he didn't have the track shoes, because you had to supply your own track shoes. So Dick, being as creative as he is--lunch checks used to cost seven cents apiece, so, you know, you could get three lunch checks for twenty-one cents. But anytime people were buying lunch checks, they usually wound up with some pennies left over. So Dick's thing became, he would take a nickel first, and he would stand at the head of the line, right there by the line, and says, "I need two cents so I can get a lunch check." He did that. Dick got to the place where he's making [a lot of money].

Jefferson

And this is at school?

Cunningham

At Sumner High, Sumner High School, yes. He would stand there at all three lunch periods and take the odd pennies. He'd always get odd pennies, and from those odd pennies he was able to buy a pair of track shoes, and it got so good, that became his regular gig. So everybody would look for Richard and give him two pennies, you know, or give him their odd pennies. [Laughs] And he'd just laugh about it. He came back to the locker. We counted that money, and he had enough money to buy him some track shoes. He went on to Philadelphia, and I think the first year, I think he came in second and got a turkey.

Jefferson

Okay. I'm going to pause for just a minute.[Recorder turned off.]

Jefferson

We were talking about your experiences in St. Louis, and we were talking about your kind of learning about your community. You worked. Your father was active in the spiritual substantive world. How did that influence you growing up, that experience, you and your siblings and what have you?

Cunningham

Well, I think my dad always wanted me to become a minister, but it didn't seem to me like it was the thing of interest.

Jefferson

I forgot to turn it back on. I thought I turned it back on. Okay, sorry, so go on. We're talking about Stower's Teachers College.

Cunningham

When I first went to school, I went to school with the idea that I wanted to be a nuclear scientist. You know, in those days the atomic bomb was just being discovered and worked on and utilized, and, you know, I had a great desire to engage in that kind of research. But I found out that--chemistry I liked. The first year, the first semester, I did very well in chemistry. Did so well that the Dr. Dogood asked me to serve as a teaching assistant for the next semester and subsequent semesters. But then I got into qualitative analysis, and that physics started beating the living daylights out of me, you know, kinetic energy and Young's Law of Module, stress and strain. And all of the mathematics, because you have to really concentrate, you know. You can't really mess around when you're dealing with math. So it kind of drove me away from what I wanted to do, because I was spending too much time in the laboratory. You know, I'm seventeen, eighteen years old, and there's other things I want to do, and that's just taking away from my time.

Cunningham

Then I found out I was going to become a father, so now I have to make some real decisions, and I wasn't going to rely on my parents. You know, I couldn't have my parents taking care of me and my wife and child, you know. In those days there were certain concepts of manhood. A man is responsible for his

family. So I joined the air force and subsequently saw another part of the world.

Jefferson

So in terms of your experiences in Decatur and your experiences in St. Louis, were the communities similar or were they different, in terms of the people that you were around?

Cunningham

They were much different, in the sense that friendships were more integrated. I mean, there was no conscious determination between black and white. Sundays, you know, we were with a lot of black folks, but--you know. I can remember, I went to Gasman Grade School, and every year when the first snow would come up, you know, some of us who were buddies, we'd all gather at the school, black or white or what have you, and we'd have snowball fights. We'd make igloos, put up snow-built walls, and we'd just fire snowballs at each other like crazy. Some white and black guys would be together, and on the other side would be some white and black guys, because there weren't a lot of black guys to go around, you know, in Decatur. But we weren't conscious. We weren't making decisions consciously in terms of race. We were just a bunch of young kids, eight, nine, ten years old, having fun in the snow.

Jefferson

Then in St. Louis was it a similar kind of experience--

Cunningham

No, I ran into--

Jefferson

--or was it different?

Cunningham

It was different.

Jefferson

Did it have an impact on you one way or the other?

Cunningham

Yes, maybe to some degree, because in St. Louis there was an ethnic separation, and there was an ethnic ethos, you know. I never was one to really engage in a lot of fighting, and then that's where, you know, you run into gangs, and you run into all kinds of people, and many of those same people who have become successful to this day. Every time I see--he was an actor. I can't think of his name right now. [Stack Pierce] He's in Palm Springs. He used to be part of the Turks, and on Saturdays the Regal Theatre was one of the theaters we would go to. That was on Easton, which is now Martin Luther King, as I understand.

Cunningham

We would go to the theater. Dad would give us a quarter, and my brother [Ronald Cunningham] and I, off we'd go to the theater. Go see, you know, all those Lash La Rue and all those kind of movies that you saw in those days. And this guy would be waiting. Oh, his name almost came back to me. [snaps fingers] He would be waiting on a corner, because he always looked like he was like maybe three, four years older than we were, and, you know, those days, two or three years, guys look like giants. He would take our quarter every week. So we learned to go down the other side of the street and make certain we got past him. When the traffic cleared, dart directly to that box office, put our quarter up there, and go on in and get our seat at the table--I mean, seat in the movie.

Cunningham

But then, you know, we'd run into a lot of fights, which--and my father always told me that I was responsible for my younger brother. Now, my younger brother is only like maybe at best probably five-foot-five, five-six, five-seven, and I was always over six feet. So I would have to make certain that my brother had a good distance to get home, and I'd stay there and hold back the bullies until I saw an out, and then I'd take off running and catch up with my brother, you know. [laughs] He'd say, "Well, don't act like you know me." And I don't want them to catch me and bother me. So we grew up with an understanding that there are bad characters and they try to take advantage of you. But some of those guys have turned out to be pretty good guys. We run into each other even to this day.

Cunningham

But it was my formative years, and there was a difference between the two communities. You learn. By growing up in St. Louis I learned to be more aggressive. I learned a little bit more about socialization, a little bit more about how to maneuver; some good, some bad. But I still had a strong family life that taught me some values.

Jefferson

Your father is a minister. Your mother helps him at the church. Three children. Were you around a lot of adults, growing up?

Cunningham

Yes, yes.

Jefferson

Were you interested in the civic life that was going on? Because we've talked a lot about your experiences, and you had a strong family connection, but some people--what I'm trying to get at is, were there some influences, in terms of the experiences that you had with some of the people who may have inspired you for the future?

Cunningham

Yes. I mean, in high school I sang in the high school choir for four years. We were an award-winning choir. We had members like Grace Bumbry later who joined us.

Jefferson

Grace Bumbry?

Cunningham

Grace Bumbry. She's an opera star. Look it up. You'll find out about her. Some summers we would sing with Wings Over Jordan. I don't know whether you remember them or not. But our choir director is a very famous gentleman. His name was Kenneth Brown Billups, and he was a tremendous, tremendous musician. I think he started the Negro Music Academy or something. I know he came out many years ago. I was still in the council, and I had an

opportunity to congratulate him, and he had an opportunity to congratulate me, because they were having their convention here in the city, and we welcomed them. But he had impact in terms of my appreciation of music, particularly a cappella music. We did a lot of anthems. We did a lot of double choruses. We did a lot of things together.

Cunningham

Oddly enough, the guy who we sang side by side in high school choir, first tenor for four years, was Ron Townsend, who went on to form the 5th Dimension. Then in my father's choir at our church, Lemont McLemore belonged. His family belonged to our church, and he used to sing in our choir. And Bobby McFerrin's uncle used to belong to our church. Now, Bobby McFerrin's father, Robert McFerrin, was an opera singer, so he was always back in New York. But Bobby McFerrin's uncle, whose name was Robert McFerrin--no, no, James McFerrin--used to belong to our church's choir and directed our church's choir, one of our church's choir.

Cunningham

So Kenneth Brown Billups had an impact in terms of my music concerns. But, you know, you have teachers who impact you. But the basic impact in my life was always my father, so I can't say that one individual had more impacted me than my father.

Jefferson

And with your father the things that impacted you about him, growing up with him, his entrepreneurship--

Cunningham

Well, yes, his leadership, his intellect, the fact that my father could sing, and my father's organization skills. He was very good at that. And once my father took on a task, he did not back off of it. He was not an overbearing person. He was a very kind person, but he was sturdy in the things that he believed in, you know. My mother was much more rigid about things, and people say I have more of my mother's characteristics than my father's, although they say I look more like my father than my younger brother. My younger brother has more of my father's characteristics. My mother took no crap. She did not like

for people to attack her children, attack her husband. She was very protective of her family, whereas my father, he was protective, but my father was an outgoing person who was interested in trying to have peace. My mother was not necessarily committed to peace, per se. So a lot of people say I'm combatative like my mother, as opposed to my brother, who displays more serenity and is more peaceful-making. So that's where I get my character.

Jefferson

So in terms of the air force and school, how did you decide on the air force?
You liked planes?

Cunningham

Well, yes. At one time I wanted to be a pilot. You know, it was another one of those childhood things. You know, you want to be a pilot. And since there was no war, you know, I mean, the only thing going on was the [unclear] of the Korean War. I got in on the back end of the Korean War. While I was in college, I also was in the Naval Air Reserve, and I had had an opportunity to do a lot of flying with the last navy chief petty officer pilot they had. They were looking for black pilots in those days, and I thought I might try the navy as a pilot.

Cunningham

But then one summer we were on summer maneuvers, and we were in Philadelphia, and we flew out. The chief put me in the plane and he says, "Look, we're going to go up and see what it's like." And he says, "We're going to land on a carrier." So we flew out over New York. You know, a carrier, up in the air, looks like a postage stamp. So we got down and landed on that little postage stamp, but you got a hook on the back of that plane. It gives you a pretty good jolt when [imitates sound], you know, so I thought about that. So we had a little bite to eat and walked around the ship. Got back in the plane. Now, you got to take off, right? So you rev that thing up. They hold it, and then they let it go, and it goes over the--whether people realize it or not--well, in those days; I don't know what they do now--but it goes up. You know how you pull it up, but it kind of drops down below the deck and then it goes up. And that was scary.

Cunningham

So we got back to Willow Grove Springs [Pennsylvania], landed, and I [unclear]. So then I decided that, you know, probably the best thing to do was to take off from dry land and land on dry land, you know. But the air force became my point of entry, and I joined the air force in 1954.

Jefferson

So you never developed as a pilot.

Cunningham

Oh, no, no, I never developed as a pilot. Never had a fear of flying, though. I've done a lot of flying. I'll fly in a minute.

Jefferson

So at that stage, from what you're telling me at this point, you were still exploring--

Cunningham

Oh yes, yes.

Jefferson

--what you wanted to do in terms of your career.

Cunningham

Well, I think all the way through life you're always exploring.

Jefferson

Yes, yes, yes. But you were in a more formative kind of exploration.

Cunningham

Probably so.

Jefferson

I mean, I'm not trying to direct you. I'm just asking questions.

Cunningham

No, I was in a formative stage, but I think I have been arrested into a formative stage all my life, because if there are things that I want to do, I go do them, if

it's something that appeals to me, you know. You'll see that through my life I have pulled up stakes and gone and done a number of things. I mean, there's nothing that says I'll stay there, you know. I guess in terms of my relationships with women, just pull up and go on. In terms of career things that I do, I pull up and go.

Cunningham

But one thing I have found that I'm pretty stable about, and that's Los Angeles, California. I love Los Angeles.

Jefferson

Yes, once you got to California--

Cunningham

Once I got to California, I had found my paradise, and I'm pretty stable about California. However, here lately with the price of real estate in other parts of the country and the fact that you could take your money and do so much better, I often fantasize about, you know, why not go and buy one of them big places in Texas and get by on the little money that I do have, you know. But every time I do that, my wife reminds me, "No, you love California."

Jefferson

I think that we'll end it here at your time in the mid-fifties, at the air force, and then at our next interview session we'll pick it up and then come into your time in California.

Cunningham

You know, as I think about it, I try to think who really impacted my life. My father has always been my impact in my life.

Jefferson

In terms of community and the people that you were around, you all were in the community, involved in the community, and it sounds like to me from the way you're talking about it, and you say it back to me, is that it was--

Cunningham

Yes, my dad was heavily involved in the community. He brought us up--

Jefferson

--that it was like a given to you.

Cunningham

Yes, he brought us up that you have to make a contribution to your community, and that's the reason why my brother does what he does, and that's the reason why I do what I do. I mean, you know, my biggest problem, I guess even to this day, is I can't say no; if you've got a problem, you know, I mean. There's some people who still call me up about city problems, and I've got my own problems with the city from time to time. [laughter] You know, I'm not an elected official anymore, you know. But if there's a problem and we feel that there's anything we can do about it, you know, we'd probably jump.

Jefferson

Now, when you were growing up, was your father involved with the political establishment in St. Louis or Decatur?

Cunningham

Yes. Yes. He was very much involved with the political establishment in St. Louis. But you have to realize that the political establishment in St. Louis was at a relatively limited level, because my father was helpful to Bill Clay, who was one of our earliest politicians, black politicians, in St. Louis, and Bill Clay, to this day, we've remained close friends.

Jefferson

And he got elected to--

Cunningham

He got elected to Congress. Bill Clay was one of the first black guys to go to St. Louis University, and he had a very interesting career at St. Louis University. Then he got involved with labor, and he decided to run for Congress. My dad was helpful to him, and Bill and I have remained friends for years. Then his son and Dave III have known each other for years, since David grew up in St. Louis, also.

Cunningham

But my dad's real strongest involvement in politics was in the time that he spent in Tennessee.

Jefferson

Did you go to visit a lot in Memphis?

Cunningham

I did occasionally, occasionally. But Memphis never had an appeal for me. It wasn't California, you know. I'm kind of biased toward California.

Jefferson

You had mentioned earlier in the interview or in our discussion that your father was involved with Martin Luther King.

Cunningham

My father was president of the NAACP for several years, the Memphis, Tennessee, NAACP branch.

Jefferson

How long was he in Memphis?

Cunningham

He pastored two churches in Memphis, and he stayed there until he was--well, even when he was elected general officer of the church, he developed our whole pension plan. So the legacy for ministers who retire from the CME Church is due to my father, because my father used to see, you know, in the old days they would bring the ministers who had retired and their widows, and they would bring them down to the front at the annual conference, and the bishops would say, "This year we're going to give each retiree two hundred dollars." And my dad said he didn't want to be sitting down there in the front row only getting two hundred dollars a year. So, having come out of insurance, he developed a program for a pension and retirement in our church. Many of the people who retire now certainly owe their better stage in life, retirement life, a more fruitful retirement, due to his vision, and it proved to be successful.

Cunningham

But my father was the president of the NAACP for several years in Memphis, Tennessee. He grew it to become the largest NAACP chapter at one time in the United States, and they were very active in that garbage strike.

Jefferson

That's what I was wondering, was he involved with the garbage strike.

Cunningham

Oh yes, he was involved with the garbage strike.

Jefferson

So you were aware of all of that.

Cunningham

Oh yes, yes.

Jefferson

That was in 19--

Cunningham

You're asking me for dates that I can't remember right now. What year did Martin Luther King get killed?

Jefferson

In '68, '68.

Cunningham

Yes, okay. Well, then the garbage strike had been going on for about a year or so.

Jefferson

That's right. It was in the sixties.

Cunningham

Yes, it had been going on for about a year or so before they finally brought them in, and they were really [unclear].

Jefferson

And your father was still there.

Cunningham

Oh yes, my father was there.

Jefferson

So that was from 1955 through--

Cunningham

My father was in Memphis from 1955 until he retired and came out and lived with me.

Jefferson

Oh. That was in--

Cunningham

The seventies.

Jefferson

--the seventies.

Cunningham

Yes. Okay.

Cunningham

My father didn't retire until he was like seventy-eight, or seventy-six, yes.

Jefferson

So okay, I think that's it, because we'll get more into those kinds of things.

Cunningham

Yes, and we'll talk about that impact, because my father's relationship with Al Gore had an impact in my life as a result of the air force, and we'll talk about that.

Jefferson

Yes, because that's moving more into kind of the next stages.

Cunningham

That's what got me into politics.

Jefferson

Yes.

Jefferson

I understand.

Jefferson

That's what I was kind of gathering, that maybe--

Cunningham

All right. I'll tell you that story.

Jefferson

Yes, that was the inspiration--

Cunningham

That's an interesting--

Jefferson

--there, because you--

Cunningham

Because for a while I thought I was going to wind up becoming a retired military guy, till we ran into some difficulties.

Jefferson

I can't imagine you being in the military.

Cunningham

I hated every minute of it.

Jefferson

Yes, I can't imagine it.

Cunningham

I hated every minute of it, but--

Jefferson

You're too independent, you know.

Cunningham

Yes. But, you know, I mean, it was the kind of thing, I had a paycheck every day. Three hots and a cot, and you go on to where your brain is freezing.

Jefferson

Yes, and as a young man, it's okay, but as an older man, I couldn't have imagined--unless you figured out how to work your way through the power structure.

Cunningham

To work your way through their power structure, you have to be very, very patient, and you have to know the rules. The other thing my dad taught me, which I eventually used in my political life, he said, "Son, when you are going to be involved with anything, always know the rules. Understand the rules, and you probably want to be a rule maker." My dad was very good at Robert's Rules of Order. We used to read Robert's Rules of Order. So when I got to the city council, I read the city council's rules, and one of the things it said in the city council, that all arguments would be settled through Robert's Rules of Order, all. That's my thing, baby, so I used to use Robert's Rules of Order. My father also taught me, he says, "Sometimes, son, it's better to get the issue resolved technically than to get it resolved politically." What he meant by that, if you could prove that they were out of order or that it could be tabled or some other device that was in Robert's Rules of Order, it was better to do that than to try to defeat it on the merits. I learned a lot of things from my dad. He was a pretty shrewd guy.

Jefferson

I remember you actually defeating somebody based on Robert's Rules of Order, because for some reason I was watching something, and you were hammering somebody to do with Robert's Rules of Order.

Cunningham

That's right.

Jefferson

And, I mean, I didn't know your philosophy, but I just remember, whatever it was, you were just hammering them with Robert's Rules of Order, and they didn't know them as well as you did at the time.

Cunningham

It was probably some fight with "Wachs."

Jefferson

I have no idea. I just remember just being there.

Cunningham

Yes, my dad told me, "You should know Robert's Rules of Order." And we used to read them. He really taught me Robert's Rules of Order.

Jefferson

This was when you were a kid?

Cunningham

Yes, a kid growing up, because I left home when I was eighteen, so, you know, [unclear] time, you know. And I was involved in church politics, church activities, so, you know. And most things always--the other thing he taught me, most things organizations I belonged to, I did not seek to become president. I always was a parliamentarian, because the parliamentarian tells who's out of order and who's in order and has Robert's Rules of Order. Another thing he taught me.

Jefferson

Okay, so we'll schedule another appointment.

Cunningham

And you notice Dave III is like that, too, because he's very technical about it.

Jefferson

Yes, well, he picked up those lawyer things from you.

Cunningham

But I'm not a lawyer, you know.

Jefferson

Yes, but you were a politician with Robert's Rules of Order.

Cunningham

That's right.

Jefferson

Okay, so let's see. Now we're going to finish. So we'll see about setting--[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (April 11, 2009)

Jefferson

Today is Saturday, April 11, and I am here with--

Cunningham

2009.

Jefferson

2009, and I am here with David Cunningham, former and retired city councilperson for the City of Los Angeles, the Tenth District. Robin Charles is also here as the videographer, and I, Allison Jefferson, am the interviewer. We're going to kind of pick up, David, where we left off with our talk last week. You were telling me a bit about making decisions to go to college locally and trying to discover what it was you wanted to do when you went to the military. So you were talking about St. Louis and Stower College.

Cunningham

Stowe Teachers College.

Jefferson

Stower Teachers College.

Cunningham

Stowe, S-t-o-w-e, Stowe Teachers College.

Jefferson

Stowe, right. It's named after Harriet--

Cunningham

Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Jefferson

--Beecher Stowe, yes. So you were there, and you majored in something that was kind of different from most people of African American descent at the time.

Cunningham

I was majoring in chemistry and physics, nuclear science, which, you know, that was a pretty hep thing in those days. We were just getting into the atomic bomb, you know, 1952. We were quite concerned about nuclear power, and I had been interested in chemistry and nuclear physics. But I soon lost interest after all the difficulty that goes along with trying to major in that subject.

Jefferson

In terms of St. Louis, at that point in time you had some decisions to make.

Cunningham

Well, yes, I was at Stowe Teachers College. I went to Stowe Teachers College in 1952. What happened was, I played a lot of basketball. I did not work and go to school during the school year as I had done when I was in high school. So what I did was, I went out for the basketball team. I made the basketball team, and I had quite a successful couple of years playing basketball for Stowe Teachers College. That's where I met David's mother. It was during my second year in college that she informed me that we could expect a child, and so--

Jefferson

David's mother is--

Cunningham

Bessie Marie ["Tekie"].

Jefferson

--your first wife's name, yes.

Cunningham

Bessie Marie, also known as "Tekie," T-e-k-i-e. Since she was with child, and I did not feel that I should stay at home and not have a job, and finding jobs were not quite that easy in St. Louis, so I joined the air force in 1954 and took my training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. I guess that was about a three-month period; I've forgotten how many days that was. But it was a knock-down, drag-out kind of thing, you know. They have to get you disoriented from civilian life and get you oriented to military life, where you jump at their bark. You know, whenever they say "Jump," you've got to jump. You say, "How high?" A lot of times you don't even worry about how high; you just jump, and they'll tell you whether you jumped high enough or not. Although I endured that for six years, I did not find it enjoyable, and I was not one who would necessarily jump when they said "Jump." So I was somewhat of a rebel in the air force. When I finished basic training, they had informed me that they were going to send me to Russian Language School, which was supposed to be in Syracuse, New York, where I would have been able to finish my other two years and get my degree, which I thought, "That's excellent. This looks like this air force is going to be a good deal." Well, about five days before I was supposed to leave, they called my name out and said, "Report to this office." I reported to the office that they indicated, and they said, "Well, you're not going to go to Russian Language School. You're going to be a cartographer, and we're going to send you to March Air Force Base." So I had to do two things. One, I had to find out what a cartographer was and what he did, and I found out he made maps and charts, or that such a profession is for map and chart making, which is an old-line profession, as I understand. You know, [Gerhardus] Mercator and a number of other people have been pretty well known for making charts.

Jefferson

Who was?

Cunningham

Mercator. And a lot of the reasons why explorers were doing what they were doing was because they were attempting to prove certain aspects of charts, maps, etc., and as the charts got better, travel became an improved--or at least the time between locations became condensed. So I also had to go to the map and find out where March Air Force Base was, because I had never heard of it. They said, "Riverside, California." Never heard of Riverside, California, so I looked on the map, and it said "a few miles outside of Los Angeles." So I said, "Wow, I'll take that." So they flew me in. We took off from Lackland, and I landed at March Air Force Base, and that's where I began my air force career in terms of what I did in the air force.

Jefferson

So had you had an inkling about coming to California before?

Cunningham

I had always had a desire to come to California.

Jefferson

So that was a desire before you had the experience in the air force.

Cunningham

Oh, sure, sure.

Jefferson

What sparked that interest to come to California?

Cunningham

You know, if you sit in the Midwest in the cold snow and rain in the wintertime, and you start hearing about California where the temperature is sixty degrees, even if it's 55 degrees, it's still much better than 28 degrees or 3 degrees below zero or slipping on ice and cold weather. So hearing about California, California is like hearing about paradise, you know. And then I had always been able to read about the Trojans and the Bruins, and I used to always say, "That would be a great place to go." And then, of course, you know, a lot of movies came out of California, you know.

Jefferson

Okay, so it was--

Cunningham

It was all of the things that impact and impinge on your life about, you know, going to the movies, sports activities year-round, good weather. And then, you know, summertime in St. Louis, it can be 108 degrees with 90 percent humidity, and in the meantime you're talking about a balmy California that might be 78 degrees with a breeze.

Jefferson

So it was all the kind of popular media and things like that that impressed upon you.

Cunningham

Yes, and the kinds of things that I heard about California, it was the kind of place that I thought I would want to be.

Jefferson

It wasn't so much that you had friends who had moved here.

Cunningham

Oh, no, no, I didn't know of any friends. I had no friends that I knew of that had come to California.

Jefferson

So you were part of the whole pioneer dream experience, in certain ways--

Cunningham

Certainly.

Jefferson

--in the twentieth century.

