A TEI Project

Interview of Sidney Thompson

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1.1. Session 1 (January 22, 2009)

Stevenson

> I'm interviewing Dr. Sid Thompson on January 22--

Thompson

> Mr. Sid Thompson.

Stevenson

> Mr. Sid Thompson, on January 22 [2009]. First I'd like to know when and where you were born, something about your parents and grandparents.

Thompson

> Born here in Los Angeles in 1931, and born at the, like many folks, the L.A. County General Hospital. I later on asked my mom how she could do that to me after I saw it as an adult. She said in those days it was there or maybe the street or home. You didn't have a lot of options. Anyway, I was born there and went through babyhood and all that, infancy here, but at the age of about four I was taken--my parents are from the West Indies. They're from the Grenadines, way down near Grenada, and I was born here but taken back

there, and my older brother [George Irwin], who's two years older than I, we went back to the West Indies in approximately 1935, and the only way you went in those days was by ship, no planes. We went by ship from Los Angeles, down through the [Panama] Canal all the way to Trinidad and then by sailboat, because that's how you did it down there. There were no engines in those boats--sail, period, and we sailed to my mom and dad's little island.I lived there for about two or three years. I went to school there, began kindergarten there. It was the British system, and the British system was very, very strict. They believed in spare the rod and spoil the child, so in kindergarten my introduction to kindergarten was missing two problems out of five on a math exam, which I thought was pretty good. They had carrying and all--like I said, the British system. And the headmaster, who was my uncle [Jack]--we went to school underneath the main school, in the sand--beach is about fifty yards away, and I got one cane for every one I missed. So I got two lashings, but after the first I decided that that was not for me, that I really didn't appreciate that. So there were pillars that went up to the upper level, and I shinnied up like a koala bear up the pole, and they called you Master Thompson, so it was, "Master Thompson, come down." "No, Uncle Jack, I'm not." But no, you couldn't call him Uncle Jack, that was later. He was Schoolmaster Jack. "No, sir, I have tasted that and I don't want the next one."So I'm hanging up there, but unfortunately my aunt [Irma], who we lived with, and my grandmother [Cleopatra], she was in charge of the secondary school. So they brought my good Aunt Irma down, and I remember very distinctly, "Sidney, come down." Now, I'd been on the island for two days, so I really didn't know anybody, neither my brother or I, but I knew enough about my Aunt Irma that I thought I'd better go down. So I went down and got the second one, went home, and on this little island, which is six miles long and about a mile and a half wide, every evening the Anglican priest would go door-to-door and say goodnight to all the families. You had kerosene lamps, no electricity, and he did that, the Anglican priest, with the schoolmaster, and that night it was Schoolmaster Jack, my uncle, who was going with him.And my mother--they came up to the door. They'd walked the whole island almost, and my mother informed me that I had to kiss him goodnight. And I don't know why I picked that particular time to revolt, but I said, "No." I felt I'd been through enough. Long story short, I kissed him goodnight, I got some more whacks, and it was my brother, older brother, who that night said to me, "Look, idiot. You want to live, or do

you want to die?" [laughs] I'll never forget the lesson. "So listen, you'd better bend or you aren't going to make it." And I decided that he was definitely correct, and so from there on I was a model student, and when I was told to kiss somebody goodnight, I kissed them goodnight, because the wrath of Mom was not pleasant.We stayed there for about three years, and then we went from there to British Guiana. What is now Guyana was British Guiana, and the reason for that is that we, my and my brother being born here, were U.S. citizens. My father was naturalized, but my mother was a British subject. By this point, Dad thought he could open up a radio business down there, but then found out there were only two radios in all of the Caribbean and maybe South America for that matter, so he realized that he was not going to make a living doing that. So he had to get back to the States, but they had the quota system and my mother was a British subject, and we were being put off, put off, put off because of that. And it was an aunt who was here who was one tough lady who I'm sure bugged immigration so much that they just figured it's easier to let them back in.So after I went to school for another two years [it was actually only one year] in British Guiana, then we came back here, and I finished elementary school here, and just as a memory and as something as an educator I would never do, because I went to school in that system I read easily. I picked up reading. They thought I was a genius, which I was not, but they kept skipping me, so I skipped two years between there and junior high, and I was a little guy. I loved sports but I couldn't play because of size, and skipping me just socially put me--I graduated from high school when I was sixteen and a month, from Belmont High School here in the city, and by this point I wanted to go to sea in the worst way, but Dad said I had to get a degree to do it. It was a real problem to go to Annapolis. They weren't taking folks that looked like us, and I finally found the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, a small academy that licensed you in the U.S. Merchant Marine, which are the tankers, passenger ships, freighters, as an officer, and then I was also commissioned in the Navy, which created a lot of problems.But I'm jumping ahead, because I went with that bent. I came back here, I finished elementary at Dayton Heights here in the city. I went to Virgil then Junior High [School] and then to Belmont High School, which was a real interesting period for me, because the school was racially mixed and, in fact, had a number of Jewish immigrants, kids who had escaped Nazi Germany, and got to know a lot of them, also a small African American population. We

weren't large, but it was pretty close, because you know how that worked in those days, especially around adolescence. So I went to school there and learned an awful lot about different parts of the world, different cultures. I used some Yiddish with that part, and then with the African American kids I learned a lot about--because my folks were not from this country, similar experiences, but not from this country. I met kids from New Orleans and from other parts of where black population tended to be in the South as well as some from Chicago and Detroit, so it was kind of a broad brush that I learned in those days about how the country was.Let me give you an experience. I had been raised, for all intents and purposes after being a baby, I was raised down in the West Indies at the early part of my life. The British, with their colonial system it was very strict. The white Brits, Englishmen, controlled, but they did allow through education for civil servants and so on to come up in the civil-service system, so it was to the advantage of many of African descent people to gain as much education as they could. And, in fact, my dad, who went to school down there completely, ultimately ended up as a school principal very young, and by the way they were paid on the basis of how well the kids did in achievement. And you could be paid in chickens, or you could be paid in the British pound, so it was a lot of pressure to have the kids achieve, which I think meant that that corporal-punishment thing went on, because that was the quickest way to get the kids' attention, sadly, but it was.But he had done that, and then when I came back to this country in school I had learned, "I pledge allegiance to the flag [hand outstretched]," and, of course, they got rid of that, because that looked too much like that, so we were doing it like this. And silly me, I took that to heart. Man, this is great, I pledge allegiance--because under the Brits I had learned "God Save the King" and I had learned "Britannia Rules the Waves" and all these things. Then coming back as a young, young kid, I was a little torn between all these things I pledged allegiance to, but I accepted I was a U.S. citizen of the United States, and I pledged allegiance, remembering that this is the period before World War II. [Adolf] Hitler is just coming along now, and Dad insisted on us reading the newspaper and being up on all of that stuff, so I was reading about these things and appreciating, "with liberty and justice" and all that.In about 1942 or '43, probably '42, my brother, who at this point is, let's see, about fourteen, and I'm about twelve, and at that time I was in middle school at Virgil, my aunt--I had an aunt, the aunt that got us back here, ended up with her job going to New York, and we

had a lot of relatives there. A lot of West Indians had come up out of those islands and ended up on the East Coast. Dad came here because he couldn't stand the cold. But we took a trip, my brother and I, on a Greyhound Bus across the country, and we saw an awful lot of this country in the week. It was about a week by the time you got off the bus. There was no air conditioning, by the way. You burned up. But I remember we left in the early evening and we went to Bakersfield. No, not Bakersfield, San Bernardino. We went through San Bernardino. I saw signs that said, "No dogs, no Mexicans, no blacks." And I remember thinking, wow, what's that all about? And I really didn't quite get it, although we sure talked about it in the house and so on, but it just was not an experience I had had, as some of my friends, African American friends, had had in the South, of course, and even parts of the Midwest.

Stevenson

Exactly. Right.

Thompson

Well, we landed in Las Vegas at five o'clock in the morning, and my brother and I went to get breakfast and went into this little quick-serve place. We were sitting at the counter, and the girl said, "I can't serve you." Dumb us, we thought that meant that we were sitting in the wrong place, that they weren't feeding anybody sitting at the counter, although there were people sitting there. And we said, "Okay. So where do you want us to sit?" And she said, "I said, I cannot serve you." About that time a deputy sheriff, who to me looked like six-eight, but a big man, definitely, with the gun, a baton, the whole nine yards, the uniform, the size, and he came down and said, "Look. Get your oom out of here, or I'm going to be pleased to do it for you." And he did this to a kid who had always respected the law. We had a close friend who was a police officer in Los Angeles, and I respected police officers. But I looked at this monster, and my brother said, "We're out of here," said, "Let's go." And by the way, he was the one with the real temper, but he was the eldest, so I think he figured he had to keep everything under control. So he got us out of there.

Thompson

We couldn't find a place to eat until we ran into an African American guy who was cleaning the front of a store, and we said, "Hey, where can we go get

something to eat?" He said, "Oh, no problem." He said, "Go around the corner and there's a little shop halfway down the block on the left. Go in there. You can get bacon and eggs or whatever you want." I said, "Good." And he said, "By the way, don't worry about what she looks like. She's an older white woman from Alabama, but she's real cool." So we went down and went in, and sure enough she said, "Where are you boys from?" We told her and she said, "So who got you here?" So we told her our story, what happened, and she said--I'll never forget this old lady saying, "You know, guys, that's the way it is in this world. We've got some people that thrive on that sort of thing, because they themselves don't know how to deal with themselves, so they take it out on you and everybody else. Always remember that." She says, "There still are some good people." It was a lesson I've always kept in the back of my mind, white woman, Alabama, and she fed us.But that did not change what developed in me a strong dislike for the country, and the reason was as we went across the country I could never be sure that that wasn't going to happen again, and indeed it did in Indiana. A little more subtle, but the same thing, so that by the time I got to New York I was kind of a bitter kid, but I kept a lot of stuff in. I didn't talk about it, although I'm sure my aunt would have dealt with it, too. But whenever people, like they made that thing about Michelle [LaVaughn Robinson] Obama and what she said about the country, and they made this big deal about it, and I had some of my acquaintances here at UCLA, and I said, "Hey, guys, let me do you like an old teacher. Put your pencils down and listen to me." And I told them this story, and I said, "You know something? If I could have led a Russian Air Force attack group to bomb Las Vegas, I would have done it." I said, "Young, foolish, dumb, but disillusioned." I said, "And you folks don't understand that. That hurts. And you can say, 'I understand.' It's like the death of a mother. You can say you understand, but till you experience it, it's not the same." And I said, "That's something that stayed with me clear until I went to the Academy and did all those things," which I'll talk about in a bit.But when I went overseas in the Navy, the Korean War, they told me to activate my commission in the Navy or I'd be a private in the Army, so, okay, I think I'd better take the commission. So I did, and so we were in Japan. We were in Southeast Asia, Singapore, Philippines, went all over. I'll never forget being refused service in a teahouse in Tokyo, being pushed out the door. "No, not you." And I begin to understand that this is--and I had been raised in a Japanese community here, which was a

small community up in the L.A. area, in the central area, what they called East Hollywood near L.A. City College, okay? Vermont [Avenue], Melrose [Avenue], Virgil [Avenue], right in there was a Japanese enclave. They're people I know still to this day, their kids. And I remember that when we went to school, the darker Japanese had a problem, and they had terms for them. And I remember thinking, "That's not right. Not when I look at me. He's lighter than I am." But I realized that this stuff is shot through society.And when I came back and I realized finally, being now twenty, twenty-one years old, you've got to understand something, that this is people we're dealing with, not a country, a mission, and a dream and all. These are people, and they're going to do some hateful things, and they're going to do some beautiful things. And it changed my attitude towards the country. I began to understand how people are. And I told them, I said, "But never before that or since that have I felt more American than when this happened with Barack [Hussein Obama]." I said, "But you've got to understand, and you have to have been through it. And I went through nothing compared to my little buddies that came out of New Orleans, Shreveport [Louisiana], Biloxi [Mississippi], and telling you stories about going to school down there and walking on the sidewalk and having to get off the sidewalk and all that stuff we know happened." And I said, "So it took a little doing to get my bearings. But don't ever forget that, because you didn't live it." They were quiet. And they're good guys, they really are, and you know, they're victims of their skin, too. I said, "None of us selected this."

Stevenson

Right. Okay, I have some follow ups.

Thompson

I'll pause.

Stevenson

Okay. Could you tell me something about your mother and her occupation?

Thompson

That's good, too. My mom was the product of a Scot--down in those islands, as in the South also, but down in those islands there was a complete mixture

of people and their attitudes towards families. Many of the men way back--the British got rid of slavery way back in 1820, '15, way back there, well before us, of course. A slave ship on its way to Barbados crashed in a storm on--there's Bequia [Island], my little island I call it, and six miles away is St. Vincent, bigger, the size of Catalina. My dad was born there actually. Well, when the ship crashed, the slaves said, "Hey, we're out of here," and they ran ashore, and they ran into the Carib Indians. The Carib Indians weren't indigenous, because they had displaced the Arawak Indians, but it was an Indian population that came from South America, because South America is just--there's forty miles between Trinidad and South America, that's how close. So they went by canoe. The Caribs were very warlike. These African slaves never ended up on the plantation or anything in Barbados, which is where they were going; ended up intermarrying, intermixing with these Carib Indians.So I have relatives who are part Carib Indian and African American. But also the whites who came over there, as we know, lived some rather interesting lives. And this gets to my mother. But her father was a Scot, from Scotland. He was over there. They were all entrepreneurs, looking for a quick buck and all that. I don't know if he ever married my grandmother, but they were a pair. My mother is a product of that, but she came out very fair, with straight hair and all that. Daddy, he read a lot. He knew he was Ibo from his Daddy. His mom was Carib Indian and African American, so he had a mix, but if you looked at Dad, he was obviously more black than Mom, both in appearance and features and everything. So they were married, but Mom never--I mean, they didn't know what to put. When I was born, on my birth certificate for her it says Ethiopian. Now, don't ask me why, but it does, it says Ethiopian. It's on my birth certificate. I can bring it in and show it to you, Ethiopian. Why? The nurse didn't know what to call her, so she said, "Oh, well, she must be Ethiopian." That sounded exotic, I think, that's the reason, because they want to believe, oh, she's different.Anyway, long story short, Mom was very fair, Dad was dark. We came out all kinds of mix in between. I have a brother, younger brother, happens to be a doctor. He's the one two down from me, and he looks Middle East. He really does. He could be a Middle Easterner, both hair, features, everything. The brother right behind me, older than he, is my brother Cecil [Thompson]. He's an economist, and Cecil is dark. I learned an awful lot again about people, because--and the brother ahead of me, Irwin [Thompson], who was regular Navy and retired, knew Jim, he is

dark, African American hair, African American features. So we look like all kinds of stuff just by accident. But we played cricket, the British game, because Dad came up from the islands and he played cricket, so from the age of five down there, up here until I was about thirty-five, we played cricket here in Los Angeles, with Basil Rathbone, C. Aubry Smith, Errol [Leslie Thomson] Flynn and all these Brits.It was real interesting the way they dealt with my mother and my father, but they never separated them, because they refused to be--they were husband and wife, and that was period. But you could see the wonderment in--what is--but a lot of them, being Brits, knew a lot about the colonies and a lot about the mixtures and what went on down there. She finished school here. That aunt that got us back brought her here when she was still young, prevailed on her mother, and she finished high school in Chicago. She went on briefly, but married my father, who had come up and was a West Indian and knew my aunt and got to know Mom, and Mom was a pretty lady, so I guess he figured, well, what the heck. So he did, and he married her, and she had four boys, and during the whole time--she's worked when she was younger. But typically in those days you worked in service and that kind of stuff. That's what she did, until she got really fed up with it, and I remember the day she came home and said, "I just can't do this anymore. I'm not going to take that off of some of these people. I don't care if they're white, black, blue, or pink, or if they have a million dollars. I don't care."Dad--can I lump them together?

Stevenson

Sure.

Thompson

Dad, I mentioned, was a principal, teacher-principal in the West Indies. He came here and he taught school in Chicago on the South Side. He contracted pneumonia and realized--he was told by the doctor, "Listen. You'd better get out of this climate or you're going to die. You're just not ready for this." So that's why he came out here. He came out here and he couldn't do a thing. This was the thirties, and the best he could do was the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. He had a degree from the University of Cambridge, West Indies, and he had all that to back him up, wrote poetry, wrote stories, but none of that mattered in those days. He worked in the WPA. He was a slightly

built man, not big at all, and he was just killing himself working. However, clear from 1929 he had an abiding interest in radio, which had just begun. It had just been invented and he was in on the ground floor.On his own, he'd get an old radio and worked on it, and he had a real knack for it, and when we came back from the West Indies they hired him up in Hollywood at one of the radio stores. They had these radio-repair places, a lot of them. You don't see them anymore, you buy a new one. But he did that, and Alva, my mother [Cecily] had by this point gotten fed up with working in service. She was a mother, a housewife, and she concentrated on us and keeping Dad going, because he managed to get on teaching adult school, electronics. He met [James] Jim Taylor at Jefferson High School, teaching adult school, and I remember he always mentioned Jim.Because of this radio ability, when the war started, [The] Lockheed [Corporation] began hiring people who had knowledge of radio repair. He realized that since he'd been on the ground floor--and this was an exceptional guy. I mean, he was a literature major and yet he ended up in engineering. And I said, "You never had a course in engineering in your life." I said, "As far as I know, you had algebra and geometry, period." "Yeah." "Well, how do you do it?" He says, "I don't know." I could see him thinking, and he said, "Well, I develop what I need." And he did, so that he went from teaching adult school and during the day five days a week working at Lockheed, radio installation and repair in the planes, and then along comes radar, and he took to that like a duck to water, no training, and they made him a radar engineer.I remember coming home from school one day and he was there grinning all over himself. "What's going on, Dad?" "You're looking at an A engineer." "What?" And so the fortunes of the family changed radically. And Mom, in other words, was a housewife. It was Mom who we met. He would come home from Lockheed. Sometimes--imagine, we live in Hollywood. He would drive to Palmdale every day to flight test the equipment in planes. They'd flight test the plane, and he was in the plane doing all of this radio stuff and radar then. Then he'd come home on the fly. He would have his dinner, jump in his car and go down to Jeff [Jefferson High School], and he would teach adult school till ten at night, five nights a week.He told us once, because we talked to him sometimes when he was home on holiday or something, and we'd talk with him, or when we were playing cricket it was good, because we could talk to him. He said, "I've been so dirt poor that I'm never going to be poor again, if I have to work myself to death." And we

realized the commitment he had made, and he was teaching adult school every night and going to Lockheed, flying sometimes every day. It just amazed me. And Mom--he told my mother, "Okay. You don't like doing that, and you don't want to do anything. Right now you want to be a mother-housewife, and we need you with the boys." There were four boys. By the way, she adopted a baby sister, because I don't want to leave that out, because she didn't want to have any more boys. And she wrote me a letter--I'm at the academy now, and she wrote me a letter and said, "I'm adopting a baby girl." That's my sister, Lynn Thompson, who is the head of human relations [Director of Employee Relations] here at UCLA. That's my baby sister. She was an attorney and she applied for the job and got the job and so on.But the background then was Mom, housewife, Dad, gone, to make it, to try to make it, and clear through the war and even after the war through the Korean War he was still--he worked for Lockheed up until he was seventy. The last time he flew to Hawaii from here in a plane flight testing radar against submarines, he was about seventy-two. But he was a strong smoker, Camels, all those island people and the Brits. The British--we'd go out to cricket, everybody was smoking. I never did, my brother never did. We were in athletics at one place or another, and we just didn't do that. But it eventually killed him, because he contracted emphysema seriously in the seventies, early seventies, and he passed in the early seventies. Mom lived to ninety-three, but he went--Camels did him in.

Stevenson

Okay. I have a couple of follow ups. One, going back to the time that you were going to school in the Caribbean, what were your interactions like with your classmates if you can remember, you being a transplant from the U.S.?

Thompson

They all knew--I had a couple of ins. And we were all little, by the way, so at school it was not an issue. Kindergarten, what do they know? At that age you look around, oh, well, do whatever they tell you to do, especially there--shut up. But I had relatives all over those islands. My granny, who I should mention, Grandma Clee, Cleopatra, a little thing at four-foot-ten, but about that wide, too, she was the island nurse for probably--she died at 102 or something. And I remember, of course, from when we were down there, and she came up here a couple of times, up to a few years ago, everybody over fifty had been

delivered by her. She was the midwife on all births on Bequia Island. They knew her, their grandparents knew her, their mother and daddy knew her, she was just known. So the minute--I had not been back to that island for about forty-five years, between school and working, and finally I said, "I'm going back." And when I went back and I landed there--we were four boys now, although they only knew two of us, my older brother and me, because the other two were here, born here and raised here, but they would all say--the minute I got off the boat--I had friends with me who traveled with us. We flew down and took a ferry over to Bequia. When I got off that boat in Bequia it was twelve midnight, because it was Carnival in St. Vincent, and the boat wasn't leaving till it was time to go home. They danced there, they danced on the boat with no lights. I'll never forget. And when they got off at Bequia, I hadn't talked to anybody particularly, just casual, but when I got off we went to the hotel where we were supposed to be, and it was all locked up.We didn't know what we were going to do. I had my wife, a friend, a close friend and his wife, so there were the two of us, the close friend and his wife and their sister, his sister-in-law, no, his sister, his sister Amy. She worked here. We were going to sleep on the park-bench tables in the patio of the Hotel Frangipani. It was locked up, and there were dogs all over the darn place, and we didn't know any of them and they didn't know us, and I said, "We're going to get bitten if we go fooling around." So we just got back--and then this older lady came walking by, and she spoke with that soft West Indian, and she said, "Excuse me? Y'all here for something?" "Yes, ma'am, we're here because--." "Oh." She goes like this, "Oh, Sid Thompson." And I went, "Yeah, guilty." She says, "Please, Grandson--." "Yes." She says, "We knew you were coming." She said, "Don't worry. It's an Englishwoman." She says, "I'll wake her up." So she went, and now they have phones. We went over and she called her, and she came and opened up the hotel and brought us in.But I'm saying that to illustrate, I could never go anywhere that they didn't know who I was, simply because of my Grandma Clee, who gave birth to all of them, and they talk about her like a legend. She finally passed away at the bigger island, St. Vincent, because she had to go over there for medical--my Aunt Irma, the one that told me, "Come down," in the school, my mother's sister, half-sister, she had her come up and stay at the bigger island, because there was better medical availability, but she passed away--age. But she was known by both islands. So my mom, they knew all about her, where she'd been in the States and all that, and they still

remembered my dad.I was in a little port town in Barbados when I was in the Merchant Marine Academy. They sent us to sea for a year as officer trainees, and darn if the boat didn't land in Barbados. Bequia is just a hundred miles from there, but I couldn't get there, ship was moving. So I went over on the dock and I talked to everybody, and I went down and I was talking. Some of them said, "There's a couple of boats from Bequia." I said, "Where?" "Over there." So I said, "Okay." So I went over. Well, it was Conrad Mitchell was the captain. Conrad Mitchell was a Mitchell, and the Mitchells were famous. My mother was very close to the Mitchells and my aunt and my grandmother. I mention that because, very frankly, they had been drinking rum, they were feeling no strain, but they were happy people. They weren't prone to fighting and carrying on when they got too much to drink, but they did imbibe. I wasn't drinking, so I was sober, sitting there listening while they recounted tales of the islands and all that. In fact, I went back to the ship, which was anchored out in the main harbor, and I wrote a letter to my grandmother, and I took it back and gave it to one of them to give to her.Conrad Mitchell is talking. It's now midnight, one in the morning, and he's still talking about the islands and this and that, and he had a huge family, so he could talk about his family forever. But halfway through he says, "Sid." I said, "Yes, Conrad." He says, [imitates accent] "Schoolmaster Thompson." I said, "My father." "The man whipped me every day for a week until I decided to study, and he told me he would kill me first, that I was going to be somebody or else." But he said, "But he tore me up." He said, "Man, he didn't brook no nonsense." I said, "Conrad, that's my father now, remember that. That's not me, that's him." He says, "Oh, no, no. When you go back to the States, tell him Conrad sends his love and respect." He says, "I wouldn't have read, I wouldn't have done anything, because my older brothers didn't, and I was going the same way." But he said, "He told me he'd kill me first." [laughs]Well, it's that kind of close connection on those islands that even exists today, and although the populations have gone up, there's an influx of a lot of Europeans, Germans going down there and buying up property, so you see these housing developments on this little, tiny island in some of the nicest spots where we used to go just to see coconut trees and a couple of sheep and a cow wandering around. That was it. Now it's houses, so there's a lot of stuff happening. But all of that to tell you that they kept tabs. They knew people from way, way back, great-this-and-that and grand-this-and-that, and they just knew it. And they would tell you stories,

and you never knew if you were getting all the facts, because this is by oral, so you never know how much is written and how much is not. It's a fascinating part of the world.My father, he told us, "I like oceans and sea." By the way, none of the other ones liked it, because they all got seasick. I didn't. For some reason I never got seasick in my life, so the ocean was always something that I've done. I have a boat now that I keep, a little sailboat up north up in Oxnard. But, what was I saying? I lost it. Darn it, it was something I wanted to--it'll come back to me. But the fact is that all of this is recorded. Oh, I know what I was going to tell you. There's an island historian, graduate, master's degree in literature and history and all that, from Cambridge in England. They didn't allow you in the early days, my dad's day, to go to Oxford or any of those, although there were certainly African-descent folks who would have qualified. But they did decide to open what they called a bona fide adjunct, auxiliary to Cambridge in Jamaica. Jamaica now has its own university, but it was British originally, and that's where Dad went, and he got his degree from there, and a lot of the people that have made it in civil service, which as I said, the Brits allowed you to do, were from there. And you had to get--I mean, they pushed an education. I've always said, "Well, the Brits did one thing right." Where this country was whipping the slaves not to read, they were whipping them if they didn't read, so this whole switch, a different environment.

Stevenson

Okay. I have a question. In terms of your father and his experiences in being able to get these different positions with Lockheed, do you think his experience was different, that he maybe got these opportunities because of the different trajectory of his education or being a naturalized citizen from the Caribbean? Do you think there was any effect?

Thompson

Excellent question, because sometimes that does play into it. Let me digress this one second, then I'm coming back, and I'll remember to come back to this one. But Barack Obama. The fact that his father directly African makes a difference to these people. Had he been a black from the South, speaking like a black from the South, I'm convinced many of these people would have had a problem. So he--I want to say it kind of romanticizes it a little, because Daddy was an African, a real African. Mom, of course, is white. Well, there is a

tendency for that here. Also, it's a tendency to use it for an excuse, this way. I've had people say to me, "But you're different." "Why?" "Well, first of all, you're from the islands." I said, "So?" I said, "My ancestors, the bigger part of them anyway, got there by way of slave ship, same ones that deposited people here." I said, "There's no difference. It's only where." I said, "The difference is that one was British and one was U.S." I said, "And the Brits did do away with slavery a heck of a lot earlier than the U.S. did." They got the message much sooner, thank God.But at the same time, everything was set up on a colonial basis, so their king and queen had absolute control of all of these colonies, even now that they're independent, and they are. And they need independence like a hole in the head, some of them, because they don't have a thing to go on. But they wanted independence because they were tired of being under the Brits. And those colonies, they were offered membership in the U.K. [United Kingdom], and most of them take it because my mother to her dying day, even though she had now been naturalized, still talked about the queen, and I realize how deeply that was in her, and you have to read English history to understand what the monarchy means, even though they say it's a lot of baloney. The British are funny. They'll say this and mean that. But they have never given up on the monarchy, and even as a British subject and in a colonial state, which wasn't always the best, she still talked about the queen. So there are things engrained in us to make us different.But I found that my dad, his education surely made a difference, and the man spoke the king's English with a slight British accent, because that's the way they taught them at the university. So he was different, and he played cricket, and these folks here like to believe if you made it and you blow the stereotype, well, obviously it's because you're different. Well, yes, how you're raised or who you are, those things are all determined by your background. But a lot of it is used as an excuse for why I can keep this group subjugated and acknowledge it, but this group is different. I've never bought into that. I fight that, "Cut that out. We're the same people, different circumstances, different cultures." And it's hurt me sometimes, because I have people that say, "Well, you're not really black." I've been through that many, many times, and I say, "Well, I was principal of Markham [Junior High School], and when I left, they walked out and had petitions to keep me," I said, "so I did something right, even though you think I'm not black enough. I don't know what that means anymore," I said, "because there are gradations of everything."We can hold the way

people look against them, because they had nothing to do with it, and they are, and then you're going to hold that against them means there's no hope. What are they going to do, bleach themselves or what? Get darker? What do you want them to do? Anyway, I've been through all of those things, and we can talk a little more about that later, but Dad got where he was because of education and a burning interest in something, and it was radio, which then becomes a question of when it happened, and it was a perfect fit, because at the time that he was coming along, he wasn't making dime one in these repair stores. He was just making subsistence, and then, [snaps fingers] boom comes the war, and Lockheed has to build a million planes and they've got to have radios in them. And he knew more about radios at that point than a whole lot of people in this city. There were very few people that knew what he knew. They would summon him from all over the place at Lockheed. He said, "They were always sending a little truck to pick me up and take me over to plane number whatever, because they were having trouble and didn't know how to fix it." But he did.So education, drive, very important, drive, and that's familial, that's cultural. They drove on education, literally beat it into you. And then that little thing you mentioned that I just mentioned, that with a slight British accent he didn't make sense to them. They didn't understand it. Well, god, he came from another country. You understand that? They spoke a different way, just like they speak in the South a different way. So that's really--it's a combination of things, but no question that they looked on him differently. He was the first black engineer at Lockheed. Another one came later, as a matter of fact lived behind me where I was living after I started teaching, with my wife and kids. He lived behind me, Mr. Rice, and he talked about Dad all the time. He was an engineer, and he said, "He was the first, and we went in behind him."Years later I met a retired CEO of Lockheed who referenced Dad and even had a Lockheed paper with Dad on the front of it, after he had retired. So he was known, but considered a little differently, and that's because of problems this country has dealing with race, big time.

Stevenson

Okay. I'd like to move forward and talk about--you're back in Los Angeles now, and you're in elementary school. Like to talk about, first, talk about the neighborhood you lived in here in Los Angeles during that time.

Thompson

Interesting. The neighborhood was, as I said, primarily Japanese, small but Japanese. Then this is during the war, and, of course, a lot of this was from working in the war industry, planes, building ships, all that. So primarily Japanese but then some Mexican Americans moved in, typically low-income. And then across the street and down on the street just west of us, Westmoreland [Avenue], Madison, there were African American families that lived down there, a doctor, Dr. Harris, a police officer, Officer Stanley, but that's to say that there weren't a lot of African Americans. Then across the street moved in the Winston family, and the Winstons, I went to school with them. I'm still in contact with them, and they were in the building trades. [Their] daddy was a plasterer from New Orleans. There were two other families on maybe three-block-long Virgil, where Virgil goes about three blocks to Melrose, there were maybe four or five during the war, four or five or six African American families or people, and down on the next block a few more, but they were not the predominant group. In those days, the predominant group lived around Jefferson High School or lived around generally east of Vermont, and a lot of the building restrictions and stuff was west of Vermont.

Stevenson

The housing covenants?

Thompson

Yes. And that stuff didn't break until after the war, and after the war as you recall maybe, you're still a young one, but it moved west, and most of the African Americans were living around Jefferson. A lot lived in Watts around Jordan [High School]. Fremont [High School] had none. I remember when Fremont was integrated, and they hung an effigy of the girl, African American girl that first enrolled at Fremont High School. Can you believe that?

Stevenson

Really. What year was that?

Thompson

That was way back in the early fifties, and they hung her in effigy, a caricature, and put it up the flagpole and all. Manual Arts [High School]. It began to change. I saw the population move, heading west. And you know, Alva, for

example, people tell me about experiences. Another one I used on those folks here at UCLA who were talking about why Michelle Obama referenced not loving the country, just, here, and I'm an American, yes, but I've got some problems. And I said, "You know, there was another one." And I asked them, "How many of you were here living in Los Angeles in the forties and fifties?" Well, most of them were much younger than I and they didn't, they came later.I said, "Okay. Do you know that when I was a kid we went to a certain part of that beach at Santa Monica or we didn't go?" I said, "Do you understand that?" "What are you talking about?" I said, "Get the picture. There's no sign that says 'coloreds only' or 'colored.' There wasn't anything like that. It was just a given understanding that that's where you went, because most of the blacks came from the South, and they understood the little ins and outs of the population. Didn't have to say it. You knew it when the cop said, 'What are you doing here?'" And they went, "What?" I said, "Yes. All the African Americans went on the beach below the Miramar Hotel, where it is now," I said, "down there." And I said, "And that's where we were. And when that broke is when I came back here from the academy in the fifties and it had broken." I said, "And even then," I said, "I'm lying on the beach with my buddies from high school who I ran into or met up with, and I remember this girl walking by saying, 'My, what a beautiful tan he has.'" [laughs] And her husband or boyfriend, he's going, "Shh, shh, shh, shh, shh. That ain't a tan."Well, I said, "That's the way this place was." I said, "We couldn't drive through Beverly Hills. Do you understand that?" "What?" I said, "Yeah. You drive a car and you're black through Beverly Hills, you get pulled over." I said, "You know what they told you? 'You don't belong here, and I don't want to see you back.' Take down your license number. 'If I catch this again, I'm going to run you in.'" I said, "Beverly Hills. Los Angeles." They just didn't know. They couldn't really understand it either, still, but at least they knew something, that it must have been wrong and that, god, I must have been a little difficult to live with. I said, "Especially, like the kids from the South, the Winstons from New Orleans, they would say to me, 'We understood--in the South it was clear what the rules were.'" They said, "Up here we never knew what the rules were." I said, "Yeah. I visited a friend in high school, I went over to his house, junior high. I went over to his house just the other side of Vermont Avenue, just west, and we were playing ball in the backyard, and this white woman, her three little girls were playing out there and we were out there, and we just

sort of kidded around with them, but it was more--they were younger. She came out and read my buddy the riot act. 'You live here and I live here, and I want you to know I never lived around Negroes, and I don't intend to, and I don't appreciate him being over here with my daughters.'"And my partner is white, Jewish, and he's going, "Uh--," because he's never had this. And he's looking at me like what--I said, "Stan, don't worry about it. I'm out of here." I said, "It's okay. You're fine," and I left. But I repeated that to them. I said, "How the heck would you feel?" "I wouldn't like it." "You wouldn't like it?" I said, "No, it goes a lot deeper than that." I said, "What it goes to is I can't do a darn thing about it, but it's there, it exists. And it's about me, and it's about this. I can't do a thing about this. I can do a little bit about this." They weren't interested. I was trying to get them to get a feel for it, and they got some of it, but not much. Anyway, all that to say that when I was a kid in school, the neighborhood was generally slightly mixed, but more where I was was more Japanese American than it was anything else in the early years.And then when they were relocated, Dad, because he was in radio--it was so sad. These Japanese would come to the door. "Mr. Thompson, can you take this short-range radio component out of my radio?" Because the FBI was going around looking for those. But a lot of the radios were built that way. So Dad said, "Yeah, bring it over." "How much?" Dad refused to take any money. He'd take it out, get rid of it, but that didn't save them, because the next step was the relocation, and our neighbors, the guys I went to school with all ended up in a camp. We were taking care of their fish, took in the dog, a cat, I mean, you know. And there was another manifestation of this race thing, in this case against them. Meanwhile, I'm looking at German Americans all over the Midwest and everywhere else, they're walking free as a bird.

Stevenson

Which camp did some of your neighbors go to?

Thompson

Manzanar. Some went further. Some ended up in Arkansas, they ended up in the mid-Southwest area, weather totally foreign to anything they had known here and living under extreme conditions. They were living in temporary housing. They went to school in that poorly heated--food nothing like they were used to, and I've talked to many Japanese who said the same thing, how

they felt. They had their own racial feelings. That's another story. But as it applied to them for relocation, as Americans how deeply it hurt, and you always hear that. Many of us say, "Oh, gosh, it must have been terrible." "No, it wasn't terrible. It was god-awful. It wasn't terrible." Nothing they could do about it, and they get slammed, and they lost very good businesses. A lot of the Japanese in my neighborhood owned like the corner gas station, the Endo brothers, Dad had known them for years, and when they had to leave they were given a moment's notice to go, and they had to put that thing up for lease to an American white, and they took a real beating, because there were people berating them because of, "You're Japanese. They're Japs," that business. So it was another lesson.

Stevenson

Yes, and you were how old when this happened?

Thompson

That all happened when I was about ten, eleven.

Stevenson

Okay, so thinking back to your thoughts then as a ten-year-old, what were your reactions to this?

Thompson

It really began with, how can this happen? They're American. I went to school with them. Now, in truth some of them had Japanese flags. Well, what did they know? Their history is Japanese. Their granddaddies and daddies in many cases were Japanese, from Japan, so I just knew the inequity of it, and we talked about that many a night. Dan and my mom would talk about, "Well, it takes a lot of forms, but that inequity exists, and it exists because of who you are, what you look like." It's not about, like Martin Luther King used to say, about your heart, what's in your heart. Well, this wasn't about that, but their heart or not in their heart.

