

A TEI Project

Interview of William Elkins

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (January 12, 2007)

Foster

OK. Good afternoon. It's December 7, 2007, and we're at the home of William Elkins to do an oral history for the Second Baptist UCLA Project. Bill, will you give me your full name and date of birth to begin, please?

Elkins

William Elkins. Born January 25, 1920.

Foster

OK. And, as I explained to you, this is an oral history, so we are going to do from soup to nuts. And so I would like you to kind of think about your childhood. You were born in Arkansas. Would you tell us your hometown and where you were born and --

Elkins

I was born in a little town called Forest City, Arkansas. My parents were divorced when I was 11 and I came to California with my mother [Virginia Nesbit Elkins] and sister [Jenilla Curry] to join my mother's family, who had begun to migrate here, I guess, four or five years prior to 1931.

Foster

Thirty-one?

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

OK. Let's go back to Forest City. What are your remembrances of Forest City, and where is it located in Arkansas? Is it Southern Arkansas? Central Arkansas?

Elkins

Do you know, I think it's -- you have to say southern Arkansas. Had a very pleasant childhood. My father [William Elkins, Sr.] ran a very successful cleaning and pressing business.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And I guess you would have to characterize my family as middle class. We lived well. I did not attend the public schools, attended a school that was run by the Catholic Church. My father was very close to the bishop, whose name I don't recall, of that area, and we attended --

Foster

The Roman parochial school?

Elkins

Right. Came to California, of course, and reunited with my, as I indicated, my mother's --

Foster

Family.

Elkins

-- family.

Foster

So your father was rather prosperous and rather successful. Did he have sibs [siblings], brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, that you remember kind of being instrumental in your life?

Elkins

An aunt, who we were very close to. Loved her dearly. Named Mary Ellis.

Foster

An Elkins or a Nesbit?

Elkins

Elkins.

Foster

OK. Was she your father's sister or --

Elkins

My father's sister. And no brothers. That I know, there were no brothers.

Foster

OK. Do you remember any of your other aunts, but you just remember Mary Ellis?

Elkins

Along with Mary Ellis there was another aunt who lived in Memphis, Tennessee, who frequently visited the little town of Forest City, Arkansas. In retrospect, of course, I was too young to have any real sense of the dynamics of what was going on between African Americans and whites, but in retrospect, it

was a nice, little town devoid of many of the problems that southern cities had between African Americans and white people. I don't recall the population of Forest City -- probably 20,000. 15 - 20,000.

Foster

What percentage were African Americans approximately? Just a --

Elkins

Probably a good 30 or 40 percent.

Foster

OK. It wasn't one-to-one, but blacks were a plurality in the community.

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. Now, your father being close to the Roman Catholic bishop now, you are a Baptist and I assume a lifelong --

Elkins

We were Baptists. We belonged to the largest Baptist church in Forest City, and I remember some experiences there with Sunday School and group development.

Foster

So, do you remember who your pastor was when you were in Forest City?

Elkins

No.

Foster

But BYPU [Baptist Youth Prayer Union] and Sunday school and those things were very important. Now, what about your mother's family before they departed. They are Nesbit's, right?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. So, what --

Elkins

My mother was the last one left in Forest City. All of her sisters and brothers had migrated to Los Angeles, so when she and my father were divorced, it was an automatic move.

Foster

So, you were a boy of 11. You had gone to Roman schools all of your life. And then how did you find your way to Southern California? Did you guys take the train?

Elkins

No. We came back by train.

Foster

You came by train. And do you have any remembrances of that train?

Elkins

Well, as I remember, it was two nights, two days. It was a long --

Foster

A long trip.

Elkins

Not an unpleasant one, but a long trip. And we had no problems whatsoever.

Foster

So, here you guys are. Your mother is single with, two children, right?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. So where did you guys located in the Los Angeles area?

Elkins

Her family, my grandfather [William Nesbit], had bought the largest home in --
1206 East 25th Street in Los Angeles. A six-bedroom --

Foster

Home.

Elkins

-- home.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And hell, there were -- let me see. There were four families living there. We
slept anywhere except in the kitchen, but it was a very, very pleasant
experience.

Foster

So, your grandfather Nesbit had owned a home.

Elkins

My grandfather was one of the first African Americans to receive a Carpenter's
license in Los Angeles. He was a very successful home builder. And, when we
were growing up, had a lot of cousins. We worked with him during the
summer. And earned some money building homes.

Foster

So, your grandfather, Mr. Nesbit, what was his first name?

Elkins

Will.

Foster

Will Nesbit was very instrumental because he was here. There was a home for
you and your mother and sister to come to. And so talk about your aunts and
uncles. You said that your mother was the last to come out here.

Elkins

There were six sisters [Ann Phillips, Virginia Mackey, May Harris, Janette Ford, and Winifred Harris]. My mother and, if I recall correctly, was the third sister. And there were three brothers. So there was a total of --

Foster

Of nine. Nine, OK.

Elkins

-- nine. And I remember shortly after relocating a couple of the brothers -- one went to Chicago and one went to St. Louis, Missouri, and one stayed and worked with my grandfather as a carpenter.

Foster

As a carpenter, OK. So, the Nesbits were a large, extended family. And so where on 25th Street were you actually located?

Elkins

On the 1200 block. I often make reference to when we were growing up, it was an all-black community. It was a Chinese family, a Japanese family and an Italian family in the block, in the 1200 block of East 25th Street. We had a very pleasant experience.

Foster

So you were one block east of Central Avenue, then?

Elkins

You got it.

Foster

OK. So 25th and Central.

Elkins

Second house east of Naomi Avenue.

Foster

OK. Does the house still stand?

Elkins

It does indeed.

Foster

OK. So that's --

Elkins

We sold it, I guess, about 10, 12 years ago, after all of the sisters --

Foster

Had passed away.

Elkins

-- had passed away.

Foster

So you lived 1200 block, 25th Street. So 25th and Naomi. So where did you then go to grammar school?

Elkins

I went to elementary school on 20th Street.

Foster

20th Street. Which is right there.

Elkins

Down Lafayette and then Jefferson.

Foster

And then Jeff. But I want to come back to the Nesbit family. So your cousin, Charlie [Nesbit], is here, and you guys are about a couple of months apart?

Elkins

No more than that.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And then Charlie, we came to Los Angeles in '33. Charlie came not a year later.

Foster

OK. OK. OK.

Elkins

To join the family.

Foster

So all of the Nesbits. Did your mother eventually kind of rent a place on her home, or did she stay with her father?

Elkins

For years, all in the same home. And, when I was a senior at Jeff, [Jefferson High School] there was a four-room apartment right on the corner and my mother and one of her sisters decided to rent the apartment in that facility.

Foster

But that was just basically a half block away. So everybody --

Elkins

No. No. It was right next to 1206 East 25th Street. The apartment building was on the corner of Naomi and 25th Street. And 1206 was immediately east of the apartment building. So, that was no big thing. So we finally --

Foster

So describe this Nesbit household. So you had a set of grandparents and their children and then their grandchildren. So how many of you collectively -- how many collectively Nesbits --

Elkins

Let me reiterate. There were four families living at 1206 East 25th Street.

Foster

OK. OK.

Elkins

Literally.

Foster

Literally. OK.

Elkins

1206 East 25th Street is, as I indicated, the largest home in the block with the largest lot. It was huge.

Foster

Was it a lot and a half?

Elkins

Easily.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And we had a very pleasant home experience.

Foster

So the cousins all got mentored together. So if one did something --

Elkins

Correct. They were more like brothers and sisters, not first cousins.

Foster

OK. So kind of describe that experience. So you and Charlie and the rest -- so -

-

Elkins

Well, there were me and Charlie, James, Tamblyn, and then Virginia came, the daughter of another one. Let me see, there were me and my sister, Charlie --

Foster

So you and your sister were the Elkins.

Elkins

Yes. And then there were the Nesbits and the Harris' and the Phillips.

Foster

OK. So there were four families.

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

And so in terms of your schooling and mentoring, your aunts and uncles were just as instrumental as your mother, then, in terms of --

Elkins

It was the most cohesive family you could imagine. As I said, a very, very pleasant experience, and we took care of one another.

Foster

So what were the expectations? Did you guys have a vegetable garden or chickens or was it just --

Elkins

No. As I recall, one of the aunts raised some chickens, but no vegetable garden. You know, it was a different world then. When I was in high school, I worked two hours a day at the market on Cooper Avenue and 25th Street. And, my grandfather leased the vegetable operation in the market and we would travel to Seventh, Eighth and Central to the big market there --

Foster

To the produce market?

Elkins

-- two or three times a week to pick up vegetables. First on the streetcar and then my grandfather finally bought a car. So we used the car. That was a pleasant experience. I remember grapes being three pounds for a dime compared to what they are now.

Foster

So your mom came right as the Depression was hitting full force. There --

Elkins

My mother worked as a domestic. Six dollars a week. And a 75-cents a week streetcar pass.

Foster

But for you guys growing up, the Depression, because there were five families including your grandparents, didn't impact you much because I assume collective meals at five or six o'clock at night, shared chores --

Elkins

When I look back on it, we were never poor. This was during the heart of the Depression. And we lived an extremely good life.

Foster

Did you realize it at the time, or in retrospect you kind of looked back and kind of said --

Elkins

No, in retrospect, because I remember, I used to travel to Sears Roebuck at the beginning of the school year to pick up two pair of corduroy pants. And I had a jacket and some wool trousers, two pair of corduroy pants, a couple of pair of jeans and a number of shirts. That was my wardrobe.

Foster

And you had to keep it clean?

Elkins

Absolutely. Absolutely. I relayed back and the people thought that my family had money. We did not, because the boys and the girls were so clean and then war -- I'd press those corduroy pants and, as I said, many of them thought the Nesbits, the Elkins, the Harris' had money. We didn't.

Foster

Now, you mention 25th Street. 25th and Central, was that where Mr. Hawkins had his pharmacy, not Gus but Gus' brother? Was there a Hawkins pharmacy or

--

Elkins

There was a building immediately south of the pharmacist there on the corner of 25th and there was a Dr. Robinson and, hell, there weren't but maybe four black doctors in Los Angeles then.

Foster

Because there was a Smith Pharmacy, but that was on 12th Street, and then it moved all the way down to Jefferson. But didn't Gus' brother have an office near 25th Street?

Elkins

No, he was in a building in the 41 or 4200 block of Central Avenue.

Foster

Further down on Central Avenue. But let's go back. So you come in 31 and here you are going to 20th Street. What kind of boys and girls did you meet as a fifth and sixth grader at 20th Street? And what was that --

Elkins

It was a totally integrated school setting. All the way from Lafayette -- there was a large number of Hispanics at Lafayette. At Jefferson High School, the student body, as I recall, was about 65 percent black. The rest, Anglo, white, and not that many Hispanics.