Cunningham

Certainly. But subsequently, the strange thing about it, many of my high school classmates wound up here in Los Angeles. Ron Townsend is here; subsequently came out. We sang side by side for four years in high school

choir. Lemont McLemore was here. He used to belong to my dad's church. And then, because my dad [David Surmier Cunningham, Sr.] was a CME [Christian Methodist Episcopal] minister, which is a Methodist connection, I was able to make contact with people within the Riverside area and the Los Angeles area. And after coming here, we found out that my first wife had relatives here in the city of Los Angeles, so I was able to make contact with them.

Jefferson

So Tekie came out here--

Cunningham

Well, yes, she eventually came out.

Jefferson

--for a while.

Cunningham

Right. This is where David was born, in Norco Naval Hospital.

Jefferson

In Norco Naval Hospital, Dave III was born.

Cunningham

Dave III was born in California, so he's a native Californian.

Jefferson

He is a native Californian.

Cunningham

That's right.

Jefferson

I'm sorry. It's just that that was something that I hadn't kind of known.

Cunningham

That's right. He was born at Norco Naval Hospital.

Jefferson

All right. And then in terms of the CME connection, in terms of your growing up and your family, you said in our talk last time that in St. Louis, this was a good situation for the family and your father. You may not have used the words quite like that, but he had big churches and he was active.

Cunningham

Yes, he was a substantial figure in the city of St. Louis. He pastored one of the major CME churches there.

Jefferson

Do you remember what the name of it was?

Cunningham

Oh yes, Scruggs Memorial CME Church. It was on Cook Avenue, and it's still there. During his pastorate, he had over a thousand and some-odd members, and it was rather a prolific time for him. He pastored there for eight years. St. Louis was an interesting, formative time in my life. Some good experiences, some bad experiences, you know. A tremendous number of people who eventually wound up out here in California. There are about six or seven of us, young men who used to run around together in high school. So far as we can find, there's only three of us who remain alive to this point. One we can't find. He wound up flying, becoming a pilot with the Flying Tigers, and we haven't been able to run him down. But my other two buddies, they're out here. High school, hope-to-die buddies, they're out here. One is in Orange County, and the other is here in Los Angeles. Of course, we haven't been able to find the other one in about six months, but what's left of that old gang is out here.

Jefferson

In California.

Cunningham

Yes. So it was a draw for a lot of people. I think California drew a lot of people from St. Louis.

Jefferson

In terms of your parents, were they encouraging you to move into the air force and come to California? What was their thought on all of that?

Cunningham

My parents were not necessarily ecstatic about me going to the service, because they wanted me to finish school and make my way into some profession, and do something worthwhile, positive. They felt that the air force might deter or push me off of my track. But, like all things, these are decisions we have to make. My parents can only impact so much, and it's our lives that we have to live, good, bad, or indifferent.

Jefferson

So in terms of St. Louis as it compares to your living situation in Decatur and in Freeport, you all were more comfortable in--

Cunningham

Well, I was becoming older.

Jefferson

--in St. Louis. You had mentioned the house you all lived in. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Cunningham

In--

Jefferson

In St. Louis.

Cunningham

In St. Louis, well, let me go back to Freeport. The house we lived in in Freeport--see, we went to Freeport in 1939. The house we lived in in Freeport was kind of like a--it wasn't a bad house, but, I mean, it didn't have the modern accoutrements that you have today. Indoor toilets were not available. There was no such thing as gas cooking. There was no central heating; a small stove in the--the living room, dining room and the den, I guess it was all one shotgun pass to the back. Then we had a bedroom off to one side, and another bedroom off to one side, and then the kitchen out the back. So we

were in a situation where, if you had to relieve yourself at night, you either went out to the outdoor facilities, or you had to use what they used to call a honeypot. Before we left Freeport, though, they decided that this was very difficult for a young minister's children, to have to go through that--or, I guess, the minister. So they cut a hole off of the kitchen and moved the outhouse up against the back of the house. So, I mean, you know, you didn't have to go outdoors, but it still was cold in the wintertime. But then when we moved to Decatur, we moved to a much more comfortable living condition. It was two stories. We each had our own room. A rather simple Illinois house with a nice porch around it. You know, it had a nice porch, a typical Illinois rural country style home. But then we moved to St. Louis, and we moved into a mansorial type house, three stories tall, and my brother [Ronald] and I had the top floor for the whole time we were there. Of course, we were growing up. We were much more mature when we got to St. Louis than we had been in the other places, which meant we were exercising much more independence about the things that we wanted to do and the places that we could go, as long as our parents would say yea or nay.

Jefferson

You talked about your father taught you in terms of--one of the things that you really appreciated about him as an adult were his organizational skills.

Cunningham

His administrative skills.

Jefferson

His administrative skills. In terms of the family and the things that they imparted to you all, education, you've just said, was something that was very important.

Cunningham

Oh yes, education was very important.

Jefferson

So were there some other things, in terms of those kinds of values of the family, that you recall, and they have come forward with you?

Cunningham

You certainly had to have a religious background and worship and commitment to the institution, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, which we maintained to a degree. Probably I have not done it as well as my brother has done it. He's made his whole life's work following in my father's footsteps. He is a bishop of our church. He's done outstanding missionary work in West Africa and the Caribbean, and he continues to be a prince of the church. I know that if my father was alive, he'd be extremely proud of him for what he has done in terms of the clerical profession. Now, that was not my desire to do that. But I do know that my father had an opportunity to see me in my profession, and he did express his respect and pride in the things that I had done.

Jefferson

So accomplishment, doing something that was going to be productive as a citizen--

Cunningham

Productive and a contribution to the community in which you live, to make certain that the community is a better place because you were there. That was more or less the theme of our father and our mother. I mean, my mother was very community-minded, too, very concerned about the well-being of the community in which she lived. So, I mean, those are things that we have naturally--well, I can't say that we have naturally gravitated to, but in terms of maturation.

Jefferson

They were things that--

Cunningham

--that we were expected, and that in the expectation, we did.

Jefferson

They were values that you felt were imparted to you.

Cunningham

Right, and I have attempted to impart similar values to my children.

Jefferson

And to people that you have represented.

Cunningham

Well, yes, of course, of course.

Jefferson

So now let's go back to looking at Riverside. So you get out to Riverside, you look around, and what do you think?

Cunningham

I thought, "Gee, that's a pretty small city." When I went to Riverside in 1954, Riverside only had twenty-six thousand population; very small African American population. The principal aspects of life in Riverside were down along what was known then as Park Avenue. Became involved, and then also I found out that there was a small Mission Church, CME Mission Church, in Riverside, and we helped it develop and grow.

Jefferson

What was the name of the church, do you remember?

Cunningham

Well, they called it Riverside Mission. Now it's the--because oddly enough, my brother eventually--years later he pastored the church as it grew, and right now it just purchased a new facility, and the people are worshiping in the new facility in Riverside.

Jefferson

You don't remember the new name.

Cunningham

Wow.

Jefferson

It's the CME Church in Riverside, and your brother was there for a little while.

Cunningham

He was there for a while, particularly while he was--well, I think after he finished Claremont theology, School of Theology.

Jefferson

So then you inspired other members of the family to come to California.

Cunningham

Yes, I was able to convince my brother to come. My sister was married to a sailor by then, and they were living in San Diego, so the family was here, and quite naturally we determined that when Dad retired, my mother and dad would come to California.

Jefferson

So once you came out to Riverside, that was it.

Cunningham

Oh yes. I mean, there was no return.

Jefferson

It's like whether I stay in Riverside or not, I'm staying in California.

Cunningham

I'm staying in California. You better know it. That has always been my base for the last fifty, sixty years, has been California. But Riverside was a very small place at that time. But after about six or seven months in Riverside, I got sent overseas. I wound up in England, making maps and charts and playing basketball and seeing the world from that side of the channel, as they call it. I did have an opportunity to do some travel, to Spain. I went to Spain when Franco was still dictator, and that was a very interesting experience, because you could not wear your military uniform outside the airfield where we were, so we had to take civilian clothes.

Jefferson

What part of Spain?

Cunningham

Madrid. We were in Madrid, which is a beautiful city, by the way; at least, it was in the fifties. I visited Madrid in 1956. That's a long time ago. So then I came back to the States, rotated back to the States after almost twenty-some-odd months in England. I was only supposed to be there eighteen months, but you remember the Hungarian breakout when the Hungarians began to fight in Budapest and all around, trying to throw off the yoke of Russia?

Jefferson

Yes, yes.

Cunningham

So what they did was they brought all the Hungarians who were refugees now, and some Czechs who were refugees who had been in that fight, so they got priority to utilize transportation to come to the States. So those of us who were due to rotate, we had to wait a couple or two or three months till they had finished bringing those folk to the United States, which was not a pleasant thing, because I was anxious to get back and to see my family.

Jefferson

During that time--this is the 1950s--the Korean War is going on; the Civil Rights Movement is going on in the United States.

Cunningham

It was just beginning to pick up.

Jefferson

The next phase of it.

Cunningham

Yes, yes.

Jefferson

Because there had always been a Civil Rights Movement going on.

Cunningham

There had always been a Civil--yes.

Jefferson

But the next phase.

Cunningham

There had always been NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Urban League, and there had always been determination that we would try under the letter of the law to make changes and to also prick the conscience of American decision makers. It looked like it was going to be a slow process, which it was on a slow track at that point in the fifties, up until it started to pick up momentum in 1955.

Jefferson

For you, as a young person at that point in time, you were aware, obviously, of what was going on.

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

Were you participating at that juncture in any type of civic activities that were political?

Cunningham

Well, 1955, which is the Montgomery [Bus] Boycott, I was stationed in England.

Jefferson

Well, yes, not--in terms of wherever you were, not necessarily going to those historic sites.

Cunningham

Well, I mean, there's nothing you can do in the military. As I say, you've got to dance to their tune and jump when they say "Jump" and do all kinds of things. I was busy making maps and charts. I was busy using that illegal photography that that young man was flying over Russia gave, because we used to get the photography. We weren't aware what the U-2 was up there doing. All we

know, we'd get fresh photography, and we weren't supposed to tell anybody, and use it and make certain the maps and charts are updated. But apparently it was newer than we realized, so they knew what they were doing. Then when they shot Gary Francis Powers down, we said, "Aha, now it's clear." And I didn't come back to the United States till 1957, so by then, you know, the momentum was picking up, and by then my dad had moved to Memphis, Tennessee.

Jefferson

He moved to Memphis in--

Cunningham

1954. He got assigned to Collins Chapel CME Church. I think we talked about that last time, didn't we?

Jefferson

No, not in depth. There may be a little overlap, but it's okay, because there's different details that come in.

Cunningham

Okay. Well, Collins Chapel was one of the stable churches in Memphis, Tennessee, Christian Episcopal Methodist Church. One of its early churches, too; one of its older churches. It sat close to downtown Memphis, Tennessee, and it still does to this day. It's on E. H. Crump and Washington [Streets]. E. H. Crump. [laughs]

Jefferson

So in terms of you're in the military, so you're hearing about these things that are going on, and your father is in Memphis, and that's kind of a place where it was a hotbed. It was becoming a hotbed of activity.

Cunningham

Oh yes, it was definitely becoming a hotbed, yes.

Jefferson

So you were very aware of what was going on, even if it wasn't something that you were totally involved in. Because, by the nature of your work, you were integrating a new segment of the military.

Cunningham

You know, it's a funny thing. My father had a member of his church who was chairman of his Steward Board that was a barber. I can't remember his name right now. But his barbershop was in downtown Memphis, and his clientele was white. If he wanted to use the bathroom, he had to go next door to a for-colored-only bathroom. He couldn't use his own bathroom.

Jefferson

And it was his shop.

Cunningham

It was his shop. You couldn't sit in his chairs, because his business was catering to white people. It was right down in near Beale Street. Memphis was--you couldn't go into the--they used to have a department store there called Gottschalk's--Gottschalk's?

Jefferson

Something like that. That sounds familiar.

Cunningham

Gottschalk.

Jefferson

I'll have to check it.

Cunningham

And you could not try on the clothes. If you wanted to buy a pair of pants, you'd have to tell them what size you wanted and you'd have to buy the pants, and you couldn't return them if they didn't fit.

Jefferson

Did you get any impressions from your father talking about the situation there in Memphis? Because that was different from St. Louis.

Cunningham

When I would visit, when I would visit, he would always tell me to be careful, you know. "Things are different. We're trying to change it," which meant that I didn't want to spend a lot of time in Memphis, you know. You don't want to be subjected to those kinds of insulting, degrading kind of situations. Why? You don't have to. Now, I remember when, just as I was headed overseas, I drove my car from March Air Force Base to Memphis, Tennessee. I had my wife and David III with me. We'd stopped off in St. Louis to see her relatives, and in those days St. Louis and Memphis were about three hundred miles apart. You could either go down the Missouri-Arkansas side or--you could go down the west side of the Mississippi River, which takes you through Arkansas, or you could go down the east side of the Mississippi River, which takes in Tennessee and, I guess, Illinois. So it was really actually shorter to go down the west side. I'm on my way from St. Louis to Memphis to see my parents and spend time with them before I go overseas. We pulled into a filling station. Now, I'm in my uniform, air force uniform, because it's all I had. I didn't have civilian clothes in those days. And I pull in to fill up the tank with gasoline. I have to use the restroom, right? So I head to the restroom. The owner jumps in front of the door and says, "You can't go in here. You have to go behind the house." So I went behind the house, okay. He finished filling up my tank, put the cap on it, closed the door. I put the car in gear and left.

Jefferson

It's a very ironic situation, that people could take your money.

Cunningham

That's right.

Jefferson

Your money is good enough.

Cunningham

But I didn't give him any money

Jefferson

Oh. Oh, okay.

Cunningham

Oh, no, no, no. He took the hose out, because, you know, they at least were still pumping gas, you know. And he closed up the gas cap--and I made certain that my wife and son were in the car, and put it in gear, and I hauled tail out of there. Nobody caught me before I got to Memphis, so I said, "That was a free tank of gas." I mean, if I'm going to suffer that kind of indignity, and I'm wearing the country's uniform, and I got to fight for this country? No, buddy, you're going to have to give me some free gas, in that case.

Jefferson

I like that story. That's a good story. So in terms of this kind of period, you're aware of all that's going on. You're in the air force. You're in California, based in California.

Cunningham

Right. Well, but I go overseas and I come back. Now, of course, being gone for eighteen months, there's tension between you and your wife, and that tension apparently had sparked to the point where after I was there for a couple days, she disappeared, she and David. So I went on to Memphis, because, you know--

Jefferson

This is in St. Louis. You're in St. Louis.

Cunningham

Yes, because I come back to St. Louis, because that's where she had--we had agreed that she would stay with my mother and father, but then she said she didn't like staying with my mother and father, so she went back to St. Louis and stayed with her sister. I get back to St. Louis. There's this tension. I had taken a short reenlisted. I had saved my money, and I had all my cash in my pocket. She left with the majority of it, and I didn't see any more of her. Her sister said, "Oh, well, I don't know where she is," you know. So I called her mother and called several places. They don't know where she is, which I found out that that became a trait that she would use from time to time, or a couple of times, which led to our dissolution. So I went on to Memphis, sad, you know, heartbroken. So, you know, I had like thirty days, because I'm back from

overseas. My father was doing some things at that time. This was 1957, and they were being pretty effective [unclear], and my brother had gotten out of the air force, and he was going to LeMoyne College. He was trying to cheer me up, and he and I would go out sometime together. He couldn't understand why I wasn't having a good time. But anyway, he was kind and my parents were kind. It got close to time for me to come back to California, because I was reposted to March Air Force Base.

Jefferson

And this was 19--

Cunningham

It was 1957, yes, like March--February, March--March of 1957. So my dad was a very shrewd person, so my dad said, "Son, look, I'm going to St. Louis." I had been in Memphis now about twenty-five days, you know, calling every day. "You heard from Tekie?" Call her mother, "Have you heard from Tekie?""No, just don't know where she is.""Where is my son?""Don't know."So my dad says, "I'm going to St. Louis next week. You want to go with me?"I say, "Yeah."So he says, "Okay. Get in the car." We drive up to St. Louis. He says, "Oh, by the way, let's go over to Laura's house and see how she's doing."

Jefferson

And Laura is your--

Cunningham

Tekie's sister. So we go up to St. Louis. We get there at like maybe six o'clock in the evening. Knock on the door, and who answers the door? Can you answer that question?

Jefferson

I think it was Mrs. Cunningham.

Cunningham

Tekie. [laughs] Yes, she answers the door. Flabbergasted, wow, you know. But, "Well, you're so immature," you know, all this sort of thing."Yes, but whatever I am, I've got responsibilities here." "Well, you know, we'll talk about it. You go on back to the base and you stay in touch."So I came back out here, finally.

Came back to March Air Force Base. Finally she decides to come out. I got a place; bought a house full of furniture. I went to--you ever heard of McMann's Furniture Company?

Jefferson

Yes, yes.

Cunningham

[laughs] I'll never forget it. I went on the hook for like four rooms of furniture, bedroom, living room, all that, television, you know. When I had been in high school, I had made this stool that I used to carry with me all around, because it was my handiwork. It was just a stool, just a plain stool. We used to put the Hi Fi--I don't know whether you remember the portable stereo? You know, you could put a little portable stereo that would play records, phonographs. We used to put it on the stool, and I liked to play the phonograph; liked to listen to a lot of jazz music. So my mother [Eula Cunningham] and father [Cunningham, Sr.] were coming out to visit us, coming out to visit California. This was their first time, and they were driving across country. A week before they were supposed to come out I came home from the base, and sitting in the middle of this empty apartment was the green stool with the Hi Fi stereo on top of it.

Jefferson

This is '57, '58?

Cunningham

This is '57. This is like summer of '57, because they were coming out. So sitting there was this green stool that I had made with the stereo on it. So the next-door neighbor was a friend, and her husband was in the service, so I went and knocked on the door, and Sanade said, "Well--." Her name was Snate; very interesting name. She said, "Well, the biggest van came about three, four hours ago, picked up the furniture, and Tekie caught a cab. She went to the railroad station."So I said, "Okay." So I knew the train had to stop in San Bernardino, so I rushed over. What today is [Interstate] 215 was La Cadena Drive in those days. I rushed down that road. I don't know why I didn't get a ticket. I got to San Bernardino Train Station, and the train was still there. I

jumped on the train, walked through the train, and couldn't see anything. Later on David shared with me that she took them into the restroom and said, "Don't say anything." So I missed the train. I got off the train and went on back. So then I determined I'd better start getting my life together. You know, I couldn't afford to keep the apartment, so I closed the apartment down and went back on the base into the barracks, and continued to do my work. By then I was living on very little, but I had been a presser when I was shining shoes in Union Station. Mr. Epps taught me how to press.

Jefferson

In St. Louis.

Cunningham

In St. Louis. So there was a cleaner's in Sunnymead right off the base, and so I sat down with the owner. I went to the owner two or three times. One day I stopped and says to him, "How is your business with the people in the air force, with the airmen?" He said, "Well, I'd like to increase my business." I said, "I've got a deal for you. First of all, I'd like to pick up clothes. For every ten dollars' worth of clothing, I take a dollar. You give me a dollar. I'll pick up the clothes, and I'll deliver them." So it got to be pretty good, and it was getting pretty heavy, so I got about four other guys in my barracks that were friends of mine. We became a consortium of deliveries, and we started making money. Then what I would do, is also I would press clothes. So I was making--in the air force--I was making a couple of extra hundred dollars a month, which was big money in 1957 or '58. So I had that little gig and was doing real well. So I bought an old TR-2. I don't know whether you know--

Jefferson

Yes, I do. English sports car.

Cunningham

English sports car, an English sports car. It had four gears and an overdrive, which was the fifth gear, you know. You could get like thirty-eight, forty miles to the gallon on that thing. But as I say, I think it was a '55, a '55 TR-2 with the long hood, you know, long body, short back. You know, you can't put anything in it. But turns out that the canvas top was a little threadbare, and, you know,

I'm working, so I decide in I guess it was November of '58. Maybe so. November of '57, November of '58. I think it was closer to November of '58. I decided that I would drive back to St. Louis. So I had a friend by the name of Willie King, who he and I were one of the top guys in our squadron for cartography and photogrammetry work. I mean, we weren't easy guys to get along with. We had fun, but we knew our stuff, and we didn't like the service, but we knew our stuff. We knew what we could do. So Willie was from Kansas City, so Willie said, "Well, I'll ride back with you to St. Louis. You drop me off at Kansas City." I said, "Okay. We'll take turns driving." Willie said, "Oh, no, I don't know how to drive." So now I got this old TR-2, raggedy canvas top, and it's November weather conditions. So I take a look at the map and determine, "Well, we'll go through Arizona and New Mexico. Then we'll drop down to Oklahoma. We'll maintain a relatively warm kind of drive, you know." You had the canvas top and then you had the windows you dropped in, that dropped into the doors and then you'd push it against the canvas top, and, you know, then you're off and running. I don't think duct tape existed then. We got some tape. We got the electric tape, so we're taping stuff up, right, to keep the wind out, to keep the temperature out. Plus we took a couple of army blankets with us, because we're prepared; we're going to travel. Now, you've got to remember, in those days you were lucky if you could get a room--if you were black, if you could get a room in Arizona. You definitely would be segregated somewhere in New Mexico, and the rest of the way, you could not get a room in a motel, hotel, or anything along the way. So we're going to make this eighteen-hundred-mile drive. So first of all, I start out going to--

Jefferson

And this is the second time you've done this now, second or third time.

Cunningham

Oh yes, yes, but before I had had--

Jefferson

You had the family with you.

Cunningham

Before I had the family, and I had a 1953 Turtleback Mercury that was enclosed. But I eventually sold that when I went overseas.

Jefferson

I was just thinking in terms of your experience with the trip.

Cunningham

The family was one thing, yes. Yes. But the family was one thing, but just Willie King and myself, it was another thing. I didn't have to worry--well, I did have to worry, because like when I came across with the family, it was in the summertime. It was around June or July, and there was no such thing as air-conditioning, so in those days we brought this little thing that you could put on the side of the window. You fill it up with water, and you'd pull the string, and you'd get some hydrated cooling.

Jefferson

A manual air-conditioner.

Cunningham

Yes. You know, you'd pull it, and you'd cool off everybody, and with the wind blowing through, you know, it did drop the temperature somewhat. I mean, it made it much more bearable than coming through there when it was a hundred and some-odd degrees. But now I'm going through in the wintertime. Well, I don't realize that [Route] 66, which was the route, which I've traveled many a time, that 66, which goes through Flagstaff [Arizona], that Flagstaff was one of the highest points. Right outside of Flagstaff is one of the highest points in Arizona with snow on the mountain. So we get up to Arizona. We get up to the top of that mountain. My hands were freezing now, you know; driving is cold. We pull into a filling station and try to see if we could get a heater installed. The guy says, "Your car won't fit. We don't have anything that will work off of that British car you're driving." So I told him, "Come out." We got gas, and I said, "Come out and tape us back in," and off we headed back down. So we came down from Arizona. We went through New Mexico, and as we were driving--in those days New Mexico, 66 was divided. It had two lanes on this side and two lanes on that side. They had a median that was pretty wide, and I'm driving along, and I just spotted--now, we left Los

Angeles. We left Los Angeles around twelve-thirty at night, because I had been playing in a band, and we got through, got in the car, and we took off. About eleven-thirty or twelve o'clock the next afternoon, going through New Mexico, I fell asleep. I dozed off; I can't say "fell asleep." I dozed off, and I go down into the divider, and I'm headed back up, and I look up, and there's a Mercury coming at me. I go back down in there and pull back over to my side of the road. In about two minutes I hunched Willie. I said, "Willie, did you see that?" He said, "Well, yeah, you know, you were dozing, but, you know, I didn't want to disturb you." [laughs] "Willie, we're about to get killed, man, you know." "Yeah, okay." So about ten minutes later I pulled off to one side and took another nap. But then we drove the rest of the way to Kansas City, and about twenty miles outside of Kansas City I hear this whirring sound. [imitates sound] So I can't figure out what is this sound. We were still rolling. So I dropped Willie, and I head to St. Louis. Get to St. Louis. This car's really just about to die--so I determined, "Well--." I stopped, knocked on the door where David and his mother were staying, which became a whole drama after that. But I can't leave town because I've got to get my car fixed. I could tell there was something wrong with my car. It's late at night, and I can't get the car fixed till the next day. That's when I discovered that there was someone else involved in my wife's life. He came in while I was sleeping on the couch, and he threatened to kill me and all kinds of things. I told him, "Well." I went back in to go to sleep. The only thing that interested me is my son. "If I'm dead in the morning, it's your problem, not mine." So apparently he didn't have nerve enough to kill me, because I'm still here, and he ain't. [laughs] Hate to say it; sorry to say.