Stevenson

Right. So you definitely when you talked about it in your family circle, you relayed that to inequities against African Americans and other--

It's another expression of racial inequity, of racial intolerance, of racial abuse, and Dad says, "Of course." As he put it, "Of course." He says, "And a lot of people are wondering how come the Germans that are of German descent aren't being put in a camp." He said, "Well, first of all, hard to identify them, and the race thing is always easy," as he explained it. And he said, "Under the racial thing--," and you know, I'm just remembering this, Alva, I hadn't thought of it. But this whole business during when the war started, we were gearing up to a first-class war, obviously. We had been, in fairness, been bombed. But we went whole hog in building almost a hatred for the Japanese. We called them Japs, "The Japs," typically buck-toothed, wearing glasses, and little.During the early part of the war, but it was after Pearl Harbor, but just after Pearl Harbor my brother and I and some of the neighborhood guys, the Winstons, we used to go up to City College. They played football up there. We didn't have any money, so we'd climb the fence and go in and watch the game, and they didn't bother us. We went into a game and it was City College playing the Camp Lejeune [North Carolina] Marines, and there were a lot of Marines in the audience. Sadly, the quarterback of the City College team was Japanese. These guys were yelling obscenities, "Kill that so-and-so Jap," and a lot of us sitting in the stands were from the neighborhood and we knew him. I was too little to get into anything, but certainly with no damn, pardon my French, Marine. And all of a sudden the fights started to erupt, and the Marines whipped off their leather belts and they left the buckles clear. They were swinging those things and people got hurt. And, of course, these are trained fighters in peak condition. And then in fairness to them, and I remember later thinking of it from a more mature viewpoint, that they had been hyped to this, "Kill the Japs!", and you've got to hate if you're going to charge ashore in the face of machine guns. You've got to hate and just go and don't question. That's what they were.And those sort of things during the war--and that was early on. I was, like I said, ten, eleven years old, and I remember it vividly, I guess because of the expressions of hate that just to me, how do you hate like that? I'd read about Hitler, and I said, "Well, I guess like that." Gradations between him and where some of these people are. But it was a memory I still carry about that. The Japanese being moved to internment, my friends, the stuff that happened as a consequence of World War II and the fact that we were fighting the Japs, and, of course, an inability to distinguish between Japanese

nationals from Japan and Japanese Americans, that these Japanese Americans are suspect because they're Japanese. And a lot of them were better citizens than half the whites left. Bad.

Stevenson

Okay. Before we move forward, I want to talk a little bit about Central Avenue and its significance during this time as a business district, entertainment center, and maybe some of your personal experiences, even though I know you were young at that time.

Thompson

I was very young, of course. We had friends, the Drake family. The Drakes used to live down on Westmoreland a block west of Virgil Avenue, so they were in that same community I've been describing. They were from the South, and interestingly, Daddy Drake could truly have passed for white. He had long hair, he was white in complexion, but a little ruddiness here and there, but he was Southern black and proud of it, and that was it. Celeste, his wife, a beautiful lady--I always loved her smile--she was African American, dark, beautiful smile, and just a lovely, lovely lady. My mom got all of us boys and we went to see her before she passed. She was ninety-eight or something, but just a--when we went to the West Indies, they came down and picked us up when we came back and were always talking about how--they used to embarrass me--"Sid had this accent," because I was little and I had assumed the Brit. I was talking about the "cos" meaning cows, and the Drake girls, who were older than I, were saying, "What's he talking about? What's he saying?" And the mother, Celeste, was trying to explain, "He's been in another country and they speak that way."But I'm thinking of the Drakes. They lived about three blocks west of Central Avenue, so Dad and Mom and us, and we went over to them over the years, we'd go down there. In fact, all my brothers went, depending on when they were born. There's eight years between me and the last one. But we'd go down there and it was like another world, because where we lived it was a tweener, and they were African Americans, and I never understood this, but the Winstons, who were party people, they loved to party--New Orleans, and when it was in the [Los Angeles] Sentinel it would be "a party at the East Hollywood home of the Winstons." Now, the East Hollywood home of the Winstons was just a house like everything else,

but that was the kind of attitude people had. And we understood that the primary black population was in around Central Avenue, down around Hooper [Avenue].And I remember that when my dad and some of their friends, most of whom, almost all but one were American, African American blacks, that when they went to a nightclub in their younger years, they went to the Club Alabam or one of those places on Central Avenue. It was always Central Avenue. And when I was asked about it more than once, I would say, "Because they couldn't go on the Miracle Mile, folks." I said, "They didn't let you in the door." "What? Did they have a sign?" I said, "Oh, heck no, no sign, just a big bouncer who said, 'No,' unless you're ready to fight him and the police who'd back him up," I said, "you didn't go." So it was Central Avenue, and that's where I was down at the Dunbar [Hotel] back a couple of years ago, and that was a lot of memories, because I remember as a little kid we drove by the Dunbar and that when a lot of the stars--I'm thinking of the Lena Hornes and that era, "Satchmo," Duke Ellington when he was alive, all of those guys and women, men and women would have to stay in the Dunbar, or like that was the best that they had at that time for African Americans. Same thing, of course, true in Vegas. Remember they used to have to stay in the hotels on the other side of the tracks in the black community.

Stevenson

Right. Exactly.

Thompson

They couldn't stay in those nice hotels. Lena Horne, for god's sake. I said, "If she can't stay there, good-looking African American woman with a talent won't quit, and she couldn't stay in the hotel," but it was true, and the same thing was true here, not quite as direct but just as effective. It was years before African Americans could stay in what became the Beverly Hilton when they built it and those kind of hotels. You just didn't stay there.

Stevenson

Okay. I'd like for you to talk a little bit about your elementary school experience--

Thompson

Here?

Stevenson

Yes, here, interactions with classmates, teachers that were memorable, either good or bad, and just like I said, your impressions of your experience.

Thompson

It was a good experience. It was only two blocks from me, down the street to Clinton, down one more to Westmoreland, so it was two blocks to go to school, and we didn't have dime one as a family, so everything was brown-bagged. My experience of the kids--I have folks I've known with the district, and I've known these people for probably fifty, sixty years or more, and they used to talk about--there was a Mexican American guy, Arnold Rodriguez, who lived in the community and ended up working for L.A. Unified when I was doing my thing. He said that--there was another guy by the name of Oscar Bauman. Oscar was of German descent and a wonderful young guy. He was my age. They were typically two years older than I. They had skipped me, and that's the memorable thing about elementary school. They skipped me a year and skipped me another year, and I never--like I would go into classes and they were talking about fractions. I didn't even know what it was. They had skipped me through that, and that's why I hate that kind of thing. Whenever parents start that stuff I say, "Don't let your ego lead you astray. The kids needs to know sequentially certain things, and I never did catch--I had to catch up on my own in junior high, I said, and it was a killer.Now, Oscar Bauman and Arnold--Arnold told me years later, he said, "I remember saying to Oscar, 'Hey, Oscar.'" They lived about, oh, ten blocks from me, east. "I've got this guy I know down at Dayton Heights, and he speaks with a British accent and he wears short pants, and his name is Sid." So he brought him over, and Oscar and I became good friends through junior high. He moved north after that. But I got along fine. They just kind of found me to be an oddity because of the accent, and they all knew I could read and do things pretty well, so that was all right. The teachers were obviously impressed, and I think what happened to them, they got carried away with race, too. Here is this African American kid who can read at a young age texts that would be good for high school. I just was a good reader. But they assumed that that meant I was some kind of genius, and the fact that I was black also meant I must be a genius, because

black folks just can't do that. You know? It was just incredible, and it hurt, because it just tore me up socially and every other kind of way, I was so young.I didn't catch up till I went to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, because you had to be seventeen to get in there, and I killed a year at UCLA because I was only sixteen. So I did a year there before I went to that academy, and I say that because all the way from this, not in the West Indies so much but when we came back, from about there all the way through high school, I was a misfit. I was a little kid running around, ten years old when I was in junior high. I graduated, as I say, at sixteen. I was thirteen when I went into Belmont High School. Well, you're in high school. I didn't even qualify, Alva, and I loved athletics. I was reasonably coordinated, but I was a little, skinny little kid. I wrestled at UCLA. The year before I went to the academy they wanted me to wrestle at 121 pounds. Can you imagine, 121 pounds? I boxed at the academy at 148 pounds, three months later after I left here.I say that because it just creates all kinds of stress on you in a social environment that's already stressed, meaning white, black, brown, and all the separations that occur at adolescence, and being knee-high to a duck didn't help. Plus all that education I had to make up, because they skipped me. I mean, they threw me into algebra when I got to junior high, and I'm sitting there saying--they were going into fractions and all that, decimal fractions, and I'm looking at them like, "What's that?" because they had skipped me. So it was not--I don't want to say it was unpleasant. Socially, I like people and I get along fine with them, and I don't have any problem. Even the worst dope I can deal with if I just know what he is and where he's coming from. But elementary, junior, and senior, especially--I started to catch to catch up a little in high school, but I just never fit, and everybody would talk to me like they were talking to an elementary kid, because they really were. So it was hard for me.But I had a lot of interests, and another thing about me that was pervasive was this business about going to sea. It really was, it was pervasive in the sense that I was going to do it no matter what. I kept telling my dad, "I'm going to sea, I'm going to sea," and Dad knew all the time what he would do and what he wouldn't do. And during the war, the first merchant marine--that's private now, ships that carry freight, tankers, even cruise ships are private, not military, unless the military takes them in time of war. I had an uncle, a distant uncle--now, I don't know if he really was an uncle or not, because I found out that a lot of these times they'd talk about, "Play this, and play--," just like the South, kind of

everybody from an African background, they have their, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, they really mean that, and everybody's a cousin or an aunt or an uncle when they really may not be, but who cares?

Stevenson

Right, exactly.

Thompson

Okay? So this guy, [Captain] Hugh Mulzac, I have a picture of him right now. He was from Union Island [Grenadines, W.I.] in the West Indies, which is south of Bequia, my little island. And by the way, Bequia is B-e-q-u-i-a. It's a really odd spelling. My dad used to say it's probably "beckwa," but he said they'd change it. He [Hush Mulzac] was a naturalized citizen. He had been going to sea since he was, I think, twelve in the West Indies, on sailing ships, and he's an incredible story in his own right. He comes to the United States, he goes onboard ships as an able-bodied seaman and different things, merchant marine, not Navy, Navy wasn't taking any blacks in that, stewards but not that. He, in spite of going to sea and not getting the job commensurate with what he could do--they had him as a steward, as a chief cook, all kinds of things. Nevertheless, he managed to work his way up and sat for his master's papers as captain, master's papers in the merchant marine in Baltimore.And he told the story of going in. He's very light, but obviously of African background. He goes in and they're looking at him, "Yeah, what do you want?" "I'm sitting for the exam." He said, "I told them, no, I'm sitting for the exam." In other words, this isn't debatable. And they said, "Okay." So they threw the test at him. That examination for that position is about an eight-hour exam and it's about everything, storms, balance of ships, all the stuff you have to do if you're going to load a ship to go to sea. He had none wrong, unheard of. He said the person giving the exam kept looking at him like, "Who are you really?" [laughs]When the war started, they were building all these ships and Hitler was sinking them about as fast as they built them, but FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], Roosevelt, ordered a ship to be named for an African American. So they built a ship down in Todd Shipyard down here in San Pedro called the S.S. Booker T. Washington, and it was a liberty ship. That was the kind of ship it was, class of ship. And then, of course, FDR said, "Well, we've got to get a crew for it, and it ought to be black." And they were able to scrounge up--the captain was Hugh

Mulzac, and they had these other guys as crew. They all stayed at the property next door to where we lived on Virgil Avenue, because my aunt owned it, and she was in the Auxiliary Women's Corps down on Central Avenue, because again, during the war our troops, sailors, whatever they were, could not go to the USO, so they had their own on Central Avenue.

Stevenson

Never heard of that.

Thompson

Yes. She headed it. Auxiliary Women's Corps, AWC, something like that, and she was approached about this guy going to be named captain. And then when she found out he's a West Indian, and she knew the Mulzacs on Union Island--they all know each other. So he stayed at our house. So here is this little kid running around, all taken with the sea and going to sea, and here is this man walking around with four stripes, a captain. They took me down to the ship, to see the ship, and man, I'm just like, [whispers] oh, my god. So he goes through the canal, and they had put him on the Murmansk [Russia] run through the North Atlantic, and it was the worst. Hitler was torpedoing them faster than they could go out to sea. I mean, it was--and there were times when he was in convoys. They had a radio program about him. My Spanish teacher at Virgil Junior High, she said, "Sid," because I didn't hear it. She said, "Your Uncle Mulzac, they had him on the news." They broke up the convoy because the Germans sank so many ships, and they said, "You're on your own. Get to Murmansk on your own." And he took off and it took him three weeks, but he got there. Well, he did that three or four times. He's quite a guy.He retired. I went back to see him as a high school student and told him I wanted to go to sea, and, of course, he tells me, "You've got to go to sail first. You've got to do sail before you can do steamships." I'm still back East. That was that bus trip we took. That's where I met him, wonderful old guy, but really torn up from the war, ulcers and all kinds of things, wondering whether he's going to be alive or dead, I guess. I wrote my dad and told him that I had met Hugh Mulzac, and Captain Mulzac told me that I had to go to sea through the sail. And I'll never forget the letter he wrote back to me in New York. We were going to be coming back in another couple of weeks anyway, but he wrote it to me and he was telling me all about his experiences, because he'd been to

sea, too, before he got into radio and all that, before he was a principal, as a young kid he had gone to sea in summers on sailboats. He says, "Sid, listen to me very carefully. You are going to sea, IF you can get a bachelor's degree doing it." And I remember going, why is that important? I want to go--a kid, right? And I was only, shoot, thirteen maybe.Anyway, Hugh Mulzac was an inspiration for me in the going-to-sea piece. He came along at that opportune moment when he was the only black sea captain in the U.S. Merchant Marine, of all the thousands of ships, one. That was another lesson. One. Now, it changed, and when we get to the academy I have a lot of things to tell you about that, about American culture and mores and southern cadet officers who had special feelings about Sid.

Stevenson

All right. Well, this would be a good place--[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (February 11, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm continuing an interview with Mr. Sid Thompson on Wednesday, February 11, 2009. I'd first like to ask you, what was the role of religion in your upbringing?

Thompson

God, I haven't thought about that for a long time. The earliest religion that I recall is in the West Indies, because I was little when we went back, and my folks had been raised Anglican, basically Episcopalian, and as a result they went to an Episcopal church here in Los Angeles which was basically black, with Father H. Randolph Moore. And Randy Moore, the son, was once an attorney and then head of the Juvenile Court as a judge, and he headed the Juvenile Courts in L.A. I mention that because Randy was a pretty close friend when we were real little and then later when we came back. But basically, my family was Anglican. In the West Indies the church was an Episcopalian church, although they speak of it as Anglican, which is probably more accurate because it followed the British lines very closely. So that was my earliest recall of religion. We went to church every Sunday, and there was a lot of praying and hymn singing whenever there was a gale or a storm and the boats were

out at sea and stuck out there and whether they were going to survive, and some didn't. But that was kind of the background of that little island and all of those islands; St. Vincent's, same thing.We came back, and I mentioned the aunt that was instrumental in getting us back into the United States. She went through a bout of cancer when she was relatively young and from that she gravitated towards Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, Massachusetts and all that. So when we come back, we come back to an aunt who is heavy into the Christian Science movement. This was in the late thirties, and we ended up, because she was such a formidable person, I mean, she was incredible. I get the feeling that my dad didn't feel like fighting, and he went along. We would read the passages for Mary Baker Eddy that she wrote, and there's a lot of faith healing and all of that involved with it. I never felt that we did things strictly according to the book, because when we were sick my mom had no problem with medication and taking care of that. But I was raised that way clear up to the Merchant Marine Academy, till I was about twenty. So my early upbringing is Anglican, Episcopalian, and Christian Science. I went to Third Church of Christ Scientist downtown in L.A., a big church, and even at one time we were thinking of trying to get into the Christian Science School, which was in Beverly Hills. I don't think we would have had any chance of that, but we didn't try, so I don't want to blame anybody for anything. But that's how I was raised up to the age of twenty.After that, because it said no wine, no this, no that--nah, I don't want to be in something like this. So I drifted away from it, although I have to confess I had this nose smashed when I was at the academy. A kid, big kid, center on the football team, threw a bat by accident, and it caught me across the bridge of the nose, and they were pronouncing me dead, I think. I had a skull fracture and all kinds of stuff. I ended up in the base hospital, and I remember using some of it to say, "I'm not going to use any bedpan. I'm getting up." So I got up and I went to the bathroom and I did everything. "How did you go to the bathroom?" I said, "I got up." "You what?" But all this to say that I drifted away, and I am not currently a member of any organized church. I happen to be a believer in a supreme being, but I am not a member of any organized church.My wife, second wife, was Catholic. My first wife was Catholic. Both of them were Catholics, and I attended Catholic Church with them, just to keep it all in the family. And I didn't have any problem with it. I was Christian, basically raised Christian, but the background during my formative years was Christian Science, which was also very

interesting. There weren't too many blacks in there, but there were a few downtown where we went to church, and I remember the kids all saying, "So what is it?" That was my background in religion.

Stevenson

Okay. Can you tell me about your secondary school and high school experiences, memorable teachers, and with regard to high school was there any college preparation per se in those days?

Thompson

Junior high, Virgil Junior High School on Vermont Avenue, when I went there in 1941 I was ten and two months, or about three months. I was this big. I was a fish completely out of water. I think I mentioned to you the real tragedy perpetrated on me was skipping me, because it just was too much. Two years was just way too much. And Dad was all proud of it, of course, West Indian and all this stuff about education, that, "My kid is doing--." So I went into junior high and it was a blur. I was so little and running around, but I was a decent student. But in doing the two-year skip it had a profound influence on me for about through junior high and into the beginnings of high school before I could catch up with the fractions I missed, percentage. Especially in a sequential study like mathematics I had a real problem, because I'd missed so much. They put me in algebra and I was like, what is this percent business? I couldn't even define it.So junior high was not unpleasant. I played in the school orchestra, which was city-renowned. They had a 101-piece orchestra in junior high, mixed, white, brown, some black and Asian, had everything that was around at that time. I played in the orchestra and I loved it. They had service organizations during World War II, they had patrols for after school to get the kids home safe, made up of students, which was very fascinating. You wouldn't dare do that in this day and age, but you did back then. And junior high I recall as a bit of a blur. I didn't have any problem with the humanities. I could go through that. But the mathematics in particular and science were a major problem, because sequentially I had missed so much, and I still recall it as being--and then junior high and even worse in high school, particularly junior high, I just didn't fit. These kids were already into puberty and beyond, heading out, still adolescence but later, and here comes Mighty Mouse walking around. I didn't know up from down. They were all asking me, "How

come you're so young?" I said, "I don't know." I couldn't explain it. I didn't know why myself. They kept skipping me, telling me, "We're going to put you in the fifth grade." Now I was in the third grade. I said, "Why? What did I do?" "You didn't do anything. It's great," and they were all applauding me, but it hurt. And to this day when somebody talks to me about skipping I tell them, "Don't brag to me about that, please." I said, "Just be careful with it."I went into high school sixteen and three months, I mean graduated, I don't mean went in. I went in at thirteen in Belmont High School. Now, let me explain a little bit about those two periods of time, and I don't know if I mentioned it the last time. At Virgil I still had a lot of the West Indies in me, the experience, and down there you weren't conscious of color, because you were really on those islands all one. There were white folks, but there were very few of them, and typically it was the governor and his wife or something. There was no governor on Bequia [Island] anyway, so we didn't see too much of them. They were mixed people, some of whom looked white, and there was a caste system related to that on that island and all of those islands, and still is. It's referred to in Malcolm Gladwell, "The Outliers." If you haven't gotten that book, take a look at it. It talks about he's white, a West Indian mother and a British white father, and he writes a lot about the racial thing in Jamaica and those places, very interesting, nothing that far off of what happened in the South.And you know the history. I mentioned New Orleans, all of that stuff, and the fact that we happened to sadly pick up the mores of the white society in terms of color, and we did our own color, as you know, and we did at parties. I can remember parties that were Creole at which some blacks would show up, noticeably black, and we would come in and it was a different group. The Creoles married in the Creoles and so on, and some of that still goes on, as you know.

Stevenson

Yes. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that. This was actually referred to in my interview with Dr. Owen Knox, where he indicated he'd taken his wife to a party, I believe in New Orleans, and it was, as you say, a Creole party where everyone there--could you talk a little bit more about the role of skin color in our community particularly and your experience with that?

Thompson

Yes. One of the more memorable things I recall is across the street was some African American kid that we went to school with. Daddy was a plasterer. They were from New Orleans. They were darker, more African. One daughter was light but obviously of African descent. I remember once I was in that group. My brother--I had a brother two years older, and he was not skipped and all that, but he was a good student. I mean, he went on as an officer in the Navy and all the rest of that stuff. I remember two of the brothers of this other family across the street saying that in our family, mine, were four boys, my brother who was more African in appearance than I, I was light but still obviously of African descent, a brother behind me who was dark, darker than he, not black but really dark brown, and then another brother, that's my youngest brother. He's a doctor right now and if you met him coming through the door, you'd think he was Middle East, just the way it all worked out genetically. And they were talking about it, these two brothers across the street and my brother, and they were saying, "Well, the best-looking of your family is--," pointing at me, and I was busy trying to look like I didn't hear him, and the younger brother, who was at that point a little guy. He was only two, I think.In other words, something that stayed with me from that, this structure even within families, in which one looks more white than the other, and that's a badge of honor of some kind, like they had something to do with it. It's always stayed with me. It always worried me, because I had the brother behind me who was dark. I told you we all played cricket, the British game, and we would go out to cricket. Every Sunday we played cricket religiously till I went to the academy and my brother went in the Navy and all that happened. When I came back, I started playing again, till I got fed up and said, "Oh, the heck with this." Interestingly, at that cricket match were some Americans whose father was South African. Now, between you, me, and the fencepost, if you and I saw the father you'd say, "Hey, man, you've got something in your genes you ain't owning up to, because you've got some funny-looking hair here." His hair was curly but tight, and he was swarthy, a little guy and an egomaniac from the gate.Well, these sons of his, and he had five of them, were very British. They spoke with a British accent don't you know and got parts in the movies. They were in movies in the forties, the Severn Brothers. They were even on the cover of "Life" magazine, Billy Severn and Raymond Severn, and they actually were in the movies. But they would make racial comments to my younger brother, the brother behind me, for which he's

never forgiven them, and I was young I didn't quite understand. I didn't even realize that that was going on. He told me this much later, about some of these comments they made, so that the racial thing, the ethnic thing was different for different members of the family, depending on how they looked, which you know well. And a part of it--the brother that is the youngest one would have had no problem in a Creole party. Another brother would have had all kinds of problems, not obvious but not to be mistaken.In junior high school--I wanted to bring something in there to show you the kind of culture that existed then. Los Angeles had, as we mentioned before, the beaches that weren't marked colored, but everybody knew that's where you'd better be. In the schools--I'm from the West Indies now, I'm back a few years, and I'm a seventh grader at Virgil Junior High. The guys across the street were good friends of mine. They were black, because we were all in the same block. We were the only primary black families on that particular block. There were a couple more down below, but on that block. So we were in with Mexican families, a lot of Asian, more Asian than anything, Japanese. We were in gym, and I remember this like it was yesterday. And I loved gym. I'd go running around. One thing I could do was run and act the fool, so I was running around, and they had coed dancing like on a Wednesday, and they had it every other week, coed dancing.So I'm sitting there wondering--now, at that age I could care less about dancing. I wanted to get a ball and go out and play kickball or football. And all of a sudden I found myself outside. They told me to go outside, and we were playing softball, and I remember saying to my buddy Larry, who lived across the street, "Larry, what are we doing out here?" And we were all obviously like this. And he said, "Oh, we don't go to coed dancing." And it didn't really from a social standpoint sink into me, because I really didn't care I wasn't dancing, but what it was was they would not allow the black kids in coed dancing, because they might end up dancing with a Mexican or a white, and by the way it was both. The gradations of what's white were stretched. In those days they classified Mexicans as white. That changed later. I remember in homeroom when a Mexican kid says, "I ain't no paddy. What do you mean white?" Because that's what they called white, paddys. "I ain't no paddy boy. I'm Mexican." And the teacher going, "You're white." "Uh-uh." [laughs] It was just so funny.But in that coed dancing, I went home and told my dad. "What?" He says, "You tell that coach you're going to coed dancing." "Aw, Dad, I don't want to." "Do it." And West Indian dad, "Yes, sir." So I went

back with the coach and I said, "I've got a problem." And the coach--they all liked Sid. Sid was a good old kid. I didn't mess up too much, and I liked to play and do dumb things, but I was basically not a pain for them. And the coach says, "So what's this about?" I said, "Well, my dad wants me to be in coed dancing." "Really?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You are in coed dancing." I said then, "Coach, I can't tell Daddy no." So I said, "I need help." So coach said, "You come on up to coed dancing." The next time they had coed dancing they invited me up. They told me to go up with them. So I told Larry, "Guess what?" "What?" "I'm going up with the coed dancing." "Why?" I said, "Look. I think he just found out my dad was ticked because they didn't let me in." I went up there, they lined up the kids to dance, and Sid wasn't in the line. And the coach looks over and he says, "Hey, Sid." So I come over, "Yeah, coach?" "Listen, man. I need help." "Yeah, coach?" You know, this was the coach. "What do you need?" "I've got forty kids that I've got to get down here to check on why they're not dressing for gym, and I want you to take the summonses to all the classrooms." "Okay, coach." I'd been conned. Alva, I'm out there running and I'm going, wait a minute. But I was smart enough not to tell Pop. I just left it alone. I said, okay, you're running messages, and that's what they did.Now, four or five parents of kids, African American kids, raised continental cane. Dad was working two jobs and didn't have time to breathe. But some of these other parents, four or five of them went in. They all knew each other, lived in another community called The Flats over off Temple Street. Flats was an area of black, still is somewhat, Bonnie Brae, that area right off of Temple, and between Temple and Beverly, in that general area.

Stevenson

Now, is this the area the call The Island? Because as I understand it--

Thompson

We called it The Flats. Now, it may have evolved, because the composition also changed over there. It went from very heavily black--as blacks went more west, more Hispanics moved in and so on, so The Island I haven't heard.

Stevenson

Yes. My understanding, because I went on a black history tour, was that the reason why it was called The Island was because it was a small number of blacks surrounded in this residential area by whites.

Thompson

That's right, that's what it was, so it makes sense. I think what I referred to as Flats was more a black term, an African American term.

Stevenson

Ah, okay.

Thompson

We referred to it--whenever we went over there by streetcar, we always said, "Well, we're going over to The Flats." Island, that's interesting. The whites probably called it that. And in the schools, if they had dancing, for example, not in gym but if they had a social dancing--my brother when he was at Belmont, I think a tenth grader, he danced with a Hispanic girl, and the teacher called him over and she chewed him out. "What do you think you're doing?" "About what?" He hadn't the foggiest what she was talking about, and she climbed his frame for having the audacity to dance with a Mexican girl, Mexican American girl instead of a black girl. And he was dancing with everybody, but the stuff was subtle and not so subtle.So to go on from there, in junior high there were some vestiges. I began to understand there were differences between the way I looked and other people looked, and, of course, when you reached the eighth and ninth grade and the whites started dating among whites, there was no black dating among whites or vice versa, none of that. It was strictly segregated socially, and that lasted. That was true for a number of years, I mean, into the fifties and so on, but gradually then began breaking down, as we all know from the colleges and so on. But going into senior high from junior high, now we're into the late forties near the end of the war. I've been through that trip I made across the U.S. where my sensitivities for the country were dashed, and now I'm in high school, and I don't recall the racial thing too much, except to say that we pretty much hung out in our own groups.There were a lot of gangs, Echo Park, Custer Street, Alpine Street. Alpine Street gang went to Belmont, and those guys were the ones that were involved in the zoot-suit riots, when the Navy got involved and

sailors were coming up jumping browns and browns. It was mainly brown and white. The blacks were kind of out of it.

Stevenson

Tell me more about that.

Thompson

I'm doing it by what I was told. I learned from way back, having to travel on Temple Street past Echo Park, that you stayed on good terms with those gangs, and I was friends with all the Mexican gangs, and whenever something occurred with a black kid, we would get the word. Larry would run into me in a class and he'd say, "Sid, after school we're all going to follow Jasper." Jasper Ross was the sprint king for Belmont High School track. He was a wonderful track man, and he took the city, but he was kind of loquacious. He liked to talk and he would--, "I'm Jasper Tissue Mingo Cool Papa Ross." I'll never forget that. That's what he called himself. But sometimes he'd open his mouth and the Mexicans wouldn't like it, so Pino Ortega one day was going to beat the slop out of him, and he did, and then he was going to get him again after school.The way it worked, the blacks would tell each other, "Okay, we've got a problem after school." We weren't many, but everyone of us was down there on the street corner when Jasper came out of school, and the Mexicans were all lined up, but they had a smaller group because they didn't organize it that way. There were more of them than there were of us, in terms of school, but in the gangs we were basically dealing with a gang. They looked at us and we looked at them, and fortunately for all of us they decided not to get into it, because we had a few too many more people than they thought would be there. But that's to say that it was a weird kind of thing. We would do that, and yet in those Mexican gangs there were black kids--

Stevenson

Oh, interesting.

Thompson

--but typically mixed-looking. But they weren't pure Mexican, and you knew that. Jackie Lee, I won't forget that kid's name. I know he died in prison or they executed him. He was a thug. I mean, Jackie was pure thug. His face had been

burned in a gasoline explosion. He was something else, but he was one bad kid. But he was a member of I think Custer Street gang. He was a member of a Mexican gang, so there were those kinds of crazy alliances, sub-alliances, and he didn't even speak Spanish. But he ran with them clear from elementary school, and he was such a thug that all the other thugs liked him.It's funny because now that I think about it, the blacks didn't really look on him as an outlier, as somebody outside the group. It was just Jackie. "That's the way Jackie is," and they tended to accept that. Everybody hated the guy. Any number of people would like to kill him. But there were some crazy mixtures, and sometimes in my own neighborhood, across the street from me was the Cardenas family. Raymond was a little older than I and a very powerfully built kid, mature for his age and very disillusioned, father was a child abuser, a drunk, ran around on mom and everything else, and the kid just turned to gangs, so he formed his own gang over there by where I lived. And one night he was going to beat the daylights out of me and my brother coming home from Boy Scouts in our little uniforms, little guys. He had five guys with him, and he came over and he said, "I heard you called my mama--," the usual. And I said, "Who's your mama?" because we didn't know. And the guy that saved us was a fellow by the name of Hector de Aragon, who I will love forever, who was in the group, the gang, but I knew Hector a little bit and he said, "These guys don't even know your mother." And there was a midget in the group, a sick little character, and he's the one that told Raymond we had said this. I might not be here today, because Raymond was that bad, but Hector saved us. And he said, "Nah, nah, nah. Leave them alone." He lived down the street from us.Raymond lived across the street, and we were on tenterhooks. Alva, there were days when we would walk around two blocks to get away from wherever Raymond was. One day an old friend of our family--I think I mentioned the Drakes, who helped pick us up at that ship--

Stevenson

Right.

Thompson

Bob Drake, who was all of six-two, big man, boxed professionally for a while, but he was married to a Mexican, and he ran with--he was black, but he ran with a bunch of Mexican guys. And one day we were over at Celeste Drake's,

the Drake's house. Bob was there, and he said, "How are you guys doing?" He was talking to us. Now, he's a young man. And we said, "Well, pretty good." He says, "What's the matter?" "Well, we've got a problem," and we told him about Raymond. He says, "Ray Cardenas?" I said, "Yeah." "Francis is his older brother. Francis is my boon buddy." So he came over one day and Raymond was walking down the street, and Bob called him. "Raymond." "Bob." So he came over and he's a little bit, because he's looking at us, and Bob said, "Man, these are my two buddies. I've known them since they were that big, man." He says, "They're cool. Don't bother them, okay?" He says, "Bob, sure. Hey, guys, we're friends." And I was, ever since then. He straightened out a little bit, but it was so funny, because these cross-alliances sometimes really helped out, because he happened to know his brother Francis, who was his older brother, much older, and he revered Francis. And if Francis' buddy Bob said don't do it, he wasn't going to do it. So after that we could walk anywhere, and I know if I needed help I could have called on Raymond, but it wasn't starting out that way.These are experiences, and I mention them only because sometimes it's hard to get into people's head how at the time these things happen, they're emotionally very frightening for you, for a little kid running around two years ahead of himself anyway, and there were guys that you went to school with that just had tendencies already for ending up in San Quentin. There were some bad people, not many, just a few. Belmont the same way. Now, at Belmont I never was counseled--you mentioned Belmont. Belmont I was never counseled specifically about college. Anglo kids, white kids were, and I had many former German Jewish kids who were friends of mine, I was friends of theirs, who had escaped Nazi Germany--I think I mentioned that--and they were there. Jack Reasonfeld, the guy I will always remember. They were brilliant, flat out, because they came from a background of daddy was a doctor, mama was a doctor, this kind of background, and they got a lot of attention, as they should.But we didn't get much attention, as we should, and I had to kind of do my own thing. I mentioned about running into Mulzac in New York. My aunt took me over there. And I told Daddy I was going to sea, and he said, "Yeah, if you get a degree," remember? And so I happened to find a book about the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. I knew I couldn't get into Annapolis, not likely, but the Merchant Marine Academy already--not on his ship. I see the cadet in the picture, and I think he's white. He is white, but because most of the kids were

that went to the academy, and still are, but there were African Americans already there. There was one. But there was a history of having one, and I figured I could get in on that basis, so I counseled my own way in. I did my own writing. I called. I did all the things I had to do to find out. None of them did it, and that was just a sign of those times.And a number of the African American kids in that school--the Hines brothers, they were from The Flats, Alfred Hines, Joe Hines. Alfred Hines ended up--what do you call the head of the post office in Los Angeles? Postmaster General--in San Francisco. I mean, some of these kids went on and just did some incredible things with very humble beginnings, and I always tipped my hat because I always felt like, in later years, I had the fortune of a father who was educated. A lot of them came from working fathers, plasterers and cement workers and steel workers, and yet they were a family, and that for me is what has been--in those days you knew Daddy and Mommy. And what's more, if you messed up down the street, somebody down there was going to tell them, and you were about to get pounded, so there was more community. But there were families.And later on, just to digress for a sec, as I got into Crenshaw [High School] and Markham [Junior High School] and I just was stunned at the lack of fathers, which you know they're addressing coming up pretty soon. I think Al Roker is doing something, Sunday I think. Anyway, and it's what Barack [Hussein] Obama referenced, too, about the missing of black fathers, because you had families then and now you don't. And those things saved us, because those people did have a discipline and their kids had a discipline. I remember old man Winston saying, "Don't bring no D's in this house. I will murder you. Don't come in here with no D's." [laughs] And they knew better to do it, so they worked. They didn't work as hard as they might have, but they worked a heck of a lot harder than they would, I think, today, as I look at it.Anyway, the experience in high school was better, because I graduated at sixteen. I was a little bit older, but I was still knee high to a duck. But I caught up in mathematics, that was the big change. It took me all of junior high to catch up on the stuff I'd missed by them skipping me back in elementary school, and it was a real burden, but I ended up in Trig getting an A, trigonometry and geometry. I finally started catching on I noticed in geometry, and then from there on mathematics was much easier, never a cinch, but it was certainly easier. And going through high school I graduated with some honors and things, did fine. I got into UCLA because I had to kill a year, couldn't go to the

academy at sixteen, so I had to make up a year, so I went out to UCLA where my brother already was and basically just went through a year, because I had no interest in what UCLA had to offer me. I was going to sea and that's it, until I got into the academy, which was a pure joy except for dealing with southern white midshipmen, which was a problem, but other than that.

Stevenson

Okay. Well, before we move to speaking about the academy and your application and everything, a couple of other things. One, reflecting back on those gangs that you mentioned, Alpine Street gang, Custer Street gang, how did they compare with the gangs today?

Thompson

Good question. Good question. Very different. A lot of fists. Fists don't kill, typically, but once in a while somebody would grab a ball bat. Now, if somebody had a knife, oh, my god. In those days that was just--a gun was--I remember being at a party in Watts and my brother coming over, older brother, he came over and he said, "We're out of here." And I said, "Why?" And we had to take a streetcar to get out of Watts back, so we're talking serious business here. "Why are we leaving?" "Out." So when he said that I figured something's up, so I went out the door. Usually it was him and some girl, and he was going to have to fight some guy. I mean, he'd get himself in it. But he came out and he said, "There's a guy in there with a gun. I saw it." I said, "What? What?" So nowadays it would not be that big shock. I've been around kids that talk about guns all the time.When I got to Crenshaw and Markham, looking at that, and that was the sixties and seventies, late sixties, early seventies, it had changed. The Hoover Street [gang], not to mention Bloods, Crips, I mean all that stuff, it was far different. The gangs were more about man-to-man sort of stuff, although three or four might jump in, which they did with regularity, but not to the extent of killing you, which the difference I would say is that as I noticed the progression of gangs and I've dealt with them most of my life, Pacoima, Watts, Crenshaw, because Crenshaw was a different school. I'll mention that when we get to it. But I noticed that these gangs were not as bad as [meant worse than] Custer and Alpine were, and they were--you didn't want to cross them, because you would get your backside beaten, so you didn't. But it wasn't with the finality

that is sort of detached. I mean, people now, I mean, they can shoot and kill you and never touch you. This distance thing, it's a dissociation thing, and the gun allows it. It's far different.