Foster

OK. Many people, not your contemporaries, but people my age or younger, or people non-native to Los Angeles, think of the Central Avenue corridor in the 20s and 30s as being all black and you are kind of disabusing this picture in terms of describing your block on 25th Street, your experience at 20th Street, your experience at Lafayette and your experience at Jeff. Do you want to elaborate on that? People got along, according to you, but how did they get along? I mean, there weren't large numbers of whites or large numbers of Mexicans or large numbers of Germans, but how did things operate?

Elkins

I don't recall a single incident of racial disruption between blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians. A large number of Asians --

Foster

Japanese Americans or Chinese?

Elkins

No, Japanese. As a matter of fact, one of my best friends was Japanese. Hishamo Nishumo. I remember that name, and how distressed we were when we moved.

Foster

Did Hishamo go to Jeff with you?

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

OK. He went to Jeff.

Elkins

And he came back years later when I was at UCLA and he joined us then. But to answer, you know, what kind of relationships, absolutely cordial relationships. As I say, I cannot recall one single incident involving any kind of disruptive behavior or any comment between blacks and whites or any other people for that matter.

Foster

Did you have black teachers either at 20th Street or at Lafayette or at Jeff?

Elkins

There were two black teachers. There were none at Lafayette. And certainly none at the elementary school. And there were two black teachers at Jefferson, a man who was the head of the music department, who was a genius, really.

Foster

Who was that?

Elkins

What the hell was his name? I'll think of it in a minute.

Foster

Just blurt it out when it comes to you.

Elkins

Was instrumental in me getting a scholarship to UCLA. As I indicated, I grew up in the 2nd Baptist Church and got a scholarship from Independence --

Foster

We'll want to come back --

Elkins

-- and it was passed on by Clayton Russell. And it was such an embarrassment to my church that they started a scholarship.

Foster

Because you and Albert McNeal both received --

Elkins

Albert went to [inaudible] and I went to Jeff.

Foster

And you went to Jeff.

Elkins

And we got --

Foster

The two scholarships.

Elkins

-- the two scholarships from Independence.

Foster

I want to come back to Lafayette, though. Did you meet Tom when you were at Lafayette? Bradley?

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

OK. So you were both at --

Elkins

We go back 90 years.

Foster

OK. Well, not quite 90, but you guys met when you were both students at Lafayette and one went to Jeff and the other went to Poly.

Elkins

You got it.

Foster

Talk about Central Avenue a little bit before we get to 2nd or kind of go to those things.

Elkins

Well, you know, Central was -- there were a lot of black businesses on Central Avenue. There were several theaters. The Lincoln Theater. One of the big things was we went to the matinee at Lincoln.

Foster

On Saturdays or on Sundays?

Elkins

On Sundays.

Foster

On Sundays.

Elkins

Went to the matinee at the Garrity Theater on Saturday. A nickel.

Foster

OK. So your mother let you go to the show on Sunday. OK.

Elkins

Yeah. They were sensible people.

Foster

So not overly strict.

Elkins

The aunts and also very, very sensible. I remember it was 10 cents for students at Lincoln and 25 cents for adults. And if you were over 16, you had to pay 25 cents. So I'm 17 and still paying the 10 cents. But I was tall, so I would never

forget this experience if I live to be 100. So this Sunday I went with my 10 cents ticket and the man at the door said, son, I've been letting you slide for over a year, but you're going to have to start paying 25 cents. Broke my heart.

Foster

So the Lincoln Theater was a big part of Central Avenue. The Garrity. So those were kind of instrumental. Did you --

Elkins

And the Rosebud [Theater] and I don't remember if there was a 7-11. The Lincoln was big in our lives, but when black shows, when they came, black bands, and other shows, when they came to Los Angeles, Lincoln Theater was where they appeared.

Foster

OK. So I'm going to take you, not so much away from Central Avenue, but I'm going to mention a name. S. P. Johnson. And I knew that he was chair of the trustee board at Second Baptist and also sponsored sports teams and what have you. Do you have any recollections of S.P.?

Elkins

How could I not have?

Foster

Well, I just kind of want to --

Elkins

He was almost like a father to me. And, we had him -- the mortuary purchased every other year, we had a basketball team and the uniforms and S.P. purchased --

Foster

The uniforms?

Elkins

-- the uniforms for our basketball team. And sponsored picnics, Christmas parties, for the young kids of Second Baptist Church.

Foster

So, S.P. was a real benefactor for --

Elkins

He was a much-beloved senior member of Second Baptist, and as I said, a father figure to many of us who didn't have fathers. We loved him dearly.

Foster

Because he was the Sunday School superintendent or just because of all of the things he did?

Elkins

It was for many things for the young people. Very sensitive and very accommodating and was a benefactor for so much of what went on at 2nd Baptist Church.

Foster

A number of people have talked and I've, in another context, I've asked you about the Unity picnics. Do you remember the Unity picnics and where they held? Were they held at Lincoln [park] or were they held at Brookside [park] or would it depend?

Elkins

Certainly. Both. And we looked forward to them.

Foster

Explain to someone who wouldn't know what the Unity picnics were so that --

Elkins

Simply, I don't know how many, several hundreds of people, were convened in the park and there were gratuitous beverages supplied, fried chicken, barbeque beef, whatever else I don't recall. It was big. It was very big in our lives.

Foster

So each church or most of the churches had kind of trucks that kind of went --

Elkins

Right. It was a good thing because it afforded the churches and opportunity to interface with one another, the membership with --

Foster

Particularly for the young people or --

Elkins

Particularly for the young people, that was the concern.

Foster

The young people. So, the other part of that was around the world there were particular events that 2nd [Baptist Church] would have for young people at BYPU. What were those and, again, why were they important? I kind of come back to S.P. Johnson.

Elkins

Well, I was president of BYPU probably when I was 19, 20 years old. The black church was one of the most important factors in the lives of young people. Many more of the young people then were affiliated with, identified with, or were members of churches. That's not so, today. So they were big in our lives.

Foster

OK. Having said that, I want to ask you a question. Walk me through a Sunday for you between the time you arrived in 1931 to the time you went off to UCLA. Just walk me through what you'd do on Sundays from the time you'd get up to the time you went to bed.

Elkins

Well, we diligently went to Sunday school.

Foster

OK. That was

Elkins

Every Sunday. Yes. And then there was no 8 a.m., which --

Foster

So it was the 11 o'clock.

Elkins

Yeah. And to the 11 o'clock service. Came home, changed clothes, you had to wear a shirt and tie of course if you went to church, and went to the theater every Sunday, as I indicated, the Lincoln Theater or the Rosebud, but the Rosebud was further down, if there were some special [show], and the theaters then had what we'd call serials. Do you know what serials are?

Foster

Yeah, I know what a serial is.

Elkins

And I remember my cousin, Charlie -- we were in the theater and the serial was over and they would always close the serial with the star being in trouble. And, so the star was in trouble and it closed with the word, "Will he escape?" And Charlie said, "Hell, yes." It broke up the theater.

Foster

So, you'd go to the theater. Now, when was BYPU?

Elkins

BYPU was at six o'clock and then BYPU was a good hour and then back home. That was Sunday.

Foster

You didn't do 7 o'clock service or sometimes you would or --

Elkins

No.

Foster

OK. OK. OK. So it was a long day, but your folks, your mom --

Elkins

It was pleasant. We were at, as I said, the theater, and then back for dinner. And then there were -- there was no such thing as TV and radio. There was a lot of serial stuff.

Foster

Well, describe Sunday dinner. Describe Sunday dinner.

Elkins

Well, just very pleasant dinners. The kids -- this is at 1206 East 25th Street. All of the cousins would be seated in the kitchen. There was a large table in the kitchen and the older people ate in the dining room. With plates. Never any plastic plates or anything. So dinner was a formal thing, you know, and very

pleasant dinners that we had. And we enjoyed the meal and enjoyed one another, on the face of it. That was it.

Foster

That was it. So walk me through going to Jeff [Jefferson High School] as a 14 year old. What was it like?

Elkins

I never entertained the idea of trying to go anywhere else. A number of -- quite a few of the students went to Poly [John J. Francis Polytechnic High School] or went to Manuel [Arts High School], but I wanted to go to Jeff. I had a very pleasant experience at Jeff. I did well. I was a good student, obviously, and used the grade point average that I achieved, as I said, to get the scholarship for UCLA. But, I was very active. I was president of the student body.

Foster

That was when you were in A-12, when you were a senior?

Elkins

That was when I was president of my class when I graduated. So it was a very pleasant experience. I had an extraordinary relationship with a number of people outside of 2nd Baptist Church, including Clayton Russell. When I was at Jeff, I was the first student from Jeff to win the oratorical contest at SC [University of Southern California], and Jeff had been participating in it for years but had never won it, and I won that. And Charolotta Bass had me down and took a picture of me and ran my picture on the front page in the California Eagle as the winner of that --

Foster

It's kind of interesting that you mentioned oratorical contest, because it appears that Lloyd Griffith, who was older than you were, had won an oratorical contest, you had won an oratorical contest at Jeff, and Dieon Morrow had won an oratorical contest. There seems to be a Second Baptist connection between public speaking. That the pastor's -- one of the pastor's sons and then his grandson and then a loyal Second Baptist minister --

Elkins

We did well. We did well.

Foster

What do you attribute that to? I mean, how did you get into public speaking?

Elkins

I don't know. I took public speaking, I guess, the last three semesters when I was at Jeff and did well and I remember my teachers very well and they encouraged me to focus on it. I had no intention of competing in the SC contest. This was the University of Southern California citywide schools from all over -- all of the high schools. It was big. It was big. It was no small thing. And I was encouraged and decided what my speech was going to be and I

decided I wanted to give a speech on Toussaint L'Ouverture [Haitian Revolution leader] [inaudible].

Foster

OK.

Elkins

Who was quite a character.

Foster

Right.

Elkins

And so that's the speech I gave and won. And, of course, it was a delight.

Foster

So you said Reverend --

Elkins

I represented Jeff in a number of activities during my senior year involving other schools. There was -- Jeff was, as I said, about, what, 65 percent black. And, there was a need to reach out to involve the black students --

Foster

In a lot of activities.

Elkins

Yeah. And with other groups. With other segments of the population. And, of course, I welcomed that. Bottom line, very, very pleasant experience and went to Jeff and, of course, went into the service and came back and finished and applied to UCLA Law School and was accepted and had -- but I wanted to work. I had married and they insisted that you not work, that you focus and go through --

Foster

Full time.

Elkins

-- full time with them, so I went into probation.

Foster

So you graduated from Jeff in '38?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. So, did you go straight in the service, or did you start UCLA in 1938?

Elkins

No. I didn't go into the service until 1939.

Foster

'39, OK. So, because your cousin, Charlie, didn't go to college. You went to college.