Jefferson

From other complications.

Cunningham

Yes. Yes, he died from heart and all kinds of problems. You know. David's shared with you. But what was interesting is, I got the car fixed, and I was pretty distraught, you know.

Jefferson

The TR-2 at that point in time, the sports car was like a California thing.

Cunningham

Oh yes, it was a California thing. It was a California thing.

Jefferson

To be coming back to St. Louis with a sports car, I'm sure that--

Cunningham

Yes, well, it was weird. It was weird. Yes, it was weird. You're right; it was a California thing. I mean, I had gone completely California, you know.

Obviously, I was not going back to St. Louis. But as a result of that, I mean, the last thing I said to David's mother, because it was at that point that I made a decision in my life that, first of all, I was going to change that circumstance. And then she let me take David with me to Memphis, because I was going to Memphis. And the last thing I said to her, I said, "Yes, it really hurts, but let me tell you, the only way anybody will ever know that you existed is you will be a footnote to me in history." I mean, I made that decision at that point right there that I was going to do something that was different. And Dave III and I drove to Memphis, and he was the cutest little thing. I mean, here is this guy, like three years old or so, and I've got him wrapped in an army blanket, because, you know, it's cold. And he says, "That's all right, Daddy. Don't cry, don't cry. You and I, we're together," and we've been that way ever since. So I went on to Memphis, and I determined that I was going to do something different. Eventually I got back to the air force and got back to March [Air Force Base], and March had this thing where you could go on TDY [Temporary Duty].

Jefferson

TDY is--

Cunningham

Is Temporary Duty, where you got paid, and you got paid a healthy sum per day. The thing about it was that it was to the Aeronautical Chart [and Information] Center in St. Louis, Missouri, and I felt still that if I could get there, I probably could talk some sense into my wife [Tekie].

Jefferson

And so this is like 1958?

Cunningham

This is 1958, '59, somewhere around there. 1958, '59, somewhere around there. During 1958 they would send one class, and they changed the rules. One, you had to be a trainee. Well, I was no longer a trainee. I was a pretty good photogrammatist. Then you had to be a staff sergeant or above to go. So they kept changing the rules.

Jefferson

And the name of the school again was--

Cunningham

The Aeronautical Chart and Information Center, which was in St. Louis, where they make charts. It would have been ideal from my perspective, I thought. So I kept seeing them change the rules, right? So they have something in the service called chain of command, and if you want to complain or bitch, you've got to go up the chain of command. So I went, innocently; talked to the first sergeant. "Can I talk to the commander of our squadron?" He says, "Yes, okay." He says, "Well, don't know what we can do. You know, the rules are the rules." So I went and talked to the base commander, and he says, "I don't know whether we could do it. Rules are rules." So, base commander. I talked to the commander of that section of the air force. "Can't do anything." I mean, I walked. I had to walk. I had to wait a lot of times, you know, and this took about seven months. Still no answer. So, now you realize my father's in Memphis, Tennessee. One of his dearest friends, someone he respected and he worked with, was Senator Albert Gore, Sr. So I wrote my father, recommended a letter that he should send to Senator Gore or at least make some inroads with Senator Gore. My father did that, and Senator Gore sent a Red Line telegram. Do you know what a Red Line telegram is?

Jefferson

Yes, I'm sure.

Cunningham

Now, Senator Gore was chairman of the Armed Services Committee of the Senate. He was also chairman of the Subcommittee on Appropriations. So, you

know, you get a Red Line telegram about Cunningham, right? So I come in one morning to the squad, to where we worked, and my buddy, who we played on the base team together, "Big Ike" Sellers, he stammered and stuttered. He says, "H-H-Ham, Ham." He caught me as I was--"Ham, Ham."

Jefferson

That was your nickname, "Ham."

Cunningham

Yes, they used to call me "Ham." "Ham, man, man, big trouble, big trouble. They're down there, generals and majors and colonels. They're down there talking about you." I said, "What?" He said, "Well, they just got a Red Line telegram, and they want some answer from Senator Gore." So I walked back to the office where I worked. It was a big, bay-like place, where we had all these charts. We had all these drafting tables, because we did a lot of drafting and stuff like that. And this E-9 sergeant says, "What did you write? What did you do? What did you write?" I says, "Sergeant, you want me to have my father write a letter on you? You have no right to question me about what my father does." "Well, we didn't know you were unhappy." I said, "Look, don't bother me right now, because if you bother me, I'm going to have to have my dad send that letter on you." [laughs] Man. Left me alone. These guys, I mean, I'm telling you, I have never seen all this big brass that had been so mean, and they wanted me to jump sixteen miles high. They were jumping like--I mean, they must have met for about two or three hours. Then they called me in after lunch. "What's the matter? What are you dissatisfied about?" So I told them I was dissatisfied about the treatment I have received. "Well, what do you mean?" "Well, you have passed over me four times to go to St. Louis." "Well, you know, the rules are the rules. We don't know what we can do." They said, "Anyway, you need to get some new fatigues. You need to do this. You need to do that. You know, you need to straighten up." A lot of the times they would have inspections. They call an inspection outside, and up there in Riverside on a cold winter day, it's cold. So I had this powder blue sweater I used to wear. I would put it right underneath my uniform, and they'd gig me. I told them I didn't care. "You can gig me, but I'm warm." [laughs] So I wasn't exactly the kind of guy I should have been. So they said, "You need to straighten up." I said, "Well, whatever you say."

Jefferson

So in terms of saying that you weren't exactly the kind of guy--

Cunningham

I did not necessarily conform to what they thought would make a great airman, because I was not interested in being a great airman. I was concerned about being a good professional in what I did, you know. Matter of fact, when they had a tremendous problem and one of the biggest issues they ever had, back in '59, I think it was, sometime in '59 or early '60, Sabre [F100] Jets flew over China, and they had a dogfight. There was about twenty-six or thirty of them. They shot down MiGs like crazy. Willie King and I were awakened at two o'clock in the morning. We were told to come to the laboratory. They said we couldn't tell anyone. They brought us in. They gave us this photography, and they told us we needed to rectify--what they call rectify it. We got on the Bausch and Lomb, and we spent something like eight hours straight having to straighten out that mission so that the photography could be utilized so we could be prepared to lay the photography for a photogrammetry map or chart, which Willie and I did all the rectification. After they printed them, we then laid the mosaic, because there's a certain way you--you have to cut--you have to match up--

Jefferson

And this is for mapping purposes.

Cunningham

Yes. This is a map. You know, the projection is already there. The base of the map is there.

Jefferson

And what it is, it's like looking at a satellite view.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

It's a day.

Cunningham

Yes. Today it would be a satellite. They don't have to do that anymore.

Jefferson

Right. It's an aerial view--

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

--and it's a combination of layers. So you have the layer of the terrain with the layer of the mapping over it.

Cunningham

Well, yes.

Jefferson

The photograph would be the terrain, and then the mapping would be what you're making over it.

Cunningham

Right. We would have a base map. Before we had a base map, we--well, you got pretty much the idea, because we used to make elevations, which would be one thing on the Oasle [Material] chart, and then we would have roads and streets on the Oasle chart. But by the time you compiled it all, it made one base, and from that base we would then lay the photography. Today I'm sure they don't do anything like that today. Just go up in the satellite; bam, shoot it, and they know what they're doing.

Jefferson

Based on those past maps.

Cunningham

Right. The other thing was that Willie and I, we liked to have fun, so we would mess around with stuff. We learned how to convert Chinese coordinates, because the Chinese would put their coordinates down in degrees, minutes,

and seconds. Where we would start from ten degrees and maybe go to ten to twelve degrees, they may start their coordinates at ten degrees, twelve minutes, and thirty seconds, and that would be their cross-point, and they'd started from there. But we learned how to read Chinese writing for numbers, just messing around, and transliterate them into English. So we were one of the few guys that could take old Chinese maps and be able to utilize them for their positional base to be able to start the projection. So they had us there. We had to refly the mission. We put the mission down, and they were able to make a chart, maps and charts that mapped most of the coast of China at that period. This is 1959, so you could see how primitive that was at that time. Later on when I visited China, I used to say, "Well, just think, I mapped Guanju [China] or Canton," you know. So he and I used to do that. But then--back to the story--I saw these colonels and generals all jumping around. So they said okay--they imposed these rules on me.

Jefferson

You're going back to the story about the letter--

Cunningham

About my father and the letter.

Jefferson

--and with Al Gore, Sr.

Cunningham

Because the letter was very important. It was a very important point in my life, very important point.

Jefferson

I could gather a few things in my mind, but you're going to tell us about that.

Cunningham

Yes, very important point. And I see all these powerful guys. They're jumping and carrying on, you know. Senator Gore, who does he know? What was he doing annoying Senator Gore? So I did not follow the rules that they imposed on me. However, at the next promotion cycle they promoted me to staff sergeant. I didn't get any new fatigues. I came in on time, as I always did,

because I've always been a stickler about time. Did my work. Enjoyed my life as best I could. But they promoted me. Now, you've got to realize this created quite a stir. Now, at this point I was no longer married to David's mother. I had been remarried; gotten remarried to a young lady in Riverside.

Jefferson

And your second wife was--

Cunningham

Fern. Fern.

Jefferson

And this was around 1959, '58.

Cunningham

1959, yes. Around 1959--yes, 1959. When I had this event with them was in 1960, when the letter came. But in the latter part of 1959 I had taken the OTS [Officers Training School] text, exam.

Jefferson

And that is the--

Cunningham

Officers Training School. Because one of my desires had been to be a pilot. I just thank God I didn't make, because I might have been shot down in Vietnam. But I did pass, and I was supposed to go to a class in September. If I remember correctly, it was 52-G class in September of 1960. So I get promoted, staff sergeant. I'm going to go to OTS. Well, I got promoted over their fair-haired white boy, who was an airman first [class]. And it so happened that when I was an airman and lived on base, I used to go through the chow line. But after getting married and living off-base, they gave you a dollar and I think it was ten cents a day, because your breakfast was so much and lunch was so much and dinner was so much, so it figured out to about forty dollars a month. Well, they hadn't taken my mess card, so, you know, I'd get there in time; I'd go over and put my mess card down and have breakfast. Particularly the airmen 1st were the ones they had to check the people in. I had been promoted over their fair-haired boy, and he was checking. He was

checking people in this one morning. I showed up, put my card down, went and got breakfast. After I got my waffles and eggs and bacon, as I was sitting down, who should loom over me but the first sergeant. He said, "What are you doing here? Did you pay for that?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Well, I want to see you in my office." I said, "Okay, sarge." I said, "I'll tell you what. This is going to be an expensive breakfast. I'm going to enjoy it. I'm going to finish it. As soon as I finish it, I'll be over to your office." [laughs] Well, I know I'm going to lose a stripe, right? So I go over. He said, "We've been waiting for you. We've wanted you for a long time." He said, "Ain't a damn thing Senator Gore can do about it." I said, "You're probably right, sarge." He said, "So I'm going to give you Article 15. I'm going to be nice to you. I'm only going to give you Article 15, and we're going to take your staff sergeant stripe from you."

Jefferson

Article 15 is--

Cunningham

It's a disciplinary action that can be done by a superior. There's limitations on what they can do. They can take a grade from you, but they can't put you in jail and do all that under Article 15. You have to have a hearing for that.

Jefferson

So they took a stripe.

Cunningham

Yes, took my stripe. I'm no longer an NCO. I'm an airman first again. So I said, "Well, sarge, since this has happened, can I have the rest of the day off?" He said, "Yeah." So I went down the road, turned into UC [University of California] Riverside, applied to go to UC Riverside; got my transcript and everything. Three weeks later they told me I had been accepted, and under the rules--I guess this was around June--under the rules I could get out thirty days early to go to college. So I got out of the air force.

Jefferson

Thirty days early from when you were supposed to get out anyway.

Cunningham

When I was supposed to, yes. I was due out sometime in September that year, my time was up.

Jefferson

And it was peacetime at that point, even though we were having some Cold War things going on.

Cunningham

They had things going on in Vietnam, too, 1960.

Jefferson

Yes, Vietnam had started, yes, yes.

Cunningham

But I was a hangover from the Korean War. So I went to UC Riverside. But before I got ready to get out, you know, I had like a month or so left, so the same E-9 sergeant who had raised the question about my father writing Senator Gore called me, and he says, "Well, Airman, we have to interview you for reenlisting. We have to ask you to reenlist." "Reenlist? Are you out of your mind?" Now, you've got to realize it's 1960. 1960 was also a very recession era. He said, "Well, Airman, you know, it's going to be very hard to find a job out in the world. You have a job here. You're being paid." I said, "Sergeant, I don't want a job." And he looked at me. I could see just going on in his mind, "One of these guys that go out there and get on welfare or something, you know. What the--." I said, "Sergeant, I don't want a job." He said, "Well, what are you going to do?" I said, "I don't want a job, because if I get a job, I'm going to have to work for some prick like you." What could he do? I mean, I'm gone. [laughs] And I said, "As a matter of fact, I don't ever plan to get a job the rest of my life. I'm going out and get me a position." And so far, I've been able to live up to that truth.

Jefferson

Did you feel like you learned some lessons from what was going on?

Cunningham

Oh, did I ever.

Jefferson

There were many things going on here, the military, the letter from Al Gore, Sr. I'm sure that had some kind of impact.

Cunningham

That impacted me and said there's something important about political power, and that's when I made a determination about what my major was then going to become, because when I entered UC Riverside, I changed my major to political science with a minor in economics, and I committed to myself that I was going to get my degree this time no matter what happened. I was going to get my bachelor of arts degree, and I did. Played a little football; studied. My first daughter [Leslie] was born while I was--

Jefferson

And Fern, your second wife, she was a teacher, right?

Cunningham

Schoolteacher.

Jefferson

Where did she go to college?

Cunningham

University of California, Santa Barbara.

Jefferson

Oh, she went to UC Santa Barbara? Oh, okay.

Cunningham

Yes. What do you know about UC Santa Barbara?

Jefferson

Early person out there in terms of African American.

Cunningham

It had just--in the fifties--

Jefferson

Moved to the new campus.

Cunningham

Right, and in the fifties it had been California State University at Santa Barbara, or California State College at Santa Barbara, and they turned it into UC and moved it to the Goleta [California] campus or Isla Vista, whatever you want to call it.

Jefferson

Either way, yes.

Cunningham

Subsequently, my second daughter got her degree from UC Santa Barbara, Robyn.

Jefferson

Was she from that area?

Cunningham

No, she was from Riverside.

Jefferson

She was from Riverside originally.

Cunningham

She was from Riverside. Yes, she was from Riverside originally, yes. But we had become married by then, and my first child was born in 1961, and I graduated from UC Riverside in 1962. That was exciting. I finally had gotten my degree. But also while I was there, now, you know, having been inspired by Gore and my dad's relationship--

Jefferson

And what's going on in terms of your father's relationship?

Cunningham

Yes, my father's relationship with Gore.

Jefferson

Did you have an opportunity to meet him during this period?

Cunningham

No, I didn't have an opportunity to meet him, but I have met Al Gore, Jr., and Dave III has met him. One of the things, he knew my father, Junior did, and knew of the relationship, and that was one of the reasons why we were very supportive of Al Gore. I mean, if Al Gore had run this time, I would have been--

Jefferson

Because I don't remember when Al Gore, Sr., died, either.

Cunningham

I subsequently met Al Gore, Sr. I met him out here. He came to a couple of events.

Jefferson

But that was later. You didn't meet him during this time when he was very influential in your life, indirectly.

Cunningham

No, no. Yes, he had been very influential. Now, you know, he withstood a lot of slings and arrows when he was in Tennessee. They called him a racist and White Citizens Council ran candidates against him. They accused him of being a nigger-lover. They did all kinds of things to Al Gore. Al Gore never flinched, never changed, and as you know, he voted for Civil Rights, and it eventually cost him his Senate seat. That's the reason why not only my personal relationship with him but also because he stood on principle, and that's what people don't understand about his son. His son inherited that from his father. Al Gore, Jr., has stood on principle. But, you know, as a result of that, I went to UCR. Majored in poli sci; minor in econ.

Jefferson

So you kind of at this point are thinking about politics.

Cunningham

Oh yes. Well, interestingly enough, while I'm there in Riverside in school, met John Tunney. The City of Riverside in those days would elect city council members at large. They had, if I remember, five members in the city council. Four of them lived within a quarter miles of each other, if you put a circle around it. Some of us determined that this was not very helpful to the community, and so we put together desire to break them up and have them elected from council districts. We ran into a lot of opposition, but when we walked the streets--we campaigned very hard for the charter change. They accused us of being in favor of large-style politics. Chicago-style politics will come to Riverside, you know, all the bad things that's going to happen. Well, we got it passed. Now, I graduated from UC Riverside in 1962. The first election--

Jefferson

What was it that inspired you to get involved in that campaign to get district representation?

Jefferson

I had been involved with the NAACP. One of my buddies in the air force, we were in the Southern Area Youth Conference.

Jefferson

While you were in the--

Cunningham

While we were in the air force. It wasn't always easy, but we were.

Jefferson

Right. And this was while you were here in southern California.

Cunningham

While we were in southern California. We were members of the Southern Area Youth Conference. My friend, we ran his campaign for him to become president. One of the things my dad used to always tell me, his key to understanding politics and power, is always know the rules. So he inspired me

to always know Robert's Rules of Order. So every time he would run, I would serve as parliamentarian, so I was the parliamentarian for three or four years in the Southern Area Youth Conference, which took in Santa Barbara, San Diego, a number of places. Mrs. Talley, Ruth Talley, who eventually worked in the California State Education Department. She was one of the assistants to the black gentleman that was--

Jefferson

Wilson Riles?

Cunningham

Wilson Riles, yes. She was very close to Wilson Riles. But she had been one of our mentors that we had worked with, and Helene Stuart, who was from the Sheriff's office, she said. So I had gotten involved, and now I'm in school, still remain involved, and we worked very hard to change this situation from everybody out at Arlington Heights out in the hoity-toity part of town running the--

Jefferson

In Riverside.

Cunningham

--yes, in Riverside--running the city. So we got it done, and we got the city broken up into city council districts or ward districts, and there was some talk about, "Well, young man, why don't you run for city council in Riverside?""No, I can't do that."

Jefferson

"I'm in school."

Cunningham

No. "I'm graduating and I'm going to Los Angeles." See, now, California was the Mecca, but the draw was Los Angeles. Now, while I was at UCR, doing well, getting through school, one day I'm walking down the hall, and I see this poster or this thing that says, "Apply for Coro Foundation. Here are the requirements," and it tells about the program. I apply to Coro Foundation.

Jefferson

So tell us about Coro Foundation, because this is an organization, aside from you getting training from them, you've been involved with them since that time as a mentor and a board member.

Cunningham

Yes. Yes. Well, not as a board member; I served on the selection committees from time to time. Coro Foundation gives an internship in public affairs. It was started in 1946, I think it was, by Van Duyn Dodge and by [Donald] Fletcher. Fletcher was an attorney, a young attorney. Van Duyn Dodge was an investment financial advisor, an investment banker. They were quite concerned with the principles of democracy; how do people understand?

Jefferson

What was Fletcher's first name?

Cunningham

I'll have to think about it.

Jefferson

I'll look it up.

Cunningham

You can find it on Coro. He'd kill me. We became such good friends, even after I left Coro. But we always called him Mr. Fletcher.

Jefferson

So Dodge and Fletcher.

Cunningham

Yes. Van Duyn Dodge--well, Mr. Dodge, yes. But Fletcher was more hands-on. Van Duyn Dodge was quite an intellect himself, but Fletcher was more hands-on. It was started by them with the premise that you could bring young people to understand the workings of politics, government, special interests, labor, all of the institutions that make up our democratic society. How do you get them to work in concert with one another? You need people who understand the

how-to, how to get things done. Now, if your interest is to get things done to destroy the system, that's your business. If it's to improve the welfare of people, that's your business. But at least you can learn what are the tools; what kinds of tools do you need to be effective in utilizing power for change, whatever kind of change you want to make. And underlying that, because it's very important, they say it doesn't matter what political party you belong to. You can do it anyway, you know. So they were indicating that they were interested in bringing people in. I think it had principally started in San Francisco. They would take twelve young people, and they would give them assignments. Then I think around '50 or so, 1950 or so, they started in Los Angeles, or they brought a class to Los Angeles. I applied when I graduated in 1962, and lo and behold, I made the first cut, and they brought me in for an interview. I had to do essays and I had to do all kinds of things, and it was really a challenge for me. It was exciting and--you know. Now, the internship was only, I think, about twenty-five hundred or five thousand dollars for ten months. But I still had my GI Bill, so, you know, I'd get a hundred and thirty-five dollars a month, and then you get another two--

Jefferson

So you were also using your GI Bill to go to college, too.

Cunningham

Oh yes. Oh yes. I used it. Then at the end of the ten months, if you do a dissertation, you could get your master's.

Jefferson

With the Coro.

Cunningham

Yes, through Coro's relationship with, at that time, the Occidental College. So I went to the selection process. It was in Pasadena. It was a pretty intense, unique kind of situation. I wasn't certain what the outcome would be, but I got selected, and I knew that relatively early. I knew that, I guess, by April, May, and graduation was in June, so I knew what I was going to do. But I needed to come to Los Angeles, so I also said, "Well, I've got to do something during the summer." So I came to Los Angeles and took the county test.

Jefferson

This is in 19--

Cunningham

1962. So I came and took the county test, and I was hired. I passed it. I worked as a social caseworker for three months at DPSS [Department of Public Social Services].

Jefferson

And DP--Department of--

Cunningham

The Department of Public Social Services. Right. I learned about AFDC and Aid to Dependent Children. All those things have changed now. You know, this is 1962, so those things don't happen anymore. We used to go out on midnight raids to see, first of all, if there was a man in the house, and we found them hiding in all kinds of places, under the bed, the closet, in the refrigerator, out in the garage, you know. But we were trying to follow the rules. Anyway, I did get selected to go to Coro, and I got my assignments. My political assignment was to Charles Warren's--to Charlie Warren's assembly candidacy. Also my labor assignment was to United Auto Workers, which is where I met Ted Watkins, because Ted Watkins was just starting--he was getting around to formulating the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

Jefferson

Now, Charles Warren, what was his district? Do you remember what number it was?

Cunningham

56th Assembly District.

Jefferson

What part of town was that in?

Cunningham

The heart of Los Angeles.

Jefferson

Was he a [Jesse M.] Unruh Democrat or--

Cunningham

He was a Democrat.

Jefferson

Was he a Unruh Democrat or one of the other folks? Was he a [Sam] Yorty person?

Cunningham

Oh, no, no, no. He's the one that introduced me to Tom Bradley. You have to understand, Charles Warren was a very, very progressive person. We did his campaign. He was successful winning. But while we were doing his campaign, he called me one day and he says, "I want you to meet me at Bill Below's house. I have someone I want to introduce you to." He introduced me to Tom Bradley. He says, "He's going to be the next council member for the City of Los Angeles, for the 10th Council District." Tom and I met each other and became very simpatico, and I worked in Tom Bradley's campaign for the city council. But first of all, let me get back to Coro, because it's extremely important to understand that Coro consists of these blocks of assignments. And you have to write about it, and you have talk about it, and you have to determine the lessons that you've learned. So I was assigned to Charlie Warren's political campaign. I was assigned to the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce. I did United Auto Workers; it was my union involvement. And I forgot what--I had another--there's about five or six blocks that you go through, business, etc. Well, it had some interesting experiences. One of the first things you do is you visit the city council. You visit city hall. You visit the board of supervisors. Now, this is 1962, September. So we're visiting city hall. We are there to--oh, no, first we went to the board of supervisors, and who do we see at the board of supervisors but this little short banty guy that smokes a cigar.

Jefferson

I know who that is, but you tell us.