Stevenson

Another question. Could you tell me something about what you did for recreation or your social life as a teenager, and what sorts of activities would African American young people--

Thompson

We were very heavily into sports, so that we went to all the track meets, and we ran track and played ball and all the rest of it, so athletics was a big part of the African American background in school, even if they weren't going on with it. There were no pro football players. In fact, pro football wasn't even near was it is today, even if it was all white. It was kind of get together, you made a few bucks and that was it for a career. But we still participated, heavy participations in athletics, so that we would go to the all-city track meets, and I say we. The black guys, we'd get together and we'd just go. We'd all go, either together or we'd meet down there. So that was one major part of the social structure, and it's a cultural thing. We were allowed that. We were allowed to run. We were allowed to play football. Joe Hines of the Hines brothers, he was a good football player. He was at Belmont. He was student body president by the way. I forgot to mention that, African American. I think he was the first one.As I look back, in junior high I was so so young that it's a cloud for me. I wasn't into any social anything. I was beginning to notice girls about the time I was in the ninth grade, which put me at thirteen, just beginning to go into puberty and all that. The partying between junior high and senior high was very restricted. It was black. So the parties we went to-- The Flats was not a large area as you indicated. I like that Island term, because it really was. So at Belmont and Virgil there was not a large African American population for you to interact with. So we would go find it. We would go to parties where there were kids from Jeff[erson High School], and Jeff was the big black school at that time. We were kind of an anomaly, because there weren't that many blacks that had gotten over on that side of town, west like that, and even if it was a hokey, hokey house, it was a big deal because it was in Hollywood, you know, this kind of stuff. You'd see it in the [Los Angeles]

Sentinel, Hollywood home, which was a three-bedroom old home that folks were making it in, you know?But the parties were definitely segregated. They were basically all black. There were no Mexicans. Creole, yes, but an offshoot, obviously, of the black, but mainly black and mainly not in our area, so we'd go out of our area. I mentioned Watts. We'd go clear to Watts for some parties. Folks didn't always know it. I don't think Dad would have thought too much of that, because it was so far. We'd go down there, and sometimes the trains didn't run after twelve-thirty in the morning, so you'd better make it or you've got a long walk through some rather interesting territory. We'd been run out of Watts a couple of times. But in the main, the social thing was black by whatever means, and you traveled in order to experience black. Sometimes that was kind of interesting, because they'd start jumping on each other about one school or another, "You people over here in the ghetto." That's a sure sign of starting something, and we got pretty sophisticated at picking that up. When that stuff started, we're out of there, because it's not going anywhere but downhill from that point.But it was all segregated socially, so any girl as I got to high school and started to date, would be black, and you would go to parties jointly. In other words, you'd figure out where you wanted to go, and a lot of it was on safety things. I mean, where could we go and not get into trouble? Because you're using public transportation. We didn't have cars. That was a big difference to what I see today or way back even in the seventies. Kids have cars and had cars. Back then we didn't have cars. Cars ran on tracks, and you were very vulnerable getting on a streetcar. So in other words, you had to be sophisticated and cool about what you did, and we were, but it was definitely very segregated, and we never talked about the other persons.There was one thing Belmont did which was interesting. They worked up some kind of an arrangement with the Downtown Y[MCA], the old YMCA, and on Friday nights we were given access to the pool, and they would have dancing and stuff, and that was the most integrated. Now, most white kids, except the tough ones, stayed away from those, because that's where the minorities went, because we didn't have anything else. We didn't have clubs and all that stuff. Jewish kids had a lot of Jewish organizations, because we talked. The kids I knew would tell me, "I'm going to the Jewish this and that." Sometimes we went. They would invite us, but it wasn't social-social as in girls. It was more fun. They'd play softball and stuff, and my brother and I, we'd get invited many times to some of these Jewish events, so we had a kind of cross-cultural

thing. But that Downtown Y had swimming and dancing and table tennis and all that stuff, and it was a welcome relief for a lot of kids that had no other access to anything, and we could take a streetcar down Temple very easily right into downtown to go there.One of my memorable instances of crossing, again, with the police was down there, when a cop asked us what we were doing, my brother and I, on the street, coming from the Y going to the bus, the streetcar, and he asked us what we were doing, obviously looking for some problem. Huge guy, put us both on a wall, one hand on each of us, and he could have killed us with either hand, and I remember that vividly because we weren't doing a thing wrong. My brother told him, "We're coming from the YMCA. We belong to High Y." "Don't give any of that crap. I don't want to hear it. Just shut up." "Yes, sir." And whenever somebody talks about police brutality I tell them, "You know, I don't think a lot of people that haven't been through it--you don't understand the power of a particularly big man, typically white, gun, nightstick, badge, full weight of the law, and he's decided to come down on you." I said, "I don't care how anybody writes about that. Until you've lived that, you don't understand the terror of it, because you have nowhere to go. You can't beat him physically, and you can't resist him, and he's decided to hassle you."And that's just an aside, that one instance, because we really thought we were going to get worked over, because they'd done some of that. The police department back then was--so that's a memorable thing about being at Belmont and that YMCA thing we did, but it was still basically a good thing for kids, and it shows that we really needed those kinds of things, because we had no other options. It's like our parents--we talked about that. They can't go to the Miracle Mile, so they went to the Club Alabam on Central. The only option, no other option. You say that to people today. "What? What do you mean you couldn't?" "We couldn't. Wouldn't let you in. Wouldn't let you approach it."Anyway, the social thing was black, totally black in terms of boy-girl. In other arenas, the athletes, for example, had a lot of things they would do and get into that involved white, black, and brown, and if there was any integration at all, it was there, through athletics, and some of those kids were fast friends for a long time that were mixed races, so in other words, the athletic-team thing overcame some of the racial stuff. But the minute you introduce a girl, talking about boys now, different ballgame, and all that integration stuff went out the tooth. You'd better not show up at that party at somebody's house. They'd throw you out.

Stevenson

Interesting. Okay, so you spent a year at UCLA because you were at that point, at sixteen, too young to apply to the academy. Can you tell me about your one year at UCLA? What do you recall about that year, and what year is this by the way?

Thompson

I'm laughing because I came out here, I was sixteen years old, Alva. I was about five-foot-three or -four, five-foot-three maybe. I weighed all of 120 pounds. I was one little dude. And I came out here--this is 1947. I did UCLA between '47 and '48. In 1947 guess who came home? All those vets. These are men, battle-hardened typically. I mean, some of these guys have been through Normandy, been through some things, and they're back. But they're men. They are not kids. We're not talking about some eighteen-year-old, nineteen-year-old starry-eyed little guy. Here I was sixteen, this big, a little bigger, and this place was like--it was obviously not anywhere near this size, but it was a big institution. It was certainly many times bigger than my high school.I looked around at UCLA and I kind of did my own thing. I decided that I was going to get through the classes, and I didn't care how I did it but I got through, because I was just doing this year to get to seventeen. I was a pretty good little jock in some ways. I couldn't play football, I couldn't play basketball, but I could wrestle and they had wrestling. They had boxing. My brother was captain of the boxing team here. That was before they went into real interscholastic men's and women's and they had to get rid of some of those because they needed the money to form the women's athletics, which makes a lot of sense, so wrestling went and boxing went.But my crowning glory, there was a great wrestling coach here by the name of Briggs Hunt, and Briggs Hunt retired years later, but he was a legend here. And my crowning achievement was in May of 1947 he said, "Thompson." "Yes, sir." He was from Oklahoma. "Yes, sir?" "I want you to come on the wrestling team this fall." "Yes, sir." I didn't tell him I was trying out for the academy. Well, I subsequently made it and I was appointed, so I never did that. But I always liked the idea that Briggs Hunt asked me to be on his team. So it wasn't all sad. I had a nice time, but I was in awe of the place. I mean, being quite candid, you can imagine the conversations of some of these men, of women and everything else, and Sid, here I am down here, will go, "What is this?" At

sixteen I was beginning to understand all that, and I was dating and so on, but it was still different. These were men. And sometimes I'd be sitting there and they'd start talking, and they'd compare notes about this battle and that battle and stuff they'd been through was in many cases awesome. A whole lot didn't, but the ones that did didn't forget it, so I learned a lot from that.So the year at UCLA was kind of--I look on it as a placeholder. I just marked time to get out of here, to be seventeen. That worked. Although I went through some things to get into the academy, I made it. Want to talk about that?

Stevenson

Yes, let's talk about your application and what you went through applying to the academy.

Thompson

I applied, and you had to send a picture, and I was worried about that, but I put the picture in, and I knew they had had one or two or three blacks before, so I figured, this isn't breaking ground, so maybe. This would be in March I applied, and then around May they sent back and said that--I got a letter saying that I had to take a written exam, and I did that, and I had to get letters of recommendation, and I got those from Belmont, and I got one not from Briggs Hunt but from somebody out here, because I didn't want Briggs to know I was looking at this. I just didn't want to disappoint him. But when they told me that, "You have passed the written," I remember doing a hallelujah, wonderful, great. And then I had to go for a physical, and Alva, I've played, I've run track, I've wrestled. I'm little but I'm starting to grow a little bit and fill out a bit, and I wasn't worried at all about the physical, the least of my worries. "You passed the written." Shoot. I can get the letters of recommendation, and I did, so the physical was nothing.So I went down for the physical at Naval Officer Procurement, which was an office in Downtown Los Angeles like a recruiting office, but it was specifically for officer recruitment, so it had that aura about it. I walk in the door and here's a young doctor. He says, "So what's your name?" And I said, "Oh, my god, a southerner." And he was. I had learned enough to know it might be a problem. He put me through this physical--I was there for about two hours, blood pressure and the usual. Well, okay, I expected that. But, "Walk here. I want to see you walk towards me." You know how I began to get funny feelings? And then he--now, to my

knowledge he's an M.D., okay? And he [unclear], I've been there now most of the afternoon, and he looks at me and he says, "I want you to close your teeth." "Like that?" "Yeah." And then he goes, "Uh-oh." And he says, "You have an occlusion problem. The teeth weren't quite meeting in the back." Now, how in the heck could he see in the back? And it was beginning to occur to this dummy, you're being had, son. You've got this southerner, and he doesn't want to see you in this.And he ran out immediately and got the guy running the place, who was a lieutenant commander. This guy is a Navy doctor lieutenant. The other guy comes in and I could see him a little puzzled, but he went along with him. He said, "Well, you know--." And I said, "Well, do I have any right to a review or anything?" I'm by myself. My brother drove me down and left me. "Well, yeah. You can go to the chief dental officer at Long Beach Naval Station." "I want to do that." I just, you know how you're older now and you're mature and you're deciding, uh-uh, you ain't doing this to me without a fight, not for where I've got to go or where I want to go, and I've gone through the written and all this stuff. And he said, "Well, I can call him and set an appointment." I said, "Please do," and he did.And now I didn't sleep. The appointment was the next week. I didn't sleep for four or five days. I just was a nervous wreck, my mom and dad talking to me, "Oh, come on, now. This is only one thing. There are a lot of other things." "No, Dad, I want this." "All right, then go after it, just cinch it up and go in and do it. You go down and see that guy and tell him you want to be a naval officer," [unclear]. I remember that. And he said, "No, don't tell him that." He said, "Just go in and do it." I said, "Okay, gotcha, Dad." So I went down there, again my brother, the older brother was still at UCLA. He drove me down, dropped me off in this mammoth building. I'm looking around, "Oh, God." I go in there and they send me in to meet this chief dentist, and all I can remember doing is saying, "Please, God, don't make this a southerner. Give me a chance."The guy comes in. First of all, he's a commander. He's fairly senior for a dentist. He comes in and he says, "So Mr. Thompson, what's the problem?" So I told him, "Well, I was told that I have an occlusion problem in the back." And I'll never forget that look on his face of, "What? How in the heck would you know that?" He said, "So what did they do? Did they use the wax things to get imprints?" I said, "No. He just had me put my teeth together." And I remember this guy in the back of his mind saying, what kind of check is that of anything? He said, "Oh, really?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "Do you want me to show you?" He said,

"No. No. I'm clearing you." He said, "You're signed, sealed, and delivered, Mr. Thompson. Get yourself to the academy." I said, "All right!" Ran out of there, ran into my brother, I said, "Man, he signed it off. He said, 'What did he do?' I said, 'Nothing.'" He said, "Because he knew." I said, "I think so. He had that look of, oh, man, they're playing a game on this kid."So anyway, long story short I go back home and I get a letter from the academy and it tells me to show up, but that's the other funny part, Alva. The Merchant Marine Academy is located at Kings Point, New York, which is a beautiful, beautiful grounds, the old Chrysler estate, big estate. They built a whole academy there just for about a thousand men and women, men then and then men and women, as opposed to Annapolis and West Point that are three thousand. But, remember I had to put that picture?

Stevenson

Right.

Thompson

They had--the first year of that academy was typically you went to one of two schools. You went a year to San Mateo in California, Alva, or you went to Pass Christian, Mississippi. The year that I applied they closed San Mateo, so now there's only one first-year school and it's in Pass Christian, Mississippi. And my orders were to come to Kings Point directly, and I didn't understand about Pass Christian. I knew it existed, but I didn't know what the significance, and when I got back to the academy as a fourth-classman--now, they had some people from New York. They didn't send them down there. They had them right there on Long Island. But then every kid from Puerto Rico, every kid from Panama that had a little funny skin color issue, they were in Kings Point, because at Pass Christian there was a welcoming dance the first night you were there. They didn't want no black kids lining up to dance with these white southern belles.So I went back and again, young kid, what do I know? I don't know why I'm there, I'm just there. You have to stand watches all night, they have military crap. So we're meeting and I'm sitting there. I'm a fourth-classman, so you don't open your mouth. There's seniors and first-classmen there, and they were in charge of the watch, two of them, and both of them it turned out were from California. They were talking between them and they said, "I've been trying to figure out--there's a California kid here, but I don't

know why. Everybody else is at Pass Christian." I went and put my little hand up. I said, "Sir, I'm from California." He goes, "Oh." [laughs] "Oh. Got it." They didn't bring it up again, though. It was so funny, because it was kind of an awakening, "Oh. Oh! We know how you got here." So that was kind of an introduction to the place.Thoroughly loved it. Went to sea, not all of it pleasant. I still had some problems. I was on a merchant ship, Moore-McCormack Lines as a midshipman. There was one deck, one engine midshipmen assigned to. They had to do that, because the government paid for a lot of those ships and as a part of that payment they had to agree to allow midshipmen to come onboard for training for a year, so we spent a year at sea and then had to make it up by going to school the eleven months of the year, the remaining time. The problem in the Merchant Marine was the same. I was on a merchant ship, a young kid. I'm eighteen years old. There's one of me and one deck cadet, engine cadet who was a real nice guy, friends, we've known each other for years, a white kid. I went up on the bridge for watch, to go on watch the first time, and it was no problem. The second officer, who did the navigating, was up there, and he was a nice enough guy. I even took star sights with a sextant and all that. In the early days we used to do it, and got to map, chart my positions and all that stuff. The captain was Norwegian, Ingvald Molrlog. Funny how the names stick.But the third officer was a fellow by the name of Gresham, Texan, all of six-three, big man and just one of the nastiest--nice-looking guy, but just a terrible disposition, and when I came up on watch and they asked me to stand watch with him, and he looked at me and this was not going to be happening. I lasted two watches with him, in which he told me, "You stand out on the wing of the bridge," which is off the bridge and outside. We were in southern waters so I didn't mind, but obviously he wasn't going to do a darn thing to help or train or anything else, and the next thing I knew I was put on a different watch. Then the first officer also--a number of the guys on that ship were Norwegian. Gresham I don't think, unless it's way back, but he wasn't. They weren't all, but the senior officers on there were Norwegian descent, American Norwegians.The first officer was Anderson, Chief Mate they call them, first officer. He called me in one day and he said, "Okay, you've been standing some watches. I want you--we're going to have a special assignment for you. I want you to shine the fire extinguishers on the upper levels of the decks of this ship." I remember looking at him like, what? And I was talking to the cadet who was in the engine room, and he's from New

Hampshire. This kid hadn't the foggiest about race nothing. And he said, "Why would they do that?" I said, "Well, I think it has to do with the way I look." "You mean because you're African American?" or at that time black. I said, "Yeah." "Oh, my god. He wants you to shine--?" And that's what I did till we got--and that trip was four months, all the way down to Rio de Janeiro. Now, I didn't mind, because I was going to some fascinating places, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires. I got to the West Indies from Barbados. I was just a hundred miles from my home and I really wanted to go. I told you a little bit about that, I think, before.

Stevenson

Right.

Thompson

As soon as we got back to port we were ordered to come down to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy assignment office in San Francisco, and they reassigned me, and I knew it was all about color. And I thought to myself, "Gresham, may you roast in hell." Pardon me, but I just thought of that guy and what a nasty--if there's such a thing as a typical white Texan, he was it, just thin-lipped and beady-eyed, the way I saw it. But the funny part was, Alva, they put me on a ship, a Grace Line ship to go to the other side of South America--I'd gone down the East Coast, this is the West Coast. The captain was a German, A.E. Naumann, tough, came up in sailing ships, and the stories on him are kind of legend. He wasn't a big man, but he's powerful. But he had a reputation for taking on bouncers in those bars down on San Francisco's Embarcadero. I mean, I think of that, I think, oh, my god, that's some crazy human beings down there in those days.But you know what? He was the fairest man I had ever met up to that point in a position of authority. He was all over me. "Cadet! Blank, blank, blank, blank. You've got to do this and this," and, "Yes, sir, captain." And you know, I was running all over the place. But I would handle the phones when he was trying to dock and undock the ship, which was tricky stuff, and I handled that pretty well. I mean, he could understand me and I'd, "Captain," to tell him. He'd [unclear]. And one day I was in the room having coffee down in the ward room, officers quarters having coffee, and he came in and he said, "Now, look." He said, "You know, I'm counting on you for a lot of stuff, Thompson." "Yes, sir." "I want you to

check those chronometers," the expensive clocks that they use for navigation. He says, "I want to make sure those are always wound and up to speed, okay? And you check them for accuracy." "Yes, sir." I had the fairest, most pleasurable trip, although we had some problems with other officers, not with me so much. They were pretty good. I didn't have anybody that absolutely didn't want me around. But it just shows you--it's like I told you about Las Vegas, where we ended up eating with the woman from Alabama, white woman, old white woman.

Stevenson

Right, right.

Thompson

So you can't make judgments. Some people fit the mold and some don't. Thank God there are people that don't always fit it. He didn't and it was a memorable year, and I did it at the end, which was fortunate. Anyway, it was not as bad an experience as it had started out, because I was very bitter. But I didn't even write home about it. I just left it alone, and then I came back to the academy and I did my two years there. I went on to the Navy from there. Why? Well, when I got out of the academy I stupidly got married at a very young age. We were both twenty-one years old. I always tell kids that tell me, "I'm not married yet and I'm twenty-five," not to worry, because I was way too young. But we raised four kids for about twenty years and got through some horrendous times, but still it was an experience, but that's another story.I got home here in L.A. from back East. We both--I'm married, my wife came out. I was going to go on a ship, a merchant ship, and the ships were tied up on strike. They'd picked to go on strike just as I graduated. So I'm at home for about a month, and I get this telegram from the Navy Department that says, "You will activate your Navy commission," Korean War. "You will activate your Navy commission or be a private in the Army." No question there. So I activated the commission. This time I had to go down for another qualifying exam, and I had no trouble with the officer doing it. Times have changed, you know? It just changes. But the interesting part there is that when I reported to the ship at San Pedro Harbor, Long Beach Harbor, it was huge. It was a big, heavy cruiser, 800-foot warship, and I know nothing about the Navy, because I was trained on merchant ships. But I went onboard, and I remember going

down to get my orders stamped in one of the ship's offices, and there were several of them. These things are like a city. I went down to it and the yeoman, clerical staff down there. They stamped it. "Okay, Mr. Thompson, you're onboard and you'll see Mr. So-and-so, who'll give you your assignment."Well, I did that and they put me, Navy ship stuff, but in gun turrets, which gave me ear problems from the gate. But the interesting part was later on I took an interest in training, and I remember helping some kids that were white and black. They were kids that never got their high school diploma, and somebody asked me to help them, so I did, with their mathematics in particular. And I did. That's where I loved teaching.

Stevenson

I was going to ask you, was this--

Thompson

That's where it started. I didn't realize it, but it really did, because I was still thinking, sea, sea, sea. So then when the training officer's position opened up because the guy there left, they asked me to be the training officer, take care of these guys getting their diplomas, training to become whatever, radar men or whatever the position might be, and I said, "That sounds interesting," so I did. Well, I got in pretty tight with the yeomen, the clerical staff, four guys that were right in that office, and we were friends even after I got out of the Navy. They told me one day when we were in there, "Mr. Thompson, you know something?" I said, "What?" "You were something we talked about at chow." I said, "What, when I came onboard?" "No, no, no, before you came onboard. Your orders were on here two years before you graduated." I went, "What?" He said, "Yeah. Your orders were here in 1950, because one of us was onboard at that time," one of the guys told them. It's weird. They didn't see a picture or anything. All they saw was the orders.

Stevenson

Interesting.

Thompson

What it was was the Navy was covering its bets, and every place there was a black who was about to become an officer, they figured out ahead of time

where they wanted to put them, and they never put them on small ships. They never went on destroyers or tight-quarters ships, submarines and things. They always were on big ships. My brother, that older brother who graduated from here, he went to Officers Candidate School and ended up in the Navy. I'm in Korea and he writes me and he's finished Officer Candidate School. We're the only two black officers on the Pacific Coast, honest to God. Same family. He ended up on an aircraft carrier, big ship, so they had us--wherever there was a black it was lined up that they'd be on big ships where there would be a lot of officers and their chances of friendships and so on would work out, rather than something small where you might run into five guys who don't like blacks.

Stevenson

Interesting, interesting.

Thompson

So it was a calculated move on their part, but I had nothing but a good experience in the Navy other than the war nonsense, shooting at people and things. But in the main--because we showed the flag all over the Pacific. We went down to Singapore and Bangkok and Hong Kong. I saw more of Asia than most people would ever see, the Philippines. That ship went everywhere to show the flag.

Stevenson

Follow up on the Merchant Marine Academy. Your major while you were there?

Thompson

My major? No, they didn't have like math or this. You all took heavy mathematics, heavy science because of the naval training. The degree was a degree in nautical science, because we did a lot of ocean stuff and all this. It was all about ships. I always said it was a fancy name for a trade school. It was to go to sea.

Stevenson

Interesting.

Thompson

They did a lot more--for example, Annapolis would do a heck of a lot more with gunnery and all that. They practiced having the guns fired off on ships. I never did that. I went on that ship and the first time they shot those guns off I'd about died. My god, blew out light bulbs and things. But, no, it was not that. Now, there was a marine engineering. You were either what we call deck or engine. In fact, on our epaulets we wore in one case an anchor if you were deck, to run a ship, or if you were an engineer to run the engine room you had a propeller. The guy I was at sea with had a propeller because he was an engineer, and everything he did was training to run engines, ships' engines. Everything I did was preparing to run a ship, so they were just two different things.

Stevenson

I see. And at the academy there were other African Americans there at the time you--

Thompson

There was one ahead of me and there was one in my class, and he was a kind of quiet guy. He went all the way through, and he did some things in the marine-something department in New York, so he went on in marine whatever. But in the main, there were two and one ahead who graduated, a terrific guy. He was kind of light-skinned and they could put up with him a little bit easier, the southerners, than they could with some of us. And the other kid was kind of dark, and he had a little bit of a rough time.There was a very dark kid from Haiti, Nelson, or as he called himself [pronounces with French accent] "Nelson." And Nelson was one obstreperous cat. He was something. He would go down South and he would come back and he'd say, "Those southerners." He said, "Mon, I don't understand them." He said, "What kind of people are they? Idiots!" And he'd rant. He wasn't a big guy, bright, really bright. But he reacted to America's racial policies in a very negative way, but not enough that they threw him out or anything. He graduated. But he was a real thorn in their side, because he was very dark and very obvious, and he didn't give a blessed hoot about whether they liked it or not. I always loved the guy. We would go out together and stuff, and I'd tell him, "Nelson, you've just got to be cool. Don't let them get you, man, because they'd probably beat

you." He says, "I know. I know it." He says, "But I'll never do anything stupid." I said, "I know."But there were a few blacks, and they made a point sometimes of letting you know there were a few folks that didn't want you there. But in the main, I could never argue about the academy in terms of its total--the way it handled us totally was fair, and certainly the other academies weren't doing that, so I was very happy with it, and later on I went back, by the way, as an advisor there, not professionally, I wasn't paid. I was at UCLA. About ten years ago they put me on the advisory committee, and I worked with the admiral who runs the place, and he had a burning desire for the inclusion of minorities, and I saw more Mexican Americans, more African Americans. And one of these African Americans, I'm proud to say, the last time I was there was the regimental commander. In other words, he was still a midshipman, but he was in charge of all midshipmen under line officers, but the regular Navy, regular Merchant Marine. But he was the lead cadet, lead midshipmen officer of the academy, very, very bright kid. I loved talking with him. So a lot of good things have happened.You know, you always have to think in terms of progression. Things happen, things change. I look back at the beginnings and first time in there in '47. I remember what '47 was and the war and all that stuff, and some of the things some of us went through, and you always think that those are things that lead to other things, acceptance, whether they like it or not, they're going to have to deal with blacks and browns and other people. There was a kid from Hawaii, I remember that, a Polynesian-looking kid. He and I, because we couldn't go home at Christmas, it was too far, so he couldn't go to Hawaii, so we hung out together at the academy. I think they were maybe fifty guys there from different parts of the world that couldn't go home. His experiences were different. They could more put up with a Hawaiian than they could with an African American, for the same reasons that a Creole was--it's different. But he had his moments, too, when he said he ran afoul of this officer or that officer because of skin color and who he was. He was kind of a swarthy Hawaiian.The academy was a good experience for me. I never regretted a day of doing it. It allowed me to go to sea, and I had to get that out of my system, and I did. Not entirely, I got my own boat, but other than that I decided I couldn't go to sea and raise a family, and that changed a few things.

Stevenson

I did have a follow up. During World War II, in those years were you aware of, say, the Tuskegee Airmen--those are probably the most famous--and other blacks in the military?

Thompson

We had relatives who were in the military. Matter of fact, some of them stayed with us. They would come out from New York. A lot of them were from New York. We had the Phillips brothers, wonderful, wonderful guys, and they were in the Navy. They were enlisted men, and they were assigned to Port Hueneme, where they trained Seabees, the construction battalion, and so they would come down to stay at my aunt's place. She was right next door, the one that ran the Women's Auxiliary. They would stay at her place, right next door to where we were living, and, of course, we would get stories from them. These were New York kids and they had not been raised in the South or any of that, and they had a whole different attitude, and they had problems with some of the Army decrees on segregated this, that, and the other.I'll never forget when we went out to Victorville. We went out there. Dad got a chance and we rented a cabin out there, with the desert and the horses and the whole nine yards. Well, it was owned by blacks. A black family owned this dude ranch, not a big place.

Stevenson

Interesting. Remember the name?

Thompson

No, darn it, I'm blanking. It was in Victorville, I know that, and if I heard the name I'd probably know it. But there was an Army base nearby, and they were shipping the black--there was a huge black component there, engineers and guys that had to build roads and stuff, and they were getting ready to ship them overseas. The war in Germany was progressing. They had a big going-away bash at the ranch, and I remember the best barbecue I had in my life, except it was Texas barbecue. It was hot. Man, I mean, I was a little kid, because it would have been the early part of the war. It wasn't near the end. I take it back, it was the early part. It was about '44, '43, '44, and they were shipping out, and I remember listening to those guys talk, and the topic of conversation was access to what they knew they could do and what they

weren't allowed to do. It was very big to them. And no, I never, did not hear of the Tuskegee Airmen, because in those days they didn't advertise it. It wasn't important. Even Mulzac, even this big deal was not a big, big deal. In the black press, The Sentinel, yes. In the white press, no.So I didn't really learn about those guys until after the war, and I know some of them now. One lives in my complex where I live, and he's now ninety-something. But you realize the things they went through, and we talked a little bit about some of that, and yet they weren't--even to us as role models. I mean, as a kid I would have said, heck, I might have decided I'll go down there and fly planes. I don't know. But you never had access to that. They just didn't tell you, unless you happened to be there or meet some of them or whatever. It was not advertised. A lot of things happened then that were vestiges of a really racist society. It just didn't want to acknowledge what it did to people, one, and number two, it's almost like you didn't want to acknowledge that these people have brains enough to go fly a plane and guts enough to fly a plane, and it was very prevalent in the thinking. That's my take, because I never heard of it, and that's criminal. What did we have on the role models? All you had was John Wayne and these clowns playing at it and nothing that was real that we could have put our teeth into as kids.

Stevenson

Okay, so after you left the Navy, what trajectory did your education take at that point?

Thompson

Came back here. I started doing some post-grad in math and science and then realized I really don't want to go into math and science. I wasn't interested in theoretical this, that, and the other, or burying myself. I liked people and I wanted to be around people. I got a chance to sell trucks for International Harvester in 1958, '57, '58, around in there, hated it and I hate sales, because ostensibly I was hired to sell trucks to blacks.

Stevenson

I was going to ask you, would it have been unusual for them to hire a black salesman?

Thompson

Yes. But I was specifically hired to go after the black trade.

Stevenson

Right. And these were trucks?

Thompson

International trucks. They built pickups to heavy-duty eighteen-wheelers, so it was big stuff and little stuff. But the problem was, as one of the salesmen told me, an Italian American who said, "Sid," Valenti, never forget him, he said, "Sid, you're here to sell trucks to blacks." He said, "Black folks, they don't have any money." He said, "They can't buy these trucks," and he was absolutely right. I found myself scurrying around selling where I could to whites. There wasn't any money, and I had to live. I had two kids at the time, three. And one day, to be real candid, we had had lunch, me and another salesman, Ross Sony. He was from [U]SC. He was selling trucks between jobs, and we were sitting there sipping a glass of wine we had after dinner, and he said, "Sid," because I told him I wasn't happy. I said, [unclear] "--sell trucks to blacks. These poor folks don't have any money. They don't want me selling to white," I said, "and I don't want to sell, period." He said, "Yeah." He was the same way, a very bright guy, and he said, "You know, I worked in teacher procurement for USC." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "You'd be a heck of a teacher. Did anybody ever tell you that?" I said, "Well, Dad taught."And to tell you the truth, then the Navy thing kicked in, and I said, "Tell you the truth, some of my more pleasant things were as training officer on that ship, because I got to see a lot of young guys, white and black and brown, who never would have made it except they earned their own little diploma finally, GED, and made it," and some of them were getting ready to go on to community colleges and so forth and correspondence courses and all that. He said, "You ought to consider teaching. I'm serious. You've had a lot of math." He said, "God, they're hiring math people like crazy." So I thought about it for a day, and the thing with this truck thing was going nowhere quick, so I went down to the board, 450 North Grand, and told them that I was interested in teaching.And the guy was the principal of Venice [High School], can't remember his name, wonderful guy, because I did meet some--there were some folks I met down there that weren't good, not nice anyway. But he was a real nice guy, principal, and he's talking to me, he says, "You were an

officer in the Navy?" He says, "How many black officers?" I said, "There were two when I was in there, me and my brother." And he said, "Where'd you go?" I told him Belmont and Virgil and he said, "And you had all this math?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Man, I think you'd be a good math teacher." So he said, "Here's what you're going to do. You're going to take a course at UCLA." No, he said, "Cheap--go to Cal State L.A.," he said, "and take a course in child psychology." He said, "You've got to have something, so why don't you go take a course in that, and then we're going to have you talk to some people." So I said okay.So I went and took the course. Alva, to this day I've got to confess I never student taught in my life. I never took the whole teacher-ed thing. I took courses to get the credential. But what he did, when I took the child psychology thing I took it in the spring, got through that final and he said, "How'd you do?" I told him, "I did good." He says, "I want you to take a course this summer, not with the university but with us." He said, "Dale Carpenter is an old name in mathematics, and he is going to be doing some teacher workshops this summer at Cal State L.A., and I want you to take his course and then we'll make an assignment in the fall." I did that. I went back down and the head of personnel, I'll never forget, looks at me with this disdainful, sneering--it's been a long time, but I wanted to just knock his lights out. I was so angry with this human being. I said, "God, what a pig. Who hired--?" I said, "Let's not go there." True story. I said, "Let's not go there. The man I talked to is the principal at Venice. You don't like it, you talk to him. But he told me," and I told him, and I said, "and I'm here expecting to be assigned." "Well, okay," he says, "I'll see what I can do." I said, "You do that," and I went home.Well, Alva, it was about two months later and I get a phone call from Dale Carpenter. I had a good time in his class. He liked me and we got along fine, and he called me and he said, "We want you to go to Pacoima. We want you to be a math teacher up there. You report to Dr. Dave Schwartz." He said, "He's putting the school together," because it had its problems. It had a couple of riots and one thing or another, so I thought, well, that'll be interesting. [laughs] So I went out there, and Dave was a big ex-USC baseball player, a pretty good one. He was all-something or the other, a big guy, Jewish and deceptive, a big, rough, [imitates gruff voice] "Here's what I want to have happen," and a Phi Beta Kappa, so bright as the devil. Shook my hand and told me years later, "I liked your handshake. It was firm." He had his own way of testing people.Anyway, so I started teaching at Pacoima Junior High, never

student taught, never--I didn't even observe. I went to Dale's class and he talked about the sequential teaching of arithmetic and mathematics and algebra, which was fine. But never--I'm going in this classroom on a Monday morning and don't know the first thing about what I'm going to do next. I had some help from a wonderful guy who was the math department chair, Jerry Adler, and Jerry later on became an adult-school principal. But he gave me some pointers and I listened, and I went in the class and it worked out really great. I loved it. They seemed to like it. It was a day when there was corporal punishment. They got rid of that--actually, later on when I was a deputy they got rid of corporal punishment, but in those days they'd swat the boys if they acted up, and that was just part of the--I was swatted when I was in school. It just shows you how that corporal punishment thing was engrained.And by the way, there were kids that worked on. They swatted me twice and it was over. They're not swatting me again, and I behaved. Now, there were other kids though that that didn't work, one. Number two, there were kids that actually, I think, enjoyed being battered, and that's the sad part. These kids were probably getting battered at home, and we carried out the abuse at school. So when they got rid of it, although I reacted to it at first, I said, "Well, wait a minute. We've always--." But after I thought about it I said, no, wait a minute, we can't continue what's been happening at home. I say that because when they went into the school, that's how they nailed it. They got a bunch of men, a few tough women, and Principal Schwartz asked me, and I'll never forget his first question, "Are you afraid of kids?" I said, "God, no." "You ever been in athletics?" I said, "Well, I've done some boxing," and I was at the academy. I said, "I've boxed, I've wrestled." "Really?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay." I said, "That's how I'm going to teach math?"First day in class a kid by the name of John Guinsburg that was Mexican Jewish, looked like Fonz, the Fonz with the hair, pure thug. He had a lead pipe up his coat, leather coat, leather coat, the whole nine yards. It fell out, boom, all over the floor. So I went back and I said--second day I'm teaching. I go back, "Is that yours?" "Yeah, so what?" I said, "Hey, say that one more time." I said, "You're not talking to some dope." I said, "I'm not going to put up with your mouth, so knock it off." "All right, man. Well, don't--you're getting angry." I said, "Yeah, I am angry, because I didn't come on you." "All right, all right." I said, "That's your pipe, right?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Pick it up." He looks at me, and I'm looking at him like, pick it up. So he picked it up. I said, "Give it to me." And I was thinking, you'd

better put it in my hand. So he laid it in my hand. And I remember going home that night and my wife, that wife saying, "So how did it go?" I said, "It wasn't really about teaching. It was about surviving." I said, "These guys, they've got some kids in there that are really bad." I said, "But it worked out, and I didn't have to really go on him, and I think I've got him so he'll listen a little bit." Well, it worked out with him. He actually graduated from the junior high. I don't know what he did in high school, didn't want to get into it, because he was a really interesting kid.But all that to say that I began to find an affinity with kids. I just liked kids, and it hurt when they didn't make it, and it felt wonderful when they made it. And I was good enough in math, they made me math chairman a year later. I said, "Do you guys know what you're doing? I never was trained." Said, "Oh, shut up, just do it." "Okay." So I was math chair, and I went on to teach classes in arithmetic, algebra. We had some geometry classes, and we had a group of kids, extremely bright. It was a borderline area. It had a Jewish population that came from all the Jewish culture. You had an African American population that came out of San Fernando, the Joe Louis Tract, some places that were heavily African American, and then a strong Mexican influence from San Fernando-Pacoima that had been there since the 1800s, so it's an incredible area. Some Asian kids that came from the big nurseries up on Foothill, a mixture.And I had a group of kids that went through algebra and geometry [snaps fingers] like that, and the question was, what were we going to do--I take it back. They went through algebra, but they were getting ready to take geometry, but they didn't want to do that, because they were going to get geometry at the high school, so they had to have a filler, and I didn't know what in the world. They asked me to teach it, and they said, "Well, you're doing stuff with--." I was working with the Air Pollution Control District at the time, part-time computer thing, and I decided--I had come back here and taken some analytic geometry and one thing or another, so I went into analytic geometry with them. I'm saying that because I was trying to do something that would not have them marking time and withering on the vine, but not taking away from what they were going to do in high school and the kids saying, "I already had that." I didn't want to get into that kind of a fight with San Fernando High School, for which we were the primary feeder.So I went into some analytic geometry, and I did something totally different. I was scared, because I didn't know how it was going to go over, not with the adults, they didn't know what I was doing, but the kids. These were very bright kids,

and I'm digressing for a reason, because I've got to add this. They had a reunion a year ago. These kids are grandparents now, you believe? And to see kids with a doctorate in computer science. One is the lead meteorologist for the United States in the Western states, a wonderful, wonderful, bright, bright kid. We had lunch at Jerry's in Westwood, and there were twenty of them there, twenty-five, with wives, husbands, because there were girls. One girl had become a district superintendent up north, Solano. It was just a wonderful experience. It's something you don't get as an administrator. You have to have been a teacher to have the relationship.But these kids have gone on and done some just--one kid that I thought would end up in prison. He was a bright, bright kid, but he was messing with narcotics, and when he gave me his card at the luncheon and he was a Ph.D. in naval architecture at [UC] Berkeley, I said, "I think you made it." He laughed. He said, "I'll bet you figured I would be behind bars somewhere." I said, "You probably were." He said, "I was once, until I wised up." And he said, "But now I'm doing these things." In fact, he even worked with the guy that designed the sailboat I own. He mentioned, "Do you have a boat?" I said, "Yeah, I've still got my boat." "What is it?" I said, "A Rawson sailboat thirty." He goes, "Oh, my god, I know Rawson." He says, "I was up in Seattle, Washington." That's where they are. This is to say I was thinking to myself, you know, as you look back over the years, you think you know people. You don't know anything. You don't know.One girl, attractive, older woman obviously, a grandmother now, but then in those days she was an attractive girl, but she had a real race thing about Mexicans, and I don't think that ever left, because we were talking about the old days and she said, "Yeah, but some of those kids that were there, those kids," and the way she was talking I said, "Boy, you didn't mellow with age." So sometimes it doesn't work out real well, but a lot of times it did, and it was just memorable. So the time at Pacoima--I taught there for nine years, and I always have said teaching time was absolutely critical for somebody to be an administrator. You've got to know teaching. You just have to. You have to know kids, and you can't do that in two or three years like we're doing now. We're putting people in charge of schools that haven't taught really in depth anything, and to understand teachers and to understand what it's like to be in a classroom day after day after day, and I always tell them, "Answering the bell," it's different. I said, "I'm not saying that being a principal was easier. No question. Being a high school principal, good God. Five, six days a week you're out, and it's every

kind of activity in the book." I said, "But there are just differences in the kinds of things that you're working on, what you're doing as a teacher, as an administrator." But you can't denigrate either job. They're just necessary, and being a teacher begins with it. That's where most of the administrators come from. They were teachers.And I always think back, when I start to say, "They ought to be--," I would think, okay, when you were in the classroom, I said, and I hadn't forgotten it, I could remember. Anyway, the time at Pacoima, we had the plane crash. Did I tell you about that?