Elkins

Charlie went to City College. They -- all of them went to City College.

Foster

John Luke -- there were a number of people I know you went to school with. How did, you know -- so, you worked for a year when you graduated Jeff before going into the service? And how did you decide to kind of go into the service, because some people, '37, '38 --

Elkins

Decide? Hell, I was inducted. It was not a unilateral decision on my part -- I would have never gone in. But I was inducted.

Foster

You were inducted in '39.

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

And you stayed in from '39 until -- when were you discharged?

Elkins

I came back in 44.

Foster

Forty-four, OK.

Elkins

A long haul. I went to Italy and came back. I had one unique experience. I had had two years in Italian when I was at UCLA, so when I was inducted in the Army, I ended up in Italy and I was very fluent in Italian. So the federal government decided it was going to keep me in what is called the Army of Occupation. We were going to win the war and when they needed -- in particular, they wanted some black officers. I don't remember what they called them. (inaudible)

Foster

OK. Let me get this chronology correct. You graduated from Jeff in June of '38. That's correct?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

And did you start UCLA in September of '38?

Elkins

No, I worked.

Foster

You worked for a year. And then --

Elkins

I went to UCLA.

Foster

You went to UCLA in the fall of '39?

Elkins

You got it.

Foster

And then when were you inducted?

Elkins

I was inducted in 1940.

Foster

OK. So, you had a year at UCLA before your Uncle Sam called you.

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

OK. So you just had that one year. So, you worked for a year. You spent a year at UCLA.

Elkins

About a year-and-a-half at UCLA because I had had two semesters of Italian.

Foster

OK. So that -- I needed to get that clarified. Did you do any athletics while you were at Jeff?

Elkins

I played basketball my second year, first string, and decided I wanted to play football instead of basketball and sustained a hip injury that knocked me out, so I gave it all up. I didn't try to play anything.

Foster

OK. So you did sports one year and you were involved in BYPU and you were involved in debate. OK, so those were the things that kind of took up your time. OK. Did you work at any time while you were in high school?

Elkins

Remember, I told you that my grandfather bought --

Foster

A produce market.

Elkins

-- we had a produce -- well, we leased it. It was owned by the Japanese, and I worked every summer there full time and -- well, not full time. We worked with my grandfather building houses, and I would work weekends, on Saturday.

Foster

So that gave you your spending money. That gave you money for shoes or those little extra things that you needed or that you thought you wanted.

Elkins

Yeah, that was important.

Foster

So what did you do between '39 and '39? You said, you worked. Again, did you work for your grandfather that year or did you work for someone who was paying you a salary besides a family member?

Elkins

Oh, I worked with my grandfather and in the produce market.

Foster

OK. And so then in 39, you matriculate to UCLA. Describe this. What happened? How did you apply? One of the things I didn't ask you, you said you'd had debate --

Elkins

Well, I applied -- I was accepted at UCLA in '38 when I graduated and decided I wanted to work a year and then went -- the acceptance was still good in '39.

Foster

And you mentioned that you had won this oratorical contest, and that kind of broadened your horizons both in terms of the white world but also black Los Angeles. You mentioned Mrs. [Charolotta] Bass. You mentioned Clayton Russell. How did Clayton take an interest in you or Mrs. Bass, because you won --

Elkins

Well, there were -- you have to remember, it was a different world then, and there were six students at Jeff who were excelling and I was among those. I indicated earlier being involved in extra-curricular activities in the city. I was on a number of panels, student panels, and I don't even -- I met Charlotta Bass before I won the oratorical contest. And the same with Clayton Russell. We, well, one of the panels that I was on won something, and Clayton -- and this was before I graduated. So he had us over to introduce us.

Foster

This is at Independent Church.

Elkins

At Independent Church. And when I graduated, Independent was giving scholarships -- how did you find out that Albert MacNeil and I --

Foster

I know a lot of things. You know, being an LA native, I knew you got those scholarships. So you won the scholarship, but you mentioned there were five other Negroes. Can you remember -- in your class at Jeff, that were also doing academic --

Elkins

They were active and involved in panels of caring churches.

Foster

Can you remember who else beside yourself --

Elkins

There was a young man by the name of Lloyd Herbs, Albert Jones --

Foster

Lloyd is a member of St. Phillips and is still --

Elkins

Yeah, Lloyd is still living --

Foster

-- living and still very active. He and your cousin spent time together.

Elkins

Yeah, Charlie. Yeah. Albert Jones. Excuse me, very active. A young lady by the name of Cesile Phillips. And the other two I can't recall.

Foster

OK. But you guys were the cat's meow there at Jeff.

Elkins

Yeah, and you know, as I say, it was a different world then and if you sort of stood out, if you were selected and -- there was a lot of notoriety.

Foster

A lot of notoriety. So, let's fast-forward to '39 and Clayton's decision to have this scholarship. So, how did you apply? Or did someone tell you to apply?

Elkins

Clayton Russell personally called me and told me to apply for his scholarship. And, wanted to know if my church was giving out a scholarship. No. Well, you apply here. And I remember being introduced to Independent [inaudible] along with Albert [inaudible].

Foster

So, Albert was where? At Poly or --

Elkins

At Poly.

Foster

-- OK, so Albert was at Poly and you were at Jeff. One of the things we haven't discussed about your youth and coming here, we talked about S.P. Johnson and the Sunday School, what are your remembrances of Dr. Griffith? Since you were a young boy but coming of age.

Elkins

I remember him very well. He was like a father figure, I guess, like a grandfather figure to those of us who were growing up then. Devoted a lot of time to young people, Dr. Griffith did. And, was much beloved by us because he devoted so much time to us. What do I mean? Private counseling sessions with those he had chosen to guide and give counsel to.

Foster

So he would talk to you about the value of college? He would talk to you about the value of a good Christian life?

Elkins

Absolutely. Absolutely. And, that was very important.

Foster

Now, you mentioned you had been president of your class and BYPU, your BYPU mates, can you remember any of them that kind of stand out in your mind? That, you know, you kind of remember going to the theater with, but weren't at Jeff so much with you but were people that you were close to at 2nd in those days?

Elkins

I'm embarrassed because I don't remember names. Faces and experiences, yes. Douglas, well certainly I remember Douglas Vindactor, Artis Grant, who died two or three years ago. Phillip Washington. Those are all that I can remember.

Foster

But that's good. So '39, you go off to UCLA. And, here again, did you re-meet or reacquaint yourself with Tom Bradley when you were a freshman at UCLA or --

Elkins

In '39, there were 22 African Americans.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

Bill [William] Elkins was one of them. Kenny Washington. Tom Bradley. Jackie Robinson. Woodrow Strode. And there was another boy from Pasadena. It was the first string, then.

Foster

Mac or Jackie's brother or --

Elkins

No, Jackie's brother didn't go to UCLA. At any rate, we were very close to one another. We took care of one another. We nurtured one another.

Foster

Did you still live at 1206 East 25th Street?

Elkins

I was married.

Foster

You're married. In '39 you're married?

Elkins

No, I'm sorry. In '39, I lived at 1206 East 25th Street. I mean in the apartment next to it. One of these picnics with Jackie at UCLA. This was, I guess, maybe my third year then and Jackie [Robinson] was trying to graduate. There was a

southern white man who was head of the history department. We knew -- all African Americans knew about him even before he went to UCLA. He felt that he had to atone for the sins of the south. And he welcomed African American students to take one of his classes. If you were a D, and there were no African American students at UCLA who were D students -- if you were a C, you got a B; if you were a B; you got an A, and if you were an A student, you got an A. So Albert Jones and I got As, and he decided that he was going to have, for the first time, I've never had an African American as a reader. And he selected me and Albert Jones to read the course materials. And, Jackie took the course and flunked it. And flunked it. Jackie was one of the finest human beings that I ever met, but he just wasn't much of a student. So, leaving the campus and here's Jackie, Bill, Bill, Bill, wait a minute. I got a D. Dr. Koot gave me a D. I can't stand a D. I'll be ineligible next season. Get a hold of him and tell him to make it a C. I said, Jackie, I read your paper, you didn't just flunk it, you clobbered it. You didn't come close. So, Dr. Koot read his paper. I told him. And he said, he called the students, Mr. Elkins -- the student readers, Mr. Elkins and Mr. Jones -- Mr. Elkins, I just don't see how I can do better than a D. He's flunked this miserably. Go back to him and tell him it's a strong D. And Jackie said, can't he make it a weak C. So he changed his grade to a C.

Foster

Now, there is another piece of this UCLA puzzle. You and Tom Bradley are Kappas. When did you go through your Kappa line? Was that in '39 or --

Elkins

'39.

Foster

So, you guys were made in '39 -- you guys were in the same pledge class?

Elkins

No, no, no. Tom was a -- Tom's a few years older.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

He's about three or four years older. At least three years. So he was -- had been a Kappa and an interesting experience, I was dating -- I had begun to date Eleanor [Elkin], my wife, and there were two or three Kappas who were high on Eleanor. Eleanor was a stone fox. So, when I went through the sand [inaudible], one of the guys, Tom's age, who had been made the same time he was, decided to take it out on me because Eleanor --

Foster

Was interested in you.

Elkins

-- and not in him, so Tom -- they forbid him to paddle me.

Foster

OK. Yeah.

Elkins

And so that's a true story. And so he was forbidden to paddle --

Foster

And so Tom stepped in and kind of --

Elkins

Yeah, Tom and a couple of others. But primarily Tom. Tom knew what was happening.

Foster

So Tom's class was -- Tom graduated in '40 or in '41?

Elkins

Tom graduated in '41.

Foster

OK. OK. So there was a little bit of an overlap while you two were there, but he was a little bit older. Now, you mentioned --

Elkins

Yeah. I knew Tom way before --

Foster

You knew Tom at Lafayette, right?

Elkins

Yeah. And an experience I never -- Jeff, during those years, had a superior track team. It was rarely beaten. It was nothing to win two or three or four consecutive city titles. So Wilbur Miller, a guy by the name of Wilbur, Wilbur just died last month -- was the best 440 man in the city. Tom was the second-best 440 man. And Tom was at Poly; Wilbur was at Jeff. And I guess there were 200 or 300 people who came to the track meet at Jeff when Tom --

Foster

And Miller ran?

Elkins

-- were going to hook up. And, of course, Wilbur Miller beat Tom in the 440. I'll never forget that. And it's funny how some things like that will stand out in your mind. But that was quite an experience.

Foster

So you had known one another long before you had gotten into UCLA and those things. And you guys were Kappas. So that was an instrumental experience.

Elkins

Yeah. Tom had a crush on Eleanor's cousin, a young lady, one of her cousins two or three years older than Eleanor. And I knew Tom -- everybody thought

that maybe Tom and Colleen were going to get together and get married, but that didn't happen. They dated --

Foster

Where and when did you meet Eleanor?