Cunningham

Gilbert Lindsay, deputy supervisor to Kenneth Hahn. So that was my first glimpse of Gil Lindsay. Then our next visit was to the city hall to meet the mayor, and Yorty was the mayor at that time. Now, it was very interesting. Yorty was during '62. [Richard M.] Nixon was running for governor of California. Yorty was endorsing Nixon, and they had this big press conference down in the mayor's office, and the twelve of us, the twelve of us who had been selected, were there. We were at the far end of the room as you go out the door. And I was the only black person that was in the class. Matter of fact, I think there were only probably two or three black people in the room. The others were in the back.

Jefferson

Were there any Asians or women, do you remember?

Cunningham

We had about three women in our class, three or four women. We had about five women, interestingly enough.

Jefferson

White women or--

Cunningham

White women, white women.

Jefferson

Asian, Mexicans?

Cunningham

No, no, no, no, no, no. You were either Caucasian or one black, okay? But now you've got to realize this--Yorty introduces Nixon; says he's endorsing him and why he's endorsing him. Nixon gets up there, and he thanks everybody, and he says, "I would like to shake everybody's hand, but I'm busy on the campaign trail, and God bless each of you. I want to thank Yorty for--." You know, he thanked Yorty for endorsing him, and he's just, "I must hurry out, and I'm sorry I can't shake everybody's hand, so I won't shake anyone's hand." He said that, "I won't shake anyone's hand." So he comes down. You know, there's a long list of people, a long line of people, and he's leaving. He's

walking at a pretty brisk pace. I'm at the end near the door over there, and he gets to our group, and he says, "Who are these young people?" Says, "Well, we're from the Coro Foundation." "I know Coro." And he says, "Who are you, young man?" He [unclear] coming, and he shakes my hand. I said, "This is slick. You know, he's going to shake my hand, and I know it's going to show up somewhere else." So when we got back to our session, I said to a couple of Republicans, I said, "You know, I know you all are disappointed and it would have been better had you all had a chance to shake your hero's hand, because he ain't my hero, you know." Then, you know, he then followed with that speech, "You won't have Dick to kick around anymore," you know, so another interesting thing. The campaign comes off. Everything is going.

Jefferson

For Nixon.

Cunningham

Well, we have the campaigns, yes.

Jefferson

Or Warren's campaign, or Bradley's campaign. Which campaign?

Cunningham

Warren's campaign, which was a general election.

Jefferson

And this is 1962.

Cunningham

Right. Warren gets elected to--

Jefferson

And Bradley is running for city council as well.

Cunningham

He's going to run for city council in '63. Charlie Warren gets elected to the assembly. I'm still in Coro. [Edward] Roybal in the 9th Council District, gets elected to Congress.

Jefferson

And that encompasses Boyle Heights and downtown and the Central Avenue District and greater areas.

Cunningham

You got it. You got it. So now they've got to fill the seat.

Jefferson

And Warren's district overlaps part of Roybal's district.

Cunningham

Right. It overlapped part of Roybal's district.

Jefferson

His assembly district.

Cunningham

His assembly district overlapped Roybal--

Jefferson

I mean his city council district.

Cunningham

Right. It overlapped the 9th Council District and part of the 10th Council District.

Jefferson

And it also then overlapped his congressional district.

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

Warren's district.

Cunningham

Warren's district also overlapped Roybal's congressional dis--that he got elected to. So now the 9th Council District is open. Sitting on a council in the 8th Council District is Gordon Hahn. Kenneth Hahn is in the board of supervisors.

Jefferson

And Gordon Hahn is--

Cunningham

Kenny Hahn's brother. So apparently they got together in some fashion, worked a deal to get Gil Lindsay appointed to fill the unexpired term of Roybal in the 9th Council District. And as I understand, later on history says that the deal was that Gil Lindsay would just serve out the unexpired term, and then--

Jefferson

Quietly go off into the sunset.

Cunningham

Quietly go off, since he had been so heavily involved and loyal, and that's another story. I happened to be in city council the day Gil Lindsay got seated. As he walked in, they introduced him, and he had on his mohaired silk suit with a white-on-white shirt and a beautiful tie, you know, and gold cufflinks, and his Stacy Adams shoes with the threads as clean and white as they could be. Gil strutted in there, and Gilbert Lindsay took his seat, the first black member of the city council. I happened to be sitting in the audience, because the whole class was there to see this occasion, never knowing that years later I would serve with him and look out from the city council into the audience. So then we worked on Tom Bradley's campaign.

Jefferson

In 1963.

Cunningham

1963. We put together a very, very effective campaign. I helped do the precinct--

Jefferson

Before we move on to Bradley, you had mentioned that in terms of the Coro experience you met Ted Watkins.

Cunningham

I met Ted Watkins.

Jefferson

And then you were talking about the other assignments. One was--you met him at the United Auto Workers--

Cunningham

Pasadena.

Jefferson

--was the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce.

Cunningham

United Auto Workers.

Jefferson

Then was one of the other assignments at the telephone company?

Cunningham

Oh yes. I got assigned to AT&T, GT--was it GTE then? Well, it wasn't GTE then. It was General Telephone. What do you got there?

Jefferson

I have some notes.

Cunningham

Yes, I got assigned to General Telephone, and at that time General Telephone's office was out in Thousand Oaks, Westlake, somewhere out in the valley, and I used to have to go out there. I would go out there, and that was very interesting. Did I miss another assignment?

Jefferson

Well, there were four, you said.

Cunningham

Well, four or five blocks that we had to go--

Jefferson

Did you do something with the L.A. public health department or the superior court?

Cunningham

No.

Jefferson

Because in terms of my notes, my notes may not necessarily be accurate, because sometimes in terms of gathering information--

Cunningham

I did something with the Los Angeles public health department, that's right. Matter of fact, the gentleman--well, it will come back to me--he eventually got elected to the assembly from Inglewood. He worked for the public health department. [Curtis Tucker] That's where I first met him.

Jefferson

Wellworth or Wedworth?

Cunningham

No, no, no, no. Black gentleman. He was the first black assemblyman from Inglewood area. Then his son eventually got the office after he passed away. And I can't remember--

Jefferson

Tucker.

Cunningham

Tucker, you got it. You got it. Tucker was a public health agent. He had some job with the Los Angeles public health department.

Jefferson

Was it Walter or--

Cunningham

No, Walter was out in Compton.

Jefferson

Oh, he was Compton. But it was Tucker still.

Cunningham

It was Tucker. We can get his name. Because we did a study--yes, I remember that now. We did a study of whether or not--the city had given up its public health department because it was much more efficient for the county to take over public health, to have the responsibility for public health. So the city gave up its public health department, and we did a study about whether it was cost efficient, whether or not it had been helpful for those who received the services, and that there had been a diminution in terms of the services. You know, so it's one of those kinds of studies. So we did have to work with Tucker, and that's where I first met him. Yes, that was an assignment--I had forgotten all about that, yes.

Jefferson

So in terms of this Coro experience, what do you think was most inspirational from it? And then in terms of you got the degree; you wrote a thesis.

Cunningham

Well, I did that about seven or eight years after I had finished Coro. I went back. I went over to Occidental and I did my thesis and--

Jefferson

And some coursework.

Cunningham

And some coursework, and got my master's, which I thought was extremely important.

Jefferson

The experience with Coro, though, set up you for--

Cunningham

Yes, it gave me--

Jefferson

--for some thoughts on your career direction?

Cunningham

Well, of course. It set in motion my career direction. It gave me an opportunity to meet some very important movers and shakers. It gave them an opportunity to see me in action, both in terms of my reasoning capacity, both in terms of my work ethic, and also in terms of my ethics, period. So it was kind of like taking a test, you know. I mean, you got a chance to do that. One of the things we did in Charlie Warren's campaign, this is where we first developed--and this is where I first met Willard Murray. Willard Murray was a brilliant engineer, who devised the process for our computer walk sheets. Walk sheets at that time were a tool that you used to determine who the voters were in the district, what their party affiliation was, and what their propensity was for voting.

Jefferson

And they're called--

Cunningham

Well, they were called walk sheets in those days.

Jefferson

Spell it for me.

Cunningham

W-a-l-k.

Jefferson

Oh, walk.

Cunningham

Because we used them to walk the precinct. You know, we'd do precinct walking, which no one does--well, they do every now and then. You know, the successful campaigns do very well in terms of their--

Jefferson

So this sheet was something where it was a computer--

Cunningham

Computer-driven process. You know, where they used to go out with a folded printout sheet. Now you wouldn't have anything like that. You'd have a different kind of printout. But, yes, that was the first--and that's when Jess Unruh was making his moves to become speaker. We put on a precinct operation that was very successful, which gave Democrats control of the state of California, and they haven't relinquished it quite yet. There's only been one or two errors.

Jefferson

Not in terms of the assembly.

Cunningham

Not in terms of the assembly, not in terms of the senate.

Jefferson

The governorship, we've had a few--

Cunningham

The governorship. We have lost the senate. We've had difficulty in the senate from time to time, but by far and large, as a result of Jess Unruh's work and what we did in that campaign, the Democratic ascendancy in the state of California has remained somewhat secure. Then Charlie Warren hired me right after that to serve as his administrative assistant for a short time while I was going to law school.

Jefferson

So now you worked for Charlie Warren on staff from what time?

Cunningham

On staff--I was the staff. [laughs]

Jefferson

Oh, okay.

Cunningham

Yes, because he only had one staff member in those days.

Jefferson

And you were like based here.

Cunningham

Based here. I used to work out of his law office.

Jefferson

So that was 19--

Cunningham

'63.

Jefferson

How long did you work for him?

Cunningham

About a year. I went to law school, and then I got an opportunity to go work for Dukane Corporation. Actually, it was ETL at that time.

Jefferson

So okay, you've done the Coro thing. You've gotten a taste of where you think your career is going to be.

Cunningham

Right, but I've got to make some money, too.

Jefferson

Then you decide--

Cunningham

Well, I always felt that law school was extremely important, because the only way I was--you know, most elected officials are lawyers. So I went to law school for a year.

Jefferson

So that's 1963, '64?

Cunningham

Yes. Matter of fact, Johnnie Cochran and I were in law school together.

Jefferson

And this was at Southwest.

Cunningham

No, no, no.

Jefferson

At Loyola [University]. I'm sorry. At Loyola Law School.

Cunningham

Yes, Loyola Law School. But then I had to find something to do other than just practice law, because that wasn't--my family was growing, and I got an opportunity to--

Jefferson

So you never became a lawyer.

Cunningham

No. I only spent a year in law school, which is a dangerous thing. I mean, learn just enough to think you know something until you go through and find out that the law is much more jealous than that.

Jefferson

So this is interesting, but it's not quite what you need to do in terms of your life at that point in time.

Cunningham

Not at that point in time. You know, you go to law school because you think you'd make a good lawyer or make a good living, and all of what it prepares you for, you know. Most of the CEOs at that time had a law degree. You look around, and that seemed to be the path to a successful and a comfortable life. But I subsequently got recruited to go to overseas for ETL, which eventually was bought by--

Jefferson

ETL is--

Cunningham

Well, it was called Electronic--

Jefferson

That was the name of the company.

Cunningham

Yes. ELT. No, ETL, Electronic Training Labs out of Maryland, and they needed someone to go to West Africa, and so they were looking for black folk. As adventuresome as I am, I decided, "What the heck."

Jefferson

And you took the family.

Cunningham

Yes, I took the family. Yes. I eventually brought the family over. I went there, and I was responsible for all of West Africa.

Jefferson

And this is '64.

Cunningham

Yes, '64 I went. I was responsible for all of West Africa.

Jefferson

And the company then, it changed its name, right?

Cunningham

Yes, it went from ETL to Dukane Corporation. Dukane Corporation bought them. They sold out to Dukane Corporation, which eventually was bought by Motorola [Corporation], whether you know it or not. So they hired me to go to West Africa. So all this language lab--well, first of all, I had to learn what this piece of equipment was. So while I was learning it, what the equipment was in Maryland, they also

Jefferson

What was it?

Cunningham

It's so primitive now. It was a set of tape recorders hooked into a master station where you could put in stuff that you could play back to the class, and you control it. You had a master console. The master console cost somewhere in the neighborhood of like thirty thousand dollars. That's a big piece of equipment, you know. You had to have air-conditioning and all that, because you had servos and all that, and you had to wire electrical, and, you know, you could sell like thirty stations at a time, you know, and then you could add on. You know, thirty stations is more money. It cost so much per station.

Jefferson

And these were things that were for individual learning, these stations?

Cunningham

They were for individual learning or for class learning. You had earphones you put on. You talked into the tape; you listened; so you could learn. Something like the Rosetta process that they have now, you know, put out on disc. You can sit on your computer, and you can listen and feed back, you know. But I had to learn what this equipment was. I was no electrician. But one of my assignments was to find someone in these countries, or that could cover several countries, who was an electrician who could install equipment if I was able to sell it. It was a hard piece of equipment to sell. Often it was financed by USAID [U. S. Agency for International Development]. That was always easier to do.

Jefferson

USAID?

Cunningham

Yes, USAID, because most of these countries don't have the money and aren't going to purchase a piece of equipment that they did not think was all that viable. But I was successful. Well, I was supposed to go from Senegal all the way to Cameroons.

Jefferson

Where were you based?

Cunningham

Lagos, Nigeria.

Jefferson

In Lagos.

Cunningham

Lagos. I was to be based in Lagos, Nigeria.

Jefferson

This is 1964.

Cunningham

It's 1964.

Jefferson

And in '64 had they gotten their independence by then from the British?

Cunningham

Yes, yes. They got their independence, I think, in 1960. No, Ghana was the first one, and they got their independence in '60, and I think Nigeria was next. Anyway, you know, the--

Jefferson

It was around that time, and they were independent.

Cunningham

Colonialism was dying, gone, dead. So I went from Senegal to Sierra Leone, from Sierra Leon to that little country that--

Jefferson

Togo?

Cunningham

No, that little country that Alex Haley wrote about for Roots. I forgot the name of the country, but it's a small little country, little airport.

Jefferson

Guinea?

Jefferson

No, it's not Guinea. I went through Guinea, Mali--

Jefferson

Niger?

Cunningham

Niger, yes, which is--it's Burkina Faso now, I think it is. Niger. Anyway, for about forty--I had visas to all these places to see what the possibilities were.

Met with--

Jefferson

And that's your first time in Africa, with this job.

Cunningham

First time in Africa, right. Carrying all my goods; basically, got a couple of suitcases. Headed to Lagos. Well, I think when I left the states, I had about fifteen, sixteen hundred dollars in my pocket, you know, in traveler's checks, which was big money in those days, you know. By the time I got to Lagos, Nigeria, I had fifteen dollars left in my pocket. I already had a hotel reservation.

Jefferson

How did that happen?

Cunningham

Well, you spend money as you go along. You know, you've got to pay hotel bills and all that.

Jefferson

I see. I see what you're saying.

Cunningham

There were some travel expenses.

Jefferson

I got you. I wasn't sure what you were saying.

Cunningham

So I get to Lagos airport. I've got to get to town. Taxicab driver says, "Well, this will cost you twenty, twenty-five dollars." "I don't have but fifteen dollars." So he and I haggled, negotiated. I said, "Look, you give me a few days. I'll get hold of the company. They will cable me some money, and I'll pay you." So we worked it out. So I got to the hotel; stayed at this hotel downtown. I forgot the name of it. But, now, you've got to remember I went to Nigeria on a visitor's visa, which means you could only stay thirty days. The company told me to work it out, find a way. Interesting, the kind of things you can learn. So I got there. I hired a lawyer, either a barrister or a solicitor. I've forgotten which one. He told me what he wanted. This is what it will take to get you a resident's visa, but you've got to have a quota. You've got to have a Nigerianization quota. So we worked that through.

Jefferson

What does that mean?

Cunningham

You've got to have somebody from Nigeria who is involved with your company.

Jefferson

Which is what you were trying to do, anyway. You were trying to find people.

Cunningham

Yes, but they want them in a little higher position than what I was looking for. But anyway, if you use your money wisely and do things wisely, one thing about Africa, you can get a lot of things done. I guess that's about all I could say. And we did get things done. But the lawyer said, "Well, you know, usually if I get you a resident's visa, you would have to leave the country for a couple of days and then come back." Well, we worked it out so I never had to leave the country, so I got a resident's visa, a permanent resident's visa, which then allowed me to bring my family over, bring my car over, and get a house, all of those kinds of things.

Jefferson

This was a big deal.

Cunningham

It was a big deal. It was a big deal. You didn't have to pay any tax, so, you know, found a house. You had to lease a house for five years, whether you used it or not, so the company had to pay the money out front. But it's a big complex, compound; garage, quarters for all of your help, fenced in, gated in, you know. Right across the street from the Ethiopian embassy, ambassador's house. It was in a good neighborhood. It was on Ikoyi Island. And moved in and had some very interesting experiences, which are just part of life in West Africa.

Jefferson

In West Africa, yes, I can imagine.

Cunningham

Part of life in West Africa. Lived through two coups. Saw the government change while shopping the first time; saw the government change. Traveled throughout Nigeria. When I first went there, I'd travel throughout Nigeria without a passport. Didn't carry my passport with me. Drove my car everywhere. I had a Mustang two plus two, Fastback, you know.

Jefferson

Was that a convertible, also, or just a sports car?

Cunningham

It was the next generation sport car that they made.

Jefferson

So this is in 1964.

Cunningham

Right. I actually bought it here in Los Angeles, the first 1964 two plus two Fastback that they sold in Los Angeles. It was blue, midnight blue. I took it to Nigeria, and it had California license plates on it.

Jefferson

You were just living large.

Cunningham

Everywhere I'd go, they'd say, "California." I was known as "California." Yes, I was really living large, living large. Had a lot of fun. Sold some language labs. I put the language lab in Liberia, the university.

Jefferson

Okay, that's what I missed. These recording devices were for language.

Cunningham

For language uses. One of the problems in West Africa and most African countries, you have an official language, which could be French, Spanish, English, but you have tribal dialects, and the most difficult thing is communication. So the only way you could talk is through English and French, you know, if you have Gula, Fante, Twi, Ebo or Ibibio, Rivers, whatever. In Nigeria, there's two hundred and sixty-nine dialects, so people had difficulty communicating with one another, you know. So this was supposed to be the panacea, you know, teach them the official language so that they can learn English from their own language.

Jefferson

Dukane had a contract then with AID to sell these.

Cunningham

No, Dukane was listed, had a listing with AID about how much AID would pay for the cost of Dukane equipment.

Jefferson

I see. So if you got--

Cunningham

So you could go in, and you could say, "Well, you know, if you can get AID to underwrite, this is what you can get." In many cases they were getting AID assistance. You know, we were giving economic development. But the critical thing was, where I had success, was when Dukane cut a deal with Britain that we could have an English license, and in several of the countries we were successful because the old boys were from England, and so the people who were making decisions were Englophiles, or Anglophiles. So in their mind the best equipment is that equipment that comes from England. Later on America's ingenuity overrode and they began to want American equipment. It was very hard to sell an American car. I mean, you could sell Mercedes. You could sell Mercedes and Rolls-Royces and Vauxhalls. I don't know whether you know what a--Vauxhall was an English car. You could sell those cars all day long. You could sell German cars, Opel, etc. Those cars sold all day long. But to have an American car running down the road in Nigeria, I mean, it was like unique. No sooner I pulled my car off the docks, I had one sheikh that demanded his guy have me come over and meet with him. I went over to his house. You had to take your shoes off. You're sitting in the living room with all these guys around, picking his feet and [unclear]. They're talking, and I don't understand.

Jefferson

You're in your thirties at this point.

Cunningham

Yes, yes. So the guy says, "I want to buy your car." I said, "It's not for sale." He said, "Well, if you do decide to sell it when you leave, I want to be the one to buy it." No problem. What did I care? But having an American car there, I mean, it was just like wow, where did this--and particularly a brand-new one

and one that was as racy as that car was, you know. It was so California, you know.

Jefferson

It should have helped with your sales.

Cunningham

I did a language lab in Enugu [Nigeria]. I did one at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka [Nigeria]. I wasn't too successful in Ibadan [Nigeria]. We were talking. We were in discussion with Ibadan. I tried to make inroads with the Muslim part of Nigeria, which was up around Kano and Kaduna, and visited them on several occasions. But, you know, the way they wanted to do business, I just couldn't do business the way they wanted to do business. But I can tell you, in Kaduna you could practically buy anything you wanted out of the bazaar. They had these traders that would sit on rugs and their legs crossed. You could buy a Rolls-Royce. They'd have a Rolls-Royce to you inside of three days if you wanted it, if you wanted to haggle for their price. It's amazing what goes on in that part of the world, but it does. But Nigeria, that time in Africa, was very interesting point of time. Now, all of a sudden Nigeria began to fall apart. The first coup happened. I'm shopping at one of the grocery stores and watch this, right across from the army base. Guy comes in, and flag goes down. They're saluting, and the flag goes back up. Government changed. Interestingly enough, though, let me back up a bit. In 1966 they had the Commonwealth [of Nations]. It was the first time it met in Africa, the Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth of Nations, you know, all the British influence, and they had it in Nigeria. A good buddy of mine--to this day he remains a friend--Dawson, Horace Dawson, who ran USAID in Nigeria, and he used to live around the street from me. We used to like to go over to the casino, because you had to put on your white jacket and your tuxedo pants. You know, it was very formal. We'd go over there, and I'd gamble, you know. It was, you know, like Casablanca, you know. You'd get that feeling.

Jefferson

You're living the expat[riate] lifestyle.

Cunningham

Yes, you're the expat. You're expat. So he'd call me. He said, "Hey, Dave." It was like on a Sunday night. He said, "The conference is over. [Milton] Obote has invited--," because he had been in Uganda.

Jefferson

So this is '66.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

Okay, so you're there from '64--

Cunningham

To '67. I got out--yes. So he said, "Obote called me, and he wants me to come over." He says, "A few of us are going to get together." So we went over to his Federal Palace Hotel [Suite], and it was Milton Obote, who was the head of Uganda at that time; one of the representatives from Kenya. He had several African either heads of state or important leaders there. So we were all sitting around with our shoes--since you've got to take your shoes off, you know; that's the first thing--sitting around with shoes off, and we're talking, you know, having libation. And it began to get serious. Milton Obote said, "You know, 'the teacher' is in trouble." Well, Tafalewa [Tafawa] Balewa was the prime minister--was the premier of Nigeria.

Jefferson

Say the name again.

Cunningham

Tafalewa, T-a-f-a-l-e--Tafalewa. Tafalewa. T-a-f-el--Tafalewa, Tafalewa--f-a-l-e-w-a, Tafalewa.

Jefferson

F-a-l-e-w-a.

Cunningham

Tafalewa, Tafalewa. T-a-f-e-l-w-a, Tafalewa, and his last--Balewa, Below [phonetic]. Tafalewa Below, Below--ah, he was premier. [Benjamin Nnamdi] Azikiwe was the president. He said, "The teacher is in trouble," because Tafalewa Balewa--Balewa--god, I don't know how to spell that. We can look it up.

Jefferson

We can look it up, yes.

Cunningham

Tafalewa Balewa was the premier, and Obote said, "The teacher is in trouble." Well, Tafalewa Balewa had been a teacher before he got into his office, and he says, "You know, I think there's trouble ahead." So we listened. I said, "Well, that's strange. I mean, I know they're having these elections and there's all kinds of commotion, but, you know, things don't look that bad. You're still traveling the streets [unclear] no trouble." He said, "Nah," he said, "there's trouble. There's trouble, trouble ahead." So all the Commonwealth leaders left. They were gone, and that Monday morning we wake up and find that the government has been couped. They broke in and killed Tafalewa Balewa. They killed the minister of finance, Fester Ekoti Ebony. They killed him, and they killed a couple of others. Some of the other leaders, like Sodono Sokato [phonetic], he was gone. They sort of suspected that he might be behind it, but they didn't know who the planners were and all that. What finally happened was that a consortium of generals came together, and they took over, and they started running the government. But it came true that there was trouble in Nigeria, and for another year there was nothing but trouble.

Jefferson

So this is 1966, 1967.

Cunningham

1967.

Jefferson

And you're there with the family.

Cunningham

Yes, I'm there with the family, yes. One day I'm coming back across Carter Bridge, and shots are being fired across. [imitates sound] A bunch of us have fallen down in the bottom of our cars, hoping and praying that we don't get shot, you know.

Jefferson

You're driving--

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

--your Mustang?