Stevenson

No. I think you alluded to it, but--

Thompson

Oh, my gosh, first year. Yes, the first year of teaching at Pacoima started in September. The next year in February, and this would be '56, '57, we were graduating two graduations, one in the winter, one in the summer, before they went to all year. They were rehearsing with all the kids in the auditorium, in the ninth grade. The school was a big school, 2300 at the time, and graduating classes were large, so there was a full house in the auditorium practicing. I was teaching math in the bungalows down by the athletic field, and I'm a beginning teacher. I still don't know which end is up. I hear this screaming sound. I had come out of the Korean thing and I was thinking, that sounds like a bomb. I ran outside--I told the kids, "Stay," and I ran outside the door, and I see pieces--it was aluminum foil coming off this plane, and what they didn't realize, a lot of folks, that plane was a transcontinental, four-propellered transport plane, a big propeller-driven plane. It got hit by a military jet over La Crescenta/La Canada, came on a wide arc out of control, had a big hole in it. My dad, who was a radar engineer, remember? He told me later the guy was running a blind radar run on the plane, in which they blackout the cockpit and they go on radar, very dangerous, and he did it to a plane--fortunately did not have passengers. It was only three crew.Plane came in over the athletic field. I didn't see it, I could hear it, just horrible screaming of the wind going through it, and then this horrendous explosion, wham, and flame and smoke all over the gym, gym field. It blew up about fifty feet in the air, blew up over the gym field, and I thought, oh, my god. I told the kids to stay. I had a teacher across from me by the name of Mrs. Williams who was a

disaster. She couldn't control a thirsty horse. And I remember yelling to her, "Mrs. Williams, watch my class. Keep them under control. Don't let any kids out. Hold them here." Because we were way down in the south bungalow. And I remember her yelling at the kids, "Shut up and sit down!" What got into her, you know?But I ran out there and I didn't even get to the field. There were kids coming towards me that I knew. They had peeled off burning clothes from airplane fuel, and white kids who were yellow from burns. Hispanic and some African American kids were injured, but not seriously. But what happened was, Alva, he came over the field. There had been 350 girls out there. They had just taken them in for showers. He didn't hit the gym. He blew up over the athletic field. The pilot was obviously trying all he could to control to an open space; didn't do him any good. They were blown to pieces, and he blew up over the field. One of my kids for the next period was killed, and three others were killed, and a whole bunch of others lost a leg, terrible burn injuries, and that was in my first year, and I thought, it can't get any worse, and it really never did. That was absolutely--you know who was a student here, did I tell you? Ritchie Valens [Richard Steven Valenzuela].

Stevenson

Oh, really?

Thompson

Yes, I had Ritchie. Ritchie was a student at Pacoima, and he had graduated--no, he hadn't graduated, he hadn't graduated. He ditched that day. He was doing all this music stuff. And in his movie he thinks of it as a crash of a little Piper Cub, and people who saw the movie thought that's what happened. And I says, "No, no, no, no. That was a huge plane, four engines." The engines--the explosion was so violent it drove them into the asphalt. Those engines were below ground level, if you can believe, I mean, just a tremendous explosion. Anyway, that was one that took a while to get over for all of us. All of us were really traumatized, kids, parents. Parents--I remember a woman jumping a sixteen-foot fence around the athletic field, and this mother I remember in her nightgown and a robe jumping, and it was months later when she asked me, "You know, Sid, I never knew how I got into the school." I said, "You jumped." "What?" I said, "You jumped from the top of that fence." She says, "What? I couldn't have done that." She says, "I'd have broken my neck." I said, "Well,

you almost did. But you jumped and I saw you moving, so I figured you were okay." But I said, "No measure of a mother--you saw--you weren't sure if your kid was hurt, so you were going to find out." And I said, "You went up that fence like a Ranger going over an obstacle course." I said, "It was amazing. And you jumped." I said, "And you weren't the only one."Anyway, all of that was there, and I remember it vividly, because it was just something I always related to people about the lessons we learn, and I won't go into them, but it's all about those people you can count on in emergencies and those you can't, and I learned a big lesson. There was a war vet there who used to talk about his exploits as a pilot and all this stuff. He was catatonic, absolutely frozen. His kids took the flag and marched out and left him. [unclear] So anybody that was counting on this war experience, this and that, it wouldn't have worked. He was frozen. Then I always talk about the little old lady that was the teacher who was a disaster, who told the kids to, "Shut up and sit down," and they did. You just don't know how people react in emergencies. Anyway, a little lesson.

Stevenson

Okay. Well, that's a good place--[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (March 23, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Sid Thompson on Monday, March 23, 2009. I'd like to start our session today talking about the vice principal and principal test, and I want to look at this in the larger context of a time when there were very few if any black vice principals and principals, if you could talk a little bit about that.

Thompson

Well, it's true. There was Lou Mazique and folks like them that were kind of the spearheads of all of this and began it early on and went on. Jim [Taylor] was a tweener, because when I started teaching, Jim Taylor was an assistant principal at Poly High School. I used to call Jim the gem, because my dad knew him well. They taught together at the Jefferson Adult School. Father was much older, of course, and Jim was a young fellow, but they were the beginning. There was one here, one there, same with the elementary level. When all of it

began was the tail end of--late in the forties, I don't know exactly what date, but it was early fifties.There were two sides to look at. One was the history of the district was not inclusionary. It did not have black representation as such, or any representation for that matter, Asian, Hispanic--I mean, white, basically. And we knew that that was representing a huge change in what the district was about. We also knew, though, that they had a major problem with South Central, and then they had these what we called pocket ghettos and barrios like San Fernando, Wilmington, Canoga Park. They're places where there were minority populations, and they were having to look at that because we're having a problem controlling that. And sadly, a lot of it was looked upon as a matter of how do we control these populations who are poor and really aren't going anywhere that they could see, the general population, so there was a mixed bag.But we did figure that there were enough problems related to minority areas that they needed minority representation, and we saw it as an opportunity for things to change. I went to work in '56 as a teacher. Jim Taylor was right next door at Poly High, and we used to send kids from Pacoima [Junior High], our school, middle school, to Poly, so that was a visible change, and that we happened to know him helped, too, because I knew him from here when I came out for a year before I went to that academy. My brother knew him well back then. So we saw all of that as the very beginning of change. But Jim was an easy role model for them to pick, just excellent English, excellent in everything, great personality, good person with people, so he was an easy choice for them, for the district, the institution.But a lot of us were being actively trained. When I went to Pacoima and after about a year of teaching, the principal, Dave Schwartz, white, Jewish, liberal, big old guy--and he told me one day, said, "You've got to be an administrator, so I want you to go into my training program." He set up a training program. He had eight people in it. He had Jewish, he had non-Jews, he had white, just white Protestants. I was a black. I'm trying to remember if there were any--no, we didn't have Hispanic. It's funny. The Hispanic piece followed, because most of what they were looking at was--in Pacoima, for example, a pocket ghetto-barrio, because it was also heavily Hispanic, but they didn't even begin to think about Hispanic representation. They just thought about, ""We've got to get the blacks in here. We've got problems with the black kids." So much so that those of us--oh, there was another one, Roger Dash. Roger Dash was an African American. He was older than I, a little older,

little older and a little more experienced. He started sooner. He was also in the program.The reason I remember that so well is that he and I were asked, along with a couple of African American teachers who weren't going into administration but were respected on campus, and we were asked to meet with the African American kids to talk with them about the kinds of things they could do to help themselves. Well, it sounded innocent enough, but it turned into, "You folks can't be so loud. You folks, you've got to tone it down. Let's not forget about our cleanliness." Well, they were appropriate for some kids, but individually. I thought about it later and I was not proud of that moment, to be included and we were doing this. It just bothered me a while later, after I got a little bit more experience. I was just a young guy on a block and I was going along, "Okay, we'll meet with them. Heck, talking with kids is no problem." And the kids all knew us, and I don't think any of them took it necessarily badly, but it just was not the right way to do it, and I recall it as a lesson, and from then on I always said, "If you have a problem, deal with it the way it is a problem, individually, and don't do collective this and that, because that's not the way it is. And if I were one of those kids that showered every day and did what Mama told me and carried my books to school and did my homework, I'd be insulted. Why are you telling me this? What about all those white kids that don't do this, living up in the canyons there."So as I thought back on it, it was a time when I reflected, and it wasn't that long. Within a year I was reflecting on that, and we cut that stuff out. But as far as the administrative part--and that was a growing thing is that administrator. I said to myself, listen, if you ever move on in this, don't ever get caught doing that, because it's not right for our kids and not fair to any human being. But in terms of the exam process, I studied, and it was very rigorous then, because they required you to know an awful lot of minutiae. There was a book this thick called "The Administrative Guide," and I swear to God, it looked like the Bible, I mean, and it was in its own way, but it was thick this, but covered with codes and the distance apart of chairs when they're set up in classrooms, and the minimum width of aisles for fire reasons, and all of that stuff, how many times you hold a fire drill. And it was done, I'm convinced, as a good way to weed out the hundreds and hundreds of people who applied. That's the classic way to do it. You just throw enough junk at them and if they don't know it, they're out. That gets rid of some of them.And then you had to write essays and all that sort of stuff, and then you had oral interviews and so on. So the

first time I took it, I didn't make it, which was not at all uncommon. I took it, as I recall, twice, and the second time I placed pretty well with it. What began then was a process of not from a racial standpoint, really from an experience standpoint. They would take you downtown for different programs. I was taken downtown--no, no, not true. I was first taken, before I was made a vice principal the list had not come out, but the principal at Maclay Middle School [Junior High School], which was an integrated school next door to Pacoima that had opened, and the principal was what turned out to be an old friend of mine, a big old white guy named Fred Frazier. I'll never forget Big Fred. And Fred was one of these individuals out of the Midwest, right out of the corn belt, but he loved people, and his African American kids in the school he'd fight for with some of the parents, because it was a mixed school, and there were whites who didn't like being in there with blacks and browns and so on.So he had an assistant principal who was promoted, and he had been talking to my principal, who was now a different person. Dave had moved on to other things. And he called that principal, the then-principal of Pacoima, a guy named Bill Layne. He gave me a real push. He said, "I want you to do this, Sid. We want you to be an administrator. We want you to be a principal. So I went over, I took the job as an acting assistant principal. Then when the list came out and I had made it, then it was a regular assignment. So I went over there in '62 or '63, '63 I think, and then--'65, because I taught nine years at the other school. I went over there, I became an assistant principal, and that's when I began to meet other African Americans, because this district was so huge. What did you know about the harbor, the East Side? And we had blacks from the East Side all the way west.And by this point we had managed to integrate finally Dorsey [High School] and places that I remember as a kid, blacks were not in there. They did anything, just like they did with Odetta with this situation at Marshall [High School]. Marshall was a protected school, and, "No, you can go to Belmont [High School]. We're going to let you go to Belmont," with all the other black kids we're trying to put in there, and there weren't that many. There weren't that many blacks over there. Belmont's black population was a tiny percentage of the total--mostly white and Hispanic. So these kinds of changes were the very beginning in the fifties and then into the sixties. Now, it really picks up when the Watts riots hit, and folks began looking at this saying, "Now, how are we going to run these schools?" And quite honestly, a lot of white folks are saying, "I don't want to go down

there." So they were having trouble filling those positions.I don't want to forget this, because it was such--I remember once being asked by some white principals when I was at a senior level, so I don't forget it, "What is this white-black? We serve as principals, and we--," and they were going on and on, and I knew them, and they're good guys, but they were in the system. So when I stopped them I said, "Okay. I'm going to give you a scenario. I have an opening at Jordan High School, and I get twenty Porsches down here, fast cars, and I say, 'Okay guys, ladies, jump in, have a car. You're going to drive it. I need the first car to Jordan to be the principal.'" I said, "Do you think there are any cars out in front of Jordan?" I said, "No, be honest now." "Well, no." I said, "That's my point. That's why we have to think about those things, because how do we serve those kids, and we don't even talk about it, when you've got our own people afraid or whatever their reason is they don't go there?"Now, I say that because after the riots, that's when all of that stuff began in earnest, and Fremont and Jordan and Washington [High School] and all of those South Central high schools were very difficult to staff. And, of course, if that was true of the administrators, think of the teachers. And the reason all of that is very appropriate and apropos for what I'm talking about is because in '65 I was over at--'65 to '68, then from '68 to '69 they had me downtown as a little more seasoning in charge of what they called the recreation directors. These were people that aren't teachers. They're not credentialed, and they're hired to help with ground supervision, and that was all over the city. There was a budget, big budget for them, and this is after the riots now, so all this is very, "We've got to protect these kids," and all this stuff. So I ran that for a year, and I didn't know what they were doing. I was down--I didn't know what I was going to do next.And then they called me in the office one day and said that the principal, who happened to be white, was being transferred from Markham [Junior High School] in Watts to another school that he was going to open, Curtis, down in Carson, and that Markham was open and they would like me to be the principal, and would I accept it? And I said, "Of course, happy to do it. Thank you." I trotted on down to Markham, and I ran into some problems because the culture I was raised in, this West Indian thing, was always a bit of a problem, to be real candid, with some of the African Americans here. They didn't understand that I was in the Philharmonic Club, me and my brother, because Daddy insisted that we learn classical music and understand it. Now, that didn't mean no other blacks did it, because there

were certainly many I met who had done the same thing and were probably castigated the same way we were. But we had problems because of that. In other words, it became a question, "Are you black enough?" And that's a very common thing, and we go through it as an African American society, we go through it as a society at large.And when I went down there, they put out a lot of things about, "Well, he had West Indian affiliation," and all kinds of things. And I say this because I went to that school, I loved it. It was 104th [Street] and Compton, and the staff was primarily African American, out of Texas Southern, Xavier, the black institutions.

Stevenson

Historically black colleges.

Thompson

Exactly. And they were some of them, and this sounds like trite or something, but I really mean this--they were such a neat group. They had identity, which I never had being raised in Hollywood with a mixed population in schools, and we were the smallest population. I never learned anything about "Lift Every [Voice and Sing]." You don't know that stuff. You never heard it, because it wasn't important to the main population. And so down there, to be real candid, I got an education, and I would ask the folks from Texas Southern and Xavier, "Look guys. Tell me about this and this and this." "Well, man, don't you--?" I said, "No, and please don't beat me up because I've been beaten enough. Just tell me."But the one thing I think I made my point on was that they knew I was for those kids, and I would fight for those kids hammer and tong. I got into it with the police department, because when I went as a beginning principal, and there weren't a lot of black principals, I was the second one, because the Jordan principal at this point was now black, so change was beginning, and we were all a part of it, and that was good.We had a bad episode on the campus at Markham. It was right by the Southern Pacific right-of-way, and the darn train used to come through, and they'd take rocks and throw them at the trains, and they hit the engineer one day and put him in the hospital, and I'd just had enough of it. I understood this was part of the tradition. There was no fence. It was poverty, right? So who cared? Let them get across the tracks the best way they can. So what I used to do, one day I just got mad, and I had a little temper, and I went across the tracks with them.

The kids were going home, and I went across the tracks. I picked up a piece of two-by-four, "First one that hits a rock on that engine, you've got to answer to me." "You crazy, Mr. T?" I said, "Yeah, because I'm sick of people getting hurt, and one of you is going to get hurt, because somebody's going to send the police and now I don't know what's going to happen." Well, they would respond to that. "Okay, man, we'll be cool." I said, "You're cool, I'm cool." I put the thing down and said, "Okay, now no more of this stuff, all right?" "Okay, man." I don't mean it stopped completely, but it wasn't the tradition anymore.Well, one day they were going home. They went across the tracks. There was no train, so that wasn't an issue, but it was a Jordan Downs-Nickerson [Gardens] thing, gangs. And I see where they want to tear down Jordan Downs now, and I don't know if there's an answer to getting rid of--those gangs are so entrenched in there that it's really difficult to move it.

Stevenson

It is, it is.

Thompson

They got into it on the tracks and right way Southwest Division interpreted it as a potential riot. Now, we're only two years, three years after the Watts thing, so they came in force, and, of course, the stations had not been integrated, so these are white officers. I'll never forget this. Funny how you say things and it causes my memory to--I had gone across the tracks to follow my kids, and I was yelling at them, "Get home." "Mr. Thompson, they're fighting over--." "Okay, you go home." The police came in there in squad cars, obviously emptied the station, because they had three or four officers in every car. Motorcycles, the whole nine yards. And these young white officers were grabbing the kids and instead of lowering their heads to put them in the back of the car if they were taking them in, they'd just jam them in, and to the extent that I was yelling, "Hey, easy, man." "Who the hell are you?" I said, "I'm the principal." I said, "And I don't appreciate it--if they deserve to go to jail, okay."And you know what reflected back in my mind, I think I told you, as a kid, a six-foot officer, gun, billy, the badge, the law and abusing it. At the same time that was happening, as a beginning principal, brand-new principal, it was the lesson I also learned about people--never generalize. Down the sidewalk--this motorcycle's as big as all that, you know, police motorcycle, got all that

junk, and he's coming down the sidewalk. He's a big guy, and in front of him are a bunch of my kids. I couldn't get to them. They were coming down the sidewalk, but they were yelling and screaming. You know how they get. They got all wrapped up in this stuff. He took that bike right into the middle of them. He stopped the bike and he said, "Young man, young lady, I want you to go home now." And he said, "Well, man, you just--." "No, I'm not threatening you. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you going home. You know, I just want you to do the right thing."I sat there and I said, "Holy cow. Now, he is doing what we would expect a law officer, a peace officer to do." No more, no less, but that he's doing it, and some of these other idiots are doing what they're doing teaches you again, do not generalize. Human beings are human beings. Some will be gentle but with authority, which he was, and others will not, will abuse power and abuse it under circumstances where it's totally unnecessary. You didn't have people burning buildings. You didn't have folks shooting at people. You didn't have any of that. They were just raising cane, and that it sets off some to this reaction, some of which is just mucho testosterone, I think, "I'm going to be the man here, and I'm tough and I'm this and that," and in others--that motorcycle officer represented to me--he had power, he was a huge man, carried every bit of armament you could carry on a motorcycle, but had the dignity to respect.And I remember at a meeting that was held a month later regarding the incident at the police station. I didn't do it in an open meeting. I waited until it was clear and I got with the captain afterwards, who I'd met a few times, and I told him the story. And I said, "You know what, Captain?" I said, "I just wanted to say it to you and give it to you, because it would be a great lesson in your roster, in your meetings when you muster the troops before they go on the street to just tell them one educator appreciated the dignity, the respect that was shown to my kids by their officers out of here and then to observe the ones that have lost it." I said, "You put it in your own words." He said, "You know what? I will." I said, "Okay," and I believed him. So there were lessons learned at Markham, but I always like to say that I learned more about being black there than I learned anywhere, because it was a black society basically, and the people I was learning it from were steeped in the traditions and all the things that black folks had to do in the South to survive, and I learned an awful lot from that lesson.And my proudest moment as an administrator, including superintendent and all that stuff, was that one day they called me up on the phone. I'd been there two

years, had a lot of things going, wonderful staff, and they called me up and told me they were moving me to Locke [High School], and it was kind of devastating, because I really wanted to do another couple of years there, but they had trouble. They lost a white principal, a close friend of mine, Sid Brickman, who moved on and was being promoted, and they had an opening and they wanted me to take it, and it made the news. The next week I went into Markham, I was going to school. I got in there early every day, so I got in there early in the morning, and I was met at the gate by one of the teachers, and she said, "Mr. T?" I said, "Yeah?" "Listen. We would like you to go down to the shops, to the print shop, to Mr. --," oh, gosh, I want to say Alverson [Iverson]. That's not it.Anyway, the print shop teacher became a friend, a wonderful guy. In fact, his wife worked with me for a while. I went down to the print shop. How could I forget his name? Something like Alverson [Iverson]; anyway. I went down there and said, "What's going on? You have trouble?" "No, no, Mr. T. Sit down. Have some coffee. Have a donut." I said, "What?" He said, "Trust me." I said, "Oh, I trust you." And he says, "You sit here, you have this jelly donut and you have this cup of coffee and relax." So I did. What they'd done, they had a walkout about my transfer. I mean, it made the front page of the Times. They had a little dog with a sign "Don't move our principal." [laughs] He had on shades; it's a little poodle. They had this big old sign on him, and they had walked out, and you know, that moment was for me, because it meant, I think, that they recognized that I had tried to do some things for those kids. No matter whether I truly fit the culture or didn't fit the culture or whatever they thought, the fact is that they felt that I was knocking myself out for the kids.And I have people that I still consider friends--this was '68, no, '69. They had the walkouts, the teacher walkouts occurred when I was principal at Markham, and those were not pleasant days. They were very ugly. My assistant principal was a wonderful white lady, Gloria Marchini, and we went out together to serve donuts and coffee to the people outside, because they were my teachers. And they had some confrontations with the teachers inside, because when they came back in there was a lot of--and I tried to say to them, "Folks, we've all got the kids here though, and no matter what we think of each other and what we think we should have done and all those things--." It helped, and we were able to pull it together, and the transfer occurred later and the walkout occurred later and the signs and the dog and all that.Well, we'd been through some things, but I never forgot that place,

because of what it taught me, and I was raised in this city, but it just shows you how where you are raised determines in fine detail what happens to you, because what I encountered at Markham was like nothing I had ever encountered at Belmont or at Virgil or at Dayton Heights Elementary, because they weren't black schools. Black kids were recognized for, "How are we going to deal with them?" but not for, "What is it that makes them tick? Where do they come from? What are the things that they as a group associate with, respect? We know about gospel, we know about all these things, some of it, but we don't really know these folks, and so we don't teach them."I went from there to--actually, they sent me to Locke and then moved me again because they had a major movement at--they had a kind of riot at Crenshaw [High School], and the principal left, who was Anglo, and they moved me into Crenshaw and the same thing. But now I had been around. This was a mixed faculty, not like Markham, a new school. It was only built in the sixties, so it was different, and it was built in, as you know, View Park and that area, and while the kids initially went there as trouble--and there were a lot of problems back in the early seventies, sixties and seventies with the African American gangs, the Hoovers, Hoover Crips. All those gangs were east of Crenshaw, and as those problems developed in those schools, those parents were looking for alternatives, so they would falsify addresses and so on, and that's part of the African American westward movement. It was always, "Let's go west, it's better. Head towards the ocean. It's better," till we ran into the ocean, then oh, well. I mean, you can't go out there, so back that way. So they had moved by false addresses. That school had at one point 3800 students on traditional calendar in that school.

Stevenson

It's huge.

Thompson

And many of them when they went home at night, they'd go out the gate, went east, because the ones living west in the hills, I would see them getting up in the morning, going out in the street with their [Pacific] Palisades [High School] letterman sweaters, getting on the buses and being bused to Pali as voluntary integration kids. So the upper-level socioeconomics went west, because they had resources to do it, mother to drive them if they had to, and

all of my kids, in the main, not all total but a lot of them were from the east, and they brought in all the gang--I had a terrible time.It was also a time when you care about your kids and you're knocking yourself out, and I would talk to them like a Dutch uncle. But, you know, the gang thing was so serious that I found myself--there was a shooting at one point there every week for six weeks. It was so bad I had four school police officers, armed officers on campus, and I remember Jim Taylor, because the superintendent was Bill Johnston, and he'd gone down to Mexico for vacation, and Jim called me up because he was the deputy superintendent, and Jim said, "Sid, we need you to tell the board of supervisors what it's like in these schools right now." And I said, "I'll have to tell them the truth, Jim." He says, "Okay." So I said, "All right." Now, of course, I told more of the truth than maybe he wanted either, because I got down there and I'd just finished the night before--a kid shot right in front of me. Went out front supervising, car pulls by, bam, luckily hit the kid in the upper leg, not anywhere, and he was okay. But I mean it was scary stuff. Here we are down on the ground in our suits hoping we don't get hit, too.And an incident had happened, and they had trouble at Jefferson [High School]. Jefferson High had a homecoming, and I remember four or five of these cheerleaders were hit by gunshots. Luckily again nobody serious, but they were all wounded. It's incredible. Cheerleaders? What are you doing? And I remember I was telling this to the [L.A.] County Board of Supervisors. "What is it like?" I said, "Well, I'm running a school with police officers inside school, our school police officers." And I said, "But outside when my kids go home, they're on their own." I said, "And it's some pretty scary stuff." I said, "I'll tell you how bad it is. The principal of Jefferson High School will call me, the principal of Crenshaw, and he would say, "Fort Crenshaw, this is Fort Jefferson. How are you doing?" And that made the front page of the Times, and ever since then people--some people were very angry with me. "You call our school a fort." And I said, "Well, tell me what it looks like when you go to the gate. I've got police officers all over the place," and now when I did that, even though it was heavy, the local division, I forget which one it was, came up to the school, the captain, the head of it, and he said, "What's going on?" I said, "Look at the stats. Six shootings, six weeks." I said, "This isn't a school." And he says, "We're going to shut it down." I said, "You mean--?" He said, "The street. That's our jurisdiction and we're not helping you." I went, "Hmm?"By god, they shut it down and it made such a difference. You didn't see these kids

going out the gate running home. They were going out the gate walking to the bus stop. Police had patrols. I mean, it just called for heavy action to prevent this from happening, and we were working so hard on the AP [Advanced Placement] courses and all these kinds of things, and every time one of these incidents happened, Alva, what would occur is that the kids would go to another--they'd go west. They'd go to Pali, they'd go to Hami [Hamilton], they'd go anywhere they could get in, and I just thought I'm losing the kids that I would like to have as examples, and that can't happen. If the parent really cares, they're not going to send them here. And there was a little battle. I worked on an awful lot with the community and a lot of parents, and we got them in and we talked with them and tried to get them to understand what we were trying to do, and I said, "But I need your help in that you need to put pressures on the powers-that-be that these kids need to be safe. A kid should not be terrified going to a bus stop," or going to his house. There's got to be a better life than that.And every parent agreed. They were stuck. They weren't sure how the heck to deal with this either, because this gang thing was just mushrooming out. Eventually I think we got it more or less under control. I was there five years. I got some time there, and I thought I made a--I don't know if I told you this or I said it someone else, but one day I was standing in the quad, the middle of the school, at lunchtime. I always was out there, lunch, nutrition and so on with the kids. This young man was standing next to me, and I said to him, "What's your name, son?" So we introduced ourselves, because with all that number of kids I didn't as many as I'd like to. I said, "How's it going?" He said, "You're the principal, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah." "Well," he says, "it's like this. I think that the sheriff said, 'I need me a good prison,' and somebody said, 'Let's build a school here.'" Stopped me in my tracks, because now we had put the lid on the place, in class, everybody. "I don't want anybody roaming the halls." Standard stuff, but what was coming over, across was control, and I knew, consciously knew that we were in a control mode. The street's patrolled, the school patrol, and this young guy was just saying, "This makes a great prison."And that's when I went back to my office and I was sitting in there thinking, "He's right." So then you start to think about what can I do to change this culture? Again, now, first year as a senior high principal, I mean my second, third year, and I talked to some of the teachers, and there was a group of young teachers, kind of avant garde, and some of the old guard didn't care for them, some of whom were very

traditional teachers out of the South. I had a wonderful math teacher, math major, was in his sixties, just a wonderful gentleman, and he didn't like these avant garde folks, because he thought they were too liberal. "All you've got to do with these kids is tell them what you've got to do and do it."But we sat and had meetings and we decided to come up with a school within a school and to take 600 kids out of the main school population and have them, like we do now, with small learning communities. In other words, a school within a school. I was the principal, yes, but they ran the programs for their kids. They counseled their kids. They called home on the kids, and I thought it was really successful. But you had to work at it and it didn't last, because when I left, after I left folks didn't want to work at it and it just went into nonexistence, which happens. That's how institutions survive. They outlast you. You want to do this and this and this. Fine, how long can you last? And the day you're gone, unless there's somebody with the same burning this and that to do it, gone, right back to the old traditional.So I've learned over the years that if you're going to make a change that the institution has to be reformulated. It's hard to do it within a school, because the other traditional school controls--it's the bigger one, and it controls. That's why I loved so much when we built the King Drew High School, because right from the start it had a process for beginning with the parents involved, the parents signing the kid in, and the parent required to be involved with the child. And I could go on a soapbox, I get so mad with the mayor and everybody else. They're all ranting and raving about taking over schools. You don't need to take over anything. What you need to do is you have the bully pulpit. Get up there and tell these parents and these kids what they need to do. And I don't care, ma'am, if you have a third-grade education. When this kid does his homework, you know junk when you see it, and if he's doing junk, put his behind back in that bedroom and tell him, "Get to work, and shut that stupid television off, and don't you touch your cell phone, and get to work. And I'm going to look at it." And you know junk, make no mistake.And they could do that. They have the bully pulpit. The mayor, he's got the bully pulpit. He could tell us all one evening, "And I'm going to be talking to you every month about education." But if we're going to educate these kids, it's good teachers, good schools, good administrators and all that stuff, but it's parents involved, and if you're not involved you can forget it. The kid knows, "Shoot, I'll go on home and they don't care about all that." But we're not doing that. I've seen now two major editorials in

educational pubs nationwide, they go nationwide, saying this, that that's what's wrong with the No Child Left Behind. The No Child Left Behind talks about the school's got to--and if they don't, we're going to fire them, we're going to take away their money, all these threats. But not once does it really talk about the fact that a kid's education begins with the attitudes at home, and you don't have to be rich to have an attitude. My parents were poor. I'd better not walk in that door with some stupid report card. "And don't tell me about Miss So-and-so. That's not my interest," my dad. "Oh, no. Listen. You're in there to get an education. Don't tell me what prevents it. What prevents it is you. I don't want to hear about the teacher." And that was it, and we learned quick, that isn't what Dad's looking for, or Mom.And there are a lot of parents like that, and thank God there are poor parents. I had poor folks, black, living across the street from us in East Hollywood, and he was a plasterer, and that old man, he'd be on those kids' backs, and all of them were successful, and he was poor as a church mouse, right out New Orleans, plastering. So I had a lot of feelings about it, and at Crenshaw and points afterwards--but I really, in my beginning years as an administrator, as I look back on it, Markham formed me as an African American. I learned more about being an African American than I had ever learned in my life, because my parents weren't from here, and what you learned as a kid in a school that was integrated, which we all say should be the way it is, well, that's true. Maclay was integrated, and we fought for that integration.But you also have to know a lot about yourself, what it means to be a this or a that, because that's part of you, and when Hispanic kids talk about quinceaneras and things like that, that's as it should be. That's part of their culture, and isn't it a good thing? Yes. So why aren't we encouraging that? Well, because that's the way you can get into the parent's mind that, okay, in addition to all of this, here's the other thing that's huge in this culture. It's called education. And you've got to put aside whatever happened to you for what you think ought to happen with your kids, and Crenshaw taught me more of that at an older level. I think back and I think, boy, if I were back there now, I would do this and this and this. Human beings are kind of victims of our own time and culture, and at that time it was survival, which is so sad. But the school within a school I thought was a darn good idea, just couldn't hold. We got it in, it lasted while I was there, but then it just disappeared.So the beginning administration was the start of a recognition by a school district that if you're going to serve kids of

many colors, they need representation. Sometimes you do it for survival again, because you want somebody that can control, and, "Blacks will control blacks." Well, that's a lot of nonsense, I learned that over the years, too. A good white administrator can control and handle just like anybody else. But it helps to have it so that you can take a young man around the corner and talk to him sometimes in our own language, in a way that he can really understand it, and he's hearing it from you, who you didn't have any advantages either, just like him. So sometimes there are lessons that kids can learn that way.So the representation part, from an integration standpoint it became absolutely critical. I found it to go over the other side to the extent that sometimes I've noticed over the years, especially lately, lately being any time from my time on up--we were so taken with the idea of an African American that sometimes we'd bend over backwards for an African American to run a school, and sometimes we put people in that were really not qualified or were not the best for kids. I don't care if they're African American or what they were, they just weren't good for kids, or teachers, teachers, because they had an attitude about principal. Done better with a qualified white. We can't have it both ways. What you want is the most qualified for what you've got.Now, is it wrong to want representation in your school population? No. Is it right to say that on a staff for a school in Watts that there has to be African American and Hispanic representation? No, that's good. Doesn't have to be the principal. Could be, and if qualified, yes, but that doesn't mean you do it at all costs. Don't hurt the school just for a racial purpose, but racial representation is always something to be achieved and to be acquired. So I learned all of that over all those years, and I've come out here and I'm looking now at the schools, and I think we are so much better at representation. I see Hispanic, I see African American, but I'm worried because I don't see the African American population--it's diffused. It's all over the place, and that's problem number on. They can't point at an African American.On the other hand, I'm noticing as I look at the makeup of people east, Orange County and so on, that there is more representation in African Americans out that way, because that's where a lot of the population went, so that's good, too. Again, you can't have it both ways. And in the city I'm seeing a lot of Hispanic representation. I observed about four years ago again where we--for example, a reading program and all of the people not in the classroom who are reading specialists who are going to present this to the schools, everyone of the people in this

particular organization were black. I'm saying, but wait a minute. At this point Fremont High School was 80 percent Hispanic. You've got to have representation for that, too, because you have a whole bunch of kids there who are English-language learners, and who understands why and who and what--that can be done by an Anglo or white person. That can be done by a black person, yes, but where's the representation for their kids, for their people, who understand the culture and so on? And I didn't see that. So like I said, we go to extremes both ways.I think the lesson is representation, that true representation. There has to be, so I'm glad to see that they've gotten Hispanics in there for a lot of those schools that are Hispanic, the same way they did with a lot of the schools that were African American, that they had African American representation. Didn't have to be the principal, but there's hopefully one, two people on the staff who were, and sometimes if little Charlie needs somebody to talk to him, Sid could take him around the corner and talk to him. That's what you want, or Mary or whoever the person is.So lessons were learned. It was a beginning. I've seen this come full circle. Back when I was in middle school, I never saw an African American administrator. When I went to Belmont, went to Virgil, went to [unclear], never would I see an African American, because they didn't think it was important and necessary and all those kind of things, and they had an attitude about us, too. We belonged on Central Avenue. After the war, after the fifties, into the sixties big changes, and while it was ugly, that Watts disturbance caused a whole lot of changes. It caused changes because they realized they had to do something. They weren't quite sure what, but they had to do something, and one of the things they thought they'd better do is get some more of us in there, and that was good.

Stevenson

Okay. One follow-up question. You came into the district you said in '56. In your opinion, what effect did events on the national scene--I'm talking particularly about Brown v. Board in '54, but you had the Civil Rights Movement going on in the South and other places--what effect do you think those national events had on the changes, including more black administrators?