Elkins

I met Eleanor at a party at a Kappa party when I was pledging.

Foster

OK. So, Eleanor didn't go to Jeff, then. She had gone to --

Elkins

No, she went to Poly.

Foster

She went to Poly. So that was another kind of experience. And Eleanor, did she go to 2nd or you just met Eleanor at this party?

Elkins

No, I met her at this party. She was not a member at 2nd. I would have met her at 2nd. She was a member of -- what was the name?

Foster

Wesley Chapel. You were at Wesley Chapel, OK.

Elkins

Now, after we married, she joined us.

Foster

2nd, OK. I want to sort of close for the day and then we'll come back -- you mentioned that you went in the service in '40. And if we can kind of leave today and let you kind of reflect on your service experience and then come back and kind of talk about your -- so, when were you drafted? When did you receive your letter from Uncle Sam?

Elkins

It had to be in '39. Yeah. I was the first among my cousins. There was me, Charlie, James, and Tam -- the four cousins -- and I was the first one to go. And of course they came in months later.

Foster

How did they get you -- two things. One, this is before December 7, so the manpower call-up, how did they get you guys early and how did they get African Americans that early, because this is just right after the German occupation of Poland?

Elkins

I was, hell, I was just one of those unfortunates whose name came up early. There were some of my friends, hell, when we were drafted a year after I was drafted.

Foster

So, in '39 they called you. Where did you do your basic training?

Elkins

In Texas.

Foster

OK, in Texas. Where in Texas. Do you remember?

Elkins

I can't remember.

Foster

Blurt it out if it comes to you.

Elkins

It was -- oh, boy, it meant something.

Foster

Fort Bliss?

Elkins

No. It was about 18 miles southwest of Houston, Texas. It wasn't Camp Crocket. Isn't that something?

Foster

It will come to you.

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

So you did basic there and then what was your next duty station?

Elkins

Well, I did basic and then I went to NC [North Carolina]. They had something called Officer's Training School [OTS] for three months.

Foster

So, again, did you pass a test? Because, as a Negro, this is long before 1947 and Truman's desegregation of the arms service --

Elkins

They looked at you. If you had an IQ of above 110, you were tapped. And, I didn't seek it. They called me. And, asked if I was interested during my basic training and I thought about it and said, yes. I had great reservations about the Army because of what was going on around the world then. I was very sensitive to the treatment of African Americans in the south and I didn't want to go in the Army to put my life on the line.

Foster

So where did you take your OTS [Officer Training School]? Again, at Camp Crocket or --

Elkins

Bennett.

Foster

Camp Bennett. OK. And where was that located?

Elkins

In North Carolina.

Foster

And how long was your OCS?

Elkins

Three months.

Foster

Three months. So, you're a commissioned officer in 1940?

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

OK. And so as a new Second Lieutenant, where were you then assigned thereafter?

Elkins

I was at Camp Crocket to work in the training school and was finally recruited to go to Italy. And I spent, hell, two-and-a-half, three years in Italy.

Foster

Talk about for a little bit this notion of going to basic outside of Houston and then going to Camp Bennett in a segregated armed services. I think for someone listening or reading this manuscript, they don't have a conception of what a segregated military was like during the Second World War.

Elkins

It was a devastating experience. You know, growing up in an integrated --

Foster

Community.

Elkins

-- society in Los Angeles and a segregated army and a lot of racist officers, but I was very fortunate not to encounter any negative experiences, but I was super sensitive to them to begin with. To answer your question, it was devastating.

Foster

So when did they ship you overseas?

Elkins

I went overseas in '40.

Foster

In '40? OK. OK, so you were in England long before the --

Elkins

Went directly to Naples, Italy. Went to Italy.

Foster

Went to Italy. OK.

Elkins

I spent all of my time in Italy.

Foster
OK, you ship, went about getting duty stations, and then when did you return?

Elkins
In, I guess -- when did I return? In early '44.

Foster
Early '44, and you were discharged in mid-'44?

Elkins
Yeah. And it was a struggle. They were determined to keep me. I prevailed on Gus Hawkins and my pastor --

Foster
OK. So Gus Hawkins and Reverend [J. Raymond] Henderson were instrumental.

Elkins
And there was another man, a black man, who was over at the YMCA.

Foster
Baxter Scruggs?

Elkins
No. I can't recall his name. But at any rate, they were instrumental in writing letters and -- to keep me from --

Foster
Staying in any longer?

Elkins
Spoke to them in depth.

Foster
OK. And we'll kind of end there, and I'll just ask you one question and we'll kind of get to the marriage thing. When did you marry Eleanor? What date were you --

Elkins
Eleanor will be angry because I don't remember the date. But in --

Foster
Forty-four?

Elkins
No. In 19 -- when I came back. Yeah, it had to be in '44 when I came back.

Foster
OK. But we will continue next week and we'll go from the '40s to the present. Mr. Elkins, I want to thank you very much for taking the time.

Elkins
All right.END OF Elkins.William.1.12.07.2007.mp3

1.2. Session 2 (December 10, 2007)

Foster

Good afternoon. It's December 10, 2007, and we are back with Mr. William Elkins Jr. to finish the 2nd Baptist UCLA oral history. And when I left Bill, we had kind of gotten to 1944 and your discharge, and I was thinking yesterday on my way to church and today that I'd actually like to take you back a little bit. One, to OCS [Officer Candidate School], and you said you were selected to OCS because you had scored well on an intelligence test. That's the case, right?

Elkins

Yeah. Well, you had to take a test in order to qualify for OCS.

Foster

OK. And how many Negro officers or black officers were tapped to become officers in the United States Army in 1940 when you were?

Elkins

I have no idea. I was in boot training at Camp Wallace, I think was the name. And, two of us. There was a battalion of African American soldiers. It was a large camp. 11 battalions. One battalion of African Americans and two of us out of that battalion went to Camp Wallace in Texas

Foster

OK. It was Camp Wallace. You did your basic at Camp Wallace or you did your Officer's --

Elkins

I'm sorry. I was at Camp Wallace for basic and we went to North Carolina to the -- you know, I don't remember the name of the school.

Foster

North Carolina AMT or Saint Augustine's?

Elkins

At any rate, that's what -- it was a United States training camp for second lieutenants, that's what you ended up being if you got through the training. It was a -- what was it? -- it was three months.

Foster

So, can you remember the other gentleman's name that came from Camp Wallace with you?

Elkins

His name was Herman Lloyd.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

Lost contact with him years ago.

Foster

But Jackie had also gone to OCS, too, had he not?

Elkins

Jackie Robinson? You talking about Jackie?

Foster

Yes.

Elkins

Yeah. I was surprised. I met Jackie somewhere in Texas. He walked in a second lieutenant. He went to infantry school.

Foster

OK. And you went to artillery?

Elkins

Artillery.

Foster

And then shortly after your completion of OCS, you were shipped off --

Elkins

To Italy.

Foster

-- to Italy and describe during the interrogation of the Italian troops or civilians. I assume that there were very few Negroes who spoke Italian, so you were an anomaly to say the least.

Elkins

Yes. I was assigned to a special unit, really. I thought they were going to assign me to the 92nd, the 92nd Division was in Italy.

Foster

Right.

Elkins

But I was assigned to a special unit where we did the interrogation of Italian troops trying to weed out intelligence on what was going on in Italy and in the Italian --

Foster

Peninsula.

Elkins

It was quite an experience. Quite an experience.

Foster

So were you the only Negro intelligence officer in this group or were there --

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

The only Negro. And I had a very interesting experience.

Foster

So how did they quarter you? How did they quarter you? I mean, if you're the only Negro in this intelligence unit, the military is not desegregated, so how did they deal with it?

Elkins

But this unit was desegregated.

Foster

OK. So, whether formally or informally, it was desegregated.

Elkins

Right. Right. Right. Right. Right.

Foster

So how did your CO [commanding officer] respond to having a Negro in this unit?

Elkins

I was very fortunate to have an empathetic, sympathetic, sensitive CO. Clyde DeBon from Chicago, Illinois. And, he was very sensitive to what was going on in this country. I'm talking about in the so-called affirmative action movement. Spent a lot of time with him. Well, he spent a lot of time with me picking my brain on what was going to transpire. What we thought was going to transpire at the end of the war, whether or not there would be a movement by African Americans in this country to rectify some of the insanity that had been going on for years.

Foster

So how long was DeBon your CO? You were together what, a year, 18 months?

Elkins

No, I was in Italy for, let me see, I was in Italy almost three years.

Foster

For three years. Was he your CO the entire time?

Elkins

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Foster

So, quite a good relationship developed. Now, last week you said you were discharged in '44. The war didn't end in Europe until April of '44. So, how were you able to get a discharge in '44 and was that discharge before the Normandy Invasion or afterward?

Elkins

Well, what happened, the Army decided that it certainly was going to have to have an occupation force in Europe after the war. And, to my dismay, I was selected to serve in that occupation force. And, it was a struggle to be very honest with you to avoid being sent back -- we were sent home on furlough and

I went to work contacting everyone that I knew to try and prevent me from being sent back.

Foster

Back, OK. So they sent you home when in '44 on furlough?

Elkins

Hell, I don't remember the month. Maybe in the early summer.

Foster

OK. So it's after Normandy, then?

Elkins

Yeah. But the thing that saved me is that they decided to set up -- the war was going to end even more quickly than they had anticipated and they were not ready. And they had to set up an emergency separation center, Fort Wachooga I guess it was.

Foster

OK. Down in Arizona?

Elkins

Yes. And so that was where I was sent. And, I had my discharge paper. I was there for about six months and I wrote my own discharge papers.

Foster

Now, but that's interesting. The war is winding down. It's after the Normandy Invasion and you're an officer. You're a Negro officer, not just an officer, and it seems like the United States Army would want to hold on to as many trained officers, black or white, but particularly Negro officers, and that you were able to gather a discharge. How did that go about? I mean, what did you do?

Elkins

Well, I was -- Gus Hawkins --

Foster

OK. Was in the Assembly.

Elkins

-- was very instrumental. I'm pretty sure [H. H.] Brookings was instrumental.

Foster

Brookings wasn't here, then. But you mean, not Brookings, but Henderson?

Elkins

Brookings. Brookings. I guess Brookings was not here.

Foster

No, Brookings was not here.

Elkins

My pastor was a --

Foster

So, Jay Raymond Henderson.

Elkins

Jay Raymond Henderson. He was up to his neck.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And there was an officer, a black major, who was assigned to the Los Angeles area to recruit --

Foster

OK.

Elkins

-- African Americans.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

And he was instrumental.

Foster

Do you remember what his name was?

Elkins

You know, I don't remember his name.

Foster

So, but he was helpful for you, not in recruitment but in separation.