Cunningham

I was driving my Mustang. Didn't get hit. Well, a whole bunch of us were driving, but, you know, people start shooting at each other--

Jefferson

Right.

Cunningham

So we go back, and I'm concerned now about it.

Jefferson

Was the family with you in the car that day?

Cunningham

No, no, no, no, no, no. Then things started settling themselves out. Now, at that time I was playing a lot of basketball, and one of the White House guard was a good friend of mine. So he'd say, "Anytime, you know, come to the White House." So I would go over to the headquarters, because General Aguyi-Ironsi was now the head of government. So I'd go there and see my friend, and we'd sit there and we'd talk. So we're sitting there one day. Now, this was like about two or three months after we'd had all this shooting across the bridge. We're sitting there. An alarm goes off. He says, "Hold on." He says, "Okay." So he goes back to wherever he had to go to answer the alarm, and he

comes back white as a sheet. You know, that's kind of hard to do. He says, "You've got to get out of here. There's big trouble. I've got to go get Ironsi's family and try to get them to safety, to save [unclear]." So I go back, and they open the gate. I get in my car.

Jefferson

This is the Nigerian military installation.

Cunningham

No, this is where the prime minister used to live, but now Aguyi-Ironsi was now head of government. He's living there now. This is what would be our White House, okay? So I get in my car and I drive out, turn on the radio. Now, you can always tell when there's a coup going on in Nigeria because all you hear is either soft music or you hear the signature for what the station is, which it goes [imitates sound]. "This is the Nigerian Broadcasting Company," you know.

Jefferson

Which is run by the government?

Cunningham

Oh yes, very much so. Very much so, run by the government, like the BBC is run by the government, so they take their model after the British. So that's what you keep getting. So I get back to the house, pick up the phone, try to use the phone. There's no signal. So, "Ah, okay, they've cut the phone lines." So the phone lines are now cut. There's no phone. Didn't get out to the airport because no need of me getting on the road. If you go out to the airport, they probably had oil drums rolled out on the airfield. That way you can tell if there's a coup going on. So apparently there was a coup going on. So a week and a half later I had to go out to the airport to pick up some equipment, and on the way out to the airport--now, you've got to realize I'm driving an American car, which means I'm driving from the offside; you know, you're driving on the British side, which means by rights, I should be driving from the right side as opposed to the left side. But I'm driving the car from the left side, which is okay. You learn how to do that. And just before I get to the airport--now, in Nigeria you had these open--I don't want to call them sewers, but for

the runoff. So I get to an intersection, and a guy jumps up out of this embankment by the side of the road, stops me, puts a rifle in my car, and says something which I don't understand. But it so happens that I have my assistant with me, who's going to help me get this, who speaks his language. He told him, he says, "Well, you know, big trouble," because I don't have a passport. I still didn't carry my passport. He says, "Big trouble. This is an American." So he finally convinces the guy not to shoot me. I mean, you ever look down a rifle with a bullet in it that's coming for you? It looks pretty big, I'll tell you. So finally we turn around and we go back, and that's when I said, "I've got to get my family out of here." Robyn had just been born. She'd just been born. I guess it was '65 when she was born. I told the company I was coming back to America, and they sent me--

Jefferson

So she was like two by that time.

Cunningham

Yes. Well, she wasn't quite two. So we came on back, back to America.

Jefferson

But this is--

Cunningham

'67, early '67, like February of '67, yes. Because she was so young that we had never bought her a pair of shoes. She never had a pair of shoes while she was in Nigeria, so we had to buy shoes when we got to Rome, the first pair of shoes she got.

Jefferson

So that whole experience, you had gotten there, and so you had a lot of different kinds of experiences with this.

Cunningham

Oh, a lot of different experiences, yes. Too many stories to tell.

Jefferson

Yes, but that was--it wasn't an experience that necessarily you were interested in repeating, in terms of being overseas. It was a possibility, but--

Cunningham

Well, I mean, there were good times, there were bad times. You know, I got to know a lot of chiefs. I spent a lot of time with some chiefs. I spent a lot of intimate time with the Oba of Lagos. He and I got to be very good friends. He was a very intelligent and learned man, but he also observed the customs. You know, he had a lot of wives, a lot of concubines, children being born at the same time. He always invited me to the naming ceremonies. The naming ceremonies are big stuff. You dance, you drink, you eat, you know. He considered me one of his white cap chiefs. He said, "Come on, Cunningham. I'm going to take you down to see the old-time religion."

Jefferson

How did Fern and Leslie acculturate?

Cunningham

They seemed to acculturate pretty well. I mean, they were insulated in the sense that so far as the local situation was concerned, they weren't that heavily involved in the local situation, because she was at the American School, and there's a big American complex, so they pretty much spent a lot of time with the Americans. They spent a lot of time in the American culture. I spent more time between both cultures. I was doing a lot of traveling throughout West Africa. Ghana, I as in and out of Ghana. I was in and out of Cote d'Ivoire. Went to a couple of graduations at the University of Fahrabay [phonetic] in Sierra Leone, because we put language labs in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone, it was quite an interesting place to visit. Now I understand that they still suffer from some of the coup problems they had, some of the bitter fighting that they had. But all those places were rather genteel when I was there. So I spent a lot of time traveling, and back and forth. There were a lot of expats. There were a lot of expats in Nigeria, and there were a number of expats who had married Nigerians, you know. So I came on back to the States. Went to work for Hughes Aircraft Company.

Jefferson

I think we're going to end it there, because we've been talking now two and a half hours.

Cunningham

Oh, my God, and you didn't pay me for it. [Jefferson laughs.][End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (April 25, 2009)

Jefferson

It's Saturday, April 25, and I'm here with David Cunningham and Robin Charles, our videographer, and we are doing session three of our UCLA oral history interview. We're going to start kind of where we left off last time, and that was with you returning back to the United States after being in Africa for--

Cunningham

Two years.

Jefferson

--two years. You weren't with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], right?

Cunningham

Well, I mean, what difference does it make? That mystery is always nice to keep.

Jefferson

Okay. It dawned on me--

Cunningham

You have to find it out and prove it or disprove it. I say yes, you're not going to believe that. I say no, if I had been, you know, I would be in a world of trouble, so I may--it's kind of a nice mystique to have.

Jefferson

I thought about it after our conversation, and I was like, oh, maybe he was involved in one of those military CIA operations in West Africa.

Cunningham

Military and CIA are not connected.

Jefferson

Sometimes they can be.

Cunningham

Oh, you know something about it? Maybe you know something about it?

Jefferson

You could have been there on--

Cunningham

Hold on just a minute and answer my question. Do you know something about the relationship between the military and the CIA?

Jefferson

Only from what I've read.

Cunningham

Okay. If you read correctly, you will read that there is something called the Defense Intelligence Administration, and there's the Central Intelligence Administration, and by law, the only thing that they can do is share reports. They cannot crosswise each other. Read the documents and read the law that made them.

Jefferson

Well, documents are one thing, and the actual thing that happens is another--

Cunningham

Okay, well, maybe you know something I don't know. I don't know.

Jefferson

--because I do know that sometimes they have people that are stationed in embassies that sometimes people think are one--

Cunningham

Yes, well, the Russians do.

Jefferson

--one sort of representation, and they're another. But anyway, so you came back after being in Africa for two years, and you were coming back to Los Angeles at that point in time.

Cunningham

Yes, of course.

Jefferson

Did you know what you were going to come back and do, or did you just kind of--

Cunningham

Before leaving there, I'd had an opportunity to interact with the head of Hughes Aircraft Company, because they had come over on a mission, and we had talked.

Jefferson

Before leaving Africa.

Cunningham

Yes. I had talked to [Leland] Hyland. His name was Leland Hyland, if I remember correctly. He was the head of Hughes Aircraft Company. I had asked him how he became head of Hughes Aircraft Company, and he said Howard Hughes called him one day. He was on his job. Called him and told him that he would like to meet him; heard about him and he'd like to talk with him. [laughs] He said he sat in the hotel for three days before Howard Hughes finally showed up and says, "We're going to hire you, and here's what we're willing to pay you. Are you satisfied with that? Let me know," and left. What a guy. So I had told him I was considering coming back to the States because of all that was happening at that point in time. It didn't look like Nigeria was going to remain stable. He said, "Well, look me up when you come back." I told him I was from L.A., and he said they were looking for people who had--particularly minority individuals with some experience in business, etc. So I came back.

Jefferson

And this was after you had met him in Africa.

Cunningham

Oh yes.

Jefferson

He had been over there.

Cunningham

He had been over there on a trade mission some time--I can't remember exactly the dates. But I do know that I got back here sometime in, I think, November or December, and by the first of the year I was employed.

Jefferson

And you came back in 1967.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

The end of 1967.

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

So then you started there.

Cunningham

I started at Hughes Aircraft Company I guess in 1968. I came back--no, no, I came back--

Jefferson

You came back in '67.

Cunningham

--the last part of '66 and the first part of '67. Let's get this straight.

Jefferson

Okay, so you started at the end of '67.

Cunningham

At the beginning of '67 I started at Hughes Aircraft Company. Let's get those facts and dates and figures straightened out.

Jefferson

What kind of work were you doing there?

Cunningham

I was with Hughes Active Citizenship Campaign. I was in public affairs, community outreach. As you know, Hughes Aircraft Company was one of the first companies that had developed the whole concept of utilizing--or providing an opportunity for their employees to participate in politics by contributing and having rallies at various plants. Those rallies were organized by myself, Barton Evans, who we reported to, and Jim Hurt. We were the principal leaders in that department. But we also were the forerunners of what you know now as the political action committee. What they did was, they wanted to be sure that the utilization of check-offs for candidates was done in a fair process. For instance, if you were of a certain level in Hughes Aircraft Company, you were encouraged to provide a certain amount of money for a monthly check-off that was available to the political fund, action fund. The only people who had the responsibility for the monitoring, auditing, and concern of the political action fund were the four of us, plus top management, plus Hyland and Puckett in Hughes Aircraft Company.

Jefferson

So now it was Barton--

Cunningham

Barton--

Jefferson

Evans, you said?

Cunningham

Bart Evans, yes, Barton Evans, Jim Hurt, myself. We constituted that--

Jefferson

That department.

Cunningham

--that department.

Jefferson

And then Leland Hyland--

Cunningham

Hyland was the top executive. They called him the managing--he wasn't president, because Hughes Aircraft Company was owned by Hughes Medical Center or whatever it was called. The president of Hughes Medical Center was one board member, and that was Howard Hughes himself. But Leland Hyland was the top guy. I think he was either managing director or something. Then underneath him was--

Jefferson

P-u--

Cunningham

P-u-c-k-e-t-t. Leland Hyland was the man, and that's spelled L-e-l-a-n-d H-y-l-a-n-d.

Jefferson

So this was kind of a cutting-edge program then.

Cunningham

It was very much a cutting-edge program, I mean, even to the point where--if you will recall, in 1968 George Wallace ran for president, and there was a demand at Hughes Aircraft Company by some of the employees to have a rally to invite George Wallace to the event. Well, it was my turn to handle the event, to handle such an event, so I had to put it together, and I had to introduce George Wallace. So I carried out my duty in my fashion. You know, very distasteful, but it's part of the job.

Jefferson

It was your job.

Cunningham

It's my job. And he kind of bombed on me. A little TV was out there, but he wasn't that hot that day.

Jefferson

Let's see. 1968, that would have been Herbert--was [Hubert] Humphrey running that year as well?

Cunningham

Yes. Yes, Humphrey was running. Humphrey, Wallace, [Richard M.] Nixon. Well, also running, I think--wasn't [Edmund] Muskie in the middle of all that? Muskie was in the middle of all that?

Jefferson

Okay. I can't remember. I'm just trying to think.

Cunningham

It was the age of Muskie and those guys. But, you know, Henry Ross [Perot] was running for the third party movement, you know, so people did what they wanted to do. Well, not so much '68 as it was '67, you know, because the primary is in the odd year, because in '68 he got a chance to run on the third party. But most of that was being done in late '67 or early '68. I can't remember the dates.

Jefferson

So the experience there at Hughes, you were there a year, two years?

Cunningham

I was there almost eighteen months. Then I started my own business.

Jefferson

How did you feel about that whole experience? Because that was moving you back into the political realm.

Cunningham

Well, it was a very important experience. I mean, you had a chance to meet a lot of contributors to political campaigns. Also, if you'll recall, in 1969 was Tom Bradley's first run for the mayoraltyship. I had met Tom when I was in Coro [Foundation] and had begun to have an affinity and worked in his campaign and done things in his campaign. Since we were responsible for the contributions, the undesignated contributions, I invited Tom out to Hughes Aircraft Company, and he got a chance to know Jim Hurt and Barton Evans, and we made a decision that we were going to support him with political dollars. So I guess Tom never forgot it.

Jefferson

So at that point were you thinking about your own career in politics?

Cunningham

Well, yes, I had a taste for public office, because 1971, '72, I ran for the California State Senate. I came within a few hundred votes of defeating Jim [James Q.] Wedworth in the primary. Had there not been several other individuals who got into the race, black individuals, when we tried to say, "Well, we want to take this guy out, you know." Inglewood and Southwest Los Angeles, Baldwin Hills, etc., are fast becoming populated by a majority blacks.

Jefferson

And this is Wedworth, right?

Cunningham

Yes, Jim Wedworth, W-e-d-w-o-r-t-h. In the primary we were--

Jefferson

And he was in the assembly already.

Cunningham

He was in the state senate. He had formerly been mayor of the City of Inglewood. And, of course, a few other people got into the race, such as Walter Bremond and some gentleman named Smith. But those were the three black individuals in the primary.

Jefferson

So it was Smith--

Cunningham

It was Smith, Bremond, and myself.

Jefferson

Breemott [phonetic]?

Cunningham

Bremond, B-r-e-m-o-n-d. He was one of the leaders in the what do they call it--Brotherhood Crusade.

Jefferson

And this is Walter, right?

Cunningham

Walter, right. Walter is dead, and I don't know where Smith is at this time. He may be alive or he may be dead.

Jefferson

So it was too many people in the race.

Cunningham

But I came within fifteen votes of defeating Wedworth in the primary, and I had pretty much put my own money in it. The bulk of the money for that campaign came from my own personal pocket. In those days, you know, sixty, seventy thousand dollars--it was a pretty expensive primary campaign.

Jefferson

And at that point you had already started your own company?

Cunningham

Oh yes, I started my own company.

Jefferson

And that was in 1968?

Cunningham

'68, yes. Late 1968 we started Cunningham, Short, Berryman & Associates, a management consulting firm. We specialized in the placement and training and development of black executives, black employees, and worked with companies for them to understand what is needed to inculcate and to fold blacks into management positions in the company, and how to have your employees understand what that leadership role is all about.

Jefferson

So today we would think of that as what they call diversity?

Cunningham

Yes. Today you would call it diversity. In those days we were calling it equal employment opportunities, you know.

Jefferson

And Price Cobbs was calling it ethnotherapy.

Cunningham

Oh, okay. And we used to use some of Price Cobbs' literature.

Jefferson

Right. From the standpoint of dealing with the psychological dimensions of all of that.

Cunningham

Yes, because one of the things, you know--I'm glad you raised it. One of the things Price Cobb understood was that there was still a psychological barrier within the minds of some young black individuals about whether or not they could be accepted in the roles of responsibility that were opening up in corporate America; how they needed to understand what the corporate game was, in terms of the sense that, you know, you've got to hitch your wagon to a star. You've got to be careful the star you hitch your wagon to, because it might be the star on ascendancy, and what do you do when the star burns out? We were very appreciative to Price Cobbs for a lot of the work that he

did. We used a lot of their material in terms of what we did with various companies.

Jefferson

So what was it that sparked you to form your own company? You came back. You were at Hughes a year--

Cunningham

I came back at Hughes.

Jefferson

--eighteen months.

Cunningham

Then there was some group out of Pepperdine that was trying to do some psychological impact with so-called black executives. It was called PEDR. I've forgot what it stood for. That's where I met Ted Short and some others.

Jefferson

And you were going to classes there, or you had gone to speak to them, or they had corralled you because they--

Cunningham

They came across a series of names. You have to understand that my name was always prominent in terms of Coro's people, because at that time Coro had not had that many blacks who had gone through Coro, and particularly in the Los Angeles area. So PEDR came, and these young guys were doing this study about how they could--

Jefferson

And PEDR was the name of the program.

Cunningham

Right, P-E-D-R. I've forgot what it stood for. They had gotten people from the sheriff's department, probation, others who were from the university, Shirley Better. Shirley Better was one of the people, Ted Short, and people who were

in the aerospace industry, because as you know, it was very easy for minorities to infiltrate into the aerospace industry.

Jefferson

Shirley Better?

Cunningham

Better, B-e-t-t-e-r, Dr. Shirley Better now. And, you know, we would have these meetings and go to these classes and, you know, our brains were being picked.

Jefferson

Because you guys were in the industry already.

Cunningham

We were in the industry. We had some feeling, and so they would look for--I think we would do things on Saturdays. You know, I'd really forgotten it, because it was not as intense nor was it as sophisticated a program as Coro. But I met a lot of young blacks who were in the industry, and we began to meet personally on our own.

Jefferson

When you say "the industry," you mean the aerospace industry.

Cunningham

Who were in the aerospace industry, who were at mid-management levels, guys who were making sixteen to twenty thousand dollars a year. Now, you have to understand, 1968--

Jefferson

That was a lot of money.

Cunningham

That was a lot of money. We began to talk about what was going on in the various companies and various industries. People were beginning to break into the airline industry, a number of industries. One of the things we found out, that first of all, there was no brother or sisterhood, per se; that we needed to

develop some kind of brother-sisterhood. As we started talking and meeting, we started saying, "Well, looks to me like there's a need for some professionalism in this business to guide companies." So Ted and I talked. We picked out about twelve or thirteen other guys that we thought had the competency, capability, etc. We presented the idea, and these guys said, "Well, I'd have to give up my job, and what about--you know." This guy says, "I've got a hundred-and-seventy-five-dollar-a-month mortgage. I've got to meet my mortgage. I can't give up this sixteen-thousand-dollar-a-year job, you know." So my thing became, "Well, I don't see where that's all that important, although it is important, and you've got to be wanting to negotiate with your company, because I negotiated with Hughes Aircraft Company to do exactly that for them. So they were able to let me take the eighteen thousand dollars that they were paying me and utilize it to start my company." So Ted did likewise. I forgot who he was working for. He was working for a company out in Beverly Hills. It was headquartered out in Beverly Hills.

Jefferson

Litton [Industries].

Cunningham

It wasn't Litton. It was something else. It wasn't Litton.

Jefferson

Okay.

Cunningham

No, it wasn't Litton.

Jefferson

I was just thinking of the old MGM building, and Litton Industries was over there. Weren't they in aerospace or did computers?

Cunningham

Yes, they were--it might have been them.

Jefferson

And there certainly was another one over there, I'm sure.

Cunningham

It might have been L-i-t-t-o-n, I'm not sure. Not the L-y-t-t-o-n. It might have been Litton. I don't remember. But so he and I said, "Well, we'll put it together," and we did. We started out going to get clients.

Jefferson

Where was [Ron] Berryman?

Cunningham

Berryman wasn't on the scene yet at that moment. We met Berryman later on, somewhere we were. And we decided, "Well, we need somebody with some hard, fast financial and CPA background." We could do the financial work. It was just it's hard being direct labor, administrative labor, as well as financial labor. I mean, you've got to really, really have a lot of experience, because you have to realize how to manage your time, how you have to adjust time to each of those. Of course, as you get older, you learn how to do that. But we felt we needed someone with that kind of financial background, because we were busy doing intellectual marketing, sales, and developing the concept and idea, without really any clear definition of the cost of sales and what the pricing should be, which Ron was very good at formulating and shaping that, which we eventually did.

Jefferson

How large did you all get?

Cunningham

What happened was that, you know, we had this idea.

Jefferson

Because consulting firms don't necessarily get large.

Cunningham

No, they don't. Well, we had this idea, and we worked it. We started talking about where were our potential source of clients. Well, I had a high school friend that was running Model Cities [Program] for the City of Los Angeles.

Jefferson

And that was--

Cunningham

Bill Jones. Not Bill Jones, Fred Jones--Bill, yes, Bill Jones. Fred was his brother. Bill had a particular problem that he needed in terms of a study of some other nature, and we bid on it, and we got the job to do the study. It was about a sixty, sixty-five-thousand-dollar contract.

Jefferson

And that's an urban planning firm or--Model Cities?

Cunningham

Model Cities was a part of the City of Los Angeles. This has now become the Community Development Department, but in those days it was Model Cities. You have to realize this is 1968, 1969. Nixon is now going in as president. So Nixon goes in as president. In the meantime, I had given a speech at the Los Angeles Athletic Club about affirmative action, equal opportunity, the need for support of black businesses. Ran into two young gentlemen who were from UCLA, who had their own SBIC, Small Business Investment Corporation. Their name was Fred Warren and Kip Hagopian. Hagopian, H-a-g-o-p-i-a-n. Kip Hagopian.

Jefferson

H-a-g-o-p-i-n?

Cunningham

A-n, Kip Hagopian. And--

Jefferson

Fred Waters.

Cunningham

Fred Warren.

Jefferson

Warren.

Cunningham

Yes. Fred Warren had his DBA from Wharton School of Business. Kip had his MBA from UCLA. So apparently the speech that I gave them that day at the Los Angeles Athletic Club was intriguing enough for them to want to talk to Ted and I. So we met with them. At that time there was still a concept generating called Minority Enterprise Small Business Investment Corp. So we started talking. So they said, "Why don't you get a prospectus to us? Why don't you get a projection?" You know, over the next three years, you know, all that stuff, all that stuff to do we didn't want to really sit down and spend time doing, because, you know, that takes away from your ability to market. And, of course, that's how we wound up with Ron Berryman. I don't remember how we found him, but we found him, in any case. Ron is pretty sharp when with a pencil. You know, he just puts down--we made assumptions; we did things. So we went out and we presented it, because they also wanted to know what sort of contacts did we have that involved us into the government sector. You know, like how can you reach Nixon? Because at that point Nixon was appointing a number of black individuals in some rather interesting second-level key positions. He had come to the conclusion at that time they were talking about black enterprise; we've got to do something about it. Why don't we put a billions dollars--you know, you just reached up in the air. Why don't we put a billion dollars out? We put it into SBA [Small Business Administration] set-asides and let them fight over it. So we wound up with people in the key positions at SBA, people in key positions in the Office of Minority Business Enterprise in the Department of Commerce, and Ted had relationships with one of the gentlemen who was at SBA, by the name of Art McZier.

Jefferson

Art--

Cunningham

McZier, M-c-Z-i-e-r. Art had known Ted. They'd grown up and were both from Evanston, Illinois, and in the meantime Ted's uncle was Bobby Short.

Jefferson

The singer.