Thompson

Excellent. And I didn't reference that, and that's a great lead in to that effect, huge effect, there is no question in my mind. The Brown situation, in fact both of them--there are certain segments of this population that are frightened by that, and that's the same way it is right now, the same fear Obama strikes in some of these people, because he's black and we don't know what he's doing to do. He might want to do a Mau-Mau thing, who knows? All this foolishness. But the Civil Rights Movement to me, as is said, all is not unique to anybody, anybody that observed it and observed what Martin Luther King [Jr.] did, and I say that because it is so critical. Nobody could say there was fear involved on their part. What were you afraid of? They were going to riot and blow up people and burn? No. The very thing he talked about was not, so the fear came the other way, and the dogs and jailing and the bombings and all the stuff that went on came from the other side.I knew white folks that had a lot of embarrassment, didn't want to really enunciate on the thing or make it clear or trumpet it or anything, but they were bothered, and I think it got to people's consciousness. And I think that a lot of what happened in the sixties, while it was reactionary to the riots and all that stuff, was the Civil Rights Movement, huge. The Brown thing--the reason I separate them a little is because I noticed from the very beginning there was fear, and that fear was you know what, forced integration, and they were scared to death. Just like I served downtown during the time that some of those board members that were on there were scared to death of forced integration, [Bobbi] Fiedler, oh, the redhead--

Stevenson

Goldberg?

Thompson

Not Jackie. No, Jackie's liberal over here, and she was very much into the whole movement. Roberta Weintraub, and remember they had all these anti-busing this-es and that's, and then Tom Bartman came in and some others, but there was a lot of fear related to that. Now, why, I don't know, because the fact is only ever got integrated was us going the other way. And as a matter of fact as an observation, to show you how things worked, there are many ways to skin a cat, as we know. When the integration situation federally, Office for Civil Rights, they came with an edict about integrating faculties. We

lost so much in that it's incredible. We lost because the only integration that occurred was our people going to the valley. But they never came here.I had a teacher interview while I was Markham, late sixties, in Watts, white teacher, young, and she came down and she said, "I was told to come down and interview you, Mr. Thompson." I took her around and I talked with her, and she says, "I really like your attitude about teachers and collaboration and our involvement, and the school, gosh, it looks great, and the kids are in class. But I just can't come down here." So I said, "Well, that's your decision." She says, "I know they assigned me here," but she says, "You know, Mr. Thompson, I have some strong feelings about this." I said, "I gathered." And she said, "So if I have to, I'm going to get pregnant." I said, "Well, that's one way." But I'm sitting there going, holy cow. She did. Ran into her years later in the valley. What she did, she got pregnant, went on child leave, maternity leave, childcare, came back, but she came back as a sub teacher, and then she subbed in the valley for two years until all this stuff--again, this big system--just waited, and you guys turn your back and she's hired at Monroe in the valley. And she said, "I'm not proud of it, Mr. Thompson. That was a time when I just wasn't proud of myself, but I had to do what I had to do." I said, "I understand. There's no hard feeling. Good God, a whole lot of that happened." But she says, "But the thing that's really amazing is here I am at Monroe." I said, "I know." And she said, "So I learned that if you wait long enough, things happen."What that says is the system will correct to get its culture back, almost like a deliberate act. But we lost so much. I know so many good black teachers who ended up out there, and in return we got white subs, or subs, any sub, because we had unfilled classrooms by teachers who didn't come. So all of the best-laid plans don't work that way, and people who are in control by voting or by whatever, money, whatever, they will find ways. But the one thing they couldn't quite get around was Martin Luther King and the whole Civil Rights Movement. They just couldn't quite--it was national, it was nonviolent, it was everything, and it had the support of thinking white people, and it had a huge effect, I believe, on a lot--first of all, they were afraid of the Office for Civil Rights in the big hierarchy downtown. I would hear that all the time. The minute we were talking about doing something, even when I was an associate superintendent, they would get a lawyer in right away and say, "If we do this and this, what is that going to mean for civil rights?" They didn't want to be in violation of civil rights.Everything that was done about the

whole integration movement, forced and voluntary, was a legal-lawyer battle in which they would come up with rulings from the judge that said, "You don't have to do this, you don't have to do that." And the anti-forced integration people won, because we never did it.

Stevenson

Right.

Thompson

Tells you where the power is. That part--nevertheless, by not doing that I also noticed that they had to do other things to counter their image related to that, because these were liberal people. If you were to ask them what they considered themselves, all of them considered themselves very liberal, but not in that case. That was their kids. It's funny, we can say liberal up to this point--not my money and not my kids, and you learned that in the sixties and the seventies. So I want to say I would give the Civil Rights Movement almost a primary responsibility for a lot of those changes, no question, because they happened on such a scale and nationally that people--I mean, when you saw federal troops going into Arkansas with [Orval] Faubus and all that stuff he was pulling, I think it had an impact on people that this was serious business. It caused an awareness that they just didn't have. "It's not right to do these bad things to blacks and browns and all that," but it wasn't sticking. "It wasn't really too bad. It was okay, because we didn't want to integrate with them anyway."But yes, that was a very, very important movement, and another regret I had was that I wasn't down there with it. I just didn't understand--"So what's going on down there?" And the South was a place I avoided like the plague after what I went through in Las Vegas, so I just said, "I don't want to go South." It was years, until years later that I finally did it, because I had friends and they would tell me, "What are you doing? Yeah, we don't recommend you traveling the back roads of Mississippi at night, but--." I said, "Yeah, but I wouldn't do that in parts of L.A. either." So they said, "That's right, you've got to be smart."Anyway, it's been an interesting time in the school system. Some things change, some things never change. You know, it goes in circles, Alva, but the circles are moving. It never comes back to the same place. So when you asked me is it better now than it was fifty, forty years ago, sixty years ago when I went to school? Yes, no question. Are some things

worse? Yes. One of them beginning for me, the big one that has not changed one iota is poverty, what has happened in poor communities, especially among minority kids, that that has done this. The other night I tuned in "48 Hours" on A&E, and situation after situation was black shooting black, very rarely black shooting white, but mostly black shooting black. And you look at this and look at it and you think, good God. Have we gone so far that we've forgotten these poor people have been in that role for generations? Street kids, folks that have never progressed educationally and been able to move out. That's where they are. And with all that they've learned and the narcotics hooked into all of that, when I look I get so depressed that I just don't look anymore. But it's about black kids and black kids going to jail.And that's why I say the circle moves, and yes, we're more cognizant, and I believe that what's going to happen to the schools, public schools, there's no doubt in my mind that we're going to have more and more of the private, and why? Well, because the kids in private schools, whether they're black private schools or not, the parent goes to the door and signs for the kid, and the parent is involved with the kid, and this means that that kid's behavior is going to be a little different to little street Charlie who comes in and wants to fight everybody, and there's nobody to control him at home, and it's a question of can we control him in school. And most parents will want their kids to go with other parents' kids who care enough to be responsible for them.The scary part is, after we filter that and filter it and filter it, what's left? And it's still black street kids. That's what bothers the heck out of me, and I just don't have an answer, because it's bigger than schools. It's economics, it's all kinds of things, and it takes a will to want to cause change. But what change? And how do you do it if you don't educate? And how are you going to educate at that nit-grit end where folks really don't know and don't care, where folks have been beaten down so much they just don't know what's better, and that's the part that worries me. I think though that increasingly folks are going to go towards signing and taking responsibility and putting their kids in schools that do that.

Stevenson

Right. Another follow-up question. You talked about the effect of the nationwide happenings on what was happening in schools. What was happening locally in terms of movements dealing with things like housing,

economic empowerment, employment, full employment, things like that that may have had an effect on the schools and education of our children?

Thompson

Yes, that's a good question. A lot of things happened. I heard the other day that somebody said, "You know, this whole business of whites and blacks and browns, but particularly whites and blacks," because we're always at the bottom of that pole, I don't care how you construct it. It's our people that end up here, some of them. And that the white population and that Obama in a sense represents some of this--the old fears about the black population have shifted, faded. For educated blacks it's different. People know them. They go to whatever together, plays, and do things together, and they have learned that there is not this huge disparity between blacks and whites. There's a question of are there good blacks and bad? Oh, yes. Whites? Oh, definitely. But in the normal population there's far more, I think, acceptance now of the status and all the mores. Everything that goes with being black, people are able to differentiate. Now wait a minute, he can hold his own with us on a job?I can remember Maclay had to suspend a little white kid who was badder than the devil, fighting every time he gets a chance, prided himself on being Irish, therefore tough, and he and some black kid got into it and I suspended both of them. The father I talked to on the phone to have him come in, and he came in and he started off with--no, on the phone he said, "I know you guys have got this integrated crap down there, and I don't go with that stuff. We're white and we like it, and [unclear]." He doesn't know what I am, so he's going on and on, "And the nerve of you people to be suspending my kid just because he whipped some black kid." I wanted to interrupt and say, "Wait. That whipping, now, I don't know what he told you, but he got his behind whacked." Both of them did.But he came in and he did a double take, and you know what he did? It's a true story. He said, "Oh, god." In other words, I opened my mouth and I'm coming and here's this black dude sitting behind the desk. I got up, I shook his hand. He sat down and we started talking, and we talked and talked, and I remember at one point saying to him, "Mr.--" whatever his name was, I said, "You know, kids are kids. I used to get in fights, not deliberately and not that many of them, but I wasn't going to take being whipped around by anybody either. That's just the way we were raised over in the streets I was raised on." I said, "But when you're out there looking for it,

it's a problem." And so he said, "I know, because nowadays people shoot you." I said, "Yeah, all the above." When it finished he said, "You know, you're somebody I can talk to." He said, "And I didn't expect that." He said, "So I'm going to take that little bugger home and give him a little talking to, too." And he said, "I think we can work on this." I said, "I know we can." And he said, "Yeah, because you know, we're talking the same thing." And it hit me that he finally--wait a minute, this guy's black but he's talking like I would talk about my kid, like he would talk about his own kid.And I think as a society we've kind of come there, and we are understanding that just because your roots are from Africa doesn't mean you don't have a brain, and number two, and doesn't mean therefore that you can't assimilate all kinds of knowledge and everything else and be able to operate at a level that's consistent with what or better than you can, and I think the country has come to understand that. That's why I believe, and it's not unique, we all say it--that's why Obama--how is it that that could work? Well, people are beginning to understand, well, why not? And the more he talks, the more they're convinced why not. They know he's got a tiger by the tail. But I saw him the other night and I thought, what a beautiful representation of the race--

Stevenson

It is.

Thompson

--I mean, to express himself so thoroughly and so well and saying things that any fool can understand and I think appreciate it. Not the ones in Washington, that's another breed of cat, but Joe Blow, the average citizen. That's what I think we've come full circle on. I heard a kid interviewed, a white kid, went to school in the valley, and I forget which school but it was integrated by busing, voluntary. They asked him about multiplicity of people in the school of different origins, and he said, "I've learned so much here." And he said it in such an eloquent manner. He said, essentially, "I learned more about other people than I ever would have learned in my life, because the way I was living and where I lived, I never would have known them." And he said, "I won't say that some of my best friends, because--," and he laughed. The kid was really mature. He says, "Because that's what we hear all the time." He says, "But I'm talking about friends, real friends, real people that I respect, and I've learned

that here that I never would have learned anywhere else." And I thought, maybe the books and all other things may not be the same. I don't know, the parents have different views, but that alone talks about the national culture and what it means in schools and why it's essential to continue trying to get this, because we don't live like that.I always worry about the Korean community, all the tight little area, this tight little area, and the Armenians. We're the only thing that does any integrating of any note. In housing patterns, even though blacks have--the blacks have actually diffused into the east of L.A. I know my own daughter and her family, they live in Glendora, and they're the only blacks on--I drive in there, and they're the only blacks for two, three blocks, and they are so accepted, and she's African American. She looks like me. Her husband is African American from Georgia. The kids are African American kids. But I notice that her neighbors, they're always over there, and they're always over at their house helping them with this, that, and the other, both ways, and they don't feel any problem. That would not have been true twenty, thirty years ago, thirty years ago, wouldn't have been true, Alva.Like I think I mentioned going to that house in the forties, late forties, and that woman from Oklahoma telling me I don't belong there and, "Get out." Nowadays that just wouldn't happen, I don't think. Folks don't do that.

Stevenson

Right. Okay, another follow up. At the time when you were taking the principal test, principal's and vice principal's test, and there were no doubt other African American teachers also taking the test, trying to get on these lists, were there any formal or informal meetings of black teachers to discuss ways to get into these positions?

Thompson

It would be dependent really on the group's origin. In the group that came out of my school at Pacoima, the principal's exam you got together with principals you knew, and that was more about just friendships, people you respected, because you had to respect their opinions when you asked a question. In the initial, for the vice principal or assistant principal exam, it was a product more of the school. We were a mixed group in the training group. There were eight of us, and we were two blacks and an Asian and white, some Jewish but white. That group, we stayed pretty much together that way and studied that way,

kind of you against the book and you against the culture of the organization and that sort of thing.On the principal's exam when I say we picked the people that we would respect and would want to study with, and I remember in that group we had again there were two or three blacks who just were good people. I mean, like you have the opportunity to talk to Jim Taylor, shoot. I'm meeting with him all day and all night. Yes, but it wasn't a conscious, "I'd better sit down and we study together." We were all urged--the blacks I knew would talk about--because usually you're in different places. I was in Pacoima at the north end of the valley. A lot of those guys were down in Watts and other places, so it was hard, fifteen miles apart. In talking with them, they didn't see it as a gain if we simply met as a group. We would urge each other and sometimes there were meetings the district held to help get more information, and we would tell each other, and I can remember some of the African American guys and women, we would talk and we would go to these meetings because one would say, "By the way, did you hear?" We didn't have e-mail then, but we'd call and leave a message.A lot of it, though, was more local, and now that I think about it, it really wasn't so racially organized as it was organized by location and by the ability of the people available to the group, because you didn't want to study with a bunch of dummies, so you studied with people who had some sense and knew what they were doing. The principal's exam was, as I said, a little more--it wasn't about a group of teachers, for example. Now you're talking about a group of administrators who are assistant principals getting together to be principals. Again, I don't believe that it was so ethnically organized as it was location and where the people were you respected. They could be at other schools.I had a Japanese, Tak Nakahara, bless her soul, she passed away young, too, but a great principal, and Tak was older than I, but when I was at Markham she was at Bret Harte [Junior High School], and we used to talk a lot. And she's a good example. When I started studying for the exam, when I went from A.P. to principal I knew her, and I would call her and get her opinion on things, and sometimes she would run a mock oral for us, for example. But we would be a mixed group, because there weren't that many of us either. They weren't that many assistant principals in the sixties, early sixties. That increased in the seventies and eighties to where now, I mean, you had people available that could be gotten together.Also another difference, important difference. The rise of the African American organizations, the Council of Black Administrators

[COBA] really comes about in the sixties, and that is an important tool for bringing African Americans together, and yes, there were study groups that came from that. They would run, again, mock orals and things as a group for African Americans, and a lot of people took advantage of that offering and studied. Especially I found it to be more appropriate for the beginning level, where they didn't know a whole lot about the exam, because once you do it, for principal it's more of the same. Competition is different. These are all assistant principals. At the beginning it's teachers, and you're learning about the exam and so on, and COBA, I think, provided a very responsible base for helping those beginning people with taking that exam, the initial exam, of what it's like, what do you look for in terms of people that you would have recommend you, this sort of thing, all the politics of doing it, what you don't do and what you do do when you go to an oral interview, what you look like, how you talk, how you respond, how do you handle questions, those kinds of things. They did a lot of that.And there were other organizations, Asian, Hispanic. White folks used to say, "We don't have any." I said, "You don't need it. You own it." So we used to laugh about that, but they would come to the same organizations sometimes and say they'd like to sit in, and sure. I mean, they didn't say it had to be black and therefore whites can't come. That wasn't the case, but it was just that it was aimed to give African Americans, for example COBA, to give them a chance to have information shared with them. So that was a big piece of what did assist a group, African American group, whether they took advantage or didn't.

Stevenson

What would you say the mission and goals of COBA were if you were to put that in a nutshell?

Thompson

Well, it was the Council of Black Administrators, and that means that they were there to, one, assist black administrators. For example, if something happened on campus and you got in trouble, you took an action that somebody didn't deem appropriate, they would counsel you on that, and they would give you counsel as to what recourse you had. In other words, they represented you. They didn't do it in so much as a group going into meetings because Sid Thompson did this and that in school and he's being disciplined.

They would counsel more from the side, telling you how to handle the situation you're in, because a lot of these were administrators. They were themselves administrators, and people that are already administrators are hesitant to get in the middle, because they don't know the facts. You never do. Somebody tells you this, this, and this, and then you find, oh, no, it wasn't, this is what really happened.So a lot of those organizations--the only one that will do that is an association, the AALA, Association of Administrators, Administrative Association of Los Angeles. Now, they represent everybody, but they are like a union, and so when you have a problem they go in, legally and every other way, and they negotiate. COBA doesn't really do that. It's more informal, but it deals with black issues. For example, at x school they're having trouble at the school, and nobody seems to be answering for the needs of that school, and the school is primarily African American. Well, COBA will take a stand and go down and they'll talk to the board in open board meeting, or go down and talk privately with the superintendents and say, "We think this and this and this." So it serves a good function in terms of, one, recruiting African Americans for administration. That's a big one, because they don't want to see it go back to what it was, and right now they need to be very careful of that, because there aren't that many African Americans around that you can get in the pocket to say this is necessary, so it's a little hard to get their attention, they, the district.Number two, they have, it's part of their charter, they are concerned about the schools for African American youngsters and what's happening at them. They will take stands, for example, on the hiring of teachers and what's been happening at a school in terms of its faculty. You see what I'm saying? That kind of thing and aimed more at African American kids, aimed more at African American teachers and administrators. They're very concerned, I'm quite sure, I haven't been to a meeting lately, but they're concerned about African American teachers. We're not getting a lot of them, and that's where the administrators come from, in the main, not entirely but in the main, and that's a real concern for everybody. So their issues are not so much legal as pertains to evaluations or improper treatment of, imagined or real, of black administrators. They're more concerned about keeping a representative group of them and also making sure that our schools, the schools that are dealing mostly with our kids, are properly formulated and organized in order to deal with the problems they have. They're a watchdog, a necessary watchdog.

Stevenson

I wonder if we could talk about the Watts rebellion of '65 and maybe you could tell me personally where you were when that happened and what was the district response to that event.

Thompson

First of all, some general observations. To my knowledge there was little or no burning of schools. Businesses because they saw businesses as not theirs, and we all know that, and some of it was not even rational. Some of it was irrational in the sense that people were just letting off frustrations from way back. A lot of us who knew anything about Watts from way back knew there was trouble sitting there fomenting. I had a friend of our family's, and it was really weird because they were from the West Indies. They happened to live in Watts. We were playing this British game, cricket, which I played from the age of eight on because of the West Indies and the Brits and all that. Mrs. Lacey I believe, an older woman in the late forties while I was still in high school, we were at cricket and she was talking to my dad who she knew taught, and she was saying to him, "Tommy," little accent, she says, "Tommy, I have a friend at Jordan High School, and they have no geometry classes." And she says, "How--I just didn't know if you knew, can a kid go to university without geometry?" And he said, "No, not likely." And she said, "Well, why wouldn't they have that?" Well, it was an innocent question. My dad said, "Because somebody's allowing it to happen." He gave her one of those, because he was teaching adult school at Jeff, so he kind of knew the system.Well, she went back down there and she just didn't accept it, and she went after them. And she was such a quiet, reserved lady they couldn't deal with her. She didn't come in cussing and carrying on. She just kept saying, "Why?" And it was two years later when she mentioned at cricket, "Remember the issue?" And she was telling my dad, and I was, of course, listening, and she said, "We're having geometry in October." And he said, "How did you do it?" She says, "I don't know. Persistence." But she said--this is the forties. She said, "It's symptomatic of that whole area." And she says, "You know, they're building these massive projects all around it." What is it, five of them now? And she says, "So that's all poor people being forced to live here, here, here, here, here, with all the frustrations and everything else." And she said, "And the schools will probably reflect it." And even the businesses that were allowed to flourish, she said,

"For example, these kids and these parents and these people are living in a community that in probably four blocks has five liquor stores." And she says, "And we know what that means. And the police," and she said, "and how the police react."This was the forties and fifties, and in those days the police were crooked, abusive, the whole nine yards. They did have a few black cops. I remember a pair of twin brothers, huge guys who were just as bad as the whites. Black kid got out of line, they'd just physically whip him. So a lot of us who didn't live there--I used to go to parties in Watts; my dad didn't know it. We'd get on a streetcar, my brother and I, my older brother, and go down there, and we had to make sure we got out of Watts in time for the streetcar, the last one coming back to L.A. Otherwise, those kids in Watts caught you down there, you were in trouble. Well, there were a lot of frustrations down there, and those of us outside could see it, and in talking to friends we knew there, so it was like a kettle boiling, waiting to release steam, and it would not make sense when the releasing occurred.I look back on it and I remember people saying, "Well, why, why, why?" I said, "Because you have every frustration in the book, and nobody's doing a blessed thing about it, and you just get tired. And you're living like an animal almost, because nobody wants to take care of you or give you a chance for anything. Housing is terrible." I take people to Watts now. "What? How in the heck--man, green lawns?" You know, people from back East whose view of a ghetto is tenement. Eight, ten, fifteen, thirty stories of elevators you'd better not ride and no lawns, all sidewalks, all cement. They think it's beautiful. It's all different by geography, but I said, "Frustrations are the same, just takes different avenues." The problems down there now are not quite the same as they used to be, but there was definitely, Alva, a capping all the way from way back when the blacks, that was one of the few places when they initially came in they could live there and around the Jefferson area, Central Avenue, up a little further. It was just an accident waiting to happen, not so accidental as it was the expression of pure frustration.The schools weathered that storm somewhat surprisingly, because a lot of us thought--I was at that time at Maclay Middle School, and that's a pocket barrio, pocket ghetto, and it was an integrated school, so it had black and white, and we had some real moments in terms of that population and the kinds of things that would happen. For example, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, the black street kids in the San Fernando-Pacoima area, they started roaming the streets, and you had

eighteen-, nineteen-year-olds--I think I may have mentioned it--come into school, and they're going to get the white kids. And there's old Sid standing there all by himself, because the principal took off, another principal, new one. He left and left me standing there, and I'm talking to these kids, pleading, "Look, man, I don't want to fight, but you can't come in." "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "I don't know, but you can't come in here." "You gonna to fight all of us?" I said, "I don't know. I keep telling you," and I was talking back and forth. There's a gate, it's not locked. We couldn't lock it for fire reasons, and they're outside and I'm in, and I don't know if they're carrying weapons. Finally one kid way at the back--this was a moment when you go, "Thank God! Lord, you're with me." He says, "Hey. Aren't you Sid Thompson?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "I knew you at Pacoima, man. I had you in mathematics, remember?" I said, "Yeah, Charlie," whatever his name was. And he said, "Man, leave him alone. He's a good guy." "Okay, let's go." And you know, it's one of those moments where it's just--what could have happened could have been real ugly.

Stevenson

Yes.

Thompson

And on the other hand, something up there is--I said, "Lord, I don't know if you're there for me, but this moment I think you were," and whatever it was got me out of this mess, because I was sitting there saying my prayers. It was one of those days. That's the kind of thing that happened at that time. And as you know, when that rebellion happened, it happened in other places that didn't get the notoriety. They had trouble in places like Wilmington where they had blacks, and they had trouble in Pacoima-San Fernando with the black population, not like Watts, because it was a much larger group and a larger area, more pronounced and known, but it was a definite moment. And it caused a lot of change, because remember now, I went into Markham after that, and they wanted an African American in there. I know they did. That's the reason I was sent.

Stevenson

Okay. If you could talk a little bit about interactions, if you had any, with more left-wing groups. A couple of my interviewees, one in particular had mentioned a very interesting story about left-wing groups. In fact, they were actually young, white college students who were trying to recruit on this particular high school campus. But I'm just talking in general about any groups, whatever the interactions that you may have had with them.

Thompson

Because I was more--Pacoima was integrated, but it was integrated with lower-blue-collar-white socioeconomic, definitely lower-socioeconomic black, and definitely lower-socioeconomic Hispanic, and the populations I've always had except at Maclay, and Maclay was middle-class white still in the school, because we fought to hold onto them, and the black tended to be middle class but mostly lower-blue-collar socioeconomic, because the schools I was in tended, though certainly Markham and Crenshaw were African American schools, so I didn't get too much--the whites didn't come in there too much. Kids weren't real receptive to others telling them what they ought to do.However, I am aware of what happened at Manual Arts [High School] and University High School, and they had groups, liberal groups who were, I'm not going to say fomenting trouble, I don't know that. They had definite feelings of the plight of minority poor in particular, and there were people that were definitely heavy left-wing, maybe communists, could have been. They had some papers being published at both schools that kind of reflected that, and those two institutions, only because the principals were griping at every principals' meeting about facing up with these groups, because they tended to be more middle-class Republican or even Democrat, more conservative, so there were a lot of complaints about them. I'm aware of them, and in their school they had significant populations, non-black, I mean black and Hispanic, but they were significant numbers of them, typically teachers and staff and college kids who came on campus, and they printed papers and a lot of things to try to win over the minority kids to be with them. And Alva, I don't know how successful--there was certainly a lot of ammunition with those poor kids, but I never saw it--the institution never accepted them. That's just a given, because the institution tends to be conservative, especially back then, and I didn't see that of any note. But it was there, because I heard about it from other schools.And sometimes a kid would transfer. I remember a kid came in

from Manual. He says, "Man, over there--." You know how kids are, especially our kids. This kid, he was telling me how there was going to be a problem and that the folks who were on the Left side, he said, "They told the school, 'Look. You've got an ROTC, and they've got rifles, and we've got our weapons, so let's have a war.'" I said, "Oh, come on." He said, "No, Mr. T., I'm telling you man, it happened." Well, do I know that? I mean, it doesn't make any sense, one. First of all, your ROTC and those rifles aren't shooting rifles and all kinds of crazy stuff. But if nothing else, it indicated that there was a depth or a degree of some fomenting going on both ways, and I know darn well the district side of it didn't accept it, so they had a problem probably with the administration and so they had frustrations, because they didn't see any way to let it out. So they would go and recruit and look for us to recruit, and they were starting to get some browns in, they were after them, too. But that's the extent of it. I didn't see much more than that, especially in the schools that were heavily black. They pretty much didn't bother us. I didn't see them. Once in a while one individual might come by, but no more than that.

Stevenson

All right. This is a good place to--[End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (April 1, 2009)

Stevenson

Good morning. I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Sid Thompson on April 1, 2009. First is a follow up to last week. Could you tell me about your perceptions of cultural differences, tensions historically between West Indians and African Americans? You alluded to this in one of our sessions last week.

Thompson

Well, it depends on which ones you talk to, because if you talk to the West Indians, we were told to get the best education you can get and to move forward, and they didn't all do that by the way, because I met a lot of them that didn't, which you would expect as it's true here. On the other hand, when you talk about moving forward and ambition and all of that--I'm speaking now kind of from back here looking down on it--I always felt that a lot of students, African American students where I went to school, while their parents were

pushing them, they didn't have an interest in a lot of things I had an interest in. I think I mentioned the classical music piece and all of that, not that I didn't like my other stuff, because I really did. I had a nephew bring us a whole bunch of 78s in World War II to properly introduce us to all the music that was coming out of New York and Brooklyn and that area, as well as L.A. East. It's right here.The differences, first of all, I mentioned before and to me, for me, this is a critical one. The British had some fascinating views and attitudes about the slavery, and we know eventually they got rid of it, and they got rid of it before we did, but nevertheless they did have them, and they ran major plantations down in the West Indies, Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique. They were run all over and not just by the Brits but by others as well. But in all of that, the one thing the British did was to emphasize the world of education, and they offered it as about the only alternative a slave had, or a former slave eventually, to move up, because even when slavery ended, the control of those colonies was white-controlled from England.I recall the big white warship coming into the harbor on our little island, picking up the tests to be taken someplace to be scored and then brought back, and from that they ranked the islands, pretty brutal stuff, and it caused a lot of brutality, because those headmasters' pay depended on how well those kids did, and whether you got paid by getting to ride a donkey or you got a substantial salary was determined by how well those kids did, and there was an attitude that said spare the rod and spoil the child kind of an attitude. But it did--at the same time, when you compare to what happened to American slaves here in America regarding reading, education, in many cases we read that they were beaten, probably killed some of them if they persisted, and it was not to be desired, putting it mildly, and that to me was a fundamental difference.On the one hand, down here with the same people, same stock, you're telling them, "Okay, you'll never own this place, but you can be a top civil servant in this place, an assistant to a governor," and that sort of thing, "and you'll do that by education." As opposed to the battle that the African American slave had just to be able to read and having to sneak that and knowing the consequences if he was caught, or she caught doing it. That to me was a huge difference. It is probably one of the most fundamental differences to me, and it also means that while the Brits were controlling the colonies, because they opened it up educationally for young African Americans, men and women, although it was weighted towards the men to be real honest with you, and later it changes

and it's more equally balanced between the sexes, the whole way that they--when you educate someone and when you allow them to take positions, even if it's not at the top-top, you're now getting a view of an educated person, and I'm sure that that had an effect on the white controllers, I'll call them, because they're looking at these Africans, people of African descent, who are running substantial civil-service operations and doing it very intelligently.They had to have had a feeling about, well, wait a minute, maybe we made some assumptions about these people and the bush and the wildness and noble savages kind of an attitude thing. They would have had to acknowledged, well, guess what? They have a brain, and what it needed was just a chance to be seen, heard, taught, etc. That's far different to what had occurred here. It's taken this country generations--I'm going to oversimplify this, but I'm going to say what others have said because it's so important. It's taken generations for this country to understand the same thing, and I think the acceptance of [President Barack Hussein] Obama, as some people have mentioned in the news, in a way is an acceptance by the American people that I've got African Americans working next to me and guess what? They're pretty bright, and they can do this job. And those jobs will vary from here to here in terms of complexity. But it took us much longer to recognize that, and, of course, more of them than there were in the West Indies, because the West Indies there's basically a lot of them but in smaller areas.So those are some of what I find to be key differences, and I had an African American who told me once, talking about the West Indian thing, "Well, you people come up here and I have to admit that you strive and you do this and this and this." And I said, "It's not genetic, though." I said, "There are reasons for that." I told them something and I really meant it. I said, "You know, I think back to when I went to Markham [Junior High School] as principal, and we had a faculty that was heavily," I mentioned it's Southern, Xavier, those places. And I saw these people performing, and I remember thinking, they had to overcome in their generations that have been here all of that mess to do this. And so me, I tip my hat. I say, "You know what? Weren't born with too many pluses going for you, and still you did, and that means that before you generationally there were people that in spite of this country's attitude never accepted it," and the colleges and universities that were founded that were black, the Tuskegees and Wilbur Force, all of these, that's what they were, in spite of.So in me I look back and I say it's a common heritage with the same mixes and everything else

that everybody else has, maybe not quite the same, but the mixes being it could have been from there or there, Scotland, god knows where. All of that is pretty similar in these groups, and for whatever reason some of them have done this, some have done that. Some of it is by accident of birth and being born in a culture that said, "Okay, we're going to let you be educated." Another one says, "Good luck on getting educated," but they did it anyway. So I see it all as indicative that man, no matter what, given a chance say, we all have that same brain, pretty much the same brain. I haven't seen anything bigger or whatever. It talks about opportunity, and I've seen it done by people that didn't have much in terms of their history and yet have done a lot, and not that the Africans in the West Indies had that much going for them. What they had was a sop given by the Brits, but at least they gave them an educational sop, which was a big thing.

Stevenson

All right. I'd like to spend a bit of time at this session talking about the integration, segregation of the district. If you could tell me about the background of the movement to integrate, to segregate L.A. Unified, and I'm interested in what groups within and without the district were advocating both for and against segregation, if you could start with that.

Thompson

When you look at integration or lack of in L.A. Unified specifically, you go back to what I talked about earlier and I won't dwell on it because I talked about it, but the housing patterns and the fact that the African Americans are located in a certain place, and the browns were, too, and that's also an accident of socioeconomics. We know that because as the blacks grew socioeconomically they pushed west, and there was always a white that was willing to deal with that, as in giving up Baldwin Hills and all of that, and then the real estate people gave it up for money. They made a pile of money off of that, and the poor whites--and I don't mean economically, I mean silly, it was silly. They gave it up because they saw this black horde moving in, and as we both know so well know, here come the whites saying, "Wait a minute. We gave that up and that was stupid," and it isn't such a burning thing to live next door to a black anymore, so they moved back, and I know a number of white families that have moved back and are really happy, because they can buzz downtown

and so on. And to be real candid, they don't have to face the gang problems and all of that that goes with the lower socioeconomic problems of Watts and other places. So all of that's in the mix.L.A. Unified at the time was pretty much socially segregated. The black population was pretty much located in the early years--I'm talking now of the forties and fifties when the black population came out during World War II to work in the shipyards and the plane yards and all that stuff. When they came out they were living pretty much as I recall it from Central Avenue, some east of that and always has been. They still talk about the Eastside Boys and all that stuff. But it moved--it was pretty much located between there and as I said before around Hoover, but pretty much concentrated in a belt that went along Central Avenue and went down to Watts, and Watts itself was an enclave of black with some brown.Browns were always kind of mixed in this a little bit, but not to the degree that when they had the in-migration, which changed a whole lot of things. But at that time it was a very defined black population in a very defined housing area, and I'm speaking of the forties, because under no circumstance would the whites--who also by the way came out of Oklahoma and places like that and were not exactly prone to education. You mentioned New Mexico, and I found out from my wife, who was raised there and who's Hispanic, she told me that she remembers and never thought about it that in the movie theaters when she was a little one the blacks were in the balconies, and she remembers that they went to school in Vado, V-a-d-o down south of Las Cruces, they went to school there. In other words, they had segregated schooling. So I say that to mention that during the war a lot of the whites that came here came with that kind of baggage hanging on them. That's what they were used to. They weren't ready to deal with mixing and all that stuff, and the schools reflected it. There is no question in mind but that there was gerrymandering of school districts to serve populations.And by the way, it went as far--I can recall at Belmont [High School], because we had a fairly, not large, but a substantial number of Jewish Americans, and many of them were European Jews, former, who had been through Adolph Hitler, or they were young and their parents got them out rather than face Adolph and his insanity. They came here and they had problems, but of a lesser degree, which is always the case. There are social clubs and things here in this city and this country that first began with a Jew being accepted and sometimes an Asian, sometimes a Hispanic, but generally speaking the blacks and Hispanics come

along at the tail end of all this, and they're finally accepted in is the gradation of these things. Housing was the same way, and the schools reflected it in their districts.I mention again--a lot of people I know heard it and went, "Gosh," and that was the extent of their--both African American and white American by the way as I think about it, here at UCLA, when they heard about Odetta [Holmes] and how Odetta could not go to [John] Marshall High School, but had to go to Belmont where I went, because she was told, "We have a school for you." Yet she lived in that district, the Marshall district, saying that that was the extent--that was, to me, de jure segregation. You're deliberately manipulating what exists even in terms of where people live to call it--you took a positive step for integration, you didn't even take a step for what was legally supposed to happen and didn't.And there are many instances of that if you probe deeply into L.A. Unified's history, [John James] Audubon [Junior High School], [Susan Miller] Dorsey [High School]. Those were areas--I remember during the forties Jewish kids talking among themselves, and I kind of ran in that group and a black. I was in probably three or four different groups, including Japanese. But they talked about, "Are any Jewish kids getting into Dorsey?" And someone saying, "Blank blank, no. They don't get into Dorsey. They're being told to go somewhere else." Forties, and then that, of course, doubly applied to any African American, although there weren't many living in the forties out that way at all.That break occurred during the fifties, and when that happened there were now African Americans living within reaching distance of Dorsey, and it didn't take that long before that broke down. I remember the changing of the population at [George] Washington [High School], [John C.] Fremont [High School]. I remember them hanging in effigy an image of an African American girl who was the first black to move into Fremont High School.

Stevenson

And what year was that?