Elkins

Absolutely.

Foster

OK. Did Reverend [Clayton] Russell play a role or just Reverend [J. Raymond] Henderson?

Elkins

No. Not -- Clayton did not play a role in that.

Foster

OK. And what about Mrs. Bass? Did she help?

Elkins

Charlotta Bass? Absolutely. There probably was an article in the --

Foster

The Eagle?

Elkins

-- in the old California Eagle on that. I wouldn't be surprised if she did.

Foster

OK. OK. Because that just seems so odd for an officer to have been discharged before the war was over.

Elkins

Yeah. But it was. I was fortunate.

Foster

And I don't want to leave the war quite yet, but there is -- something happened while you were in the service or just getting ready to go to the service that I've been asked to kind of focus on in this time period, and that was the suit that was filed by Reverend Henderson against the Sunday School. I gather that there was -- the Sunday School was in control of substantial funds of the church and that was a big case and a big issue within 2nd Baptist. Were you in service at the time or do you have --

Elkins

Yes. I was indeed in service and got letters from members of 2nd Baptist, and I remember writing a letter to J. Raymond. I supported J. Raymond Henderson's position.

Foster

OK. Which was that the Sunday School funds should come to the church.

Elkins

Absolutely. And he read that letter. There was no 8 a.m. service.

Foster

Just an 11 o'clock.

Elkins

Just an 11 o'clock service. Read that letter and I got letters from several people telling me that he had read my letter. I don't know what -- it probably didn't have any influence, but at any rate --

Foster

Now, who were the opponents of moving the Sunday School money? Was it just common people in the church or was it --

Elkins

Yeah. Just the 2nd Baptist Church people.

Foster

Was Mr. Johnson, S.P., instrumental in kind of wanting to keep --

Elkins

He was one of the key players.

Foster

Because he was the superintendent of the Sunday --

Elkins

He was the superintendent of the Sunday School.

Foster

OK. OK. So, in a way, how did that change 2nd Baptist? Did that mean that --

Elkins

That was -- no, no. It was just one of the crises that we encountered and we got through it without any -- I'm sure we didn't lose any members.

Foster

Was it a crisis because of the death of Dr. Griffith and you had a new pastor in --

Elkins

There were a number of factors. There was the Thomas Griffith factor. There was a faction which felt that J. Raymond Henderson was too aggressive. There was another factor which felt that he was not aggressive enough. There were -- it was a complicated matter.

Foster

But Henderson was someone that you became very comfortable with.

Elkins

He was a father figure to me. I didn't have any father. And he was so embarrassed because I got a scholarship from Independent and 2nd Baptist didn't have a scholarship and he immediately moved to set up a scholarship program at 2nd Baptist.

Foster

Now, you're discharged in '44. When did you resume your education at UCLA?

Elkins

The same year I was -- no, '45.

Foster

'45.

Elkins

Yeah. I had -- there were a few months that I just didn't do anything. I didn't even work if I recall.

Foster

So you didn't work for your grandfather. You were just kind of -- you were footloose and fancy free.

Elkins

I kicked back.

Foster

You kicked back. So, having said that, was there a GI Bill in '45, or you just used your savings to start back at UCLA?

Elkins

Well, when I went back to UCLA, I got another scholarship.

Foster

OK. So, from Independent or from 2nd Baptist?

Elkins

This time, 2nd Baptist.

Foster

OK. So Second gave you a scholarship?

Elkins

Yeah. Yeah.

Foster

OK. So --

Elkins

Well, it wasn't, you know, we're talking about a scholarship. The tuition per quarter was \$24. I'll never forget that.

Foster

OK. But that's still -- that still was a substantial amount of money for a youngster.

Elkins

Oh my God. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. That was a good sum of --

Foster

OK. So 2nd [Baptist Church] gave you a scholarship. Now, when did you marry Eleanor?

Elkins

Eleanor and I were married in, I guess, 1945 or 1946. Eleanor would choke me if she -- I'll get the date from her. I don't remember the date.

Foster

But you came back, you courted her, you began at UCLA again, resumed your studied.

Elkins

No, I was dating Eleanor before I went in the service.

Foster

In the service.

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

But I said, when you came back, you dated Eleanor, you continued to date Eleanor, and you started at UCLA.

Elkins

Yes, I resumed.

Foster

Resumed your studies. Did you work while you were at UCLA or did the scholarship -- was enough to kind of --

Elkins

No. I had a job, a part-time job as the assistant director of the community center at 2nd Baptist.

Foster

OK. At 2nd Baptist. OK.

Elkins

2nd -- as a matter of fact, it was probably -- not probably, it was the only church-owned community center in the city.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

Some very effective programs that we did.

Foster

And so what was your major when you were a student at UCLA as an undergrad?

Elkins

Poli sci.

Foster

Political science. So did you have courses from Dean McHenry or -- you mentioned Professor Coot.

Elkins

Certainly you had to have McHenry.

Foster

OK. So you had -- so Dean McHenry taught you? OK.

Elkins

I had a good experience at UCLA. There was, I'm trying to think of it -- an agency, oh my God, I'm embarrassed. I can't think of it. There was a program run by a very charismatic white woman, a major program, and I got a call asking if I would serve on a veterans panel, a Black, a Jew, a Catholic and a non-Catholic. Four of us.

Foster

OK. Four of us. OK.

Elkins

And that was a -- just a tremendous experience. All veterans. On the war. And what the country ought to do in response to our victory. Governor [Earl] Warren heard about the panel and invited us to Sacramento.

Foster

So you got on the train and went to Sacramento to meet the governor.

Elkins

Yes. And then there was a big dinner at one of the hotels, Biltmore, somewhere, where the governor came down and the panel was a major presenter. So I met -- that's how I met --

Foster

Earl Warren.

Elkins

-- Earl Warren.

Foster

Do you think part of that was related to the fact that you had won a debating contest in high school, that you were selected?

Elkins

Probably so. You know, I had a little name identity.

Foster

OK. So, you were working. When did the GI Bill kick in when you were at UCLA?

Elkins

Hell, I don't remember. The GI Bill, when was the GI Bill passed? Do you recall what year?

Foster

I think '46, but I'm not sure.

Elkins

As soon as I had access to it, I --

Foster

Took advantage of it.

Elkins

-- took advantage of it.

Foster

And what was your graduation year from UCLA?

Elkins

I graduated from UCLA. I was eligible to graduate in 1949. I graduated in 1950.

Foster

OK. So you came back. And you worked and you had the GI Bill. And did Eleanor work or did Eleanor --

Elkins

Eleanor? Yes. Eleanor worked for the county. She was a secretary in some county department.

Foster

And William the Third was born in '48 or '49?

Elkins

In '48 or '49. You know, I can't remember.

Foster

OK. OK. Sorry about that. And then you have another child, too. Larry, is that -

Elkins

Yeah, Larry was born four years later.

Foster

OK. And where did you buy your first house?

Elkins

2954 Bronson Avenue.

Foster

OK. And were you able to use the GI Bill to purchase that home, or was the GI Bill --

Foster

No. J. Raymond Henderson, I told you he was a father figure to me.

Elkins

Right.

Foster

The house, the purchase price of the house, was \$11,000. J. Raymond Henderson gave me \$3,000, a down payment on the house. A 30-year mortgage. I think we paid \$70 a month or something like that on the home.

Foster

OK. On the home.

Elkins

That's how I bought the house.

Foster

So, Reverend Henderson was not only just a father figure in terms of kind of spiritual things, but had made available a down payment for you to purchase a home.

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

Was a very generous form of outreach.

Elkins

It was extraordinary.

Foster

OK. OK. And so even as a young person -- a young person, I'm saying now in your mid-twenties, not quite 30 years old, you resumed your activities at 2nd?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. So what were some of the committees or functions that you've had as an officer at 2nd?

Elkins

Well, I became president of the youth organization. There was a youth -- a young adult -- I was elected, they had some -- the youth had something called BYPU.

Foster

Right. The Baptist Youth Praying Unit.

Elkins

And it was -- I became president of the BYPU. Was very active in the Sunday School. I guess I had a second surrogate father, S.P. Johnson.

Foster

OK. So, S.P. was --

Elkins

Who was --

Foster

-- the superintendent of the Sunday School.

Elkins

Yeah, and was in constant contact making sure that my tuition -- that I had no problems.

Foster

That's kind of interesting, because you said that S.P. and Reverend Henderson were on opposite ends of the Sunday School.

Elkins

That's right, but they reconciled.

Foster

OK.

Elkins

I'll never forget that.

Foster

What do you think brought the two of them together?

Elkins

That was a big time. Just recognition that it made no sense, for the pastor and the most powerful member, S.P. was --

Foster

The most powerful member.

Elkins

-- member of 2nd, to be at ends with one another.

Foster

Do you remember when Dr. Beck replaced S.P. as superintendent of Sunday School? Was it while you were finishing up at UCLA, or a little bit after?

Elkins

No, that was later. He was very influential. That was after S.P.'s death, I guess.

Foster

OK. So what other kinds of service -- so you did BYPU, and was president of the youth group. When were you finally asked to service --

Elkins

And as I said, I worked part-time.

Foster

Yeah. For the --

Elkins

Assistant director of the Henderson Community Center. One of the big projects of 2nd was the purchase of the community center. You know, black churches were not involved in the acquisition of --

Foster

Property.

Elkins

-- property, much less community-based programs. And when Henderson proposed it, one of the oldies -- "Brother Pastor, what we need with a community center?" And his response was, "We don't have much of a church unless we have more than a song and a sermon on at 11:00 on Sunday." I've never forgotten that.

Foster

Wow. That's very instrumental.

Elkins

And the center -- that was big; it was owned by -- a Catholic-owned --

Foster

Building?

Elkins

-- a child-care center, and there was not a single African-American in it. And we were delighted that the church saw fit to purchase that center.

Foster

Where was it physically located?

Elkins

Where it is now, on the corner of 25th [Street] and Brooklyn Avenue.

Foster

So where they have --

Elkins

The five buildings.

Foster

-- the five buildings that are the Henderson Center.

Elkins

Five buildings. Three of them were for working mothers -- no, two of them were for working mothers, one was for young women who were either working or in school, and the child care center was funded by the government. And of course, the building for the community center where we had activities for the community.

Foster

Did Reverend Henderson get funding for this from either the American Baptist Conference or from the National --

Elkins

Funding came from several sources. The first one was the National Baptist Convention.

Foster

OK, so the NBC was instrumental.

Elkins

Yeah. And then we got it again with the help of Gus Hawkins and Gilbert Lindsay, who was working as a deputy for --

Foster

Kenny Hahn.

Elkins

Kenny Hahn. And Kenny Hahn, of course. It was quite a program.

Foster

So when did you begin your work career? You said you went to work in the probation department, what, in 1950?