Cunningham

Right. As you know, Nixon was very taken aback by Bobby Short. He wanted to know if he could get him in the White House and all that. So the opportunity sprung up for Ted to be able to get his uncle in Nixon's White House to perform, and he did perform. So we had to put our little pennies together to get Ted back to Washington [D.C.] so he'd look like he was, you know, an upstanding gentleman in the community, you know. No, he was sharp. He had to wear his tuxedo and all that, but he was there. He went to the White House; did his thing. While he was there, he had a chance to renew acquaintances, renew and make some inroads. So he says, "There's some real opportunities. Government is looking for black businesses, and we're out here on the cutting edge." So this enhanced our position with Fred Warren and Kip Hagopian. So we wound up making a presentation to them. So they liked our presentation, liked the numbers. We went back and met with them again; gave them the numbers. They said, "We're going to invest in you." So to hold the investment, they gave us a ten-thousand-dollar check, so we had to give them some value, you know, for what that represented in our company. They made a commitment of thirty-five thousand dollars, so they give us an advance of ten thousand dollars and say they will help us apply to the banks for an additional thirty-five-thousand dollars, which would give us almost seventy thousand dollars to run for a whole year and see where we go, from SBA. Well, I would say to anyone, "Be careful about getting SBA money," because we did. We did get the thirty-five thousand from SBA. We had a couple of good years, and we tried to pay SBA off and, you know, you get penalized if you try to pay SBA. It's kind of like the TARP funds, I guess. You get penalized if you try to pay it off early. They want the whole time. But the reason why we wanted to pay it off, because they were trying to manage our company. You know, they were telling you what you could do, what you couldn't do, where you shouldn't go, where you shouldn't be, what kind of cars you should have, you know, all that kind of thing, and what kind of salary you should have, because we did not feel that we should be limited by--we should only be limited on the basis of our ability to perform. So we began to get some serious clients, some substantial clients. We also were able to negotiate a major contract with the Department of Commerce, with SBA. Because of the nature of our business, we had the capability of assisting minority businesses, one, in the development of their business plan; doing

their financial planning in the sense of, you know, how do you make certain that you pay your quarterly income tax on time. How do you make certain that you pay your FICA, all the things that you have to do? How do you set up those funds and those accounts with the bank so that they're protected? Because the last thing you want to do is fail to pay Uncle Sam and the state. Those are your partners. Just to tell everybody, whether you know it or not, you have a couple of partners. You have the federal government and you have the state. You've got to pay them, pay them on time. We'd set up their marketing and merchandising, try to assist them in developing their work plan, developing their job descriptions and all the things that go into having a business, your manuals for work, all those things. We had the capacity and capability of doing that. Ted came from HR. I came from community public affairs, relations, and Ron Berryman was a specialist in financial planning and CPA in financing, and he had worked--oh, yes, that's right. He'd worked for CDC. You remember that company out in El Segundo? CDC. They were an aerospace company, too. You know, aerospace was a heck of an industry in those days. We saw that there was a proposal coming out for companies who had the capacity for assisting local businesses in a certain area. I think they were called 401, 406 grants, or something, or 406 contracts. They were doing grants and contracts, because, you know, a lot of nonprofit organizations sprung up, saying that they could do economic development. Well, our thing was, if you're going to do economic development, then you'd better prove that you can develop your own economical entrepreneurship and succeed. In the meantime, we learned that there is this opportunity, so we developed a proposal, submitted it to SBA, and we waited for several months. And in the meantime, we are still waiting for these guys to--we've just about exhausted all of our seed capital. You know, we're down to we're splitting hamburgers at night, you know, with each other, and having to look at our wives when we got home and say, "Hey, I hope you can be considerate," but there's nothing in our pockets at this point. We also got a couple of Carte Blanche cards. I don't know whether you remember the early Carte Blanche card. It was the first credit card out, called Carte Blanche. So we had a couple of those, which we were using up to the hilt. We got a call one day, and he says, "I want you guys to know that you have been successfully selected to get this contract."

Jefferson

This is after you've been working with Warren--and Hagopian from the--

Cunningham

Oh yes.

Cunningham

Kip Hagopian. Yes, Hagopian. They had invested in our company. Yes, we'd given them reports, you know, and they--"It's good."And we'd say, "We need some more money so we can operate, you know, so we don't have the pressure and the stress." But we operated underneath there. We went back. I guess about eighteen months later we learn that we had this contract. About '69, '70, somewhere along there, we learned that we had this contract. So we said, "My god, this is an opportunity," so we, Ted and I both, because I was president, had to go back and sign the contract.

Jefferson

What was it, though, the contract?

Cunningham

The contract was for roughly a half-million dollars.

Jefferson

To do--

Cunningham

To provide consulting services to small minority and emerging businesses in the area of merchandising, marketing, finance; you know, all the things--

Jefferson

So it was the same kind of business you were doing, but it was just an expanded contract.

Cunningham

It was an expanded contract. It was expanded idea. We were doing it directly for the government for these companies that needed it. So we were told that we had this contract, so Ted and I took a red-eye. We went and got our [unclear] cars, and I think it couldn't have been anymore than two hundred

dollars, round trip, per person, you know in those days. You're talking about '69 and '70, somewhere like that. So we use our credit card to go back. We take a red-eye, which means that we would get there that morning. We'd get there that morning. We'd go and have lunch. We go up, sign the contract. Now, we also had a flight back, because you could get a four o'clock flight that would get you back. So we signed the contract around two o'clock. Now, in those days to get to Dulles Airport by taxi was only fifteen dollars, so Ted and I looked at--we had gone up, we'd signed the contract, we had it in the briefcase, right? We're on our way back to Los Angeles. So we only had so much time to catch the airplane, so we said, "Well, we'd better take a taxi." So I look at Ted. I said, "Well, you know, I got a dollar and a half. How much you got?" He had about two dollars. So we said, "How are we going to get to the airport?" So he said, "I've got an idea." So we go back upstairs at SBA, and we say to Art McZier--Art McZier was now the administrator. We say, "Art, can we borrow twenty dollars? We've got to get back to the airport." [laughs] So Art said, "Okay." He loaned us the twenty dollars, and to this day, we've never been able to pay him back, because he won't accept it. He always says to us, "The interest is running." [laughs] So we took the twenty dollars, caught the taxi, and went on back to the airport and came here. Then we said, "Well, we've got to get the dollars to run this contract." So we kept trying to reach our supposed investors. So we couldn't reach them this one day, and Ted came up with a brilliant idea. "Why don't we go out there?" They were out in Brentwood. Says, "Why don't we go out there to their nice offices there?" Ted, Ron, and myself, we jump in the car. We drive out there. We park and we go upstairs. We catch them unbeknownst to them. So he says, "Come on in, fellows." So we come in, and we tell him, "Look, you know, things are tough. We need to get the other twenty-five thousand dollars so we can continue to operate. We have this contract, but, you know, we have to find people so that we can charge against it." They kept just grilling us to death. Finally Ted reached across the table and grabbed Warren, Fred Warren, in his collar, and said in some rather earthy language, "We want our twenty-five thousand dollars." Warren turned red as a beet and got on the phone. We got the twenty-five thousand dollars.

Jefferson

So this is guerilla tactics in terms of--

Cunningham

Mau mau. You know, I mean, that's what they expect. They expected black folks to mau mau in those days, you know. We've become a little more sophisticated.

Jefferson

And it was a small business, so--

Cunningham

It was a small business, and they had made a commitment to us, and we're dying on the vine without it, you know. So we were able to get it.

Jefferson

So then for the next phase that's the kind of business--you were involved in supporting and helping to train--

Cunningham

Other people, right.

Jefferson

--new African American business.

Cunningham

As well as we were able to do other kinds of things. Now, we were very supportive with Tom Bradley. Now, we were doing pretty well, because we were paying ourselves pretty well at that point. Business was going well. At one point Ted was being considered for appointment by Nixon. Well, we had worked this thing out, "Ted, you're going to be a Republican, because I'm a Democrat and I can't change, you know. I'm too well involved in the Democratic party. But you've got to be the Republican; I'm the Democrat; and Ron, you could swing either way, which, you know, according to how the weather is going, to how the game is going." Well, at one point there was some concern, consideration of giving Ted an appointment, and Ted says, "Well, I'm not sure I want to do that." I said, "But Ted, you know, that's your leader. You can't turn your leader down," which that subsequently became my undoing, so you hold that point. That subsequently became my undoing because at

some point in my life he reminded me that I had to deal with the same thing. So he didn't get the appointment. In the meantime, Tom Bradley runs for mayor in 1973 and gets elected. We'd been heavily involved in his campaign. I've always been involved with Tom. Tom gets elected. Now, we have another contract that we're doing on a nation basis that had me going around the country dealing with certain community-based organizations, because we were helping them in terms of their management and their financial planning prospect.

Jefferson

And many of these were these economic development companies.

Cunningham

Right, but this was separate and apart from the 406 plan. This was another piece of business we had achieved at that point. I'm in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Now, Tom got elected to the mayoraltyship sometime in late May of 1973, and I had run for state senate. I could get no endorsements. I had come within fifteen hundred votes of defeating an incumbent, so obviously I had made some inroads. I had worked very hard on campaigning. Now, my campaign manager was Maxine Waters and John Flloyd, which is important to understand.

Jefferson

John Floyd, F-l-o--

Cunningham

F-l-l-o-y-d. It's Lloyd with an f in front of it, Flloyd. So he got elected that May night. He had asked me up on the stage with him. We were all up on the stage. You know, it was really a joyous night, and I said, "I'll see you, Tom. I'm catching a plane in the morning," because I had a whole itinerary. I had to meet with several entities around the country. So I get to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and there's a call coming in. Someone is running me down, and they said that Mayor-Elect Tom Bradley wanted to talk to me. So I took the call. I said, "Yes, Tom, what is it?" He said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm in Minneapolis, Minnesota." He said, "Well, when will you be back to Los Angeles?" I think this was like on a Tuesday or Wednesday. I said, "Well, I'll be

back Friday evening."He said, "Well, can you get in and see me Saturday at city hall? I need to talk to you. I want to talk to you."So I said, "Of course."Anyway, I come back, and I go to see him that Saturday morning. He said, "Sit down."I said, "Yeah."He says, "I want you to run for the Tenth Council District."

Jefferson

So at that point, since you had come back from Africa in '67--

Cunningham

'67.

Jefferson

--and we're talking about now 1973--Right.

Jefferson

--you had been heavily then involved in politics, because at Hughes you were dealing with political activism there, so that's organizing as well as fundraising.

Cunningham

Right. Right. Right.

Jefferson

Then when you started your company and you were working in your company, there was a lot of networking.

Cunningham

Right. Right.

Jefferson

And you were still dealing--

Cunningham

We were still dealing with government and politics, and we were also supportive, very supportive, with Tom Bradley.

Jefferson

And you had run in 1971.

Cunningham

And I ran in 1971. I ran for the state senate.

Jefferson

How did that come about? Before we get to Bradley and him talking to you about running for his seat, how did 1971 in the assembly come--

Cunningham

State senate.

Jefferson

Sorry, state senate.

Cunningham

The senate always appealed to me as a place to be. Hopefully could make it into the California State Senate and maybe someday into the U.S. Senate. That was my hope and dream someday. Never got it. But be that as it may, this was an opportunity. We had done some analysis of the district and, you know, the type--

Jefferson

Even before he talked to you about it.

Cunningham

No, we had done some analysis of the senate district, state senate district.

Jefferson

I'm sorry, senate district, yes.

Cunningham

And we tried to get Tom's endorsement. Tom said he had too many friends in there. He wished me well. He took a couple of pictures, etc., etc., which was all well and good. And we had done some analysis. I had put the team together, and Maxine and John Filloyd had done some analysis and felt that it was a district that was winnable, that you could topple Wedworth, because he had been somewhat insensitive to the changes in the district and he was busy.

He was in the pocket of the horse racing industry. Well, I guess he couldn't help himself, because he's there in Inglewood, and Hollywood Park is in Inglewood. So we decided that's what we would try to do, and we came close to pulling it off, which meant that we had established some credibility; that people had to look at us because you did it. We came from nowhere and did it.

Jefferson

At that point, in 1971 when you were running for the state senate, you were thinking that it was--

Cunningham

This was '72, I think. You do it in the primary. You start in '71 and you go through--

Jefferson

--you were thinking that this was the path, elected office.

Cunningham

Yes. I had already determined that I was going to make a path in an elected office at that early--

Jefferson

At that point.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

When do you think you kind of got there, that that was what you wanted to do?

Cunningham

Well, I told you, I determined that that was in the back of my mind from the time that I got out of the air force, because of the experience that I had had with [Albert] Gore [Sr.]. But you have to build a resume. You have to make a determination. You have to accomplish. You have to have something that you

could talk about that you've accomplished, and you have to deal with community, and you have to do with a number of things. And I had been involved in many community-based organizations at that point.

Jefferson

So now you were at the point where you could actualize some of that groundwork that you'd already laid.

Cunningham

That's right. That's right, and I had laid enough of a groundwork to be able to have some resources, to be able to finance my campaign. I didn't need that much--if I had probably gotten another forty thousand dollars from some outside source, I probably would have been in the state senate, and if there hadn't been so many other blacks in the race, I probably would have been successful. But, you know, everybody looks at the race and says, "This guy is vulnerable. This is a district that is winnable by someone of this profile. So let's take him on," which is okay. That's what democracy is all about. But anyway, we didn't win that one, so Tom comes--

Jefferson

But you were still active.

Cunningham

Oh yes. I wasn't gone.

Jefferson

And so now he calls you in 1973.

Cunningham

So he calls me. I come in, sit down with him, and he says, "I want you to run for the Tenth Council District."

Cunningham

"What? But Tom, the Tenth Council District, you know, city council only pays seventeen thousand, five hundred dollars." Well, he had made all the reasons why he thought I should run. I did well in the state senate, and something like 35 percent of the district was in that old senate district. I said, "But Tom, I live

in Baldwin Hills. I'm just outside the district. You aren't going to change--." He said, "Don't worry about it. There's the Scott decision." Jim Scott had run for the Ninth Council District, and they had said that as long as you were domiciled in the district and that was your place of residence, I think it was thirty to sixty days before you were to take office, then you were bona fide, eligible to be a candidate, eligible to take the seat if elected. So we took the steps to do that. That was a rather stressful, trying time. Got a house in Baldwin Hills; you got a--we did it. But in any case, I said, "Tom, that's only paying seventeen thousand, five hundred dollars." He says, "Yeah, but they just passed a charter change. It's going to take it to thirty thousand." "But Tom, that's still--even if they take it to thirty thousand, that will be a forty-five-thousand-dollar cut in pay I've got to take, plus on top of that I have a car." At that time I had a Mark III or whatever, Mark II, whatever it was, that big monster.

Jefferson

But you're still thinking about this as a profession, but you're having a conversation with yourself, because it's a--

Cunningham

Yes, but at this level, you know, now you're talking about--you know, I've already been working at trying to repair one stressful economic situation that I had put a lot of my money into. Beginning to get it back, and now I'm going to take this major cut in pay?

Jefferson

You weren't quite ready to run for office again. I'm asking a question.

Cunningham

Right. Right. That's right, not at that level. I was not ready at that level, per se. But Tom and I had a very in-depth conversation. He says, "Well, I want you to do it. Believe me, it could be worth the sacrifice to you. It will make a difference in your life. It will mean a whole bigger difference in the life of Los Angeles, and by the way, that this thirty thousand dollars, you'll have that." And he says, "I will endorse you. I will use all of my apparatus to help you get elected." So I said, "Yes, fine." I said, "By the way, Tom, oddly enough,"

because we had flown to Washington; we had all met in Washington a few days after he had called me. We had already met in Washington, and we were in Art McZier's house in his den, Ted Short, Art McZier, the guy who was the head of OMBE [Office of Minority Business Enterprise], and we were sitting there saying, "What ideas can we give Tom that would be very supportive of him, make a mark for him, and at the same time provide an opportunity for minority businesses in the city of Los Angeles?"

Jefferson

The other person that you said, he was head of OMBE?

Cunningham

OMBE, Office of Minority Business Enterprise in the Department of Commerce. I'm having a difficulty remembering his name. He'll kill me, too. Office of Minority Business Enterprise in the Department of Commerce. He was the administrator in 1973, '74, so if you Google that office, you can find it.

Jefferson

And Art McZier was with the--

Cunningham

He was the administrator--

Jefferson

--at the Small Business Administration.

Cunningham

Small Business Administration.

Jefferson

In the Department of Commerce.

Cunningham

No, it's the Small Business Administration. I'm not sure that they're in--well, yes, they may be independent of the Department of Commerce. I'm not sure.

Jefferson

But these guys work together.

Cunningham

Yes, they were appointees, Nixon appointees. So, you know, the guy from OMBE said, "We could probably free up some money to put this agency together to be in the mayor's office, out of respect for him." And one of the guys we were talking to, of course, was Tom Bradley's frat brother. He was a Kappa.

Jefferson

And this is during the campaign.

Cunningham

No, this is after the--this is a few days--

Jefferson

So you've gotten elected.

Cunningham

No, I haven't gotten elected. Tom Bradley has just gotten elected.

Jefferson

Oh, I'm sorry. All right.

Cunningham

And I had to make this trip, but before I came back from Minneapolis, we had to go to Washington, so we were all there in Washington. It happened on like a Sunday, Sunday night or something, because then I went to Minneapolis, Minnesota, whatever. The days become murky. But I do know it was a Sunday night, Sunday evening, and we were sitting there, and we were talking about what could we do to help Tom succeed. Now, this is before Tom's even had a chance for me--I know I'm going back to talk to him. So we write out on two sheets of yellow paper the proposal for the Office of Small Business--the Office of Minority Business Assistance, the Mayor's Office of Minority Business Assistance in the city of Los Angeles. That's what we were going to call it. We figured out how much it would probably cost, what kind of staff it would take to do it, what kind of things there were needed. And there was some

information that we needed to get. We needed to get how much business could be identified that had been done with minority businesses in the city of Los Angeles, how many black businesses, how many Hispanic businesses, etc. So that became a task that we had to do. But anyway, I shared with Tom Bradley in that meeting we had that if so, I would like to see that consideration. So Tom Bradley said, "Okay, I want you to run." So I ran and got elected. He supported me. There were the most candidates ever in a city council race in the history of the city of Los Angeles, some forty-some-odd candidates. Included Celes King and George Takei. All kinds of guys were looking to replace Tom Bradley.

Jefferson

Who was that last person you mentioned?

Cunningham

George Takei. You know who George Takei is?

Jefferson

No.

Cunningham

You ever heard of Star Trek?

Jefferson

Yes. Oh, I do know who he is. He's the Japanese guy.

Cunningham

Yes, ma'am. Because you have to remember, the Tenth Council District--

Jefferson

Sakura or Sakuru.

Cunningham

Sulu. You have to remember, the Tenth Council District was cobbled out as a United Nations district, Hispanic, black, white, Jewish, Asian. That was the Tenth Council District. It was never, and I don't even know to this day whether it is predominantly black. Because you're in the Tenth Council District.

Jefferson

Yes. You are, too, aren't you?

Cunningham

Yes. Oh yes, I live in it. I still live in the Tenth Council District. It was cobbled out as a fairly liberal, in that sense of the fact that people would respect the talent of whoever the "best candidate"--quote--was. So Tom Bradley had been elected in that district, and he asked me to run, and I did. I'll never forget the first time we had a press conference, the first press conference we did, where he was announcing that he was going to endorse me. We did it at the Biltmore Hotel. All this, you know, and Tom was big news. You've got a bank of television cameras and the lights, I mean, I hadn't ever seen anything like that before. So I'm standing there with Tom Bradley, you know, and he's singing my praises and saying why he is endorsing me. Of course, they're grilling him to death. "Well, Mr. Bradley, you've never endorsed anybody before." And he said, "Because I happen to have confidence in this gentleman's capabilities," etc., etc. So I'll never forget this reporter. At that time her name was Nadia Trout. Said, "Mr. Mayor, does that mean that you're going to turn your whole financial apparatus over to Cunningham and you're going to raise money to underwrite his campaign?" Tom Bradley paused, and in his inimicable Bradley fashion, he said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't have a dime left in my campaign. I still owe twenty-five thousand dollars." And I'm standing there next to him, and I'm trying like the dickens to keep from frowning and crying. I just break into a smile. I mean, the guy took the picture. I mean, what could you think? Jesus Christ, this guy's got me out here and he doesn't have resources? Don't tell me I've got to go in my pocket again. But in any case, he did his best then, and we did prevail, and so I got elected to the Los Angeles City Council.

Jefferson

So at that point in time this was considered the Westside, more so; it's still the Westside, but--

Cunningham

It's still the Westside.

Cunningham

But in terms of the political establishment, this was more the--

Cunningham

To a degree, it was the crème de la crème, particularly when it came to black L.A.

Jefferson

Yes, more middle-class district in terms of the kinds of people.

Cunningham

Well, it was crème de la crème when it came to the blacks. There were poor Hispanics on the Eastside of the district, in the Westlake area. There was, of course, the Jewish middle class, which was predominant in many parts of the district, and there was, of course, the Asian enclave, which was part of Lemert Park and part of that area over there. Many were older Japanese who had come back to their homes, to their facilities, and many of them were on the verge of being retired gardeners, etc. That's what the district was.

Jefferson

And it also overlapped the Wedworth district that you ran for the state senate.

Cunningham

Right. Right. Right. That Wedworth district, I think, came up to Adams Boulevard, somewhere like that, in the state senate. But so I got elected.

Jefferson

So were you--in terms of the campaigning, I guess you were speaking to a lot of different crowds of people, and it continued on that, in terms of the whole kind of multi-ethnic coalition and multi-interests coalitions?

Cunningham

Right. The thing you had to talk about was the oneness of the district and the fact that there was much you had in common. There were some parts of the district that needed more attention than others. One of the big problems, and it still remains a problem, and it's an impossible problem to solve, though, is

the lack of adequate park and open spaces within the Tenth Council District, because it tends to be predominantly a residential district. The other side of the coin was, being a residential district, most of the business was small and medium-sized businesses, you know. It was kind of like a bedroom--actually, it was a bedroom community. The most significant aspect was Midtown Shopping Center. That was probably the biggest shopping entity there, or the other one was the shopping center on the corner of Crenshaw [Boulevard] and Coliseum [Road]--Crenshaw and Rodeo Road, Rodeo Road, Rodeo--Rodeo Road, I mean. They spell them both the same way now.

Jefferson

So your district didn't include then the Baldwin Hills-Crenshaw sh_____?

Cunningham

No, it didn't. It didn't. No, that was part of the Sixth Council District. But it does now, or the Eighth Council District does.

Jefferson

Oh, because that's where I was thinking. When Bradley ran, he was living in Lemert Park.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

So it went down at least to a portion of that area, but it didn't necessarily include the shopping center. It was around there.

Cunningham

The easternmost part, at that point, of the district came straight down the middle of the street that Tom Bradley lived on. So Tom Bradley's house just was in the district, and I think it went down to somewhere around Coliseum and started working its way around back down Exposition past SC [USC, University of Southern California], because SC was not in it. Went past SC. SC was on the other side.

Jefferson

So it probably went down to Martin Luther King Boulevard or Santa Barbara.
So it kind of gerrymandered around there.

Cunningham

It was gerrymandered around and came down, but it came down Hoover.

Jefferson

Right; then came back up.

Cunningham

It came down--no, it went all the way over at one point and abutted the convention center. The convention center was across from the district.

Jefferson

Right. I got you. So like the 110 Freeway/

Cunningham

The Tenth Council District was basically a horizontal district.

Jefferson

When you say "horizontal," you mean--

Cunningham

From downtown, from the convention center, along Olympic Boulevard all the way to La Cienega, all the way to the abutment of Culver City, which is a pretty good distance. Some districts are vertical, but that district was horizontal. Very interesting. It took in--

Jefferson

So it took in a big white-collar swath--

Cunningham

Yes, it did.

Jefferson

--of the population of this city.

Cunningham

It did. It did. It did.

Jefferson

Because these are the white-collar neighborhoods, more or less.

Cunningham

Yes, right. Right. [unclear] tend to be small businesses along there, strip malls, you know, that sort of thing. That was basically the district, and it hasn't changed that much. I mean, basically, it's moved further west, but it still tends to be a very horizontal district.

Jefferson

Maybe a little south.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

I don't know.

Cunningham

I can't say the full boundaries anymore. I do know that I still live in the Tenth Council District.

Jefferson

So at that time, in terms of being elected and what was going on around the country, there were a lot of African Americans that were getting elected for the first time--

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

--in the late sixties, early seventies.

Cunningham

Yes, there was the movement to elect blacks as mayors. You know, it was the Tom Bradleys, the [Carl B.] Stokes, while we were moving to try to get Maynard Jackson elected in Atlanta. Of course, even before I was in the city council, Ted and I flew down to try to help him get elected as the president of the city council, which was similar to being kind of the shadow mayor of Atlanta. He was very successful at that, and over the years we became very, very--we were like brothers over the years, all the way up until he died.

Jefferson

So you were involved with local politics as well as national politics on some level.

Cunningham

Yes, because we were committed to the development of black power, black evolution. My father was still living and a significant individual in Memphis, Tennessee, as head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and anytime we could lend any help or support to him, we did. The Fords were moving to get elected. So hookups were going on all over the country, you know. We were trying to help each other, one brother and sister coming to aid the others, brothers and sisters.

Jefferson

So at that time, in terms of Los Angeles politics, what was going on with Los Angeles politics in terms of your early kind of participation on the city council? You were, I think, the fourth African American elected to the city council?

Cunningham

I was fourth, yes.