Thompson

That would have been in, gosh, it's a blue, late forties, early fifties, around in there. I'm trying to think if it occurred--it was in the late forties, I believe, while I was still at Belmont or here, because I hadn't gone to the academy yet, and I was still pretty young, so it was around that period of time, and it was a

real unrest, kids walking out, white kids. The same thing with all of--Manual [Arts High School], not quite as bad, but Fremont and Washington were very, very noticeably involved in a lot of upset and so on related to African Americans coming in, because the blacks were pushing now to move into that housing.That is, therefore, a kind of indicator of the kind--we had a school system that was in no way dedicated to integration, far from it. It reflected the way people thought in those days, and white folks didn't want black folks around them, didn't want them around their kids, in particular at a high school. Might take of that at this level, but beyond that uh-uh. So I noticed--that would be the first thing noticeable to me and folks in my generation, my brothers, my sister, was that there was a definite anti-integration feeling that came out during and after World War II. When the valley opened up, they didn't want any part of African Americans, except the ones that existed already in government housing or restricted housing built to take care of poor people in the San Fernando-Pacoima area.There was even a unit, I believe, that was called the Joe Louis Tract, and that would be interesting. It just occurred to me, the Joe Louis Tract. I think that existed in the San Fernando-Pacoima area, and there were a lot of African Americans that lived in there, in that tract. But, of course, that was a place where a lot of Mexican Americans lived, too, because the Mexicans go back to the 1800s in that area, northeast valley. But the rest of the valley, Canoga Park, Northridge, didn't want any part of them, and I'll give you a personal example. When I started teaching I was hired to teach at Pacoima, obviously because it had black and brown students and they'd had trouble. They wanted to get minorities in there to be more representative, remember? And I think I mentioned the last time about how we were asked to deal with the black problem, where the black kids are loud and don't bathe enough and all. And here we've got these kids out of the hills of Kentucky living up in Kagal Canyon with stills and stuff, and they were just as bad. Nobody talked to them.Nevertheless, those kinds of things existed in the valley, and I use as an example I had been teaching at Pacoima in 1956, living in what I referred to kind of euphemistically as East Hollywood, whatever that is, but in the Hollywood area. And a number of us carpooled out there, two Japanese, two blacks, a white and an Asian. No, two Japanese, a white and a Jewish white, and we all carpooled out to teach at Pacoima. I had two kids and I decided that I really wanted to move out there, because it was just too much. I was staying late and sometimes I couldn't even carpool,

because I was way later than they were getting back home.So I decided that I would move to the valley. My wife was fair and some a quick look might have thought white. She wasn't white, but she was fair. We had two kids at first; we ended up with four. We decided that we wanted to live out there, but we didn't want to live in Pacoima or where they said I had to live. That just burnt the daylights out of me, and I wasn't going to do it. So I went to a black real estate agent, whose daddy was from Jamaica by the way. He started talking and we got all into that. But he was basically American, and he was a real estate agent, and he was older, I'd guess about fifty, and I remember him sitting us down and saying, "Now, you two know you're going into some dangerous territory here." And we said, "Yeah." We didn't really; we're young, what did we know? I said, "How dangerous?" And I remember he thought about it and scratched his chin--true story, Alva. He opened his briefcase and there was a gun. He said, "I have a license for this." He says, "Is that serious enough?" I said, "Yeah." So I said, "Should we do this?" you know, squeaky voice, "Do we really do this?" He said, "Yeah, because it has to happen."We were talking about Northridge. We had been out there, and the real estate agents, who typically were in the show house in the garage with tables--you would think we were totally invisible. We would walk up to a table and they would not even look up. Somebody else would come in, "Can we help you?" I mean, it was blatant stuff. We moved in, and I'm sorry, but it just brings up so many memories that--we moved in in a house in Northridge that had been built three years prior, leveled an orange grove and built these houses up near, to give you a feel, San Fernando Mission runs across the north end of the valley. San Fernando Mission and Reseda, that area, which is now old Northridge and full of all kinds of people, but we were the first. They threw eggs on my car. They called my kids names, and they were little, which really bothered me because they were too young to have to face human bestiality, as far as I was concerned.But the really interesting thing--a Jewish couple. She was an Armenian Jew, he was an American Jew, a doctor, sweet people. Invited us to the Hollywood Bowl, then invited us over for dinner and told us, "You're going through a lot of hell as we know it on Earth," and he says, "so we wanted you to know there's at least a couple of people that don't buy this. And we want you to know that we're here for you." Well, that was beautiful. Only two of you, but there were two. There was an engineer living up the street, a young engineer who used to drive a sports car down in front of my

house, and he would deliberately, when he got in front of my house, kick it out of gear and rev it, you know [imitates sound], then go off, anything to bother you.I told you about my father and that this guy had gone all the way from fixing radios at Lockheed to being a radar engineer, with no training. He never was trained in engineering, and I told you I never knew how he did it, but he did it. But I had to chalk it up to English education, because they really pushed it and he took advantage, and he had a knack for that. Well, he is now, as I move into Northridge he is an engineer at Lockheed. He's out at Palmdale doing flight tests. He calls me one evening and he says, "Sid?" "Dad," I said, "Yeah, Dad?" He said, "Boy, something happened today I've got to tell you." I said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, we were in Palmdale and we had been up on a flight and we came back down, and a group of the engineers," there were three or four engineers, "talking about the flight and what we could do." He said, "And this one engineer said, 'I want to talk to you, Tommy.' Okay. He said, 'What do you think of mixed marriages?'" So my dad said, "Well, between dogs and people I don't approve." He says, "I just don't." "Come on, Tommy, I'm serious." And he said, "Well, I am, too. Between people it's their business. Why?" "Well, I've got this situation, man, and it bothers me. I know you and," [whispers] it's the engineer up the street. He's describing this family that has just moved in. My dad pats him on the arm and says, "I think you're talking about my son and my daughter-in-law," and he said, "Not that it's any of your business, but she isn't even white, totally. She is mixed." He said, "But you even got that wrong." He goes, "What?" He says, "That's the kids that went on to the academy and was a naval officer?" He says, "Yeah." He says, "And I've got another one like him." He says, "Why?" He says, "Well, my God, he's a neighbor! He lives down--."Next day I'm out front watering my little--it was a big lawn, and I didn't have a sprinkler system, couldn't afford it then, so I'm hand-watering this lawn in Northridge dry air. He comes down the street and almost wrecks the car, because he takes his hands off the wheel, he's waving at me, "Hi! Hi!" And I'm looking at him like what is this guy, crazy? So I give him a little wave like this. That was the guy, and things changed that much because there were some educated people out there. I had a next-door neighbor from Texas who wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't let his wife or his kids talk to me. I was there three years. I'm painting my house on the weekends. I'm up there painting and he goes, "Mr. Thompson?" Alva, I almost fell off the ladder, because I knew who it was. I saw him out there working, and right next

door. I looked down and I said, "Yes?" And he says, "How are you?" I said, "I'm fine. How are you?" "Oh, I'm fine. It's nice talking with you." I said, "Yeah." In other words, it had finally broken with him. He couldn't live with it anymore. It was like you took a weight off of him.Now, every one of these people had kids going to school, and I mention all that because that spilled over into some of the attitudes at the schools. The white schools were for white kids. By the way, about two weeks later he came over, knocked on the door and invited us to come over for cocktails in a couple of days. And we went over and, Alva, there were only the two of us and the two of them. "What would you like to drink?" "I'll have a martini or a--?" [unclear] He didn't want to make a mistake. [laughs] He brought them back with a piece of paper on them, "martinis, scotch and water." [laughs] I was just stunned, and I said, well, this is a sign. But these were educated people, and if you wait long enough some of these things, because they know it's wrong. There's no basis in fact for a lot of this mess, and he just had to change his attitude.But there were, when we in the fifties--now, here we go to the sixties, and now the stuff is really starting, because the pressure under civil rights is really coming. There's been Watts riots and after that insurrection a lot of changes occurred from '66 on. They were already starting, but they gained a lot of impetus. Then there was the whole Martin Luther King [Jr.] thing, which in the schools was--traumatic isn't even the word, and I think I mentioned how emotional that whole thing was, especially in the school I was in, which happened to have been a racially integrated school, naturally, not by bus or anything, by communities. It isn't now. It all went private or whatever for people to escape. But the integration efforts became, if you called for a choice with the white community, the choice would have been blacks to them. "We can deal with that, but not us to them, because we don't want to go in that community."And how do you argue? You've got crime and everything else happening, and it's all blown up, of course, and used to make a point. Not necessarily any truth to all of that. I used to see headlines that would just make me think if that had happened in Northridge in that white area, you wouldn't have seen this. There would have been a mention and that would have been the end of it. With this, because the integration thing was all in the stir now, and it was being used--there were board members coming onboard with a policy of anti-mandatory busing, as you may recall. I'm speaking of Bobbie Fiedler and Roberta Weintraub and, oh, gosh, the man, a young Jewish guy, multimillionaire. But they all came in with

the attitude of no mandatory busing, and, in fact, there never was.There was a ton of voluntary busing, but that really wasn't that accepted, Alva. A lot of that happened because at the same time, late sixties, seventies, the populations now are beginning to explode with Hispanic, with the African Americans already living there, and many schools, schools, for example, in the small cities, Huntington Park, Bell, South Gate, Cudahy. Those schools were swelling beyond their capacity, and so they had to be alleviated by either double sessions or going multi-track. Double sessions were a complete disaster. The kids didn't come to the second session. Kids said, "Okay, you set it up that way. We ain't playing. We're not going to be there." And they didn't show up, and the dropout rate was enormous, so that was quickly gotten rid of, and then they came up with the idea of multi-track schools, using them year round.Now, why did that work for voluntary integration? Well, because at the same time those populations were swelling, the white population was now beginning to do this. After the Baby Boom and all of that, things quieted down and the schools were losing enrollment, and they started talking about closing schools. And, "Gosh, oh, gee, we don't want our dainty little school here closed," and I'm being a little pushy about it, but that's the way it kind of was. "We don't want our school closed. We'll even take blacks," is what they didn't say, but that's what they meant. So as a result, instead of mandatory busing for integration we now had a way to do voluntary integration under the guise of overcrowding, so in the central city you were overcrowded. They couldn't handle the enrollments, so we were busing these babies all the way from central city to Canoga Park, to Northridge, to Chatsworth. Wherever they had room we were putting these kids, and obviously [Pacific] Palisades and places like that. The harbor pretty much had a population already and didn't have a lot of room. Most of the room was valley and west side here, Uni[versity High School] and that area, but not of the size and magnitude of the valley. A lot of schools out there, and those schools all were getting busing, had busing through integration.Now, that doesn't mean, because it was happening that the schools were overcrowded and needed relief that that was a huge impetus, and there were schools that were going to close unless they got kids, all of that big, but I don't want to paint that as a picture that there was no one--there were people that were concerned about integration, and they were white people, and they were black people. The black people, my experience during the sixties and seventies in particular, and eighties for that

matter--the black people had an attitude when you went to meetings and they were talking straight up to you, and they would say, "Listen. There is nothing in our history that says this is going to be good for us," [laughs] and I had to nod. I'm saying, "You're so right. We know that. The question is, can we make it this much better?" And I said, "I'm not sure we can, because these kids are going--."The kids were going out to the valley, and the reports back were that they were out there, and as we found out, kids still ate separately, white kids, black kids, brown kids, and that in and of itself, unless you can actively change that, and it's not easy to do but you've got to work at it and not too many were willing, because I think a lot of them agreed with it, the black experience out there was not--they weren't in any AP classes. There weren't people concerned that they weren't in the AP classes. These teachers are teachers who are used to giving the material and a middle-class kid [snaps fingers] get it, and they didn't have to cajole or do anything to get him to do it, and they weren't going to do back flips to get black kids involved in that process.Not true about what happened with black schools in central city. There were a lot of teachers, not just African American, because I can recall at Markham some incredibly talented white teachers who just knocked themselves out for these kids, felt it personally about what had happened to them, so I'm trying to say that in spite of all this ugliness, there's a lot of people that are not mean-spirited, that want it to work. Just as there were when Obama was elected, there were people that really wanted this to work, really want it to work because they appreciate the magnitude of what this is addressing. Same thing was true in those days in the schools, and the integration processes that the district was going through were, to a large extent, federally controlled through OCR and other things, and as we know with the federal government, it doesn't always work in the most expeditious way, that sometimes it's heavy handed or it's no handed. We have a policy, but we're not sure how it's to be implemented kind of thing. Not to lay any blame there, but there were a lot of folks in bureaucratic roles who were saying things that didn't necessarily make it work.But just like everything else, good and bad, there was a good side, and the good side was that the integration processes, the ways we funded, what happened to those kids was an interest to the courts. Under the voluntary integration process there was oversight. To me that was necessary, essential, because the attitude of some folks, "We didn't want to see them, but now that we've got them we don't have to deal with them really, they don't want

to work that's their problem," that kind of thing, we saw an awful lot of that. And we had other teachers who were committed say that to many of us. "This is what's happening."And then don't forget the other part that I mentioned earlier, which ties to this. There was a move at the same time to integrate the staff. Remember that? And I mentioned that we lost the good black teachers that way, and the white ones, they never came, of any substantial number. Some did, some really dedicated good people, thank God. But for what we lost, we never quite gained, because we're filled behind some experienced black teachers who were told to go to the valley, what filled behind them were white substitutes who needed a job, but not experienced and not well trained. So when you ask me what was the net effect of all of this, the best I can say for that period of time, it was an experience, and minimally I want to believe that a lot of white kids who may have been looking for this kind of experience learned some things about black youngsters and vice versa.I remember once when I was still at Markham in the late sixties, one of the community activists, Dorothy Rochelle, and Dorothy Rochelle is one tough lady who backs up to nobody. She heard some things about me not being really black and all that, and she checked me out five ways but up, and I applauded it, and I think we had a good understanding when I left. She knew I was for those kids. And she had a meeting of school staffs in which she questioned the meeting of the principals from the whole area, elementary, middle, senior, and I went, and I remember at the meeting she said, "Now, let's get down to the--," in those days you'd say, "the old nitty gritty about what this is." She said, "This is about integration." She said, "I've been talking to some white folks in the valley, and we want some of our kids to go out there this summer for summer classes who aren't currently attending out there, they're attending here. And they want to send some of their white kids here." There was a bit of an intake of breath. We're mostly black now, the administrators, and they're looking and going, "They want to send white kids down here?" "Well, yeah, but you want to send your black kids out there, so, I mean, it's a quid pro quo."And Alva, I remember sitting there saying, this woman is doing something that's incredible, that I just never could imagine would happen two-way, so I raised my hand. I said, "Oh, Markham, we'll take them." I said, "Why don't you get some middle-school kids? We'll take them for the summer, if you have places for them to stay." She says, "I do." And she really appreciated it. She says, "Okay, we appreciate you're willing." I said,

"Let's give it a shot." So we had these white girls, and man, the first time they came on campus those kids were looking like, "Who they?" "Mr. T., who are they?" I said, "They're students. They're going to go here this summer." "Where are they from?" I said, "The valley." I said, "But they wanted to come down." "And see how we live?" I said, "No, it wasn't like that." I said, "They really wanted to understand you better, for their sake. They need it." Because we met with the kids, and, of course, the ones coming were farsighted kids. These weren't your average.But you know, they were, Alva, I would guess thirteen, fourteen, very impressionable age. Parents were worried. They'd heard about Watts. But after the first--and they went home for the weekends. We got through the summer I think with some really positive results with those kids. And it wasn't that, though, it was the effort that I felt needed support. It was a start of something. I didn't think it was going to go too far, but who knew? Nobody knows. You never know how things--and you don't know what those kids are doing now, so there's always that that comes out of this sort of a process. And there were many instances kind of like that, and I knew that not only were we dealing with the parents, our own staff. These were white middle-class folks in the main who were teaching, and what did they think? They had some interesting views, some of them who were open about expressing it.Others, and I really believe this, others really wanted to see change and wanted it to work, they just weren't sure how. And they knew the federal guidelines and the threat of mandatory busing would be enormously upsetting, and they weren't sure what the reactions of communities would be and all of that, and the reaction by the African American brown community, particularly African American, about we are always the ones that have to accept them. Why isn't it a matter of them accepting us? They don't accept us, they take us. One guy I remember memorably in a meeting stood up and he said, "Look. Our African American kids are out there to keep their schools open." I couldn't refute that. I said, "That's part of it. You're right." You never want to lie to these people, because they're too smart. Dorothy Rochelle, boy, Dorothy, I was just thinking of her. She was such an incredibly tough, tough lady.

Stevenson

Tell me more about her. Was she connected with a particular community group?

Thompson

She was. But to tell you the truth I can't--there were so many, and they tended to be localized. Dorothy was from Watts. As I recall, she lived on Century [Boulevard], somewhere, 103rd [Street], which is, of course, the main street of Watts. She lived, as I recall, it wasn't Century. She was just south of there in a little quiet house with a pretty lawn and everything. She kept it just so. She loved flowers. And she not only had an interest in Watts schools, though. She was down at the board, and she was looking at this thing globally, and a lot of people feared her because she was black, she knew the street, but she would give you this--she and Margaret Wright was another one. Maybe you remember Margaret?

Stevenson

Yes, yes, I do.

Thompson

She was famous at Manual Arts, got arrested over there. And Margaret would roll up to the microphone, used to work in the shipyards in the forties and always talked about it, and Margaret would say, "Now, folks, I don't know what I'm talking about, because I'm totally uneducated, so what I'm saying to you won't be in good English, and again, just remember please I'm uneducated." And I remember being at the microphone and saying, "Margaret, I'm holding onto my wallet, Margaret." I said, "And my eye teeth, with you and your you don't know what you're doing." And she cracked up, she just cracked up. But that was another one. She had more of a sense of humor, because when Dorothy was on a mission there was no humor in it, boy. It was all nuts and bolts and tough stuff. But they both worked within--they tended to be more obviously localized with their communities. They knew them there. She was around the Manual Arts area, Margaret, Dorothy more in the Watts area, but both of them had a vision that went way beyond that for the whole district, and they would remind the board that, "You represent all kids in this district, white, black, brown, Asian, every kid," and they never let them take their feet from the fire. They always held them accountable for that.And when they made a move that they visualized as somewhat racially motivated, not nakedly so, not open prejudices, not that, just the subtleties, and they were quick to hit them with the subtleties, and

sometimes the staff would be sitting there going, "Um-hmm, they're right." And there were several smart board members there, and they knew, "She's right. They're right, and they're going to hammer us." Sometimes they'd get together and that was scary, because you had double trouble, and boy, they would really come at it, and they hammered--they wanted to see mandatory integration, okay? They figured that unless their kids managed to get out of Watts or Watts was changed, then nothing was going to happen. Sadly, the lesson we all learned was that unless you can change--in other words, you have a de facto situation of how housing has occurred in this city, and the blacks were living here, and the whites are living there, and never the twain shall meet. They never met.And under that kind of generational thing that's been going on, people just didn't know how to deal with black going from a white perspective, and vice versa, with all of the suspicions that African Americans had about the way they were going to be treated, and they always said, "If somebody's going to lose in this, it's us," and they were right.

Stevenson

Can you tell me now, Margaret Wright, Dorothy Rochelle in terms of organizations, NAACP were pro desegregation, pro integration. Was there opposition in the African American community groups or individuals you can think of that were opposed to desegregation-integration?

Thompson

It was more individual than it was a collected group, and the reason, the power of these folks, especially these women, they were so powerful that nobody wanted to take them on, and if you had an organization bending that way, they would not want to be with Dorothy or Margaret or any of their minions, because they knew they were in trouble. But you had individuals who would come in and say things like--and I've had them, yes, I can recall publicly, individuals who would say, "Look. We're not going to win in this, and as far as I'm concerned you can keep your integration, and we ought to just educate our black kids where they are. We don't need this mess, because that's the way it's going to be anyway." And Dorothy in a quiet moment would say, "I understood that, because that's the way it's been. We've had to do that anyway. That is what it is, but we have another dream." That's the way she would describe it, and I'm paraphrasing the words, but in a sense, "We have

another dream. We see this having to happen."They were kind of looking ahead to what we see in the nineties, eighties and nineties, more acceptable than it was way back in the fifties and forties, because housing is more acceptable that way. I am constantly amazed at, just as an aside, my daughter--one of my daughters, I have three daughters--one daughter, then her husband and her kids lived in Glendora. When I went out there to watch my granddaughters playing soccer or whatever, and they did well in school, both of them and went on, but I was really surprised at the numbers of black folks living in different places out there, east all the way to Riverside, Colton. And as I mentioned earlier, the one that just blew my mind was what happened in, oh, gosh, the hotbed of rednecks--it'll come to me--where African Americans and browns now live, and it was a place where you didn't drive through there. In other words, the change in housing patterns where blacks are now scattered, and in some ways it hurts them, because you don't have an identifiable group that you can address. They're individual. But one would have to say, "But that's what we dreamed about in the first place, that you'd be able to live here, here, or wherever the heck you wanted to live, without fear." So how do you argue that?You're arguing that because they're no longer in a group you don't get the things that could be good for the group when it's identifiable is true, and I think that's far different to what--the Hispanic population in central city is very identifiable. It's huge. It is South Central for the most part, just not that far west but more down the corridors. The black population has just distributed itself out everywhere, and that couldn't have happened in the late forties, early fifties, even the early sixties. They couldn't have bought into those places without a whole lot of trouble, even if they could have bought in, so it's different now.And in talking to my granddaughters, who are--and I now have great-grandkids who one of them, she's had three, so I talked to her. [unclear] The African American population at the school--she went to Charter Oaks or someplace like that. I'm not sure about that. I'd have to check it, but it's east.

Stevenson

Okay, I'll just put it down as a question mark.

Thompson

A question mark. It has a name Charter something. But anyway, she told me, she said, "Granddad, we played other teams east of us going toward Riverside, Colton, out that way." The place I'm trying to think of is where Henry Kaiser had his steel mill. It starts with F [Fontana]. Anyway, she said, "We played in all of those communities," and she said, "All of those teams had an African American, two, three." She said, "What I'm finding is that they're--." And I've got a younger granddaughter who's here. I think I mentioned, she's in a doctoral program here, Ph.D. program, and that one is into everything sociologically speaking, and she told me, "You would be amazed at what you--it's more difficult in places like Redlands because of the price and so on." But she said, "And a lot of these folks came from L.A."They were a part of the black community here, and they're gone there, so in some ways it's kind of a natural integration in terms of what it should have been in the first place, which is housing, because they live there. And nobody's upset about that. Nobody builds a school to put the blacks in, because that wouldn't work in this day and age. They'd probably have to call out the National Guard or something. So it has changed to the way that it never was in the first place. In the first place it was never about the way housing patterns were, because they were segregated. For those living in the city, we know that among the African American populations a lot of things have changed. There are African Americans in the Palisades and places they'd never been in, and that has all changed. Hispanics not the same quite, because they haven't built that middle class yet, for the numbers that have come in, the in-migration and all of that. They can't afford to get into some of these places. That's why the black community around Crenshaw hasn't changed--

Stevenson

Baldwin Hills.

Thompson

--because folks can't buy in there. Those houses as little as they are some of them, expensive, and they just can't buy in. Someone was asking me that the other day, a prof down at [U]SC. "How come I go around Crenshaw and I see African Americans all?" I said, "Well, it was tough for them to get in there, and it's harder for the Hispanics, because you've got to have decent money to get in some of those homes." You just can't buy in there like you could in dead-

center city, which is central city as I would call it, down Figueroa and that area.So going back to the district itself, after all of this has been said and done, the one thing that did happen of any consequence was voluntary integration, and a lot of kids, and still do--Palisades, Venice, Uni, these schools have had and still have substantial African American populations now, and/or Hispanic. It began back then and it still is. Now, some of that indicates space available, because whites have done the private school, and there's no question--and you know private schools and I know Santa Monica area that are full of kids that were former public-school kids, white and black. There are blacks in there, too, and you talk to some of those folks, and I have, a few who will tell you, "I don't want my kids going to no place where the kids aren't interested in education or aren't studying and work habits. I just want them around a different thing." Their kids--I'm not going to argue with that. I just say, "Well, I hope you keep in mind that the hope is that we can build the public schools to where we might be able to compete, but we're going to have to do that. We're going to have to compete."Some of the things Obama is saying and this is a new Secretary of Education, I don't know. This guy is talking about just going private schools, like that's a solution. Or the latest one--I've digressed, because it just got to me--the latest one is the Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa] should be in charge of the school districts.

Stevenson

Yes, what do you think about that?

Thompson

Oh, my god. What is there, something ordained genetically that a person that becomes a mayor is by therefore an excellent school education leader? No, and I'm not saying the leaders haven't made bad mistakes. They have. But that is, to me, patently ridiculous. This is the emotion I feel about it--if you can't fill the potholes, how in the heck are you going to run the school system? And I've got strong feelings about the size of the school system. I've said it, and they need to address that issue. Just to turn it over to the mayor to run it--it is different because a lot of the patterns for that kind of a thing in cities, a lot of it uses Chicago as an example.Chicago politics are very, very different from anybody else's politics, because as I recall, [Richard J.] Daley [Sr.] had a strong connection to the legislature in Illinois, to the extent that when he took over

the schools they could pull money almost directly from the state legislature to them. That doesn't exist here, and this just is not the same control issue that it is there, and Chicago politics are Chicago politics, and simply to wave a magic wand and say, "Oh, the mayor should be running this," is ridiculous. So I'm sorry, Prez, Mr. President, but this guy needs to stop and think, because quick fixes aren't what we need. We need a concerted effort towards improvement, but it needs to be inclusive. It isn't about one person. Look how detrimental that is to a reform movement which says, "The schools should change and be more collaborative," and the collaboration being the teachers ought to be involved in what they teach.Yeah? Duh. Parents should be involved. Now, are parents going to run the school? Heck no. Parents don't want to run the school. The parents want input to what happens to their kids. But other parents don't want to be bothered period, and that's a parent we need to get. We've got to get these parents and say, "No more. It's your kid. Now, you get interested." And I don't know, we ought to find some way to make them get interested, give them coffee and donuts when they come. That's kidding. But do something that inspires them to get involved, and you're not going to ever get all of anything, but you can get more, and just taking a mayor and putting him or her in charge doesn't solve anything. I couldn't alone fix L.A. Unified if I tried. Took me a while to understand that, especially when I sat back after I left and looked at it. Oh, my god. It was an incredibly difficult task because of the very magnitude of it and all of the people involved and all of the different mixes of people and all of the politics, different politics.The board members who had political aspirations are one part. The politicians over here that felt they could control a lot of what happened in the district because they knew them, all of that plays into it. So if you ask me again, other than that I don't feel too strongly about the mayor running it. [laughs]

Stevenson

Okay. Well, I have a follow up, though. I was wondering if you could tell me about the background of Crawford v. [Los Angeles] Board [of Education]. For those listening not familiar with it, what was the background of that? How did they get to that point with that case being filed, and what were its implications?

Thompson

The issues related to me of Crawford v. the Board--now, first of all, I was not directly involved with the whole process, the litigation. They formed a whole unit of about ten to fifteen people who dealt with that, and it was in the time of Jim Taylor. Those people were to look at all aspects of integration, but they were also under what was happening under court mandates, so they were in a sense being directed through the board and the superintendent to take actions that would be consistent with whatever the rulings were legally that they would have to do.Back at that time I was all of that, I was a principal, assistant principal, principal, I was in that mode in schools, and as a result, most of what my experience was about had to do with the effect of it, and what was the effect on the particular schools, particularly I wasn't over several schools, I was over one, and particularly as it applied to Maclay when I first became an assistant principal in the valley, which happened to have been an integrated school. I'd better stop there a second, because that was very special. It was integrated without a bus. There was no bus involved. These kids came out of Shadow Hills, white kids. Shadow Hills was an area above Sunland, Sun Valley, that area, and they were kids of [L.A.] Times writers. They also were kids that generally most of those families had horses and that kind of stuff, so they a totally different breed of cat to most of the kids you had in school. Then we had a number of Japanese kids that came off of, generally speaking, the nurseries and so on along Foothill Boulevard. The African American kids came out of the vestiges, of what remained of the old Joe Louis Tract business and lived in the Pacoima-San Fernando area.But as that applied to Crawford, that was an integrated school fighting to remain integrated. We had a white principal, Fred Frasier, a big old guy out of Iowa, a farmer type, but a wonderful human being that just in his own jovial way--but he was plenty bright, and he and I and a Jewish head counselor, an Italian assistant--we were all mixed up, and we made an oath that we were going to fight to keep that school integrated with whatever it took. We took an attitude towards Crawford of here is an example of what Crawford was about, in our minds, and we were going to in our own way fight to show that this could happen. It was a devil of a struggle, because when you have folks that have been in--as now adults who were kids and were living maybe in the South or wherever all these folks, and they came from all over the place--a good Jewish population, too, now that I think about it, was also in there. But when you have these kinds of things, the adults involved bring their baggage, what they

went through, and I don't care if it's white or black. Some of the whites complained that they'd lived in black neighborhoods and got beat up all the time. I know that happens. I remember in the Hispanic community where the whites got beat up regularly by the Hispanics, and vice versa.So when it comes to Crawford, Crawford we felt was about, first of all, about a better educational process for African Americans, and that was a focus, African American kids. It was about how what these kids are living with now is not acceptable, in totality, teaching, facilities, because they were all old, generally speaking, falling apart. All of these kinds of things is the life educationally of an African American child, and Crawford was about, "That can't be right, not in this society." I'm putting it in my own words, but that's the thing that came across to us out of Crawford. Crawford was about changing that attitude that said, "This is okay. After all, it's them." And make it different. And we were hoping it could be made different.When we saw what was happening under the mandatory busing part, which wasn't going to work, and it wasn't going to work because it wasn't accepted, and it wasn't accepted because of the attitudes of the people that would have had to accept it, and that is the middle-class-and-up white population was not going to accept that stuff. And we became discouraged. I had since moved from that school, and by the way, the principal of that school, the white guy I described who was such a wonderful influence in terms of fighting to maintain the integration of Maclay Middle School, he was moved to Manual Arts. He was moved there because that's when Margaret Wright got arrested in the hallways, protesting the principal they had there then, who they removed after they arrested Margaret. She always laughs about that. And they put this guy in there. He and Margaret became fast friends. He said, "Margaret Wright's a tough old girl," but he said, "Man, I respect the heck out of her." And she told me, "That big old country boy, he's straight up," and he was.But when he left, then they moved me, and I'm not saying we were all that important, but I think we were. We were certainly committed. [makes whistling sound] The parents found other ways, because the staff that came in there, they were certainly competent, but not committed, and Crawford above all required a commitment. It inherently had to have, for that process to work, and the process of what we're going to do to improve the lot of African American kids, which was to me the whole purpose to the thing, by whatever process we thought might help. Whether it was mandatory desegregation or whatever it

might be, that's what it was. And in looking at all of the things that had happened, like I use for another example the integration of the staff and what happened under that, we came out of it and lost. As the African Americans used to tell me, "We will lose. When it comes down to the nitty gritty, we will be at the back," and they were right. They were absolutely right, Alva.And so when you ask me from an operational end of Crawford, not knowing all of--I knew who was doing all the stuff related to the legal implications. That was the likes of Jim, Phil Jordan was in there, Phil Linscomb, there were people like that who were all in there, just doing a yeoman's job of trying to make it work, but always under what was the requirement under the law. We couldn't violate the law. We could only do what we were allowed to do. But it was being restricted to the extent that we finally figured out, it occurred to us, uh-oh, this is going to come down to where it's voluntary. Voluntary is fine, but it ain't going to do it, not with the magnitude of this problem. And until it's accepted--going back now to what we said about blacks a minute ago and where they live now, until that's accepted, and people don't mind seeing blacks in their schools because they live here, until that happens we just didn't see a lot of hope. And we were a bit bitter about what we noticed.Someone had said, "Well, what's the one thing that stands out in your mind about all that period of time?" I said, "I never saw a change, a substantive change in the teacher corps that we were able to hire into our schools. Never." I said, "I'm talking about forties," in my lifetime, "forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties. When I was there in the nineties, we were still fighting it." These schools have never been properly served by even the staff dealing with them, much less parent involvement and all that stuff. They never have had that. And so as I look back on all of the effort--yet, we went like this. We went through the battles and battles, and it came right back to where, okay, these kids are all in their school. Some of them escaped and went to Palisades. We know what happened to them there. It was not necessarily good. However, the circle I just described did move here and did it again. As we say, as African Americans this happened to us all the time. But each time that circle goes around, it moves a little bit.And the people in Pali, there are people there now who have met African American kids, talking to one the other day, and she said, "You know, I have to say my attitude has changed. My kids brought some folks over, African American kids," and I said, "You found out they were--?" She said, "Yeah, I know." She said, "It's embarrassing, because how stupid."

But she realized it. And she was, "Yeah, I had feelings about African American kids, but now that I've had a chance to really see them," and some of that has to do with the Obama thing now, I think, the acceptance, and who knows where it occurred, but it did. Some of it did occur and there were changes because of that. We can never minimize the importance of that kind of thing, even though it doesn't seem to be, because it's not in the amount or numbers we'd like. But those things happened, and they were just that much better in terms of white folks accepting African Americans.So am I optimistic? Yes, I am. I don't know if human beings will ever solve racial problems, Alva. Maybe when it gets to the point where they can't recognize them. My dad used to say this. He said, "The day that they look around and everybody kind of looks the same--." I said, "That's frightening, Dad. I mean--." "Yeah, but--, he says. He made a comment. He said, from his perspective, he says, "I have watched this and watched it in human beings, and if it isn't that, they'll find another reason." It's the old business about the teachers that did the eye thing, remember? Blue eyes and brown eyes and black eyes and all that?

Stevenson

Yes, yes.

Thompson

Well, we're going to find as human beings something that I can say, "I'm better than you," because I'm frustrated and I'm insecure and I'm all those things, too. When I was in China I saw it, in listening to the discussions about the peasants and so on, or Mexico, Indians versus more Spanish. Everywhere you go, even the Africans. We're just human beings. We're basically insecure. But who knows? It may help, it may come around.

Stevenson

Okay. Last question before we fold this session. I'm to continue this discussion on the next. One of the outcomes of Crawford v. Board was mandating busing. How did the dialogue, the tone change, particularly thinking--you've already mentioned people like Bobbie Fiedler on the board, but then in the community and an organization she was involved with called Bus Stop. Now, how did the whole tone change? How contentious did it get? One of my interviewees spoke at length about getting death threats even.

Thompson

Oh, yes.

Stevenson

Yes, and could you discuss a little bit--

Thompson

Oh, yes, okay. Again, I was somewhat removed from it, and the person I was thinking of was Tom Bartman and the Bus Stop thing. They were all in that. I do recall being in some closed sessions of the board for one reason or another when I came downtown finally in the eighties, early eighties, and it was really contentious with the likes of Rita [Walters]. Rita has incredibly strong feelings about a lot of this stuff, and she didn't mind telling the Lord, "This is the way I feel." That was the way she was. And, of course, there were others who were liberally placed like that.The board itself was incredibly contentious between them, and that was the heart of it, and the whole Bus Stop thing and the willingness to battle, and I can't help but say that there were some who felt, well, these were Jewish Americans, and they should have been at the forefront of this, rather than stopping it. But it turns, and I don't know quite how that happens, but it seems to me it turns on my kids and all of a sudden that takes priority over everything I think about philosophically, and I'm going to think about--and it's the reason that black families that have the wherewithal will pull out and go somewhere, too, because I'm concerned about my kids, and when it gets personal, that's the kind of stuff you do get.I can recall board meetings, because I also was working for--the lead attorney was Jerry Halversen, and he's a very famous person in L.A. in terms of the legal end of integration and everything else. He was the person at the point with a lot of it, with other people that were private attorneys brought aboard. We did a lot of hiring of private attorneys to deal with what the courts were saying and to also deal with attempts by Bus Stop and other groups to get injunctions and everything else to prevent some of this. I can remember being in board meetings when the then superintendent would say to one of us, "Would you tell school police there's an individual that I'm really concerned about sitting on the side over here?" Some of these people, Alva, would radiate such hate that even sitting there and trying to be objective--and I was sometimes in place of another person I would sit in in their chair, and I did have some

connection to the operation of the school police department, because that was a part of Halversen's thing, and I was his assistant. And I remember that some of the people you looked at were of real concern, again because of the hate, the obvious, the way they were looking at people.Now, none of that ever spilled in. We had others sending letters, and I know because of the school police connection that letters were sent threatening physical action, and we did not take them lightly. I mean, all you had to do was think back to Kennedy, Martin Luther [King, Jr.], and you knew that you'd better not be so stupid as to think this can't happen, anymore than there isn't a danger for Barack Obama. There is a danger, let's be honest, and it doesn't take a lot of people. One nut, and we always used to think about that, so the concern was that really a lot of hatred was generated, and no matter how you paint that it carried racial overtones of black kids and all that stuff, and it was there, and reactions to and all that went with it.There were times when we weren't certain that we would have a board meeting and not have something serious occur. Thank God it never happened, but that didn't mean it couldn't, because that kind of emotion is very core-like. It's very basic. It's about how I feel about you, and I think you're the wrong color, and I'm being forced to want to accept you or yours, and I don't want to do that, so what am I going to do about it? And look what's going on even now. I mean, some of this senseless stuff. It didn't take a lot of logic for some of this to occur. We worried like crazy about some of these buses that we were sending these babies on into valley schools with some of this stuff, and organizations like Bus Stop aren't necessarily organized to be physically violent, but they carry a fringe element that is physically violent.

Stevenson

Right, right.

Thompson

And we saw--I noticed, and others, all of us knew that that was a potential. But honest to God, the ones that really scared us were the kids, because those buses were so vulnerable, pulling up there with all these, in many cases, little babies. We were transporting kindergarteners. And by the way, a lot of that was because there was no room, so we were moving these babies to where there was space. Well, okay, that's, I guess, laudable, but amoral as far as I'm

concerned. There's no moral values at all involved when you do things like that. But the threat to our kids was, we felt, enormous, and we had thousands that we were shipping all over the place [unclear]. I say, we shipped them. We put them in buses that carted them off like mail, and it was frightening, and there were threats related to that. "You're going to have these kids getting on the bus and I'll be waiting for them," and all this kind of thing. And then, of course, we would respond with undercover this and that.And LAPD was very supportive of the efforts to safeguard the kids, and we would take them to football games and things and took extra precautions about getting them out. So all that to say that Crawford, for all of the noble things that it wanted to do that we felt was a part of the process to cause something to happen for what should be happening for our African American kids, organizations, again I repeat it, organizations like Bus Stop in and of themselves aren't necessarily violent, but the emotion that has been stirred up related to mandatory busing, they had fringe elements that were definitely fringe, as in off the deep end, a lot of them. It never really happened, so maybe that helped it, if you want to be that--I mean, it's the old good-and-bad news thing, bad because it never solved anything. All we did was the voluntary. We didn't solve a thing. But on the other hand, I guess the nuts could stand back and say, "Well, you didn't do anything either. You didn't mandatorily bus anybody."That's kind of the feeling. I want to give it a little more thought. Again, I have to apologize to you, because I was not directly involved in all the machinations they went through related to Crawford. All I knew was the results of and how it affected the schools and how it affected how we reacted. And then when I came downtown it was still going on. When I came downtown and before I became an associate superintendent downtown I was assistant to Halversen, and in that I definitely was involved with the school police department, which he ran among ten other things, and I was into all of them, and I was well aware of the threats and the concerns, because I was in meetings where these were discussed, and it was very real. The sharing by police, law enforcement, city law enforcement, county law enforcement, sheriffs, with our people was very pointed that they were worried and hoped that we got through this without kids getting hurt, or for that matter adults. I said, "Hey, we're sitting up there in that horseshoe looking around, like, whoa, it's an interesting place." That's kind of my take on it.