Elkins

Well, I went to law school. And came back -- or rather, after I passed the bar, I stayed in the probation department; there were not that many African-Americans in the probation department.

Foster

So did you go to law school at night, or did you go to law school full time during the day?

Elkins

No, no, I went to law school full time.

Foster

OK. Where, at Southwestern?

Elkins

At Southwestern. Remember I told you, I was accepted at --

Foster

UCLA.

Elkins

And they insisted that you not work. And I had just married and wanted to work, and so I -- that was quite an experience also.

Foster

So you were a full time student working at the community center, a full time law student, and the GI Bill was helping out. So you were a busy --

Elkins

It was the GI. The GI got me through law school.

Foster

So you were a busy, busy person from 1950 to 1953. And so did you immediately take the bar when you --

Elkins

Yes. Took the bar, and was lucky, passed the first time. Albert Jones and I were very fortunate. That was big-time, man.

Foster

That was big-time. So -- but you didn't practice -- you continued to work in the probation department.

Elkins

Well, I had -- I'm sure I made more money, I was immediately more promoted in the probation department. And remained there, because I thought what we were doing was terribly important. And that is trying to -- I had a special program set up with community-based programs in the city.

Foster

OK. So you were one of these -- like you were out and about.

Elkins

Right. Had a program with 2nd Baptist Church, had one set up over at Brooking's church [2nd Baptist]. Had one set up at -- well, at First AME [American Methodist Episcopal]. And another one in South Central. The subsidiary to my work as a probation -- well, this was a part of it, and this was probably why I got these promotions -- trying to counsel, direct, and guide young African-Americans.

Foster

Primarily males.

Elkins

Yeah, it was male.

Foster

Males, OK. So you --

Elkins

To get their act together, to get their lives together, and steer clear of drugs -- drugs didn't begin to be the problem then that they are now.

Foster

So when did you begin your career with the county probation? Can you remember --

Elkins

Yeah, immediately after I graduated.

Foster

From UCLA, not from the law school, but as an undergraduate. 1950.

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

And you continued with the county until --

Elkins

Eleanor can give you the date that I retired.

Foster

OK. Was in '60 or '61?

Elkins

Somewhere around there.

Foster

So you had 20 years with the county.

Elkins

Yeah. 20-some years.

Foster

20-some years. So you mentioned (inaudible), when were you asked to serve as a trustee or a deacon? Can you remember?

Elkins

When I was in law school.

Foster

Ok. So 1950 to '53, someone asked you to serve on the deacon board, or a trustee.

Elkins

Well, Jay Raymond.

Foster

Asked you to serve as a trustee?

Elkins

Yeah. Not deacon, trustee.

Foster

A trustee. So how long did you remain a trustee? Or how many terms did you have as a trustee?

Elkins

I only retired -- I'm still on the trustee board.

Foster

OK. As a full member or as an emeritus member?

Elkins

Yeah, I've been on it for 90 years. I served as president up until, what, six, seven, eight years ago when we --

Foster

OK. So --

Elkins

(inaudible)

Foster

OK. So you have been a trustee at 2nd from probably about 1950 to -- until the present.

Elkins

Oh, yeah. I say 90 years, people ask me, I say, 90 years. You figure it out.

Foster

So that's 55 years that you've served as a trustee.

Elkins

That's right.

Foster

OK. So you've gone through the administrations of J. Raymond Henderson, Thomas Kilgore, and now --

Elkins

[William] Bill Epps.

Foster

Bill Elks. So you've seen the church's finances kind of ebb and flow, or has it been kind of a steady state, in terms of being able to kind of steer the course of it?

Elkins

No, it's been very stable over the years. 2nd was blessed, and I do mean blessed, to have selected good, stable pastors who had skills much beyond the skills of their contemporaries. J. Raymond was light years ahead of most black pastors, in terms of --

Foster

So when J. Raymond retired, did you sit on the pulpit committee, or were you -

-

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

OK, so you were --

Elkins

I was on the committee that -- Albert Matthews and I co-chaired the committee that selected the --

Foster

Tom Kilgore.

Elkins

[Reverend Thomas] Tom Kilgore.

Foster

OK. So 55 years as a trustee. You mentioned -- we talked about the Sunday School chasm, and I guess the other big kind of demographic change at 2nd was the question, after Reverend Kilgore's retirement, and the schism, it created Eternal Promise. Is that -- OK. Can you walk us through a little bit, what caused people to kind of think about leaving?

Elkins

Well, there -- it was very simple. The assistant pastor, for whatever reason, was supported by a segment in the church that included Johnnie Cochran [Sr.], Johnnie Cochran's father.

Foster

OK. Johnnie Cochran, Senior.

Elkins

Not Johnnie.

Foster

Yeah, but John Cochran, Senior.

Elkins

Yeah. And William Daily -- I'm trying to think of the name of the woman who was so strongly supportive of him. At any rate, the reason was, they wanted the assistant pastor to become the new pastor.

Foster

The new pastor. And that was Reverend Horton.

Elkins

Yeah. Horton. And I personally liked Horton. But I knew that Horton did not have the wherewithal to pastor --

Foster

2nd Baptist.

Elkins

-- 2nd Baptist Church. So that was it. And those who supported him lost, and those who did not support him won, and we had the privilege to select another pastor.

Foster

Now, having said that, Mr. Cochran's still at 2nd. Is William Daily still at 2nd, or did he --

Elkins

Yeah, I take personal responsibility, and if you talk to them, they would tell you that Bill Elkins influenced me --

Foster

To stay.

Elkins

No, they left and came.

Foster

They left and then they came back, OK.

Elkins

Yeah, both of them.

Foster

How many congregants did you lose to this schism?

Elkins

Oh, I don't know. Not -- just a fraction of the church.

Foster

OK, so maybe 100, 125 or so?

Elkins

No more than 100.

Foster

OK. But that was a very difficult time.

Elkins

That was a very traumatic period for the church.

Foster

But let's kind of -- you were on the committee that called Pastor [Thomas] Kilgore. So how did you find him, when Dr. Henderson announced that he was retiring?

Elkins

(coughing) excuse me.

Foster

That's quite all right.

Elkins

J. Raymond Henderson selected Tom Kilgore to compete. I'd never heard of Tom Kilgore.

Foster

So Reverend Henderson knew him from the National Baptist Convention?

Elkins

Yeah, you got it.

Foster

And they were friends, and he viewed him as a youngster that would --

Elkins

Right. There were probably three or four others that we interviewed, but they didn't have a chance. We very quickly determined that we wanted J. Raymond -
- I mean --

Foster

No, you mean you wanted Tom Kilgore.

Elkins

Tom Kilgore.

Foster

Now, normally, pastors who retire -- in some churches, pastors who retire go away for an extended period of time to kind of give the new person the chance to kind of sprout their own wings. But I gather Reverend Henderson remained in town after Dr. Kilgore was appointed the new pastor at 2nd.

Elkins

True.

Foster

OK. That didn't cause problems? People were comfortable with that?

Elkins

It did cause a stir, because J. Raymond did not feel that he was given the recognition, or afforded the recognition, and the -- I don't want to use the term "credibility," it had nothing to do with his credibility. But that he was not used as much as he should have been used. He wanted to preach more --

Foster

-- than Reverend Kilgore allowed him --

Elkins

-- than Reverend Kilgore felt that he should preach. So that was a real problem.

Foster

That you had two bulls in the room together.

Elkins

Right. And the wife of J. Raymond Henderson was so bitter, she did not attend (inaudible) until after Thomas Kilgore died. And it stemmed from the problem that the two men had. But we worked very -- I was on a committee, there were five of us, and -- a young man with those deacons and others, and we finally persuaded them to resolve their differences.

Foster

Their difficulties. Now, one of the things about Reverend T.L. Griffon and then Reverend Henderson, they were very active in the NAACP. You called Pastor Kilgore in what, '61 or '61. And how did he kind of fit into that kind of civil rights tradition?

Elkins

He was very active. As a matter of fact, he was easily the number one African-American civil rights pastor, certainly in the county of Los Angeles, and maybe even in the state.

Foster

Did he or Reverend Henderson get involved in SCLC? Was it -- did --

Elkins

No, that was totally --

Foster

Jay Raymond?

Elkins

No. No, no. Kilgore. See, Tom Kilgore knew the King family from back East.

Foster

Because he'd gone to Morehouse [College].

Elkins

Yeah. And was very close to the King family. And every time Martin Luther King came to Los Angeles, he was headquartered, so to speak, out of 2nd

Baptist. Preach, he didn't come here a single time without preaching. He was on a -- set up a committee, one of the great experiences of my young life was to have been privileged to sit on a committee that Martin Luther King and Tom Kilgore pulled together, dealing with affirmative action, and how we ought to confront the establishment, the public elected officials.

Foster

OK. This was before August, 1965.

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

OK. Now, going -- a little before that, Pastor Kilgore was called, what '62, '63?

Elkins

Yes.

Foster

OK. Now, you had another acquaintance -- when did you meet H.H. Brookings, and how did you meet Reverend Brookings?

Elkins

Well, I knew Brookings -- I'm sure I met Brookings when I was in high school or shortly after that, I was very active, as I indicated earlier, and we were interested in setting up what I called a young adult movement to address the needs and concerns of young African-Americans.

Foster

But Brookings was not assigned to 8th and Town until 1959. Shaw had been there before that --

Elkins

As soon as he came, I met him. And the -- now, I met him, I mentioned the name Albert Jones --

Foster

Right, then attorney.

Elkins

Yeah, who's a member of

Foster

8th and Town.

Elkins

Yeah, 8th and Town. And I remember when he took me over -- while I went to church, and after the 11am service, introduced Brookings. See, there were not - - there were three or four of us who were active, you might say, in things that concern young African-Americans, and I was one of them.

Foster

Who, besides yourself, was very active? You know, this is --

Elkins

Well, there was Albert Jones. There was -- oh, my God, I'm embarrassed. A young man who served as president of the student body at Jefferson, and went on -- I think he went to Cal [University of California, Berkeley]. And I knew Albert McNeil, but Albert was not active, as we were. Good young man, but --

Foster

Good young man, but he wasn't active.

Elkins

He just was not active.

Foster

But so you meet Brookings in '50 --

Elkins

Oh, that was -- oh, my God. See, when age gets you, your memory -- (laughter). But there were three or four of us who were shakers and movers.

Foster

But '59, Brookings arrived, a new pastor, new kid on the block, didn't know anybody. So Albert Jones introduces you to him, and how do you and Albert Jones -- Jones is a member of 8th and Town, but then how do you get Tom Bradley involved in this equation? How did you and Tom --

Elkins

Well, I knew, you know, we here again --

Foster

You and Tom, of course, had grown up together.

Elkins

I met Tom at Lafayette Junior High School 90 years ago. And of course, knew him when he had Poly. We were not close friends, but we knew one another, and frequently interfaced. And Tom became a Kappa.