Jefferson

So the other people that were on the council at that time were--

Cunningham

Were Billy Mills and Gil [Gilbert] Lindsay, who, incidentally, I told you I was sitting in city hall when Gil Lindsay got sworn in. I was there as a Coro intern.

Jefferson

Yes. Yes, you did.

Cunningham

Watched him come in and get seated, not knowing at that time that I would ever be a member of the Los Angeles City Council. And subsequently, when I left the city council--when I came to the city council, he was there, and when I left the city council, he was still there. So Gil was happy with his tenure. He loved being on the city council.

Jefferson

Now, Bob Farrell got elected at some point while you were on the council, is that right?

Cunningham

Yes. Yes, I guess a couple of years after I got on the council, Billy Mills got appointed by [Ronald W.] Reagan to the superior court, which meant that the seat was open, and Tom and I put our heads together and we thought that Bob Farrell was pretty much prepared, and we supported Bob Farrell.

Jefferson

So in those early years, '73, this was a special election. Who was working with you then? Did Maxine Waters work on your first campaign for the city council as well?

Cunningham

She worked on my first state senate--well, she did work on it. There was some concern from Tom Bradley that we needed personnel that could carry the entire program for what the district represented as opposed to a very narrow segment, segmentation. He had recommended that we get Winner/Wagner, which was a firm of the majority--well, it was practically a Jewish firm.

Jefferson

They were like campaign organizers?

Cunningham

They were campaign organizers, campaign managers and consultants. And I knew the Wagners. Basically, Leslie Winner, along with her husband, Chuck

Winner, developed the program. We still had Maxine Waters involved. Geneva Cox was heavily involved.

Jefferson

Leslie and Chuck Winter?

Cunningham

Winner, W-i-n-n-e-r.

Jefferson

And they were part of Winter/Wagner?

Cunningham

Winner/Wagner. You know, you have a winner.

Jefferson

I got it now.

Cunningham

They created winners. [laughs] So they ran the campaign, and Maxine was involved. Geneva Cox was involved. [Rick] Taylor was involved.

Jefferson

Now, Taylor--

Cunningham

Rick Taylor. You know, Rick Taylor. He now has his own political consulting firm. A number of people who have gone on to prominence were involved.

Jefferson

Is Geneva Cox still alive?

Cunningham

Geneva is still alive. She's had some stroke.

Jefferson

That's why I--I thought she had had a stroke. How old is she?

Cunningham

Probably eighty-three, eighty-two, eighty-three.

Jefferson

That's what I was thinking. She was a little older, yes.

Cunningham

Yes. Let's see. Well, there were several individuals who have gone on to-- Roddy Wright was working with the campaign. Bob McNeil worked with the campaign. Diane Watson worked with the campaign. There were many individuals who have gone on to certainly--

Jefferson

Now, Rod went on to work at several people's political offices on the local and the state level, and then he also ran for his own seat in the assembly.

Cunningham

Yes. Right, and presently he's in the state senate. Yes.

Jefferson

Oh, he is? He got elected again?

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

He was out for a minute.

Cunningham

Right, and then he ran for the senate seat that--he just got elected in the last election.

Jefferson

I was going to say, it has to be more recent.

Cunningham

Oh, he ran for the senate seat that the gentleman from Inglewood--he is in the state senate, and as you know, Curren Price is now running for the seat that--

Jefferson

Right, and Curren is still in the assembly.

Cunningham

He's still in the assembly. He's running for the senate seat over here that was vacated by Mark Ridley Thomas by getting elected.

Jefferson

Mark Ridley Thomas, yes.

Cunningham

But Roddy got the seat that the mayor of Inglewood, former mayor of Inglewood, who was in the state senate--and he'll kill me; I can't remember his name. He had been very sick; was termed out.

Jefferson

All right, so he's back in the state senate.

Cunningham

Yes, he's back. He's in the state senate.

Jefferson

And Rick Taylor?

Cunningham

Rick Taylor runs his own political firm.

Jefferson

So he stayed more in the consulting realm, and Geneva stayed. She worked on your staff for a long time.

Cunningham

She was on my staff. She was on my staff.

Jefferson

And she ran for political office herself at one point.

Cunningham

Right. She ran when I left, and she didn't do well. Well, she did about as well as she could.

Jefferson

Then she stayed on staff with the city.

Cunningham

On staff with Nate Holden, yes.

Jefferson

She stayed on with Nate Holden, and then Bob McNeil--

Cunningham

He has a very prominent law firm in the city of Los Angeles.

Jefferson

What kind of law does he practice?

Cunningham

He practices a whole range of legal specialties, including litigation and others.

Jefferson

So now these people, aside from Geneva, they worked on your campaign, but did they work for you?

Cunningham

Well, no, Maxine worked for me. Leslie Winner wound up working for me. Rick Taylor, we would bring in and out from time to time, and Roddy Wright worked for me. I had a lot of staff members who worked for me. Diane Watson never worked for me. We then supported her for school board.

Jefferson

So once you were elected, one of the things that you said at one point in time was that as an elected official, one should--

Cunningham

Hold on just a minute.[Recorder turned off.]

Jefferson

So they'll tell me if, after they listen to it, if they want to go forward for something else. They may, but I have to go by the protocol, and then--yes.

Cunningham

Well, we've gotten elected, so that's it.

Jefferson

No, it's not it. In terms of your being elected, you've gotten elected. You're there.

Cunningham

Yes. Right.

Jefferson

And you're networking around the country still. You're trying to develop the black power.

Cunningham

Black participation, black elected office.

Jefferson

Black participation. So how did that articulate itself here in Los Angeles after you have gotten yourself elected? So part of it was getting elected, but now you're elected.

Cunningham

And part of it was trying to provide opportunities for young people and others who had an interest in public life, and for them to be able to have opportunities. To that end, some of us, as you know, at that point in time--well, of course, I got involved with the National League of Cities, which is the national association of mayors and city councilmen around the country, and between Maynard and myself and a couple of others, we helped found what

was called the National Association--NBC/LED, National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials. We formulated that policy, or we formulated that organization, because we wanted to try to see if we could get more input into the National League of Cities' board of directors. As you know, Tom Bradley became the president.

Jefferson

So this is a subgroup of that group.

Cunningham

Right. We were a caucus. Tom Bradley became the president of the National League of Cities, the first time they'd had a black president.

Jefferson

That was in 19--

Cunningham

'74 or '75.

Jefferson

It was relatively early in his career as a mayor

Cunningham

Relatively early, right. I had an opportunity to serve on the board of the National League of Cities, and came close to becoming president of the National League. I was beat out by a gentleman from San Antonio, a Hispanic.

Jefferson

Cisneros?

Cunningham

Cisneros, Henry Cisneros, yes. But we had put the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials together, and we eventually were able to get a black woman elected as president of the National League of Cities. She was out of Virginia. Since that time there have been several prominent individuals who have served as president of the association.

Jefferson

So you saw this--so that's some of the things that you were doing in terms of empowerment of people around the country.

Cunningham

Right, around the country.

Jefferson

And locally you were looking at trying to get people on staff and helping them to get elected.

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

And then what was going on as it relates to your constituency and to--

Cunningham

Well, constituent work was also--

Jefferson

--your people that elected you and the city in terms of policy and governance?

Cunningham

What do you want to talk about first, policy?

Jefferson

Whatever works for you.

Cunningham

First of all, as you know, at that period of time there was the emergence of women and their consideration and their determination that they should be co-equals in terms of sharing the power, etc. In that regard, we started within the Tenth Council District the Tenth District Women's Steering Committee, which we felt would be very instrumental in women's participation in policy, in decisions, and in the well-being of the district, and it's my understanding to

this day the organization still goes on. Some council members have attempted to co-opt it, which I don't think is fair. It was not my desire to have it as a political arm or to co-opt it. Mine was to provide an opportunity for women to be involved in leadership roles and policy input, etc., and some women have come out of there and have gone on to do very well.

Jefferson

Who were some of those people?

Cunningham

You're straining my memory now. Of course, Geneva Cox was there. Rosa Russell came out of there. Of course, Maxine Waters came out of there and then started the Black Women's Forum, which was--

Jefferson

I was going to ask you about that.

Cunningham

--which was a whole different concept than what I was--

Jefferson

--interested in.

Cunningham

What I felt was the concern that women needed to be able to make their decisions and lend their guidance and information, and it was not necessary for me to try to politicize the organization; that that was a decision that they could make if they wanted to make it. That might not be a wise thing to do if you're a politician, but I was brought up to really believe in democracy, so whatever that's worth. Then we also felt that there was a need for the development of block clubs, which we worked very hard to develop block clubs.

Jefferson

And with that, the development of block clubs, what was the impetus at that point in time?

Cunningham

It gave people a greater opportunity to participate, to be feel safer in their own domicile, and to be able to raise the issues that were extremely important in their neighborhoods, because after all, you know, they say all politics is local, but all politics is actually neighborhood. I mean, you know, if a block of people are very unhappy, they can create disturbances that aren't necessary. Now, sometimes that doesn't mean that they're always right, and as an elected official you have to be extremely careful about that. I mean, you could play that politic thing to the hilt, and you could make bad policy trying to do good politics. You could do bad policy trying to do good politics, or you could do good policy with bad politics. You have to have, I believe--I could be wrong--you have to have some belief in yourself, and you have to have some sense of dependent independence, and you have to know when it's right to do things. My basic concern always was, knowing that most of the decisions we make in terms of the rule of law have tremendous impacts on somebody. It changes people's relationships. My basic rule was to try to have--in changing relationships, have the least dramatic impact on more people than on fewer people. Would much rather have a large majority of people who are comfortable with the decision that you make, in the sense that you have less impact on their lives than you do on some other people's lives. So my question always, to myself, was who gets hurt the most, and who are the most who get hurt? That's how I would weigh my decision, because anybody who's in public office has to realize that the decision that they make changes people's relationship; I don't care what it is. And when you change people's relationships, you have to be careful in how you do that. Sometimes you must change the relationship, and although a few vocal people may, as they say, bitch and moan, you have to be strong enough to determine that I'm willing to take the circumstance of doing what I feel to be the correct thing to do. A lot of guys don't feel that way. "What can I do to keep getting elected?" My thing was never "What do I need to do to keep getting elected?"

Jefferson

This is an interesting conversation that we're having right here, because in terms of what I have learned about you and what I'm thinking, I'm sitting here and I just said to myself in my mind, "He was not necessarily interested in

continuing to get elected." I said that in my mind before you said it. It's a summation, and I wasn't going to say anything until you said that.

Cunningham

I would not do anything to get elected, just to get elected. There are things more--you know, when you go to bed at night and you go to sleep, you'd better be able to sleep sound, and you'd better be at peace with yourself. I learned that from my father. You heard what David said.

Jefferson

So in terms of your political life at this point in time, you're on the city council; were dealing with services on a local level; were also looking at the greater picture of what's going on in America with the promotion of black power, and you are a big part of that at that point in time.

Cunningham

Well, I tried to be.

Jefferson

You had your role. Let's put it that way. You had your role. So with that, in terms of Los Angeles politics, you were looking at influencing younger people and others who were interested in the political process, as well as providing services to people, because I'm going now back to your Coro training and how that may be influencing.

Cunningham

Right. That was always my thinking, and most of the people I supported, I was hopeful that that was their philosophy. But you find out over a period of time. You know, being a public elected official is probably the most heady elixir you can drink. You've got to be careful, because that elixir fools you. You know, everybody, "Oh, hi, Councilman. Hi, Congressman. Oh, there's Mayor so and so, and there's Senator so and so," and people get--you know. Pretty soon you get to believe your own hype. I mean, when you get to the point where you are demagoguery and you've got to get even with people and you've got to punish people and you've got to prove to people that you're a big political entity, you have lost your way; I don't care who you are. My thing was I'm not going to stay in public office till I reached that point. I mean, if I could have

gone to Congress and served to try to help others, just fine. But I never had a desire to become addicted to power. Now, I also felt that if you are as powerful as you say you are, you could be powerful without the title. You can impact people's lives without necessarily being an elected official. So now that's what I try to do. You know, people call me. I try to help. What I can do, I can do. But I had to make certain that I did not get addicted to power, because it can have just distributive negative impacts for you, you know. You do what you can. You understand that you're not going to get rich doing it. If you want to get rich, get out and work your tail off and invest wisely. So that's what I've tried to do in the latter part of my years. I said, "I was not born Councilman David Cunningham. I was born and named David S. Cunningham, Jr."

Jefferson

So now in addition to the Women's--

Cunningham

Steering Committee? Also we started--

Jefferson

--Steering Committee, you were interested in--

Cunningham

Providing for the seniors.

Jefferson

--the small business--

Cunningham

Oh yes, the small business.

Jefferson

--but the Small Business Administration, was it, for the city?

Cunningham

We wrote this proposal, got it funded later on, brought the policy before the council to--first we tried to name it the Mayor's Office of Minority Business Enterprise, which ticked off some majority members of the city council, so--

Jefferson

And this is early in your career--

Cunningham

Right. This was in the first term, right.

Jefferson

--as a city councilperson.

Cunningham

Right. So, you know, you have to be smart enough to say, "Well, how do I get this entity through without necessarily changing the purpose of the entity?" So it sounded good to involve all small business, so we started the Mayor's Office of Small Business Assistance. And to this day I think that office still exists somewhere within the body of the mayor's office. The other thing I was concerned with was the plight of seniors, because one thing I've always said, if you live long enough--here is an opportunity that I can have for myself. If I live long enough, I might be able to take advantage of some senior benefits.

Jefferson

Is Marge Farrier still alive, or did she die?

Cunningham

No, Marge has passed.

Jefferson

When did she die?

Cunningham

About two years ago.

Jefferson

I was going to say it hasn't been too long ago.

Cunningham

Yes, it's about two years ago.

Jefferson

Because I saw her within the last five years with her helper. She was still doing well, though.

Cunningham

Yes, she was.

Jefferson

And she was like in her nineties.

Cunningham

Yes. Well, you know, now her husband thought I was his son. He used to call me his son, you know. They were tremendous people; they really were.

Jefferson

So the senior centers, talk about that, because that was a big thing in terms of your district.

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

When did you get involved with that?

Cunningham

First of all, there had been the Older Americans Act and older American money. I kept saying, "If this is as important as we think it is, we need to have a Department of Aging." So I had tried, and Tom Bradley, you know, I--and Tom said, "We don't have the resources to start another department. The last thing I need to do is have to handle budgets and all that of another department." I said, "Well, let's think about it, how we can get it funded." So I went around and got ten votes, and Tom didn't have much choice. We just started the Department of Aging. There some concern about calling it DOA, you know, because, you know, they don't want you to be called DOA, which means "dead on arrival." They call it the Department of Aging or the Aging

Department; I don't know which one it is that they do. But we wrote the law, we passed it, and we got the department.

Jefferson

And that was in your--

Cunningham

That was in my second term, I believe it was, I was able to put it together. Then in the period of time that I was there, as you know, the housing market just--multi-family housing was a dying process in the city of Los Angeles.

Jefferson

So this was around--

Cunningham

Around '76, '75, '76. There was a great concern about multi-family housing, the unaffordability of housing because of high interest rates. We were looking for solutions to it. I gathered my staff together, and we talked about what some of the issues were and what some of the problems were. The problems of affordability was the high interest rate. We had the CRA, Community Redevelopment Agency. Their mission was to provide housing for low- and moderate-income housing. We wanted to talk about ownership, how do you make that happen, ownership, because ownership is an asset for people, housing is the greatest asset many families will ever have! And the concern was always inflation. So we said, "Well, if inflation is the problem, how do we make inflation a partner?" Now, I guess that's not a very good concept to consider, but this was our beginning approach to it. So Leslie Winner and I met with the USC Department of--I think their architectural department, and we talked about how do you develop housing, low- and moderate-income condominium-type housing in rather condensed space. So we came up with a pilot project which you now know as Villa Montoya.

Jefferson

Say it again.

Cunningham

Villa Montoya, M-o-n-t-o-y-a, Villa Montoya.

Jefferson

Where is that?

Cunningham

That's right across from the convention center. It's right off of Eleventh Street-

-

Jefferson

And Hoover [Street].

Cunningham

Yes, but it's east of Hoover. It's right off of Eleventh Street.

Jefferson

Right. It's on the west side of the freeway.

Cunningham

It's south of Olympic.

Jefferson

It's on the west side of the freeway.

Cunningham

It's on the west side of the freeway, right. Condominiums. You can see them. So we got the design from USC. Now we said, "Well, how do we finance it?" So we went to CRA. "Well, it's your land, you know. What about it? What about this density?" "Oh!" "Oh, yeah, we can do the density. We can make it attractive," because inside of that area--I don't know whether you've been in it--it's terraces up. There's a park inside. There's a community center inside. There are all kinds of areas where families can congregate or groups can congregate, etc. So that was the basis for the plan. Now how do we finance it? Well, again we must utilize inflation as our partner. So in other words, if the bank says that, "We're only going to lend to people with the following income," okay, let's say that a unit costs a hundred thousand dollars, which means that if it costs a hundred thousand dollars, the individual has to have ten thousand--well, he has to have twenty thousand dollars down to get in, 20

percent down payment. We said, "Well, CRA, why don't you invest this deep subsidy? First-time home buyers get to come in at 50 percent of the cost. If it's a hundred thousand dollars--they can get in for twenty thousand dollars--their down payment is now five thousand dollars, because they only had to pay 10 percent of the down payment of what the cost is going to be, because," we said, "CRA, you hold the fifty thousand, and you finance."

Jefferson

So this is kind of like a quiet second mortgage.

Cunningham

Silent seconds, that's what we called it. "Cunningham's seconds," we finally insisted on calling it, because we devised it. So now you pay five thousand dollars down, and you've got a forty-five-thousand-dollar obligation. So even at 19 percent, you're reasonably able to pay the costs of that forty-five thousand dollars. All right, now this is where we say we wanted to make inflation your partner. Housing was doubling over a three-year period of time; it goes up. The value goes up. The value goes up, so you've got a hundred-thousand-dollar house. In three years it's going to go up to a hundred and twenty-five, a hundred and thirty-thousand dollars. So your equity is going with it, so that if you sell it--although the CRA is on the hook for fifty thousand dollars. If you sell it, the first thing that has to be satisfied is the fifty thousand dollars, and it has to be sold to somebody, a first-time home buyer or who is qualified to meet the standards. Your obligation is to pay off the fifty thousand dollars. Then you can take the rest as yours. So inflation becomes your partner.

Jefferson

You have to hang on to the property.

Cunningham

You've got to hang on to it. You've got to hang on to it long enough, but at least you can afford to hang on to it, because no matter what happens with the property value going up, you're only on the hook for fifty thousand dollars, and according to what I understand, your tax bill was somewhat frozen, too, at that point. So we did, and I understand that became a very successful project.

A lot of people got it. But then you also have a lot of people who play games, lie, and, you know; some people may--and you have to be careful about them.

Jefferson

So it was replicated in other places, and Villa Montoya was kind of an early--

Cunningham

Villa Montoya was the first one that was cited by the Urban Land Institute as a sample, and other people began to utilize it to some degree. The problem was, CRA always hollered about the deep pockets, the deep numbers of dollars that they had to put into it, that they couldn't do that on projects all around the area. But it spurs development in home ownership, and probably if they utilize that today to give people relief from some of their housing problems, people who are in jeopardy of losing their mortgage, if there was some way that that could be impended into the present-day process, it might be of some help. There is a possibility it might be done. I've talked with some people who have made input to certain people who are decision makers. So we might see some aspect of that. I don't think they'll continue to call it "Cunningham seconds," but--

Jefferson

I was thinking that, in terms of that inflationary time period and the way in which people were able to afford and not afford houses at that time, that was kind of similar to our time and where we are now.

Cunningham

Our time is a little bit different. Our time is a little bit different. People were put into housing that they could not afford. They were assured that--and the worst thing that happened to people is the adjustable rate mortgage [ARM]. What's bad about ARMs is that they can go up and up and up, and many of the ARMs were not capped. They were based on some kind of index, etc. And there was no question for what happens when the bottom goes out of the market or deflation starts setting in. Well, if you're smart, you have to be ready to adjust as each era comes along, and that's what I like about [Barack] Obama. Obama is brilliant enough to realize that what was good yesterday is not necessarily good today, and some of what was good yesterday has to be

modified for today. That's the dynamism of life. Life is always changing. So, you know, this conservative aspect that we've got to feel at ease with everything we do, no, we have to make some changes. What we did yesterday will not necessarily apply for what we need to do today. We have to always be looking at how we can modify or how we can make it more affordable. So I think there is something that can be done to give relief to people that keeps them from losing their homes, that provides an opportunity for them to be able to get past these rough times, because we know that this is not going to go on forever. I mean, you know, I was born in the depression, you know. I have lived through several recessions, and I'm still alive. After each recession it's kind of like--what's that they say? You bounce a ball, you bounce it; it goes up. It's like going up the steps. You bounce the ball. It goes up and then it comes down, hits the next step, and it bounces back up and comes back down. Well, we know eventually it's going to get to the top of the stairs, and where we are now is going to be much higher when we get there. So, I mean, we've come through it. So we can afford to take some risks with homeowners. The other thing I was concerned with policy-wise, I felt that there was a lot of talent that could be presented in terms of the ecumenism, because the Tenth Council District has a tremendous number of churches in it of all faiths, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, all of the Methodists, whether CME, AME, AMEZ. Many of the big churches were in Tenth Council District at that time. The head of the Catholic diocese was located at Ninth Street, which was part of the district. So I tried to put together, and we did have for a time, the Tenth District Ministerium, which was made up faith-based--or which included--it included Buddhists. We included Imams from the Muslim faith, Christian, all of the faith-based organizations, who could sit down and talk about directions that they could go in, with the possibility of how they could put together nonprofit arms that were separate and apart from the religious aspect to provide an opportunity to go after dollars to do job training, health initiatives, all those kinds of services that community-based organizations do, because many of these churches were laying idle during the middle of the week. I mean, beautiful churches, beautiful facilities, but they were underutilized. Let me put it like this. They were underutilized, so we attempted to try to do that. I must say, we got tremendous assistance from Father George at the Greek Orthodox Church, St. Sophia's. He subsequently retired and went into the restaurant business.

Jefferson

Did he really.

Cunningham

Yes, yes.

Jefferson

And Father Bacchus, did he come after him? That's who's there now.

Cunningham

Well, yes, he had to come after him.

Jefferson

But I mean right after him.

Cunningham

Oh, I don't know whether he came right after him, because Father George and I almost left at the same time. But Father George was a tremendous, tremendous person. We had a tremendous number of--we had a Polish organization, Armenian organization. We had many of the faiths of many of the churches, we had involved. We also had the brother from --St. John of God, you know, the rest home there [on Adams and Western].

Jefferson

Yes, on Western and Adams.

Cunningham

Yes. And even to this day sometimes we break bread, you know.

Jefferson

What's his name?

Cunningham

Father Patrick. Father Patrick. Even to this day we break bread, because Father Patrick always has a question that he wants to know something about, so we get called on.

Jefferson

And then with the senior citizens center, we didn't really--with the senior services. So we got the legislation passed, we got the agency, and then there were--

Cunningham

Well, we got the legislation for senior services, but also in 1976 right after [Jimmy] Carter got elected, this is a down period when they were looking for projects. They had a stimulus package. They were looking for projects. And also we had an opportunity to be able to prove that by reinforcing buildings in a certain fashion, they could be recycled into public benefits. So we took a couple of fire stations. We took the one at Washington near Arlington, and we wrote a grant with the government and got both that fire station, plus the one on Westhaven. Right off of Adams before you get to La Brea, there was a fire station back there in the neighborhood.

Jefferson

The William Grant Still Center--

Cunningham

William Grant Still Center.

Jefferson

--is now what it is called.

Cunningham

I designed the William Grant Still. The dome that's in there, I insisted on that. Kind of drew out on some paper, yes, just having fun, but really proud. It's a tremendous, tremendous place, and I hope they still utilize it. You know, it was named after William Grant Still, who spent his latter years in Los Angeles, and his family is still here. He was a tremendous concert arranger, I mean serious music, you know. Then we built the other one on Washington Boulevard. We proved that by reinforcing it properly, that it could be re-adapted, re-adapted and be re-utilized, and so the seniors, we had that for the seniors. At one point the seniors had named it the David Cunningham Center, but the councilmen who followed me had some issues with me and decided to

take my name off the building and rename it. Since that time there has been a sort of--it created unnecessary friction. As I tried to say to the seniors, whatever they call it is just fine. I mean, my name wasn't going to lend any credibility to it. If I have to worry about my name being on buildings, then I haven't accomplished much.