Stevenson

Okay. This is a good place to--[End of interview]

1.5. Session 5 (April 20, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Sid Thompson on Monday, April 20, 2009. I have some follow ups. One, you alluded to the African American students who attended school on the Westside at high schools such as [Pacific] Palisades [High School] and so forth. What were their experiences attending those schools? This was going on at a time when they were trying to achieve integration, and a lot of black parents who could were sending their kids to the Westside. But from the students perspective, if you can, what were their experiences in those days?

Thompson

The ones I talked to, and sometimes it was a mixed bag as to why they were going, some of it was athletics. I always said it began with the natural tendency on the part of African Americans to want to go west, because west was better. That's where all the folks lived that had money, and they didn't want them there, and so that made them want it more. So there's a natural thing for that as we all know in history, in our history, until we hit the Pacific Ocean, and then we had, "Oops, can't go further there." But my sense in talking, and I talked to a lot of them--I would talk to the kids who were going to Pali[sades] across the street from me. I'd just go over and talk to them, and they were great kids.Invariably there was a sense that that was a better school, and better meant--they said they had heard that the faculty at Crenshaw [High School] was a good faculty, which it was. When it opened they got really a choice of a lot of good teachers, so that wasn't the issue. It was the issue of the kids. It was a perception that these kids, white kids from upper-income families, demanded the best, and therefore those schools demanded the best. And the kids' sense was that in going there they were facing more challenges in terms of competition, peer competition, than they would have had at Crenshaw or any black school coming out of the central city, and that was a very deeply seated perception. There were a couple of them I got to know well, and then there were other kids that I got to know through various things, and when I asked them, I said, "Okay," because I visited a lot of those

schools when I was at a higher level, when I went to deputy superintendent I went out there and observation on campus, lunchtime, blacks all together, whites all together, Hispanics together, Asian kids together, so they had an integrated-segregated population.They were integrated by being on the same school site, but segregated by the social behaviors, remembering that, as we all know, this is adolescence and beyond, and when that time hits in many families these cultures really take root. No, they've taken root, but they really are followed in the sense that--I experienced that. When I was in junior high and elementary, it didn't matter. Once you hit high school, upper middle, like ninth grade, and then eighth grade, ninth grade, and then high school it was a very different world. Well, the same thing was true for these kids. They found that although some changes had occurred--I noticed, for example, white boys walking with black girls, not as much as black boys walking with white girls. I think some of that has changed since. So that part was very different. They wouldn't even let us do that. When I was in school, you'd better not even with a Mexican girl, as I think I mentioned.So these kids have gone to these schools and, in fact, many of the African American kids, my take was that they really did want an integrated experience. They wanted to get to know these white kids, and they wanted to mix with them and so on. In the main, it just did not happen. Right now I'm just dealing with the social part, and then I'll get to the school part. The social part, the athletic teams--athletes in a team will mix. There it's a question of whether we win or lose. That becomes paramount and everything else kind of goes secondary. So those kids, even in the girls' side and boys' side, the mix was generally speaking better than the whole population. The whole population didn't have that kind of vehicle for causing the mix to occur, and the kids did what was safest, and there may have been a variety of reasons. I'm sure there were some parental, "Don't you dare," and then in others maybe it was the culture, "We stay with our own," kind of thing, and that's the way it was.So the social part never really occurred except in individual instances. Like I said, I have seen white kids with black kids and not necessarily holding hands or anything, just with them. I've seen them on the campus and at lunchtime mix in the sense of talking to one another and so on. But generally speaking, other than another vehicle, athletics or whatever, drama, whatever the thing may be, they did not mix. So the dream of voluntary integration, it was voluntary but it wasn't integration. The site was integrated, but the kids weren't, and that was one.Another thing that was very

obvious if you went around to the classrooms was where the black kids were and where the white kids were. White kids were in AP classes, and as we know, the Asian youngsters, too, and the black kids, typically speaking, were not. So what happened? Well, kids came in with deficits, and in the main they sometimes came--there were integrated middle schools where kids had traveled over to go there, [Ralph Waldo] Emerson [Junior High School], but a lot of kids came out of central city and it was in high school that they did the transfer, or later middle and then high school, so they came with deficits for whatever reason, bad teaching, didn't get it, whatever. So the kids went into high school with some needs, and my experience, quite bluntly, was that most teachers, longtime teachers at some of these Westside schools, weren't used to that, having to deal with that. The kids all came in prepared, doing homework, had a good background in mathematics, good background in English and came in ready, and the teacher would take them from there. Kids that needed that, "Well, that's not my job." And I actually heard that, "That's not my job. I teach English 1-A. I don't have to go back and try to catch up with what he didn't do in the fourth grade."So there wasn't a lot of sympathy or empathy for what it was these kids--what their condition was and what they needed. So as a result, of course they could not get into AP classes. In some cases there were actual exams to get into those classes, and we did away with that. There's still other ways. Somebody makes a selection by whatever means, and we know how that works. You didn't see African American kids in the advanced classes, you just didn't, and it didn't mean they weren't doing well in the regular classes, but they just weren't in the advanced. There were white kids doing well in those classes who weren't in AP, too, for that matter. I mean, I'm not saying it was all just because they were African American. But the kids as a group were obviously missing from that whole strata of upper-level courses in the academics, and that was school after school. I'm not talking about Pali--all. Go out to the valley, I saw the same thing at El Camino, Taft [High School], so it wasn't isolated. It was systemic, but not de jure. It was kind of de facto. It just was.And again, for a whole variety of reasons, among which, and I want to say it again--these teachers were not prepared to deal with these kids. What the district did was to just send buses in and pick up busloads of kids and take them out and deposit them. There was no preparation to the teachers of, "Okay, here's what you're getting. Here are the kids that are coming. These kids have some special needs, and no, you weren't

hired just to teach this level. You teach kids, what their needs are." They had absolutely no concept of that. Now, a few did. By their innate makeup they were just people that were concerned about people, because I remember there's a famous story going around UCLA right here that in one of the public high schools, better, allegedly better academic schools, the teachers were fighting having to deal with the remediation. It was a lot of infighting and a lot of screaming and shouting, and there was stuff involved in the faculty's discussions--I won't name the school, but that the people that were sensitive to the issues knew what they were hearing in terms of some real belief structures about African Americans and Hispanic kids, and that wasn't their job to straighten that out, that was societal.When those kids--they had this attitude about that kind of stuff. When they proposed that, the administration said, "We really need to deal with it, and we need everybody to be involved, and we do need the classes that can cause these kids to be brought up to another level," whether you could or couldn't was question mark. And in one of the meetings, one of the staunch supporters of the, "I don't get into this stuff, I'm an old-time physics teacher and I don't do that thing, I teach physics, and the kid isn't ready, that's his problem." Well, in one of the meetings, before the meeting went to a discussion, they presented data on these kids. They had some longitudinal data, what happened in elementary, middle, and then to senior high school. It was quiet when they finished, and some were going ho hum and reading the paper like they will do when they want to signal that they don't give a darn and they're just not in it.This guy raised his hand, stood up and he said, "We can't have this." We looked at him, "We can't have what?" "We can't have kids in this condition." He went off for about twenty minutes, and the people presenting this stuff were just stunned, because they were waiting for him to just blast it. He said, "We can't live with this." He said, "These are kids." And then he said, "Let me remind you, these are American kids. They're ours." And he made this pitch for ten, fifteen minutes, and when he finished he said, "Okay, I don't know if anybody else is joining me, but I'm willing to talk about this." And he said, "And I've discovered with the data," shows you what data can do, by the way. He said, "With this data, it shows me a real sense of urgency." He said, "We can't lose this generation." And when he finished, I think they said he had eight or ten, "Okay, well, John, if you want to do this, I'll go with you." See how it happens? One person, respected, sees a light, and in this case it was data. He'd heard all that stuff before, but he'd

never seen it.And, for example, we have data I'm working with, a longitudinal database with USC, the district, L.A. Unified, has a huge longitudinal database that is now starting to really come to the fore, and it's a database of almost 700,000 kids, an incredible database. When you look at that database and you look at the African American and Hispanic youngsters, Alva, in the seventh grade, if you took a cohort of those kids in 2005, they went into seventh-grade subjects. If you just took math and English, 49 percent would fail, 49 percent, and of that number 54 to 56 percent would drop out, so the die is cast way back. We know that. I mean, inherently we know it, but until you see it, and we used it Saturday in the PLI, the Principal's Leadership Institute], where we're training teachers who want to be administrators, and we tell them, "You talk social justice. Look at this. Forty-nine percent fail, and those two classes are the primary predictor for who is not going to make it into high school or out." And I don't care, Sid was a part of it, straight up. We used to do a dance around dropouts. "Well, hell, a lot of those kids move on to other schools." Nonsense.Matter of fact, I'll give you something that I found startling Saturday. The professor of educational research from [U]SC is an old friend of mine, Robert Baker, Bob Baker. He said, "When you look at the kids that drop out or that are coming through and go into these classes and don't make it," he said, "the dropout rate between ninth grade and twelfth grade is way over 50 percent." And we know that. And he said, "But the other startling thing that's different today than it was a number of years ago," he said, "all that stuff about the mobility?" He said, "No. Seventy percent of the kids who failed--," no, not who failed, "all of them in the seventh grade were in L.A. Unified schools in the fourth grade." He said, "They didn't move around." In other words, the schools, the feeder schools are far more stable than we like to admit. We simply are not meeting the problem. We're dancing on it and we're giving excuses for it, but the fact is these kids are not making it.So what we told him Saturday was--with all the mess of the economy and all that stuff, the social-justice issues for these kids still exist and maybe a little worse, because of the financial problems of these families--who gets hit first? We know who gets laid off or never had a job in the first place, so it stands to reason. So when you look at the data, it says you cannot obfuscate with this nonsense about mobility, people moving and all. Uh-uh. These kids are not getting it, and we have to face that, and what are we going to do about it?

Stevenson

Okay. Good question. I mean, where did the responsibility lie then and now for advocating for African American children?

Thompson

Good question. I think the answer to that question is a totality of all concerned, and it hasn't been that way. If we look at No Child Left Behind, it goes after teachers, administrators, and school districts. No. No, no. A kid is educated, a youngster is educated by a total group, not always productively, but it is. The education of a child exists in the family, the community, and the school, and you can't isolate this one and say to teachers, "It's your fault and you've got to fix it." It isn't going to work like that. It is that all of us need to fix it, even if we aren't educated and don't know how.I think I may have mentioned this before. I don't see anything that's addressing parents. "Look. Hey, you've got a responsibility. The least you can do is send him out that door and tell him, 'You go and get an education.'" It's what the Asians do. It's no different. There's nothing in their brain that's different from somebody else. Their parents send those kids and tell them, "Get in there and learn. Don't come here giving me any excuses. Just get out there and learn." I used to come home and tell my dad, "You know, Dad, that history teacher of mine--." And one time I remember he took my arm and sat me down and he said, "Listen to me." And there were four boys. He said, "Don't ever come in here telling me about your teacher, because it isn't you and the teacher. It's you and the subject, and I'm holding you responsible for that subject, so no excuses." So I figured, well, if the teacher's no good, I've just got to keep it to myself and shut up.So the answer to that question, it's a coalition of all of that that cause it to happen to these kids. If a kid goes home and senses that the parents don't care, and I'm not asked about my homework, like I always like to say, it doesn't matter whether it's right, wrong, or in between, you know junk when you see it. If the homework has been addressed at least in an orderly fashion by the kid who put time and effort into it, that's a plus. That's the least a parent could do. Now, back at the school it takes nothing away from the need for qualified teachers, and I believe strongly that that coalition of folks, if we could get the parents involved more than they are, and I see some good signs where people are really working at that, and I have to digress a second. I'm going to come back to that coalition, working at it.Some of these kids, the youngsters, they have a sense that because the parent isn't really putting

pressure on them, they come to school and they sort of take an attitude when they sit down of, "Teach me, I dare you." And then the teacher takes an attitude of, "Oh, well, I'm here to get my check, and I can't do anything with this kid anyway," so it's kind of like some kind of collusion going on. Everybody is just sort of saying, "It's not my fault." Everybody sits back, and the loser is little Charlie, who doesn't understand all this anyway, but he'll take the line of least resistance. Not every kid. There are some that are ornery, and they're going to get it no matter what, in spite of their parents or anybody else. It's always amazed me with kids, but there are not that many of them.The vast bulk of kids need support, and when we get together--I mentioned this, I think, in an earlier session, my observation of the way schools generically, generally have handled parents is they don't want to. They really don't want to. Everybody plays this game of, "We invite our parents to come down for back-to-school night." What is that? Why don't you invite the parent in to talk about their child, and for whatever it takes to get to that kind of specificity, that's what you need to do. They've got to get it here. If they don't get it there and get into it there, then it doesn't happen and it just goes. It drifts and drifts and drifts, and the child sees no point. If the schools truly want the parents to be in there, then they need to be required. There should be something that says, "What are you doing to get them there? What do you mean you threw a party and nobody came?" Because that's generally what happens. "We had a PTA meeting." What? What's that do? You need it to be personalized.And before I forget that, there is a move afoot in L.A. Unified which I heartily applaud. They were fortunate to get a bunch of bond measures, and there are people fussing at them for building all these schools. But what they're doing, they are deliberately going after small schools, and that's the way to go. If there was one thing I can see that would make an immediate difference for many of these kids, it's that they would be in a small unit in which everybody knows them. Instead of Fremont with 5,280 kids, not even a number. One kid said, "Man, we ain't even got a number." He says, "We just go around this place," and he said, "If I'm not in class, I'm not in class."I asked a kid in one of the small schools, Eastside, and I asked him, I said, "So what do you like about this small school?" He said, "Well, in a lot of ways it's a pain in the neck, because everybody's on you." He said, "But you know, Mr. Thompson," he said, "when I was in middle school," this was a high school, "when I was in middle school and I ditched or I just didn't go to class or I whatever, stayed

home," he said, "so what?" He said, "In this small school, they called the second day." He said, "I had a teacher call me and say, 'Why aren't you in school?'" And he said, "And I went, 'Well, I--.' And she said, 'Don't give me uh-uhs and buts, you get your behind in here.'" And he said, "I'm for it," he said, "because it's personal. It's like they care." And I think that's not the answer by any means, it's a lot more than that, but certainly you begin with the fact that a kid is more than a number, more than just another one of the millions going there, and the people care. The kid said to me, "That's what I like the most about it. People care."He says, "And you know, when you have the teacher and you have the teacher again, and you start to know the teacher, and you know her commitment or his, then you can appreciate it. It makes you want to--." He said, "I got involved." The fact is, this kid is really involved, and he was a pain. They were kicking him out of class, and he wasn't in class half the time. When he was there, they wanted to shoot him. But he said that he has turned around, first of all by his attendance, and secondly, he starts to get interested in the classes, and they teach collaboratively a lot of humanitas, if you're familiar with that program, where they combine subjects and they teach to themes. It's thematic teaching, and it causes a lot of interest on the part of the kids instead of just, "Sit down, shut up, read the book, and answer the questions at the back of the chapter," which is the easy way.That's a long-winded thing to tell you that, okay, small schools, that's something the school needs to do right from the start as much as that is possible, very difficult, though, Alva. When there's a traditional school and you want to go to those small schools, you find out you're bucking the culture. We had a group from East L.A. who presented teachers, young guys, these are young folks who are teaching, but they are setting up small schools within [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt's [High School] 5,000 kids, and they told me that you just cannot believe--he said, "You know Roosevelt, Mr. Thompson." I said, "Yeah, I sure do." He said, "Well, the traditions of that thing are all about a traditional high school, the football team," because when they play [James A.] Garfield [High School] it's a huge Eastside event that goes back to the twenties. Well, those traditions are good, but those traditions also kill you, because they're saying, "Why should the school change? I mean, I went here."And a lot of the teachers in that school went there, so they went in a traditional school. They came from parents who probably put pressures on them, and they went on and they finished college and did all that thing and they're teaching. But they

have an attitude that says, "It was good enough for me, so therefore why do you want to change it?" And this one teacher, a young fellow was telling me, "Boy, what a struggle." He said, "Sometimes I tear my hair out. Why do I even bother? But I know it's right. But you are fighting the culture." And that's what I tell you about the school district, it has its own culture, and it's like a person, dares you to make a change. So I see us, we must, we have to have a coordinated collective view of a child's education. It is not one or the other that'll cause the change. I don't care if you threaten teachers with a beating. I don't care if you threaten them with no pay. You've done all that, figuratively, and it hasn't worked, because you're attacking it as if it's this entity, and it isn't. It's this entity.And I think I mentioned it would be so much better if--I just hope someday [President] Barack [Obama] decides to go nationwide and say, "Listen. The education of your children is you and your children and the schools and a school district, but you're critical. It isn't going to happen without you. And, no, you don't have to be an educated person yourself to cause--." That's been our history. We've had immigrants since time immemorial. The slaves came, look what happened to them. We beat it out of them, but they dared to read. So there's been a lot of stuff that's hindered, but we need a collective view of educating a child, with some assistance from things like small schools, beginning with, first of all, qualified teachers.Somebody said to me, "Well, how do you get qualified teachers in the United States?" And I said, "Well, I hate to tell you this, but you've got to pay them like it is. If you don't pay people to indicate a regard for what it is they're doing, then it sends a message from the start that says, first of all, the people you're getting are inferior, because they can't do anything else, like the old George Bernard Shaw thing. It's all of that, and if you don't decide that this is important for these kids, therefore we want the best teaching them, then I think you've already sent a bad message, and there's no way around it. They don't want to hear it, but that's it. If you want the best, you want your kids to have the best, you have to recruit them.Did I mention to you that we had given this huge salary increase, and then that was when I had to go to Willie [Lewis] Brown [Jr.] and take money back and all that? But when we had offered that huge salary increase that we could not afford, we had done it years before, that I saw people in that hiring line, physics grad from Yale, and I said, "So how'd you get here?" He said, "Listen. Your salary is pretty close to what I would have made going with [Dow] Corning or one of the big

companies." I saw a message. Well, we can't afford the salary increase we gave, but it was the right thing, because look at the talent I'm looking at in this line, qualified, bona fide people.

Stevenson

Well, let me ask you this. In our community, are we still in this day and age dealing with a certain attitude which doesn't emphasize education? Particularly I'm thinking about young African Americans who want to excel but are fighting against this attitude that in some quarters is still entrenched. Is that still a problem?

Thompson

Yes, Alva, it is. I think it's better. I always use an example of telling my younger brothers, I said, "You know, I looked at some of these athletes, even the boxers, who typically come from a rougher background, and when they interview them on television they don't sound like Joe [Joseph] Louis [Barrow]. Joe couldn't speak." [imitates] "Well, I hook him with a left hook--." He had street lingo. These kids nowadays, I listen to some of these basketball players, and you have to say to yourself, "He's literate. He can talk. He can speak." And I'm not saying he doesn't have an accent, but that's not the point. It's not the accent, it's the use of the English. I think in spite of all the problems, gnashing of teeth that I do and hair pulling all of us do, there's been an improvement. There is no question in my mind that the black youngsters are coming more prepared with language skills and so on than they had before, and again, that bodes well for what may happen educationally. But it's also--okay, it just crossed my mind.They had this program, "48 Hours." I tuned it in the other night, and it's real. People get shot and all that, and typically it's us, which really bothered me. Lately I notice they're getting some whites; I think somebody jumped on them. But you know what, Alva? When I listen to that program and I see the kid that--and a lot of times its a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old, either shot or did the shooting or both. When I listen to those kids, when I listen to the people talk, when they interview the ones on the street from that ilk, that's the disenfranchised part of our population. They still speak street. Their whole value system has been skewed. They've never had anything, still don't, and we've not been able to break that. I think it's less and less, I'm hoping, or at least the ones that are moving on and have some

interest in something, whether it's academic or athletic or whatever it might be, those are the kids that I see improvements in the way they speak. Maybe television--I don't know what measures that, but we still have a sizable part of this population who are disenfranchised.I always like to say the bottom of the totem pole is a black street kid. All he knows is survival. And when you see that program, as bad as it is, and sometimes I can't--I don't tune it in all the time, I can't take it. But when I do, I see a part of this generation that is still street, survival by any means. They see kids with wads of money in their pocket from selling drugs. What are they supposed to do? They don't hear at home, "Go get an education." Mama doesn't ask them the first question when they get home, "Do you have homework tonight? Are you going to do it? Did you do it?" They don't hear that. They're in the street. So, yes, and we have to face that. We have to understand that, and if we choose to ignore it, then we've allowed the disenfranchisement to continue. And they're out there. That's your gang kid. What else has he got? He figures why not? I don't have a family like a family, and even if I get killed, well.It's so sad because they'll say, "Well, that's the way it be," as one kid told me. "Man, that's the way it be. Get out here and if I get killed I get killed. Going to die anyway." So I see an improvement for those that are moving. There's been a quantum leap in the least twenty, twenty-five years in terms of what I see educationally with those kids. Even the ones that went out to Palisades, because what they did, they'd hear standard English. When they're in some of our inner-city schools, they don't hear standard English, unless their teachers, unless they're in the classroom and I've seen teachers at Markham in Watts, these black teachers from, like I told you, Xavier [University] or Southern Christian [University]. "Hey, listen. Don't walk in my classroom using that kind of language, and I don't mean cussing. I mean just the way you speak. You've got to stop that."I remember old Miss Williams, boy, she was one tough cookie, and the kids loved her, but she was on them like, a kid told me, "mustard on a hotdog." He said, "If I opened my mouth and said, 'well, I be--,' she said, 'What?'" Well, okay, that's what it takes, and you have to have someone doing that. But I had a black parent--that was something I left out. A black parent told me, "Really what I want my kid to hear is standard English, and I want him to be able to converse in standard English, and I know he will hear that at Pali. I'm not sure he'll hear it at Crenshaw." It was heavy. It was hard to deal with a little bit, but a lot of truth to it. She wanted him competitive, and she didn't care about

right-wrong, integrate-desegregate-segregate whatever. All she wanted was she wanted this kid to have a start, and she saw that start as language. No dummy. She's right. It's just that it's a shame that it had to start that way.And you know, look. At Crenshaw there were times when I took a kid around the corner and I talked in street to him, never obscene or profane, but street. I have to get his attention, so I'm gonna talk the way he talks. "Now listen to me, you little dummy. I want to tell you something." And sometimes it takes, as somebody said, a "come to Jesus" meeting, to say, "Listen. This is the way it's going to be. Now get out there and do it." I heard a custodian do that one time with a kid, just beautiful. I wanted to yell, "Teach!" But he was telling that kid in no uncertain terms. Well, there's a time and a place for that, to communicate, but it doesn't mean that that's the way you're going to communicate to that kid all the time. I had a newspaper, the school newspaper, and sometimes they'd slip into the lingo.There was a school police officer who was assigned to our school who would use the expression, "Nigger, please." Kid would come in and give him a story. "Oh, nigger, please." Well, he was talking street, and what really floored me was when they put it in the Daily Cougar. It wasn't daily, but whenever it came out, and they had the expression in there, quoting him. And I called him in, I said, "That's what you want to be quoted at?" He said, "I was just trying to get--." I said, "No, no. I understand what you were doing. This kid was in serious trouble and you were trying to jack him up and tell him, 'Listen. What you're doing is going to end up in jail.'" I said, "That's important. That's critical. But isn't there a way to do that without using expressions that perpetuate the kind of thinking that we see these kids with all the time?" I said, "They use the term MF, they use all that stuff all the time like it's an inner part of their vocabulary. It shouldn't be." I said, "It can't be. They can't move on talking like that." He was great. He said, "I know, Sid." He said, "I know you're right." He said, "Okay, I'll be cool." So I said, "Okay, that's all I want."The term is one that we now--and I love the fact that in society now we use "the N word." I like that. We can't even say it, because we shouldn't. That's good. But again to go back, because it's so important. We have a generation in those streets, parts of a generation that have not moved--honest to God, Alva, I don't think they've moved since slavery. They just haven't been able to make it. They're the chronically poor uneducated, and in that program when you hear the mothers talking to the kids, you hear that same "poor baby" kind of defeated attitude, like this is the

way it is, or, "You know, he went over to his girlfriend's house," and they talk about girlfriends and drugs and guns like nothing, part of the culture. So that exists and that's not easily broken until this society figures out what it's going to do about poverty, people like this, kids like this.It's a crying shame when you look at that program and you see fifteen-year-olds--there was one the other night, back a while ago that I happened to tune in on, and he's fifteen and he killed one or two people. You shake your head, "My god, this kid's going to be in jail forever. That's his life." Anyway, then they talk about the prison population. Well, guess who they are? The very people you and I are talking about right now. That's that disenfranchised part of the generation that never got out of the street, and they don't go to school, or if they go it's, "I dare you, teach me," or it's to chase girls or vice versa, and narcotics, the gang thing, all of it is a part of it, because there's nothing else for them.So I think this country needs--and again, I don't know that there is an answer, but I know education has got to be a part of it, and it's going to take somebody with a lot of recognition, like Barack, the president, or a Villaraigosa. He's running around trying to take over schools. Forget that, Antonio. Get to the population. You're a leader. You tell them. Tell these parents what they need to do. You can do the other, too, if you want, I don't care. I don't see where a mayor has ever done anything with schools. They haven't figured that out yet, but it's needed, really needed. That's a part of our society that we have not fixed, haven't even begun to fix, and they're still there.

Stevenson

Okay. You mentioned the use of the language by young people, and I know some years back there was a movement in certain quarters to acknowledge the, quote, unquote, "black or African American English"--

Thompson

Ebonics.

Stevenson

--and to not denigrate that, while at the same time being sure that these children are English proficient. So could you discuss that a little bit? It was quite a big issue up in the Oakland school district at one point. Maybe you could discuss that a little bit.

Yes. I remember the whole discussion on Ebonics, and it was a major issue for this L.A. Board of Education. They were talking about it. My view is along the lines of what I said a little bit ago. There is a time when you want to get a youngster's attention and communicate with him or her, and there are times, and I've known it--it doesn't happen every day by any means, but it comes at a time when you've talked to a kid and you're up to here in frustrations. How do I get side that head? And you decide consciously that you're going to go street to see if it puts a spark in him, if his eyes light up, "Okay, man, I got you," that kind of thing. I don't think you teach Ebonics, it's there. It's there. It's a part of our language, it's part of the culture, and when I came up as a kid I heard it all the time, and the way I'm talking right now is one thing, and the way I would talk back in those days with my high school buddies might be another. And again, I don't necessarily mean profane, obscene, all that. No.The approach to the subject-verb agreement and all that, sometimes you deliberately do things in a way that causes the kid to look at you and say, "That's not the way you normally talk. Therefore, why are you doing this? Why are you talking like this?" you know, that kind of thing? I've seen a kid look at me like, "So man, what's wrong with you?" One kid I remember told me, "So what are you so upset about?" [laughs] I said, "What makes you think I'm upset?" "The way you're talking. You don't talk like that." I don't, no. But I said, "Guess what?" "What?" I said, "Look at you. You're asking me about it. That's the most response I've had out of you the whole time." I said, "You normally don't say boo. You just sit there listening and go on off." He said, "Well, that's true."So the Ebonics thing, it isn't a question of having to teach Ebonics. It's there. If it isn't there, so what? It's not there. If these kids are going to get success in this world in a place like this, they'd better understand standard English, fact, anywhere, not just here. On the job. You go to an employer, you don't know how to speak, or the only way you can speak is street, and the employer has someone sitting next to you who does speak standard English, guess who he's going to take? So you've got to deal with that. The whole battle with that Ebonics thing I always thought was a sham. I said, "Come on." If you want to communicate and you feel a need at a particular time to go to that, I don't say--a lot of people say, "You slip down to--." I said, "No, no. You don't denigrate it. You've said that, too. You don't denigrate it, because that causes the opposite. You're saying that I'm no good and the way I talk is no good. No,

that's not what you're about. What you're saying is, 'Look. You're trying to go here. To get there you've got to do this. Keep this for the times that you're talking to your buddies and you're off someplace and you want to communicate in your own special way, like a foreign language, nothing wrong with it.'" And I said, "Others do it all the time."I heard the Middle Eastern kids, when they don't want folks around them to know what they're doing, they go to Farsi if they know it, and they use it. Spanish kids the same way, except a lot of people know Spanish nowadays, and they have to be careful. But I don't see it as a major issue any longer. I've noticed it's kind of quieted down, and again I see changes in our young people that make me believe that the use of standard English is starting to help. I don't know if some of that is because the black population has diffused and gone east and is now mixed into the greater population, and that may help a lot in terms--for our kids, selfishly, it may help a lot for our kids in terms of acquiring standard English. They'll hear it, and that may be a factor. We don't have huge enclaves of African Americans here anymore, and that may help them. The Hispanics, that's not true. They still hold as a group pretty much, and they're diffused. I see them in a lot of places out there, and their kids are not the kids you used to get out of the Eastside. So the more the kids diffuse and hear other languages, standard languages, standard English, the better I think it is for them to acquire it, to just get there. And I'm very optimistic about it, some of the changes I've seen.

Stevenson

I've got a follow up. You talked about the desegregation and integration at our last session. What is the legacy of some of those voluntary programs? You spoke about some of them. There were other programs like the Permits With Transportation.

Thompson

Yes, PWT.

Stevenson

Right. So what are the legacies of some of those programs that are still with the district today?

Thompson

There are kids still--because they demanded to be able to go to other schools, and even though the court thing has stopped pretty much, there is still a sensitivity on the part of the districts that they don't want to do something that flags, uh-oh, they're getting into some de jure stuff here now, that sort of thing. There really is. I can remember in L.A. we would say, "Listen. We'll do the Permit With Transportation. We can't do mandatory, it obviously didn't make it, so it's voluntary." But whenever somebody started talking about forming a charter school--Palisades, they formed a charter school out there, the high school and one of the elementaries, and I don't think Paul Revere [Junior High School], but they have a little bit of it.When they formed those schools, every meeting that I had ever heard there was always some discussion related to, "Well, we don't want this to appear now to be some way to get white schools." This was coming from white folks. "We need to make sure that this is still integrated," because by this point they'd had black kids, for example, brown kids for some time, years, and they recognized that they didn't want any part of looking like they just figured out a way to cut those kids out and have a white school, because they were also in need to operate of state funds, and they didn't want to get the state and a bunch of attorneys at the state level in the middle of saying, "Wait a minute. What are you guys doing?" And so how do you make sure that your population is going to be served in this new school? And I found that to be a major leftover from voluntary integration. It did cause an awareness, and there's still governmentally a sensitivity to anything that smacks of de jure segregation. If it is, it is. I mean, you're stuck, housing patterns and all that being what they are.But I think that was a major plus that came out of the voluntary, along with even if they don't fully integrate in the sense of being buddies and going out together and all that stuff, the proximity and all of those things are good for both. I heard a fellow on the television the other day, and I can't remember the program. It was about three, four weeks ago, and he was talking about our society. Some of it I heard at the time when Barack Obama was elected. In fact, that was the first one, yes, a guy said, "Listen. I went to school and we had voluntary integration, and we had African American kids and Hispanic kids at my school." He says, "And I want you to know, I developed a far different attitude to what I know my elders, my parents and grandparents experienced." And he said, "I don't fear anybody," not physically, but, "I don't fear a proximity to people that aren't like me." He says,

"I've learned that." He said, "When I go on a job and I see different people, it's part of the old scheme. Hey, that's the way it was in school." And I think that's a plus that has helped.Somebody said, "You know, the Obama thing showed that down deep there isn't an inbuilt fear in most people about African American or Hispanic or any other group. It's not. There's some stereotypic stuff that comes to the surface sometimes, but generally speaking it's not there." And that's my sense, too. A lot of these young folks have had experiences now, even if they didn't date them or any of that, they at least rubbed shoulders with them, talked with them, found out, hey, he's a guy just like me. He's a nice guy, that sort of thing. So I'm one that believes that the voluntary was more positive than not. It didn't do all of what we wanted, but it couldn't, because that culture is deeply engrained and it's going to take generations to drum it out of the core, but I think we will. My dad used to say, "When they all look alike, it ain't gonna matter."

Stevenson

Okay. You talked a little bit about your experiences as principal at Crenshaw High School, but I'd like to find out a little bit more about your experiences there, what you think your greatest challenges were, successes were. You were there early in its history. It was built in the early seventies?

Thompson

It was built in the late sixties, and I went there in '71, so, yes, I went there--in fact, the opening principal was still there. He's the guy I replaced. They had some riots, one thing and another, and the school was in a bit of a mess when they sent me. I look back on Crenshaw, and it was huge, way too big, 3600, 3800 kids on traditional calendar, as I think I told you, and that is just incredible. I mean, I look back on that and I don't know how we did it, getting those kids in class and not in class and all the stuff that went with it. The good things--I think first of all we established some order in the school, because when I went in there apparently there were display cases smashed, all kinds of stuff that was the result of the rioting that occurred, and it wasn't as a part of the Watts thing or any of that. It was just an uprising in the school.Well, we got it under control, got it in order, basically got the kids in class, had a wonderful AP and a basically, except for one, good staff, and we were able to do a lot of good things for the kids. I mentioned to you about the--well, they

were mostly all African American, a few white and a few Asian, Hispanic, but mainly black--the kid that told me when I asked him how he liked things at the school and he said, "I think that when the sheriff said, 'Build me a jail here,' they built this place." And I mentioned that that was because we had really nailed it. We had gone out of our way to get it in order. "Get in class. You guys stop shouting down the hallway, and do this, and do this, and do this, and do this." And I realized that we had really put a foot on the place, and that's when we got that idea to go to the school within a school. And I think that was a great idea, even though it didn't last. When I left, they killed it, which is one of the problems with all these reforms. They're always a product of somebody.It was not me who developed that school within a school. The interesting part is a group of teachers came to me, white and black, who said to me--and they generally were younger, although not entirely, and said to me, "We need to separate out some of these kids just so we can deal with them as individuals, because it's too big." We had gangs, we had shootings, all kinds of stuff. We met on many weekends to talk about it, and I got to where I really agreed with it. They took out a group of kids, I think it was 500. We illegally altered some bungalows, because they were federal buildings and you're not supposed to do that, but I had a couple of good carpenters on the staff, and they banged up some petitions and did some things and did what they thought they needed to do to make a couple of little office spaces. But what they did was to take responsibility for those kids in attendance and everything, and I thought it was the beginning of the small schools, beginning of the small learning communities, all of that which says, let's get it to a manageable size where a kid has recognition, and I really was proud of that.I'm proud of--not me--proud of my staff, who sat down and we worked it out collaboratively. It wasn't me imposing it. It wouldn't have worked. They wanted to do it, and they had a lot of heat from the more traditional, older faculty left with the traditional school. And the one thing I said was, "You cannot select the kids. Kids will voluntarily come into the program, because I don't want it that we've creamed the best and all that stuff." And they agreed, and so a lot of the crying and moaning from the people around the staff lessened, because they didn't select them out. The kids volunteered in, and they didn't bother anybody else. They tried to do everything themselves. They built their own laboratory, chem lab, their own physics center. They did all their own things, and all it meant to me was it shows you what people will do when they really want to do it.The thing that

I've not been able to address with Crenshaw is, okay, but when it leaves, it's not memorialized. There's nothing that keeps it going. A new person comes in and, "Oh, well, I don't want to be bothered with that, and let's just have a traditional school. It's easier," and so it goes right back to what it was. And that's been my experience, by the way, even with this bigger district, the school district. We did some changes administratively and the minute you leave somebody else comes in and says, "Why are we doing that? I don't want to be bothered with that. I just want to have it like it was." And that is the biggest enemy of reform going. It's the traditional culture that is always lurking, almost saying the Bill Cosby thing that he did about Noah, challenging the Lord, and the Lord says, "How long can you tread water?" Well, it's the same thing. The system looks at you kind of like, how long can you keep this up? Because the minute you can't, I'm right back where I was, and that's what happened at Crenshaw.Now, I look now at what's happening, and I have a lot of feeling of hope, because they're looking to go to these small learning communities and have the school into sections where kids can actually be known and can talk to the teachers, and so there's a plus that's coming. Now, what I like about what's happening now within the district, they have taken the small-schools thing and they have made it a policy. They are moving to small schools. Well, that's a whole different story. See, that says, "We're changing the culture of the whole place." Won't be easy. These kids [young teachers] that spoke the other day at that Saturday class we just had, from Roosevelt, time after time every one of them said, "It's tough. They fight us. Why are we doing this? Who cares?" this kind of stuff. But if the system says, "We as a system are not going to be a traditional school system anymore," well, that's a big step, because it means you won't get support for it, going back to it.So I'm very hopeful, Alva, that that's going to cause change, and I think that when these people realize it, that folks are not going to stand for the old nuts-and-bolts way of doing business, that maybe they'll realize--and the other thing that needs to happen--it gets me going--places like UCLA. I hear these folks and they'll tell me, "So what's happening about it?" I said, "You know, they're changing." "Well, don't you have to change the way you teach teachers, potential teachers? Don't your teacher-ed courses have to change? These teachers need to know they've got to be collaborative. They can't go into a school expecting it to be like they knew, teacher in front of the class lecturing, classes in English and history and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,

and go home." You can make it that way. You did. I understand that. But that's not the reform part of this, trying to deal with the kids we're trying to reach, who we're talking about. It's going to take a personal kind of effort, and the fact, again, that the district is doing that I think is huge, a definite plus. So I'm a little bit optimistic in my old age with what I'm seeing. Can they hold it up and make it work? I don't know. It's a tough one, because so many people came through the old system.