Foster

And it was -- made you --

Elkins

And was instrumental in bringing me in. So we were very close -- Tom was in my wedding, when we --

Foster

Got married.

Elkins

-- got married. Very, very close. This is many years later, I served on the five-person committee that got him elected to the --

Foster

Councilman --

Elkins

Council, 10th. And same thing when he ran for mayor.

Foster

Now, you just brought up an interesting point that makes a lot of sense to me. You went to work for probation, and Tom, when he was at Newton Street, I believe he and Kermit Brown were the two juvenile officers?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

OK. So you worked with Tom, because you eventually were dealing with juveniles --

Elkins

Yeah, we were talking earlier about the movement to help young African-Americans get their act together. Tom was very instrumental in that, along with several others. Eleanor, could I avail on you to turn this light on, please, ma'am? Give us a little light?

Foster

OK.

Elkins

Don't have any light?

Eleanor

I can turn like this one on.

Foster

OK, that's fine. Thank you, Mrs. Elkins.

Eleanor

You want more? I can turn on --

Elkins

No, no. That's all right.

Foster

We're fine.

Elkins

Just a little light.

Eleanor

You sure?

Elkins

Yeah, no, fine. Thank you very much.

Foster

So Tom and Kermit were probation officers -- were the juvenile officers, so you would kind of have conversations about the kids along Central Avenue that you were dealing with?

Elkins

Well, more than conversations; he was actively involved, as a police officer in the meetings that we had with them. A very constructive relationship, I would say, with them. And when we got Tom -- I'll never forget this -- when Tom, we

got him elected, I got a call, "Bill, come on down here and let me see where I need to put you." I said, "Tom, I got -- I'm not going to work for you. I have friends who have graduated from law school since I graduated, and they can buy and sell me. I'm not coming down there to work for you, the city doesn't pay any -- I'm going to go make some money." And I had an offer with a firm - - what was it? -- \$35,000 a year, I think it was. And I was not making \$35,000 a year working --

Foster

-- with the probation department.

Elkins

This was something that I felt I needed to do. And it was a great sacrifice. So I said, "No, Tom, I've got to go make some money." He wanted me to come as an administrative assistant, which was just below -- there were the deputy mayors, and special assistants.

Foster

Now, this was when Tom went to the City Council, or was elected a mayor?

Elkins

No, no, no. Mayor, I didn't even think about working for him when he was in Council. So then Tom called back and said, "Bill, I can make you a deputy mayor," or a special assistant, they were on the same level, "Come on down here. I need you." And I said, "Tom, you know I love you, and I'll work with you and help you in every way that I can. But I've got to make some money."

Foster

Because you just retired from the county.

Elkins

No, I'm in the probation, I'm still in the probation --

Foster

You're still in the probation, OK.

Elkins

Yeah, I'm getting ready now to go practice law and make some money.

Foster

OK, so you're getting ready to retire from the county.

Elkins

And I came home, walked in here, back into the breakfast room, there's Ethel.

Foster

She was sitting here.

Elkins

Yeah. "Bill, what's this you're doing to Tom?" I said, "What do you mean doing to him? We just got through busting our butts to get him elected?" "Well, Bill, he told me you ain't coming down there to work with him." And I said, "Ethel, I've got to go make some money." "Bill, you can't do this to Tom now. All

those people down there are going to be telling him what he wants to hear, and if he's acting," -- I'm quoting her now -- "And if he's acting a damn fool, you're the only one who can tell him he's acting a damn fool. He needs you, Bill." So I hadn't thought about it in that light. So I said, "Well, let me -- all right, let me think about it." That was on a Friday. And Eleanor got on my case, "Bill, you know you need to go down there to help Tom." Tom lived just --

Foster

On [Hepburn].

Elkins

Yeah, just a couple of blocks away. So I thought about it, I thought about it, I thought about it. And that Saturday morning, I thought about it overnight, and I walked over, and I said, "All right, Tom. You've got me for two years. I'll help you set up your administration and do what I can. But after two years, I'm gone." "All right, Bill. Come on." So the two years turned into --

Foster

20.

Elkins

20 years, of course.

Foster

Now, let's go back to 1962, '63, for a minute. You mentioned you were on that committee of five that chose Tom Bradley to run for the 10th Councilman seat. Can you remember who those other four --

Elkins

Yeah. Me, Brookings, and three other white people.

Foster

OK. Do you remember who the white people were?

Elkins

They were Jews. No, I don't remember. If I think hard enough, I'll remember their names.

Foster

Was there pressure coming from Gus to kind of push a candidate to run against Hollingsworth, or was this just kind of just in the 10th district that this kind of combination --

Elkins

That was 10th.

Foster

Right. But you heard nothing from Gus, you heard nothing from a young Joe Summer?

Elkins

No, no. They were very supportive of Tom, absolutely. Unequivocally supportive of Tom.

Foster

OK. So there was not a split between the CDC [California Democratic Council] and the kind of (inaudible) faction.

Elkins

No, no.

Foster

OK. And, what, Gil had been appointed to the council, what, a couple of months before Tom's election?

Elkins

You got it. Had not been elected, appointed.

Foster

OK. And so that meant that there were going to be, what, three Negroes on the council with Tom being elected?

Elkins

Correct.

Foster

Billy Mills and then the appointment of Gilbert.

Elkins

You got it.

Foster

And how well did that work, from '63 through --

Elkins

Couldn't have gone smoother. We -- I remember this. My Jewish friends. Tom, they met once a month, and I said, "Tom, that ain't enough. You need to meet --" I'm talking about outside of City Hall, there may be half a dozen meetings in City Hall, one office or another. Tom, the mayor, thought nothing of walking over the Gilbert Lindsay's office. If he did that once, he did it a few dozen times; I remember walking over, some issue. But I'm talking about meetings --

Foster

Formal meetings.

Elkins

-- outside of -- and Fran Savage, who was a Jewish staff member, we would have the meetings in a building downtown, and it was the building that Fran was in. Here she went to Tom and told Tom, "You know, it's a problem, these meetings, you, Bill, Gilbert Lindsay --"

Foster

And Billy Mills.

Elkins

And Billy Mills. You know how sensitive Jews are, so we stopped the meetings. We stopped them from downtown and continued them at Tom's house.

Foster

OK. So you met on Hepburn.

Elkins

Yeah. That's some of the history, man. I shouldn't be putting this on tape.

Foster

No, but it works out. What about August '65, the riots? All of the sudden, it's August 8th. Tom's on the council, you've got three blacks on the council.

You're still in probation at the time. What do you remember about those --

Elkins

-- meetings? I remember them well. The most important meeting was at First AME that we pulled together, with a number of councilmen, Xavier Slotsky was on the council, I don't remember how long he had been on the council.

Foster

Yeah, Slotsky wasn't on the council in '65.

Elkins

Wait a minute. This is another one then.

Foster

Yeah, that's '92.

Elkins

Yeah, I'm sorry.

Foster

But '65. '65/

Elkins

Still, there was still a meeting.

Foster

At First AME.

Elkins

Yeah. And I remember the meeting, a good meeting. A lot of expressions, and asking for peace, quiet, tranquility; don't let the city explode. And the city did not explode, as you are aware.

Foster

But Sam Yorty was kind of a mischief maker, or --

Elkins

Not kind of. Hell, he was a total mischief maker.

Foster

OK, I just want to get that on the record.

Elkins

Sam Yorty was bad news.

Foster

OK. So he was bad news for most Negroes and for Hispanics.

Elkins

Yeah.

Foster

And talk about the '69 election when Tom runs for the first time. There was a lot of racial acrimony in that race, and Mr. Bradley didn't win. Can you --

Elkins

Well, of course he was going to win, he was favored to win. And it was just an incredible disappointment when he did not win that race. I'll never forget, we were at the Biltmore, that's where --

Foster

The campaign headquarters were.

Elkins

Yeah, were. And all of our friends were there for celebration. And call came in from back East, from some syndicated columnist whose name I don't remember. I recall it was for Tom, and Tom said, "Bill, you take it," he was in a one-on-one meeting with somebody. And, "We want to congratulate the mayor, the first time an African-American mayor of a major city." And an hour later, we knew that --

Foster

That it wasn't going to happen. So '69, he doesn't have success. So how did you go about building the correlations that were going to make it possible in '73?

Elkins

Well, you know, Tom was an extraordinary public elected official who worked -- not 40 hours a week, but a good 60, 65. I mean, literally hours a week. I used to keep on his case. If I walked over -- I used to jog, and I'd be up at 5:00, jog, shower, and at least two or three times out of the week, I'd walk over --

Foster

To get him --

Elkins

To [Welland], we had something to discuss about some item on his agenda. And I was usually -- kept on Tom's ass. I said, "Tom, you know, you're not an old man, but you're not a young man, you can't spend all -- this much time, you're going to wear yourself out." And that is precisely what happened.

Foster

-- what happened, OK.

Elkins

Precisely what happened. That's what I was so disturbed over his death. At any rate, you need to know that we did work, man. We did --

Foster

No, I believe it.

Elkins

We did work. And Eleanor -- I think I told you, I've been married for 62 years. And going back at least 40, she's been divorcing me.

Foster

But you guys work --

Elkins

You accept your age.

Foster

You guys worked long hours, '73, Tom wins.

Elkins

Well, I didn't answer the question. I sort of tripped out on you. I said, "Tom, you're a good man. Just get ready for four years down the road, and we'll give it another shot." And we spent an inordinate amount of time organizing support in the Jewish community, organizing support with the black ecumenical leaders. Hell, I'm sure that we had at least two or three breakfast meetings a month with black preachers.

Foster

So this is where John Factor and Rabbi Magnin came into the picture?

Elkins

You got it.

Foster

So kind of describe who brought John Factor into the conversation. Tom Bradley, or Brookings, or you?

Elkins

No, Tom. Tom Bradley. So Tom was respected and admired and loved like few politicians, public elected officials were, because he gave individual time. Well, to important other public people who could help him.

Foster

But how did he know Factor? I mean, because of Max Factor, the business, or he was introduced to factor --

Elkins

No, no. We had a person, a Jewish person on staff, who had the responsibility to corral Jewish businessmen, and that's how that happened. And then he met with him once a month.

Foster

OK. So that's how you got John Factor and eventually got Rabbi Magnin involved.

Elkins

Right.

Foster

And then you mentioned the pastor.

Elkins

I guess I was just as responsible for Magnin as anybody, because he was a close friend of Tom Kilgore. And I was in a lot of meetings with Tom and Magnin --

Foster

And Rabbi Magnin too.

Elkins

And others. That's it.

Foster

Well, what about 1981 to '84, getting the Olympics. What did you guys do to make that happen?