Jefferson

It was a service center, so there were recreation programs there. Was it one of the early ones in the city?

Cunningham

It was one of the early ones. What was so critical about it--

Jefferson

And they also had an information referral center that Marge Farrier ran.

Cunningham

What was so important about it to us, and the reason why we wanted it in that fashion, because it was one of the fire stations that had been adamant about blacks not being able to work out of that fire station, because, you know, many years ago in the fire department, blacks were considered--they could not sleep in the same firehouse with white firemen. It's always been curious to me about what is it about black folks that causes--just our presence or contact. We must be one hell of a group of people if our contact and presence can create all this kind of serious discomfort. I mean, if it rubs off--I didn't know it rubbed off. I didn't know that we would impact them that greatly. But historically there has been that fear and that fright, you know. I guess maybe to an extent Obama may be proving their fears correctly, because he seems to be quite competent and capable and able. And most of the cities that have been managed by black mayors have been able to pull themselves up out of a lot of the turmoil and grow and develop. You know, this last election, just as an aside, they said, "Well, is the Bradley effect going to be applied in this election?"

Jefferson

This isn't an aside, because we're going to come to this, too.

Cunningham

They said, "Is the Bradley effect going to be applied in this election?" I said, "Of course it is." You know what the Bradley effect is. What the pundits say the Bradley effect is ain't what the Bradley effect is. The city of Los Angeles came to the conclusion that they were in such dire straits that what difference does it make if Tom Bradley, a black man, is elected mayor. Maybe he can make a difference. I said, "The Bradley effect is that the United States is in such difficulty that people are willing to take a chance on someone with some intellect and intelligence, no matter what his color may be." So yes, the Bradley effect did occur in this election, as I call it, not the one that the pundits wanted--not the negative one the pundits wanted to put out there.

Jefferson

So in terms of some of the other things that you feel are your legacy while you were an elected official, I have a list of things, but what are the ones that you think? You've mentioned a couple that you were especially proud of.

Cunningham

One of the things that I probably am responsible for to a great extent, when I came on the city council, they were into the business of grants, federal government involvement, and as you know, I'd come out of a firm that had tremendous involvement with federal government funding, with the utilization of federal funds and how to apply, how to utilize them. And having gotten my master's in urban affairs, urban planning, I wound up becoming the chairman of the grants Housing Community Development Committee, and how to utilize federal grant money.

Jefferson

It's something that hadn't been so--

Cunningham

It hadn't been so prominent before.

Jefferson

In Los Angeles.

Cunningham

Yes. It had been kind of like a throwaway, you know. Oh, a bunch of organizations coming down here begging for money, and you know. We came up with a systematic way in which we could, one, evaluate the needs, determine the system for how to put the dollars out. I even came up with an approach where, on an annual basis, I would go to Washington, and I always made certain I would go just as they were closing the fiscal year, because there's always money left over, and there were certain departments I could go to and guys would say, "Oh, you're here again." "Yeah, I came to get what's left over." So we were able to get more funding in the city of Los Angeles, and a lot of times a lot of folks would take credit for it, but that's all right. I made my annual trip to Washington. You know, I knew my way around the Department of Commerce. I knew my way around HUD. I knew my way around Department of Labor and some other departments, the Department of Defense. One time I went to the Department of Defense and I tried to meet with the guys in the navy. I said, "Well, since you all build carriers, what's the possibility that we could construct a carrier in the middle of Olympic Boulevard and see if we could build some housing? I mean, as expensive as carriers are, we could really house some people with a carrier." They said, "Get out of here." I was just trying to find a way to be creative to get some navy money. [laughs] But it was far out and far-fetched. They laughed about it, you know. But we were always looking for creative ways to get money into the city of Los Angeles. And particularly after Carter got elected, who I was very close to, we did very well, because most of the guys who went on to become appointees in the Carter administration, I knew, knew fairly well, and they were very responsive to the city of Los Angeles. Matter of fact, you know, Carter got elected president of the United States and--well, when he was running after--as it got to the convention, where I could see that he was going to be the nominee, I was asked by the Carter team to sit down and talk with Tom Bradley. They literally wanted Tom Bradley to run for vice president.

Jefferson

This is '75.

Cunningham

This is '76, '75, '76. They literally wanted Tom Bradley to run for vice president, and if he wouldn't run for vice president, would he consider

becoming the head of FBI? Tom says, "No, I won't leave the city of Los Angeles. I already know what I want to do." He was looking at the governortorial. But no, he wouldn't consider it. I had to convey to the Carter people that Tom was not interested. He would support; he would do what he could, you know. But he had other things on his plate.

Jefferson

Were you, at that point, thinking about running for higher office or looking at other--

Cunningham

Well, I think if Tom had left, I would have thought about running for mayor. It depended on where he went. Of course, now when he ran for governor, we spent a lot of time determining what the transition--

Jefferson

And that was 19--

Cunningham

In 1982. Determining what the transition was. There are thousands of offices in this state that are appointive and that have some degree of power, and we had developed a transition book approach and knew a lot about those offices. We would have had a chance to make definitive impacts in the state of California. If he had been elected governor, I would probably have wanted to go with him to Sacramento, and he and I had discussed it. But that was not to be. He came close the first time. Matter of fact, I was with him that night, and we kept looking at the numbers, because, you know, they said this is won, and we kept waiting and kept waiting and kept waiting, and Tom wasn't looking too good. Then finally we all went downstairs, and it was a kind of a "Yeah, but hold it. We're waiting for the rest to come in," you know, the vote to come in. Finally it was determined that he had no chance of winning, and that was a big disappointment for him. Then, of course, you know, in 1986 we couldn't raise the funds. I mean, I used practically all of my political funds, because in those days you could maintain a sizeable fund. I had close to a million dollars in my campaign funds. Tom Bell, who had his own investment banking firm, was one of the first [black owned] firms on the New York Stock Exchange.

Jefferson

Yes, Campbell--what was it?--something and Bell.

Cunningham

Daniels and Bell. But by then he had left Daniels and it was just Tom Bell. We pretty much financed Tom's campaign. I know I put over eight hundred some-odd thousand into it, put as much of my campaign funds as I could into his campaign, and Tom raised--we raised across the country maybe another two to three million dollars. It was an underfunded campaign, because people weren't willing to go to try to defeat [George] Deukmejian, which we tried to do. We tried and we failed. But be that as it may, we tried. But if the totality of the political spectrum, particularly minority elected officials, had wrapped their arms around Tom Bradley's campaign, he would have been governor in the state of California. But be that as it may. I guess some of them felt that he would have been a threat, you know. He would have overshadowed their importance, their eminence. That's always our problem.

Jefferson

In terms of your staff, there were many people on your staff that went on to other--

Cunningham

Various kinds of things.

Jefferson

Yes. Yes, but can you name a few of the people that were on your staff that have moved on to different things?

Cunningham

Let's talk about Allen Gershman, Rafe Sonnenshine.

Jefferson

Ger--

Cunningham

Allen Gershman, G-e-r-s-h-a-m-a-n. Allen Gershman.

Jefferson

G-e-r-s-h-m-a-n.

Cunningham

Allen Gershman, Rafe Sonnenshine.

Jefferson

Ray--

Cunningham

Rafe, R-a-f-e, Dr. Rafe Sonnenshine.

Jefferson

R-a-f--

Cunningham

--e, capital S-o-n-n-e-n-shine, Sonnenshine, something to that--well, you've seen him. He's always on television. He was just on the television the other day. He became an expert in black politics, and so he--you know. He's a professor at Fullerton, California State University at Fullerton. Allen Gershman got elected to the board of education. Maxine Waters got elected to the assembly and to Congress. Kerman Maddox has gone on to become a very competent, capable, prominent political consultant and lobbyist. Roddy Wright has gone on to public life, both as assemblyman and now sitting as a state senator. Sydney Williams was on my staff. He went on to become ambassador to the Bahamas.

Jefferson

I didn't know he had worked for you.

Cunningham

Yes, yes. He married Maxine, and he went on to become ambassador in the Bahamas. At one time Darryl Walker, who was in the Tenth Council District. He was a Rhodes Scholar and works in the movie industry as a producer and executive officer.

Jefferson

He was a lawyer then.

Cunningham

Yes, a lawyer. Okay, well, you know.

Jefferson

Well, it's not about me. It's about your interview, your oral history.

Cunningham

I'm trying to figure out who else was on that staff. Greg Irish, who was in Washington D.C. as--

Jefferson

Is he a lawyer? I don't remember.

Cunningham

No, he's not. No, he's not. He came through Coro. Went on to run the District of Columbia's, Washington, D.C.'s, Irish, labor administration activities, and now he heads up with Mayor [Antonio] Villaraigosa's Workforce Investment Board. He is the executive director. Let me think. Let's see, who else was on that staff?

Jefferson

What about Willard Murray?

Cunningham

Willard Murray, that's right. I forgot about Willard Murray. Willard and I go back a long ways. Willard and I have worked together. We talked about that.

Jefferson

Go on and talk about it again.

Cunningham

When we were both very young, in '62 when I was in Coro and he was the engineering brains behind computer walk sheets.

Jefferson

So that was your early encounter with him.

Cunningham

Yes, that was the early encounter, and then later he came back and he was looking for opportunities, and we hired him. Willard is tremendous, except Willard has a mind of his own, you know. I said, "Willard, don't take the city car outside of the domain of the city or outside of Los Angeles County without first of all getting permission." Well, we look up one day. Willard is up in Ventura somewhere with the car, you know. Got back, so we had to work it out. But Willard and I have been friends.

Jefferson

But on your staff he was an administrative aide or what?

Cunningham

Yes, right. He did very special programs. I mean, Willard is a genius. I don't know whether people realize that or not, and Willard, he always has good advice, and Willard is a piece of work. But, you know, sometime you have to let people work outside the box and think outside the box, and if you do that with Willard, you'd be surprised--

Jefferson

What he would come up with.

Cunningham

--yes, what you could accomplish.

Jefferson

Then the other people that we mentioned, most of them were involved in more fieldwork.

Cunningham

Such as--

Jefferson

Maxine Waters. She wasn't a policy analyst.

Cunningham

Oh, no, Maxine was the chief of staff.

Jefferson

Okay, so she was the chief of staff.

Cunningham

Oh yes, she was the chief of staff.

Jefferson

And then Kermit was--

Cunningham

He was doing fieldwork and some policy development, yes.

Jefferson

And then Rod Wright.

Cunningham

Rod Wright has always been--Rod Wright has been the kind of guy who would roll his sleeves up and do anything, but he's also been very studied in what he does. And Rod Wright is willing to take the long line to try to think an issue through. He still displays that in his public demeanor and his public life. Yes.

Jefferson

For you, you stayed on the city council until 1986.

Cunningham

Right.

Jefferson

At that point you had come to the conclusion it was time to move on. What was transpiring with you as it related to how you were feeling about what you had accomplished and your legacy and moving forward?

Cunningham

Well, sometimes you probably have done all that you can do at that point. Also, you have to realize, I had children, young children coming along, and at that time it was kind of difficult trying to feed a family of four or five on fifty thousand dollars a year. That's all they were paying at that point. So I determined that it was not something I had to do for the rest of my life--I had already determined that before I went there, but it was at a point at which, you know, you're fifty-some years old, and you say, "You know, I need to do something else for my own good, for my own personal worth, for my family worth, etc." So that I did, and today I'm set. My daughter has finished Rice University. My second son is at the University of California in Riverside. My third son is at Arizona University.

Jefferson

In terms of this later family.

Cunningham

Right. So, I mean, if they need something, I can respond to it relatively quick. I don't have to go in debt to get it, necessarily, for them. So I think it was a wise decision for my personal family's development. You know, I did not get elected to Congress. I kind of wanted to do that, actually.

Jefferson

You ran for Congress in--

Cunningham

I ran for Congress in--

Jefferson

What year was that? Let's see. That would have been '75.

Cunningham

'78. '78, I think it was, right after--yes, '78.

Jefferson

Okay. It was [Yvonne Brathwaite] Burke's seat, though.

Cunningham

Yes. Burke had left.

Jefferson

Yvonne Burke's seat.

Cunningham

And, of course, Julian [Dixon] got elected. So it kind of just left me feeling somewhat defeated.

Jefferson

But you had stayed on in office.

Cunningham

Oh yes, I stayed on in office and determined that--

Jefferson

And city council.

Cunningham

--determined that I was going to do a good job. Also, I had a desire to go to the board of supervisors then, and it didn't look like Kenny Hahn was going to move on. So timing is everything, and if you don't have the time to spend to wait for the timing, you move on. And I moved on.

Jefferson

How do you see politics, elected government, representation today in comparison to the time when you were most active as an elected official? Because you remained active even in your private-sector work. That's one question, and then as it relates to a new generation or how political power has evolved in terms of the black power movement in California.

Cunningham

In California the difficulty is two or three things. The first thing is term limits. That's number one, because it makes these elected officials have to scramble for the next position. The problem is that many of these people who come into public office are not coming into public office because it gives them an opportunity to improve their status in living. Well, no one ever wants to give

up good living, so that creates a problem with term limitation. The other thing term limitation imposes on it is a lack of an opportunity to have a building block process for determining a policy direction. So they've got to worry about where is the next office I'm going to go to, so they've got to worry about all these scrambling at chairs and all that sort of thing. So term limits, I think, has been very hurtful. I think the other thing that's going to be extremely, extremely very hurtful is this proposition with reference to gerrymandering, because I'm not sure judges are going to have the same kind of sensitivity that--

Jefferson

So you're talking about redistricting--

Cunningham

Redistricting.

Jefferson

--for offices for the state.

Cunningham

For the state, for the assembly, etc. I think it's going to have to change.
Because of the nature of trying to--

Jefferson

Reapportionment, that's what I was looking for.

Cunningham

Yes, reapportionment and redistricting. Because of the nature of trying to find the next seat, a lot of these elected officials don't develop the kind of mentees that can take on some new opportunities. There are new opportunities opening up in the Inland Empire. One person, I have to give him credit, who has been very sensitive to that has been Mervyn Dymally, and he's been very helpful to some people. I mean, Amina Carter is a tremendous young lady from out of San Bernardino. She's in the state assembly. Moreno Valley and the city of Riverside, and as you go down to Palm Springs and go up.

Jefferson

Amina Carter?

Cunningham

Amina Carter. She's in the state assembly, from San Bernardino, California. So, you know, you have San Bernardino, Rialto, Fontana, Rancho Cucamonga--Rancho Bernardo--Rancho Cucamonga, I'm sorry. You have those areas. Those areas are populated in such a way now that, through coalitions with Hispanics and blacks and whites, and it's not as conservative as they try to play it to be, you can have successes, tremendous successes. San Diego, there are opportunities in San Diego. But, I mean, since there is no stability, no constancy, and everybody is busy trying to look to their next office, it's hard to develop new talent. The NAACP is not as strong as it used to be. Many of the organizations where leadership used to come from are no longer there, and there is a certain sense of a new ennui that has sort of set in, you know. Despite the recession, people are somewhat--not complacent, but are somewhat at ease. Young people are doing much better than they've done before. You know, they get these big jobs, and those that don't get these big jobs, in a lot of cases, they can wait it out if they come from a certain level of family involvement, because, you know, kids go to college. They come back home, and they go and they work, you know. Black families are now--many places where you expect for that talent to come from, those black families have been able to give their children--spoiled them to the degree that they've got most of the things that they need, so now they're looking to either go into business for themselves or to go into high-paying jobs. It's kind of difficult to convince somebody to come back and do the kinds of things that are necessary to create leadership opportunities.

Cunningham

But on the other hand, I think all of us have a responsibility to try to impact the situation. I don't know where we go from here. I really don't. I have tried, personally, because you always represent a threat to elected people. So I have tried to be as innocuous as possible. I mean, if somebody needs my help, I'll try to give it. I try to share my knowledge, you know, what I know, what I don't know, what I feel I should know, or what I feel you should know. But, you know, if you get out there too far, somebody will be waiting to chop your legs off because they think you want to run for public office. "No," I tell them, "I'm

too old to run for public office, so don't worry about me." But they don't necessarily believe that, because, you know, we've got older guys who are running and they're getting elected. But I think there are a number of young people out there who are prepared to present themselves. I just hope that they have the capacity to understand what's involved. I think somewhere along the line maybe some of us need to organize some kind of mentoring process. But you start doing that, again you become a threat to those who are there.

Jefferson

Then in terms of this dialogue in the context of national politics, how do you see power as it relates to the national context and the development of power?

Cunningham

I think what's happening on the national scene now is that the lines are being blurred to a great extent. You aren't going to make it simply because you are strong in the black community. You have to be strong in terms of concepts, ideas, and policy. You have to be a thinker. You have to have brilliance. I'm overwhelmed by some of the successes that I've seen from back East. I mean, the governor of Massachusetts in a state that's, what, 7 to 8 percent black, and he's elected under the same test that was used with Obama. Young people are going to emerge who are neither black nationalists or white nationalists, but are Americans, and I think that Americans will begin to take a look at Americans and those who can present the best thing for American districts, congressional districts, senate districts. That's the hope. So that's a different kind of mentoring. That means that young people have to get themselves prepared, education-wise. They're going to have to make some sacrifices and get involved with community organizations, or be philanthropic if they have the resources. They're going to have to become part of the power structure in America, and it's there.

Jefferson

Now, that's an interesting way to look at it. They're going to have to become part of the power structure of America.

Cunningham

Yes. Not just part of the black power structure, but part of the power structure, because that's what we were fighting for, to become part of the power structure.

Jefferson

In the way that you're phrasing this, are we still, as different ethnic groups, Latino and African American, still trying to become part of the power structure?

Cunningham

I think to a great extent we are becoming the power structure. You could extrapolate just on the birth rate alone. In two generations white Americans are going to be extremely a minority in America. In America, I mean, just by numbers alone.

Jefferson

Yes, I understand what you're saying, by numbers alone.

Cunningham

They may not be minority in terms of certain aspects of the power, whether it be corporate power or whether it be labor power or whether it be philanthropic power. But in the meantime, the American people are going to become much more powerful, because there are going to be more minorities, whether it be Hispanic, Asian, blacks, or what have you, that are going to be part of the power structure. And it's going to be the beauty of America, I think.

Jefferson

It's a new day.

Cunningham

It's always a new day. Every day is a new day. Anybody who says today is yesterday has got to be off their gourd. We may not want to accept it, but every day is a new day. That's the beauty of it.

Jefferson

So in terms of your political life, what do you think was your greatest satisfaction?

Cunningham

That's hard to determine. I mean, there is no such thing as the greatest satisfaction.

Jefferson

Okay. It's a question--

Cunningham

Yes, I understand. I understand.

Jefferson

--and it may not be applicable.

Cunningham

Well, it's always applicable. You can ask the question, but you have many highs and you have many lows. You accomplish some things, you lose some things. You see some things that give you ecstasy, and you see other things that give you sadness. So the fact that you had an opportunity to do it, that's my greatest accomplishment. Whatever I accomplished, whatever my legacy may be, is not for me to determine. It will be what scholars and others evaluate the value of what I did. I was not anxious to name a lot of buildings after me. I was not anxious to name a lot of things after me. My interest was to try to make people's lives a little better because I had been here. That's what I hope my legacy will be.

Jefferson

Today what kinds of civic activities are you involved in?

Cunningham

Right now I'm involved with trying to help bring a movie theater to Watts, to the Watts community.

Jefferson

And that is the Watts--

Cunningham

--Star [Theater]. And I wind up on several community organizations. Right now I'm extremely active in my alumni association.

Jefferson

At--

Cunningham

UC Riverside. Because education is extremely important. I will be the incoming president of the National Alumni Association for UC Riverside. I think there are tremendous advantages for going to the University of California at Riverside. I think we came up with a pretty good approach to how we can maintain diversity at a university of that size or in any university, and that's by alumni being active in the recruitment of people to come to the university, and particularly people of color. The University of California Riverside is the most diverse campus in the California system. It is number five in terms of diversity in the United States. But that's because we work very hard at trying to get minority people to understand that this is an opportunity. Here is a university right here at home. We never want to be caught up in the same thing UCLA was caught up in.

Jefferson

In terms of the recruitment effort.

Cunningham

In terms of the number of people that they get enrolled, and, you know, one year they only had ninety-six black freshmen, ninety-six.

Unidentified Female Speaker

Eighty-six.

Cunningham

Eighty-six, okay. See, I missed it by ten. There were probably ten others that were black; just didn't know it. [laughter] You know, they had some black blood somewhere. But we don't ever want to be caught up in that, so we vow not to do that personally.

Jefferson

The Watts Star Theater, talk about that a little more.

Cunningham

There has been no theater for first-run movies. There's been no theater for first-run movies in the Watts community in the last forty years. All the theaters have been torn down. Theater operators did not see of any value to move into the community. As you know, the present-day movie development, the theater house has to have at least four, at least multi-theater venues so they can show multi pictures. It's got to be stadium seating, and it has to be state of the art. This is what we're trying to get done in Watts. It's being done on a nonprofit basis, which, of course, always is extremely difficult, which means that there's going to be a need for a tremendous amount of government dollars than there has been to date. The entity is becoming and developing, and eventually, we think within the next couple of years, that you'll be able to go to one of the multi-theaters at the Watts Star and see a first-run movie.

Jefferson

Okay. And then you're also active with, and you, I think, were involved with the enabling legislation as well, for the L.A. Convention Center.

Cunningham

No, I sit on the Convention Center Authority, which means that we have the responsibility for any expansion of the convention or any construction or any bonding, and we watch to make certain that those funds are used in a proper, constructive manner, and that the funds are used for what they were bonded for.

Jefferson

But weren't you involved early when you were on the council with some sort of legislation to do with developing the convention center? Maybe I have that wrong.

Cunningham

Well, yes, yes. We developed the concept of expanding the convention center, but that was years ago.

Jefferson

I understand, but that was when you were on the council, right?

Cunningham

Yes.

Jefferson

But you've remained active on some of it.

Cunningham

Yes. I represent the county. I represent the county on that Convention Center Authority. It's a joint center--I mean, it's a joint authority. So I was Mrs. Burke's appointee.

Jefferson

So you're still keeping your hand in government on some level.

Cunningham

Well, I try, you know. I am a lobbyist, which I consider to be a very honorable thing. It could be dishonorable, you know. Being a priest could be dishonorable, you know, as well as being honorable. So it just depends on the person and how they maintain their ethics.

Jefferson

So I'm going to ask you one last question.

Cunningham

Oh, good.

Jefferson

For a young person who is thinking about going into politics today, what would you offer them in terms of a conversation if they came to you to talk to you as it related to mentorship and things that they should be thinking about in terms of setting themselves up for public life?

Cunningham

Well, the first thing I would try to find from them is where they are education-wise, and I would recommend that they get an education, because all education or more college represents is the fact that you have gone somewhere; you've had your mind in a disciplined setting. You've been able to have your reasoning faculties challenged, which are all extremely important. You've learned to write. You've learned to read. You've learned some things. That's the first thing I would suggest to them. The second thing I would try to find from them is what's the reason for their running. I mean, if it's ego satiation, I would try to dissuade them. But I would tell them it's important that they have a strong ego. If they were attempting to have a plan in mind for how they think that they can improve the lives of other people, I would encourage them to continue. I would then recommend that they move to try to understand through either some public entity such as community service, some community service organizations or some political organizations--you have to be careful in dealing with those--or in some way find a way in which you have an opportunity to test those things that you believe in and be able to make a contribution in some manner. And I would suggest that they begin to enlighten themselves in political campaigns. Do a little walking from door to door, a little telephoning, a little knocking on doors, but also learn public policy by actually hooking yourself up with an elected official or someone who looks like that they're moving. I would tell them not to try to be too ambitious, but also be aggressive, but temperate, with good thoughts, with a proper demeanor, and to keep their skirts as clean as they can. I would encourage them to go do it, and if at first you don't succeed, as my father said, try, try again. A lot of times they say the third time's the charm. You have to make a choice. Okay.

Jefferson

On that note, we will end our session today.

Cunningham

Thank you.

Jefferson

Thank you very much.

Date:

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