Elkins

You know, Los Angeles was the choice of those who wanted the Olympics. There was a lot of pressure in support of other cities, I don't want to mislead you in this. But it was just sort of a natural. And we were delighted that Tom was able to pull it off.

Foster

But they are a different set of businessmen. Instead of the John Factors and the Rabbi Magnins, it's Peter Uberoff and John Argue and James Anderson. How does he bring these people along to kind of support the Olympics?

Elkins

Well, you know, we knew them -- me and Tom, we knew Peter Uberoff, and was instrumental in helping him with some business transactions. See, keep in mind, now, that the business community was developing and growing during the latter years of the Bradley -- well, all during the Bradley administration. When Tom was elected, the tallest building in Los Angeles was City Hall, 25 stories. Those buildings wouldn't have gone up without the support of the mayor.

Foster

So the mayor was instrumental with -- I mentioned John Argue, and Anderson of --

Elkins

All of them.

Foster

So how was he able to bring them together? Through his own forceful personality, or through the LA Times?

Elkins

No, no, no. Through the force of his own personality, the credibility that he had developed. The respect that they had for him. And we had -- there was the 11th floor was the City Hall -- was the cafeteria. And then there was a small room, the so-called executive dining room. We expanded that threefold. And at least two, three times a week -- and I mean this literally now -- Tom had breakfast meeting with various segments of the community.

Foster

There were some African-Americans and some reformers from '73 to '93 who argued that Mayor Bradley spent a disproportionate amount of time downtown, and never spent time with the neighborhoods. And this came from environmentalists on the West Side, and it also came from certain segments of the African-American population. How do you respond to that?

Elkins

There was that criticism, and Tom's response was that he was not "the black mayor," he was mayor of the city of Los Angeles and happened to be black. And we -- I remember meetings that I participated in, and we said to him, "How the hell are we going to elect this man mayor with a 12% black electorate unless he spends time --"

Foster

In the Valley.

Elkins

Yeah, in the Valley, in the Valley. So that was an unfair criticism. Tom spent an inordinate amount of time with black ecumenical leaders, community leaders, and God knows -- I don't know who all. But that was that criticism.

Foster

There was that criticism, and --

Elkins

Totally unjustified.

Foster

And the other African-American criticism was, the Crawford case began in 1963, that was the school desegregation case, and didn't get to Judge Edley until 1975, and that supposedly, Mayor Bradley did not attempt to influence the school board in any dramatic way as this case kind of wove its way through the courts. Again, is that an unfair criticism?

Elkins

Absolutely. I'm trying to think of the name -- what's the name of the guy, the black assistant superintendent?

Foster

Jim Taylor?

Elkins

Jim Taylor, right. We spent an inordinate amount of time -- Jim Taylor's been in this house a few dozen times, sitting on the couch.

Foster

Now, Jim -- you and Jim were also at UCLA together, weren't you?

Elkins

No. I preceded him.

Foster

OK, you preceded. OK.

Elkins

A tremendous administrator, Jim Taylor.

Foster

OK. Because he had a heart attack, he couldn't become superintendent.

Elkins

Right, right.

Foster

OK. So your view is that Bradley did spend time on the desegregation issues, and tried to thwart the --

Elkins

Oh, God, yes. You know -- now, that's a black thing, we're going to be critical.

Foster

I have to ask the question.

Elkins

No, I'm aware of it.

Foster

And then let's move to '92, the last kind of trauma that the city had. Had the earthquake a couple of years before, but then the insurrection in '92. This must have been painful for both you and for --

Elkins

Extremely painful.

Foster

-- and Mayor Bradley, because of your commitment to young people.

Elkins

Yeah. Extremely painful. You know, if you live to be 100 years, you don't forget that period, and the things that went on. And this is a meeting that I referred to earlier --

Foster

With Yuroslavsky.

Elkins

Yeah. Over at --

Foster

First AME.

Elkins

First AME church. And we deliberately made certain that there would be segments of the community that we had interfaced with in attendance at that meeting. It was -- otherwise, the meeting would take it and go to [Wes Tell] with it.

Foster

So you made sure that the meeting was very inclusive.

Elkins

Balanced. And there was just tremendous support for the mayor, all that he had done, reaching out to the various segments. They even mention my name, after -- "Oh, don't do that."

Foster

But having said that, and as a lifelong Angelino, I'm asking you and myself this question. Did we realize how the city had changed from 1965 to 1992, in terms of its ethnic diversity? You mention African-Americans being 12% in 1960 --

Elkins

I didn't fully understand the impact of the change. And --

Foster

Knew it was there but just didn't fully understand it.

Elkins

Yeah, didn't -- no in-depth analysis on the impact of what it's all about. That's a fair statement.

Foster

OK. So you've seen a lot in your 87 years. 20 years in probation, 20 years working for the mayor. You never did have your opportunity to go off and practice law. But now, as you are doing your church work and other things, how do you reflect upon this well over 60 years of public service?

Elkins

You know, what a great experience. And I feel I've been privileged as few have been, the last 10 years -- well, the last 15 years, really -- I've spent an inordinate amount of time with the state. Brown appointed me --

Foster

To the state personnel --

Elkins

To serve on the state personnel board, and that was a great experience for me. I just got off of it, what, five or six months ago and gave it up. And when I look back over it, I've thought about doing a book, and that ought to be done, of the Bradley -- the influence of the Bradley -- Tom Bradley's political life --

Foster

Legacy.

Elkins

-- on Los Angeles, going all the way back to the time that he spent on the council. And I've received maybe a half a dozen calls from editors, some credible, some not credible --

Foster

-- not credible.

Elkins

-- saying, "I'd like to partner with you and do a book," and I haven't done it, but that's something I've been thinking seriously about, and maybe that ought to have been done.

Foster

Now, having said that, '92 occurs, traumatic influence for the city, clearly a traumatic influence for the mayor, and 20 years in office, and then what, a year later, he passes away. That must have been traumatic for you to kind of -- to have seen somebody a few years older than you are, vital and healthy, all of the sudden just suddenly not be with us.

Elkins

Very traumatic. See, I said earlier that I used to try to counsel Tom. Tom was a very private person, and I don't know anyone other than myself who had direct access to him --

Foster

Besides Ethel [Bradley].

Elkins

Besides Ethel, and who was open with him. I said, "Tom, you've got to be out of your god damned mind. We can't do that," because that's the relationship that we had. And I loved the man. The -- I've seen a lot of politicians, white, black, polka dot, but never one like Tom Bradley, who had the genuine commitment to use his life, his power, his influence, to improve the quality of life for people. And that's really what he was about. And when he -- you know, we were aware, I was aware of the problems that he had, many of which had not been published, of course. And I attempted to counsel with him to back off, slow up, slow down, and so when he had the heart attack, we thought he was going to recover. The medical analysis and report and projections were that he would recover. So I had -- excuse me, the thing that really got to me is that I had gone by the hospital like 7:30 that morning -- I'd go every day to see Tom, to check with him, what you need. And I had gone that early because I was supposed to -- I had--

Foster

-- another meeting.

Elkins

I had, no, to Washington --

Foster

-- DC.

Elkins

-- DC. And here I am back here, man, at -- no, I guess it was about 9:15. I got a call from his doctor saying that he had passed. And that just -- it was difficult to deal with.

Foster

Yeah. Now --

Elkins

But that's that.

Foster

That's that. And two kind of concluding questions for you. One, you've said that clearly in your life, besides your grandfather, S.P. Johnson, and J. Raymond Henderson, were very instrumental in your life, looking at your two boys, looking at Larry and William, are there others that you can say, over your lifetime, that you've mentored, besides just your two?

Elkins

Oh, dozens. Literally.

Foster

Dozens. Literally dozens.

Elkins

Particularly at 2nd. And they're there, you know. They hold me in the esteem that they shouldn't, you know.

Foster

Are there any that you think of in particular that kind of come to your mind that really kind of took to your advice and counsel, and sometimes didn't take (inaudible)

Elkins

It would be difficult for me to name off the top of my head. Let me just say that we -- Eleanor and I have been very pleased with our two sons. Larry, as you may or may not know, is in a first-rate law firm in Beverly Hills, and of course, Bill is doing what he is doing. Tried to have them understand that we wanted them to have a good life, to have the capacity to earn enough money to have a good life. But their lives should not be devoted to earning money doing things. I think that both of them have accepted that premise, and modeled their lives around that premise.

Foster

-- that premise. And my last formal question for you, again going back to mentoring. You talked about these people, you talked about your children and about the other people that you've kind of been in contact with. What about Tom? Did he have mentors as he was growing up? He was a little bit ahead of you, but when he was Poly, and then at UCLA, were there people that you think stood out?

Elkins

Tom -- I compare his mother to my mother. Tom was raised by a single parent who did not have a high school education. I was raised by a single parent who had a 10th grade education. But the wisdom of people with three PhDs --

Foster

-- were not sufficient to what your mother had.

Elkins

Right. And I knew Tom's mother, of course, and how she loved and guided him, and he said this many, many, many times -- you know, youngsters who are privileged to have parents who are well educated, that's a tremendous advantage. But that ain't what it's about, and we should not lose --

Foster

Sight of that.

Elkins

-- sight of that.

Foster

Yeah. I remember the old people used to talk about -- kind of a coarse expression -- "Shit, grit, and mother whip," and mother whip being that kind of commonality that kind of formal education doesn't kind of convey, and it sounds like you're a believer in mother whip, and kind of the intuitive nature of being able to kind of solve and kind of resolve a whole series of issues.

Elkins

Absolutely. You know, I think of my mother, the wisdom, the common sense, the judgment, and the devotion that she had to her children, I had a sister who passed about four years ago, was extraordinary. And whatever I am --

Foster

You are because of your mother.

Elkins

I owe it to her.

Foster

Mr. Elkins, is there anything that we haven't kind of covered that you want to in these two sessions? Is there anything --

Elkins

No, I don't believe so.

Foster

You feel comfortable --

Elkins

You've covered a wide range.

Foster

Yes, I think we have. And I want to thank you on behalf of both 2nd Baptist and the UCLA Oral History Project for consenting to this interview.

Elkins

What are these interviews supposed to be used for again?

Elkins

They are part of the oral history of 2nd, and 2nd has contacted with UCLA to do these. I was asked to do four senior members of the church: you, John

Cochran, Senior, Albert Matthews, and Antoinette Carter. And I assume that the church is going to probably ask for me to do a few others as well. But those are the first four, and I said I would do it, and I said -- but on one condition: that I also be able to include Bishop Brookings in this oral history, because of yours and his relationship to Tom Bradley.

Elkins

Yeah, Tom Brookings was very instrumental in the political life of Tom Bradley.

Foster

OK. Well, Mr. William Elkins, Junior, I want to thank you for taking the time and effort.

Elkins

My pleasure. And best to you in your other interviews.END OF
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