Stevenson

You mentioned this small group of young teachers at Crenshaw that approached you with this school within a school. Were there precedents for that? Had it been tried in other districts at the time?

Thompson

Great question again. One other place, one other out of the fifty-seven high schools in L.A. Unified, Uni. University [High School] had it prior to us. They started, and you know who was the main instigator? African American. The brother of Billy Dee Williams [William December Williams Jr.], the actor? His brother was a teacher--

Stevenson

And his name was?

Thompson

--and I can't remember his first name. He was Williams, and he was a prime mover with a group of teachers at Uni, because when our people heard about it and it piqued some interest, they talked with him. We talked with him, and he came over a number of times and talked with us, with some of the folks on the staff. He wasn't an administrator, he was a teacher. So, yes, and it showed you that if something has promise and it works, give it a shot. God, everything else isn't, so try it if it make sense, if you really want to do it, and these teachers I had really wanted to do it. They went over to Uni to see what it looked like, liked what they saw. Uni is a different school, because Uni was at that time primarily white with some blacks that went in on voluntary integration, old-time community of Asian, very small but a collective Asian community and Hispanic pockets, but it was a different type of school to

Crenshaw, so it worked at Uni. We weren't quite sure whether this is going to work here. Who knows? But we felt it would, and I think it did.

Stevenson

It's interesting you should mention Uni, because another interviewee talked about Uni as a sort of innovative place and made mention of the fact that students traveled some distance just to go to Uni.

Thompson

To get to Uni. Yes, and why? Well, there was a perception, professors kids went to Uni. There was that elitist kind of thing. Okay, it's a human thing, a part of the human experience and the way human beings work, and folks saw it just like going west. It's a place to try to get into, and Uni had that rep clear back when I was at Belmont. I don't know if there were any black kids at Uni; probably not in the forties and early fifties. And then after that in the sixties to seventies is when some of that broke down, and they had a kind of avant garde faculty. Williams was avant garde, definitely. In other words, he was looking for different things to do, creative things particularly, because when he was there, there were African American kids there, too, by that point, and he saw the need. And he would tell me, "Sidney, it's critical." So, yes, Uni was the place.

Stevenson

Well, getting back to Crenshaw now, then and I think somewhat now the neighborhood around Crenshaw was pretty middle class and actually at close proximity to Baldwin Hills and those other neighborhoods--

Thompson

View Park, all of that.

Stevenson

Right, more influential African Americans. So did many of those young people, particularly the more influential families attend Crenshaw? No.

Thompson

Most of them went west. If you were to be at the gate of Crenshaw High School when we let school out, a mass of kids would come out of the school,

go to the corners and go east back towards Jeff, Locke, Fremont, that's where they came from, by hook or crook, some of it crook, false address. They wanted to get to Crenshaw to get out of their local schools, which they saw as more impacted with the gangs and so on than Crenshaw was, and God knows we were impacted, really impacted. But they didn't go west. Now, that doesn't say we didn't have--we had Margaret Broome. I remember her well because her daddy was Lawrence Broome, who was a commander, I think, in LAPD. He was a senior officer in LAPD at a time when there weren't a lot of senior officers. Jesse [A.] Brewer [Jr.] was another one. He's passed, and I don't know if Broome is still alive, but they lived up in Baldwin Hills, and they wanted their daughter, he and his wife, who was another bright, wonderful lady, they wanted their daughter to go to Crenshaw. I think she was student body president, and she ended up here and was an honor graduate from law school.There were kids that did come down off the hill and go to Crenshaw, and a lot of times almost from a sense of duty on the part of the parents, but most parents up there, uh-uh, west. Westchester [High School], Venice [High School], Uni, those schools, [Alexander] Hamilton [High School].

Stevenson

Okay. That's probably a good place--[End of interview]

1.6. Session 6 (April 27, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Sid Thompson on Monday, April 27, [2009]. First I'd like to begin discussing your experience when you went downtown to the district office, first as region superintendent, later as associate superintendent. What was the experience like? What were your duties? What were the challenges? Any challenges relating to, say, acceptance of an administrator at that level, of color, would you maybe talk a little bit about that?

Thompson

Let me address that one first of all. Things had changed in the seventies, sixties, seventies, certainly in the seventies and then from there forward into the eighties, nineties, and so on. I didn't have a feeling of any overt feelings

about my ethnicity or anything else. My experience was always that people wanted to help and that that was not a major issue. I'm certain that for some people it will forever be a problem, and you're never going to necessarily get rid of it. But as an institution, I didn't see it as an institutional problem.They first made me--I went from Crenshaw High School, I went as what they called a deputy area administrator. There are all these names for these things. It's essentially the same thing. It's an assistant to a local district superintendent. They were then divided, I don't remember, I think twelve or thirteen districts by letters, A, B, C, D, and each of those had a local district assistant superintendent who reported downtown but was in charge of those schools that were identified. They had a full staff of two deputy area administrators. I was appointed as one, replacing somebody else, replacing another African American, in fact, in Local District B, which at that time was Huntington Park, Southgate, Bell Maywood.I found that fascinating, because those communities were primarily blue collar, began as primarily white, and I remember as a kid if you went down to Watts, you did not cross Alameda to any of those cities. You did, you had a problem with the police. That's the way it was. A lot of that had changed. The browns, Hispanics had moved in, and they were turning heavily Hispanic, and some of those schools were absolutely massive. Huntington Park High School is one of the early schools that went multi-track year round, and I was there as it went into that. It had begun before me getting there.The Local District Superintendent was Sid Brickman, and he was a wonderful, wonderful mentor, really helped, excellent local superintendent, and he kind of oversaw a lot of that going multi-track year round, because Huntington Park was huge, South Gate High School and their accompanying schools, the schools feeding them. At one point Miles Avenue [Elementary School], which feeds Huntington Park, was at 2700 elementary kids. That's criminal. I remember something like fifteen or eighteen kindergarten classes, the little guys lined up like ants going to lunch, there were so many of them. They've managed now to bring that down to something human, as I call it, because that was not right, but they had no choice. The kids were there and they had no school to put them in. And I always remind us that when we had those huge populations in the valley, that didn't stop us from building schools, boy. We built them, because the middle class demanded it. These folks had no say and had no relief other than multi-track year round. We even tried half-day sessions, which was, talk about criminal, because the second half of that day kids didn't

come to school. Talk about a dropout rate, it was cataclysmic.So when I went into that district, I had an opportunity to see a lot of that beginning, and it was still--that job was not really a downtown job. You were at a local district office. You certainly were connected downtown, and you went to meetings and all that, even as an assistant to a superintendent. I did that for a while in the late seventies, and then in the eighties, early eighties, they appointed me to replace Sid Brickman as a local superintendent in that local district, and it was an experience. I may have mentioned this back when we were talking about integration and so on and the problems of segregation, but one of my memorable times in that job had to do with--I had an assistant, Gabe Cortina, who came up with an idea. We were trying to find places to put the kids, and we had a lot of kids that were not fitting into the regular schools. They were the--I'm blanking--the alternative schools. They were the kids that went to continuation schools, because they couldn't fit in a big school. There are kids that just don't fit to that, and they'll ditch or do whatever. They just don't want to face it. But they'll go to a small school.So we were looking for small schools to take some of these kids. What we wanted to do was get some of them that are on the street--they're typically minority, heavily Hispanic and some African American, and we wanted to get them in school. We had worked a deal with a church, a local church that had an annex that they said we could teach classes in, and we thought, man, is this great. So we formed a little school, even named it, and we took kids off the street and put them in classes in that school. I had a call that said, "They would like you to appear before the Huntington Park City Council to talk with them about it," so, "Yeah, great. I'm always looking for a chance to say, hey, look what we're doing." So we went down there.I want to give you a feel for that meeting. They're seated in a raised dais. That dais was up here, I mean, up there. It was like eight feet between me and the audience and these tin gods sitting up around this circle way above us, all white, all male as I recall, all older. They were sitting there, and I went up before them, and I said, "I understand you have questions about this school we have formed, and the reason we did it, these kids have been on the street and we thought here was an opportunity to put them in school and have them doing something productive," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. They looked at me and it was almost like this. "We want that school closed by sundown today."

Stevenson

What year was that?

Thompson

That would have been about 1981, '82, right around in there.

Stevenson

Interesting. That's fairly recent.

Thompson

That's fairly recent, yes. But remember now, all-white, all-male, that's what flipped in the next fifteen years.

Stevenson

Demographically speaking.

Thompson

Demographically. It went all Hispanic. The Hispanics voted them out, thank God, but they told me to close--it was almost like "High Noon." It was like two cowboys in which one tells the other to get out of town by sundown or he's dead meat, literally. I was floored. I sat there looking at them and I said, "I don't understand. Why do you want me to close it?" "We don't want those kinds of schools in our community." I said, "You don't want schools for these kinds of kids?" "Now, don't go making something out of it that it isn't. We just don't want these kids who are juvenile delinquents." I said, "That's a huge assumption," and I argued with them. I was angry. And they told me, "We are unanimous in this. Get it out of our city." I had to close it, because L.A. Unified is made up of not just L.A. city, but all these municipalities who buy in but have control, municipal control of permits and all the rest of it, so all they had to do was lift the permit that we had to have a school in that church annex, and we were dead. I'll never forget it, because it was so blatant.

Stevenson

Yes.

Thompson

I always thought just a bunch of thugs sitting up there ordering something that is almost criminal in terms of what--if you were to say that or put that in the

newspaper, anyone looking at it, even a racist, I would think would say, "Well, at least they're all in their own school and they're doing something rather than on the street threatening citizens or something," if you want to look at it in the worst situation. So I learned a hard lesson from that, that sometimes politically there are things still out there that have nothing to do with reason or nothing to do with moral values or nothing to do with education. Take any value system, positive value system, and quite often there are things out there that just don't tie to that, don't have a real-world tie to it. And they were blatant. I mean, they were glaring at me, and me looking like me anyway didn't help, so all the way around it was a very, very unpleasant situation.Gabe Cortina was with me, and he obviously is Hispanic, and Gabe went out of there, he was just, he said, "I couldn't believe it, Sid. Good God, what?" I said, "Don't even try to figure it. It has nothing to do with reality. It has nothing to do with moral values of what's good for kids that I think we should all be about. This has nothing to do with any of that. It has to do with, one, egos, two, race, and they're almost equal, they equate that way. And then the third one would be, they may have some real concerns about juvenile delinquents, but," I said, "they're making judgments. These kids aren't juvenile delinquents." Matter of fact, they had attendance problems, not behavior problems. They didn't hit kids and tear up the place and be physically aggressive or anything. They didn't do that. Most of them just didn't come to school. They were not delinquents.Anyway, the experience being in the field was a good one and having to work with principals, because we had elementary, middle, and senior high schools in those local districts, so you had to work with them administratively, and that was an eye opener for me. I got a real charge out of going to elementary schools, which wasn't my level. I was a secondary person, math, but I went to elementaries and I remember marveling at these kindergarten teachers. I had forgotten having been one. That was too long ago and couldn't remember it anyway. But some of the things I saw were so beautiful in terms of people just killing themselves for these kids. In other cases, I observed people that had no business being in the classroom but were protected under the contract, and that wasn't doing anybody any good, not them, not the kids, particularly not the kids, and that was another lesson I learned.Going from there, I was only there about two years, and then I was informed by my--how did that work? I did that, and then I was told--ah, I've got it now. It's been a while. Before I went to that job I was

still an assistant to Sid Brickman, and he called me in one day and said--because I had told him, "I've got to get a car." I said, "Man," I had some poor old wreck of a car, and I said, "I've got to get rid of this wreck." I said, "It's getting to the point where I won't trust it," and it was just general talk, "And I'm going to go out this weekend and look for something." Well, he called me in and said, "Don't buy a car." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Just don't." I thought, that's weird, except I knew there were district cars, and so I said, maybe they're changing my job, I don't know.Then I got a call to come down and meet with the then superintendent, who was Bill Johnston, and I went down to meet with Bill Johnston, and on the way to his office I ran across an old friend of mine who had retired and was running--he's the guy that hired me at Pacoima [Junior High School.] He was running the administrative association at that time, retired, of administrators. He saw me. He was down for a board meeting and he said, "Sid, they're going to be bouncing you up to something." And I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah. Are you down here to see Johnston?"So I went in to see Bill Johnston and it was weird. I'm not sure why I'm there, and Bill had been a good mentor for me. He liked Crenshaw and those kinds of things. So he calls me in, and in those days they were smoking in the offices, so he had a big cigar which he always twirled, and he had this low voice, "Sid. It's good to see you." And he got to the point, he said, "We are considering moving you to an associate superintendent level." I hadn't even been an assistant superintendent. That's not common. So I said, "Really?" I got about that far and then--now, I'm telling you this because it was a fact. Jim [James] Taylor came in and Jim said to Bill Johnston, "Bill, can I say something to Sid?" And I remember Bill looking like, what? Like, what's going on? And Jim, who'd been a friend for many years, said, "Sid, we want you to have an experience coming down here and to get used to this place and know how it operates, so we'd like to bring you down and have you work down here for a while and learn how this place works and operates and so on," which I said, "Well, that makes sense." But it wasn't an associate superintendent level.That was because there was some posturing for--they knew Johnston wasn't going to be there much longer, and in the posturing for his job as superintendent there were three or four candidates for that position, and there was a lot of jockeying related to that, and they didn't want Thompson coming in the middle of it messing it up as an associate superintendent. Now, what did I learn from that? I learned from that that, yes, there are politics, and yes, it's a

real world, and you're not going to get rid of that. That's always going to be there, and how that plays out is related to the political clout or climate related to the people trying for the position, who want this position, and there are people that would die to be the superintendent. I know some of them. I didn't call anybody. I kind of talked to my wife. I went home, and she was a principal in L.A. and understood how it worked, and I just said, "You know, I'm going to keep my powder dry. I'm going to do whatever they ask me to do. I am not going to question. I'm not getting into, 'Is that why you called me downtown, to tell me you wanted to do that? You could have just done it.'"But it was this other thing, and Jim had been approached, and Jim just didn't want a lot of upset and me in the middle. So that's one thing about--Jim is such a good person, and I've always respected that in him, with high moral values and judgments, so I knew why he was doing it, what it was about. Well, the funny part was that this was like May, April, May, so I was supposed to be coming downtown, and I didn't get a call. I think it was about August or September, and Jim called me and said, "Sid, are you downtown yet?" I said, "No, Jim, I'm home." He said, "What?" He said, "You're supposed to be working with Jerry Halversen." So Jerry, who was buried with integration, the legal side--he was the attorney, the lead attorney for the district. He was also the superintendent in charge of personnel. He had about three jobs. He had the school police department, which was huge, big as Long Beach, actually, Long Beach P.D. He had a monster job, and I was supposed to be an assistant to him, to learn the ropes and so on.So I get a call. Jim said, "Sid, come down tomorrow." So I went down and he took me in, and I met Jerry formally. I knew him, but I met him formally, and he was a wonderful guy. He said, "Sit down." He had me in the office, and he was holding conferences with board members that were very sensitive. He had people like Kathy [Kathleen] Brown-Rice, and her dear brother was gov[ernor of California], and there was all of that by phone, and I'm sitting there and I go, well. I look at Jerry and I go, "You want me out of here?" And he said, "No, I want you to hear this. I want you to learn." So I really--because I learned, and you know, Alva, I've looked back and that point and I said, the best thing I ever did was to shut up and observe, just keep your mouth shut and observe, because there was so much to learn, the play, byplays between these individuals, how the superintendent related to them and how he had to do a dance between their operation and his. And there is a fine line that I observed there between the superintendent doing that dance

to maintain the balance and then becoming involved in the politics of it, which is forever dangerous. It's okay if you win or you're on the winning side, but if you're on the losing side you are dead, and I learned a big lesson there.And also knowing to observe, keep still, observe, watch what's happening, and in the case of a superintendent I was learning early on that you're looking not just at the board. You had to look at the mayor's office, you had to look at all the offices that impact that thing, and it determined a lot of how you might behave or choose to behave because of those kinds of interactions. So coming downtown, I was called in by a guy I've known for many years and respected, happens to be a Hispanic senior school official, and he called me in and he said, "Sid, you're coming down here, and I just want you to know that this is an interesting place. It can be a dangerous place, depending on what your interests are." But he said, "I wanted you to know that you have one guy here that if you ever have a question, you know you'll get a straight answer," and I always could from him.I've deliberately left his name out, because it gets a little bit tricky. Oh, heck, it's John Leon, and John Leon was an associate superintendent, but he wasn't in the inner-inner circle, but he was certainly senior and respected. But I mention him because it shows the kind of thinking that a lot of people had at that time, even then, that was wholesome, healthy, offering help, not telling me, "You'd better do this and this and this," none of that. You make your own decision. But if you're questioning that decision in terms of what you ought or ought not to do, you could always bounce it off him. Jim was the same way. You could always go to him and say, "Hey, I'm dealing with this and this, and what do you think?" and so on, and count on a pretty astute answer, but certainly a moral answer about kids and how does this affect the bottom line of what we're trying to do?So coming downtown was an experience. In the first few weeks I learned so much, but it was sitting in Halversen's office and observing the interplay between various power centers within the district, the board, in staff, the interplay between people that were on a level with Jerry but weren't. In other words, they were associate superintendents, and there were several of them, but he was right next to the superintendent because of what he represented, the legal and just pure respect for his thinking, because he was a solid thinker. He did his homework and he knew what to watch out for.The movements down there became after that somewhat political in the sense that as I went from being an assistant superintendent in the local district and then coming downtown,

and then moving up to an associate superintendent level, which I did, and the support of people like Rita Walters. Rita was an incredible force down there. She was one tough individual. Rita was tough-tough for a little thing. But I'll tell you, she had moral values that some people don't--she had more in her little finger than some people had, didn't have in their whole body. Her decisions, I'm not saying they were never political. That's not true. You're not a politician and never not make a political decision. You have to sometimes. I mean, that's just part of the game. But what I admired was that her decisions were about kids, always about kids, and she'd jump up and pound that table and that little foot would be bouncing up and down and she's making a point, and I respected that with Rita. And Rita was one of the people that insisted on having a balance of representation in the staff, and she would hammer for African Americans and Hispanics and Asians, and it wasn't about having one or the other. It was about representation.So I was able to move up. I went in the eighties to associate superintendent and then I went to deputy superintendent, and they were running two and three deputy superintendents. And at that time, to show you the politics of these things and how the real world works, Bill Anton was the senior deputy superintendent. He was the guy that had been there the longest, and I had no doubts in my mind but that he would be a superintendent, because he just had all that respect coming out of the Eastside, and they had not had a Hispanic superintendent. So the play between Bill and I--and sometimes we would clash. We would argue about things, but I always felt like, no, but he is the senior deputy super, and I respected that, and I think he realized it. When they wanted to name a school after him, I went over and lent my support to it, because I just believe that what he represented to the Eastside was that important.So Rita was always there, not just pressing for representation, but also pressing that we would represent what we were trying to do for the kids that needed it, and I always felt like at a board meeting if you were bringing up--I had one occasion when I was totally wrong, but I was a victim of my own traditions, probably more West Indian than anything. But I had an occasion where they were talking about doing away with corporal punishment and I argued to keep it, and why? Well, I came up in it, not only in the West Indies but here. I mean, in elementary and middle school I used to get swatted for opening my big mouth and not shutting up, and I always thought, well, I'd get one and that would be it for the year or two years. But it was later, and I thank

God that I did have sense enough to at least think about it, and I thought about it and thought about it, and I said, "No. We're at a time now in this society where we shouldn't be hitting kids," and I did a flip flop and supported not swatting.The union, by the way, was demanding swatting. It was interesting. So I had to serve on a committee with them as to how this was supposed to occur, and they had so many restrictions, I mean, it would have taken an act of Congress to say, "Swat a kid." So it wasn't--that was another thing. I said, "What are we doing? This isn't worth all this, to swat some kid? Forget it. And it's wrong anyway." So Rita said, "It's about time." I said, "Guilty, Rita." But we could talk like that, which was good, and we could make our statements known. But it was keeping a careful eye on our kids, to try to say, "Are we doing what's best for them?" I did remember when I did my flip, I said, "But I want to remind us, you can thoroughly emasculate a boy with your mouth. You can make him feel like nothing. There are worse things than swatting him on the behind. We shouldn't be doing that, but we shouldn't be doing this either." And I said, "There's a lot of this going on. 'Well, I never touched him. I didn't grab him, I didn't this and that.' Yeah, but you berated him, and sometimes that stuff is--I've seen it, where someone is downright vicious with it."And that's something we've never really addressed. I'm thinking about that right now, and I'm just thinking, you know, we've never addressed that. There's no policy in the board that says, "Thou shalt not berate a kid," because you can't define it. Where do you draw the line between berating the child and correcting the child? And we know there's a line, because we know when it's berating and we know when you're trying to correct. But to define it such that you can use it as an assessment tool, for example, you can't. It's judgmental. But anyway, those were the kinds of things we went through in the eighties, and as I was downtown, as I said, I tried to be careful about the position of Bill Anton, who was a senior deputy, and sometimes I'd bang heads with him because we'd disagree about how something should be handled, but in the main I respected that.And when the board, when they went after Leonard Britton, after Harry Handler retired--Handler was the superintendent from the early eighties to the later eighties, and when they were going after another superintendent, both Anton and I applied, and that's when they picked Leonard Britton down in, was it Broward County? Anyway, Florida, and he came up from Florida as the superintendent, and he was brought up by board members. The board perceived at that time

that they would have to go outside to get a superintendent, because, "We've got to do something creative and different," and different usually means you go to somebody else. Doesn't mean necessarily you were creative, because who'd you get? And he came out and I made it known openly, "If he's the superintendent, I will support him." Others weren't so generous. They were really after him. They were angry about his selection, and when the board finally decided--he only went, I think, two years, and the board decided that they had to do something else.And it occurred when I was on a trip. I was somewhere, and when I came back he'd been booted out. I went, whoa. And Bill Anton had been put in, and they called me in and said, "You're the deputy." I said, "Okay." But, I mean, I was only gone a little while, got back and all this had happened. And that satisfied one political piece of the puzzle, because the Hispanics had been yelling for a long time, properly, that they had had no superintendent. Superintendents were all white and typically male, and he's a male, but okay, he's at least Hispanic. So Bill was the superintendent, and in the main again I had no problem supporting him, because he was the superintendent.I believe in major institutions like this one, again, you have to stay focused. What is it that we're trying to do with this institution? Well, one thing we're trying to do is to educate 700,000 kids, which is incredible, but you have to stay focused to that, and if you get into personal, adult types of skirmishes, you detract from the kids. You detract from the focus. It becomes an adult focus, and that happens far too often. Even at the adult level in city council or wherever it may be, supervisors or whatever, even if they're not dealing directly with kids, they are dealing with adults, and you're there for a purpose. You're there to try to make this society work, and if you're busy playing mind games with someone that you are jousting with about a position, you lose that focus and it shows, and pretty soon it's all about that. And you'll see our headlines and everything is about what? Not the job. It's about the people, the individuals, and that's very sad. The more we do of that, the worse it is.I love what's happening with Obama, as an aside, but I worry that people are putting this personal, human thing on him to the point of where he's a human being, he is not God. He's being expected to do this and this and this and this, and he's doing an incredible job of it, but it's just an unfair position to be placed in, unrealistic for a human being, running a massive institution, a country. Well, in this case it wasn't a country, but it was a massive institution locally, and I always felt that we were

honor bound to try to do what we needed to do for teachers and for the kids. Bill Anton, when he got into the nineties, he went in, he was there for a couple of years, and he decided that he just had had enough of politics and everything else at his age, and he decided to resign or retire.In a nutshell, I was initially a temporary appointment and then a regular appointment as superintendent in '92, and my experience of having been downtown under Halversen and having a chance to observe how it all works held me in reasonably good stead. I at least knew where the skeletons were, which is essential, and it gave me some thoughts about how I really wanted to approach the district as an organization, changes I wanted to make. I for one did not believe in local districts. Local districts to me had no basis in fact. The basis in fact for me was, here is Manual Arts High School. Who are the feeder, primary feeder middle schools? Okay, there are three of those and there they are, Virgil [Junior High School] or whomever further south, [John] Muir [Junior High School] or whomever fed it, and then there were the elementaries that fed that, and to me, to the community that represented the educational focus, the educational system that affected the kids that lived in that community. What happened in elementary educationally? What happened in middle, and what happened in high school? That was the more logical, to me, organization than a random collection of high schools and middle schools and elementaries and you were treated as a group. That's apropos of what?So I reorganized them into complexes, and I took away--I didn't have region superintendents. I had directors of the various complexes, and a complex was the high school, the feeder middle, feeder elementaries, and I always felt that--I loved it one day when a high school physics teacher saw me somewhere--I knew him--and he came over and he said, "Sid, I want to tell you something." "Yeah." He said, "You know the complexes?" I said, "Um-hmm." "You're getting heat on that." I said, "Yeah, because the old traditional system was to really be organized by high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, as if each one didn't exist together. It was separate, and I never could fathom that." He said, "I went down to an elementary school in my complex to watch a second-grade teacher teach a science lesson." He said, "I came out of there bowing to her." He said, "First, I don't know how you handle kids." They were little ones, and with all the stuff they get into and the talking and the fidgeting. And he said, "And she just did an incredible job, Sid." He said, "I'm going to help her though with some of the science lessons so that I can give her some simple

experiments she might want to try."In other words, he was looking at it now not as 9-12 but as K-12. He's looking at the elementary saying, "How can I help her?" And she was saying, because she spoke at one of the meetings, and she was saying, "I'm so appreciative of people who are the experts in a given subject, who are willing to come and help us and show us some of the things that we can use with the elementary, and they in turn get to see the kinds of teaching processes and methods we need to use to get into the head of a seven-, eight-, nine-year-old," and I thought it was a good thing. But when I retired [snaps fingers], gone the next year, right back to the traditional high school, middle school, elementary. Remember what I said way, way back, that this district is like a person? It waits, and it says, "How long can you tread water? You're out of here and I'm back to what I used to do, the way I used to do it." And sure enough, that's exactly what happened.We went through some trying times when I was superintendent from '92 to '97. We went through a depression, no, a recession, not as deep as this one by any means, but it was deep. We were going bankrupt, and I think I mentioned I had to take money away from the teachers and everybody in order to preserve the solvency of the district. It was not popular. I had to do some things I didn't want to do. They had Willie [Lewis] Brown [Jr.] as the mediator. Did I mention this before?

Stevenson

No.

Thompson

Okay. Well, let me deal with that a little bit, because it was traumatic and it was huge. We were in a near-bankrupt state in '93, '94, during that period of time, '95, all through there. Henry Jones was the chief financial officer [CFO], African American, wonderful, wonderful, we're close friends still, one of the people with deep moral values in terms of what's right and what's wrong. I could turn my back on Henry and not worry about the financial end of the system. There would not be games played, not with Henry, because he was so talented. And by the way, he's a study. He came in this district from Texas, Galveston, as a custodian. He was a custodian going to school at night, and if he worked at night he had to go to school during the day. He did whatever he had to do. But he came out, he was an accountant. He worked his way up from accountant to chief financial officer for a six-to-seven-billion-dollar

operation, a little black kid out of Galveston, like that.To me, you think of how you were born and the things you had going for you. Henry was--he had a big family. They were poor. They didn't know where the next meal was coming from. Well, we were fairly large and we didn't know either. But he was coming out of Galveston, Texas, and he was the one who came in and said, "Sid, I don't know how to tell you, but we're near bankrupt." So I said, "Oh, my god." So I found out that five, six years back in the Leonard Britton time they had granted pay raises that could not be met by the existing budget, and when you grant a pay raise it's forever. Each percent was about, at that time, about nineteen to twenty million dollars for a 1 percent increase of pay, because it wasn't just teachers, it was all employees. That's the way it was negotiated. They granted an 8 percent salary increase, eight times twenty, that's 160 million for that, the next year another 8 [percent], another 160 [million], and then the third one, they called it "eight, eight, and wait," the third one was to be seeing how much money we had.Well, after two years we were near bankrupt. We would have been bankrupt. It's was nights of going through and Henry saying, "Sid, I've gone through it and gone through it. We need to take back 10 percent." My God. How do you take 10 percent away from teachers? Helen Bernstein was this union leader, volatile but bright, and I had a lot of respect for Helen Bernstein, had a mouth like a sailor; she was terrible. But she would shut that door--she came in, slammed the door, "Sid, blank, blank, blank, blank," and she went on and on. "What is this mess? We can't have this? You can't be taking money back." And I said, "Helen, I've always been straight up with you," because we had been in LEARN together, remember? LEARN began under Bill Anton, and I pushed it and pushed it, because I really believed in it. I believed in a collaborative approach to running schools, and we had the principals and the chapter chairs or the elected faculty rep, it didn't have to be the chapter chair from the union, who went away for a weekend and talked about how they were going to handle budget and how they were going to handle different things. Half the schools had been through that process when I finished. That went nowhere the next--after I was replaced. Absolutely no where--it was killed.But Helen and I, because then she was killed, literally, she was killed in a traffic thing where she crossed a street, Olympic [Boulevard] up here towards Westwood. She crossed the street in the residential area, but as you know, Olympic is a huge street. It's about four lanes across, five lanes. She tried to run across and she couldn't see and it was

late at night. She got hit and she was killed, and that was a huge loss. When she shut that door and she started going at me then I said, "Helen, we've always been about kids. I can't let this place bankrupt. I'm getting calls from two senators, U.S., a call from the governor's office. They don't want to take over L.A. Unified, because that's what happens. You go bankrupt and the state takes it over. They said, 'Take over L.A.?' They couldn't handle Compton, right, and Richmond and Oakland, much less L.A."So I told her, I said, "Look. You bring your budget specialists. You can hire them if you wish, but bring them in, and I want you to go through our books, take time and comb through and tell me there's money." They took a month, massive budget, and she came in, "It's not there." She said, "Sid, we're going to be bankrupt." She said, "We've got to do something." She said, "My teachers will strike." I said, "I know." And I said, "And all these politicals are calling me up because they're afraid there's going to be a strike, and we can't have one." We had had Rodney King. We had a bad strike in the seventies which was terrible. It took years to get over that one, and then we had the Rodney King thing later, much later, and then we're going to on top of that do this at a time of a recession? It would have been a mess.So she came in one day and shut the door and she says, "I can get Willie Brown." Well, Willie was speaker of the [California] Assembly. She said, "My people will listen to Willie, but you guys have to be willing to listen to him, too. He's the mediator." So we agreed. The board president was Leticia Quesada. She agreed, and we began a series of meetings with Willie Brown. There was Helen, me, three of her deputies, there was Leticia, six, and then Willie had an African American--I'm blanking on her name, always dressed with an African garb, beautiful dress and so on. She was an old timer, she'd been around a long time, and he wanted her there because he thought she could keep an eye on Helen, because Helen could get volatile, so she was to calm Helen down. Her training was psychology, this African American lady. I'm blanking on her name, I can't believe that.Anyway, we began flying up to Sacramento. We met with him in his offices up there after the Assembly met. He would fly down here to the California State Building downtown and we would meet there. I remember one rainy night when we were meeting, and my wife called me that we had a potential flood in the backyard. I lived up in the hills right above here. And he said, "Where do you live?" I said, "Up the hill." "Man, you don't belong up there." That was Willie. "You're supposed to be in the flatlands." I said, "Yeah, and I'd be flooded." He said, "That's true."

The man, I just had a ton of respect, because it was also because he could grasp things. You would talk to Willie and he would ingest it and then give it back to you better than you gave it to him. It was an incredible display of his knowledge. He had that reticulosis, the eye problem, and he always read print that big. He'd have to hold it like this. But once he heard something, he retained it, and we went through all of that.And then one night we'd been doing this for about three months, meeting with him, the board president, me, the union president and her staff, and one night we had come in and we were having coffee. We never had food or anything. We just met like about five-thirty, six o'clock. I remember he said, "Sid, I need to talk to you." "Okay, Willie." So I got up and we went out, and as we went out he put an arm around me and he said, "Bro--," and I thought, oh, god, here it comes. When he starts that Bro business, I'm in trouble. He said, "I've got to tell you, you don't have anything to give up. No money." I nodded. He said, "So you know what it is." I said, "Power." He said, "Yeah." He said, "You're going to have to give up some things that you guys have held sacred for administrators. For example, whenever you want to assign a coordinator to coordinate a reading program, to coordinate early childhood, to coordinate [other things]--."I'm not talking about administrative positions. I'm talking about positions typically at the school level, and the principals did that because--and it was a good reason. They did it because they were training some of their people to move up, and they wanted them to have experiences. We had to give it up, and the union now would vote at the school for who would be in that position. Department chairs, physics, math, language, English, that would be voted, not appointed. Well, needless to say the administrators were really upset. I had to call them all to a meeting in East L.A., and that was not an easy meeting. It was me alone on the stage. I took responsibility for all of it, and I said, "What was my choice?" And I said, "A strike?" "Yeah, let them strike!" I said, "No, no. This city has been through a major riot, and not only one. You look back in its history, it's more than that." I said, "And now we have a recession, and now we're going to do something to the teachers, and we're just going to do it to them and tell them, 'What are you going to do about it?' And you're saying to go ahead and strike." I said, "No. No. I'm not going to do that to the kids. I'm not going to do that to this city." I said, "We're going to give up some power, because it isn't the end of the world. It's just that that's the way we've been doing it."And I know people--I had a student in a doctoral program that I was

teaching in recently, the ELP [English Language Program], who was a former--was, no, no, wait. He was a principal, a senior principal, elementary principal, and I told this story. Well, it turns out that he was a principal at that time, and he said, "I never really fully understood why you had to do that." He said, "But when you start talking about--," because I didn't go into details on the stage about which senators; I didn't do that. But in this class I said, "There were senators, U.S. senators, Congress people, the state superintendent of instruction, the governor's office--he didn't call, but his office--the board, California State Board of Education," I said, "who were saying, 'We can't let the city slip into this.'" I said, "And what would you have done?" And he said, "I never really fully appreciated it." He said, "And I'm thinking now if that had been me, oh, my god." I said, "Yeah, because we took 10 from principals. I gave up 14 (as a superintendent) percent," I said, "so everybody was burned in this, but we had to give up something."And that was probably the most telling thing for me except for one other one. As I look back at my time as a superintendent, I had moments of feeling up here and times of feeling down here. There that was, which was never a good thing. It was an ugly thing, but had to be done, and I made up my mind to do it. And Helen was still alive at that point. It was about a year later that she was killed. But I went, had occasion to check at a school that was primarily African American, a middle school, central Westside location, and that school--I was looking at scores, and I had some people check it because I wasn't sure what I was looking at. But after we checked it all out, what I was looking at was kids who had come in, and it was a six, seven, eight middle school, six, seven, eight, and the kids who had come in in the sixth grade who had scores in mathematics, for example, arithmetic, of A, grades of A from fourth grade, third grade, and they are now in the eighth grade--and there were a number of these kids that never had algebra. And I remember going, "Wait a minute. Why would you not put them in an algebra class? Was it just you overlooked them? What is it?" And I'll never forget a principal who looks like us, who said to me, "You know how it is with these kids. Kids don't want to do nothing. These kids--."And I went through the roof. I was so angry that I went back downtown and I did something I didn't really consider. I said to several board members, "You know what? We ought to mandate algebra. I don't care if they fail. They're failing arithmetic some of them." I said, "Maybe if we give it to them and give them a chance at it they might make it." Well, first of all, we didn't have teachers to

do that. There was a whole lot of things. And I knew I was angry, and at least I'd learned over the years wait a day, wait two days, wait three days. I took a week and then I said, "Okay, but at least what I can do is to encourage schools to give kids placement in algebra, and certainly there should be no excuse for A's and B grades and not having an opportunity. That doesn't make any sense."So then we decided to start a program, formal district program so that we were going to push that, the algebra piece. We were going to push for not just taking--there were options for science courses at the high school level that were watered-down science courses. And I said, "These kids will never know what the competition's going to be at the university and college level unless they face some of that competition now. They've got to see quality courses." And we pushed for that. We called it the Call to Action, and I did it formally before the board, that we wanted to use this as an emphasis to the schools. Now, we had not gone into the No Child Left Behind yet. That came later, but which forced not that focus but a focus on assessment. "We're going to test these kids and test them till they're crazy, and that'll be the measure of whether they're educated or not." Well, good God. That is so ridiculous it's almost childish.But we did push for what I just said, for this Call to Action. That was significant in my time as superintendent, and we really pushed it. We finally passed a bond measure, which I attribute to the President of the Board, Mark Slavkin, a beautiful job. He just argued and argued, and we won. And remember, at that time it was a two-thirds vote for those bond measures. It was later in the Romer time that it was changed to a simple majority, and that made all the difference, and now they're building schools all over the place. And I think it's a good thing, by the way, because they're talking about small schools instead of huge schools.But one of the most significant things that happened to me as a superintendent came--I was getting pressures under LEARN. They had a LEARN board made up of business leaders and all. It was a big group, twenty-five people, which is too big for anything of that type. But I noticed the mayor, not Tom Bradley--the mayor at that point was [Richard J.] Riordan, and there was a push, the beginnings of a push for outside control of school systems. [Richard J.] Daley in Chicago had taken over the Chicago schools. But Chicago is a different place to L.A., politically and every other kind of way, because I found out the mayor of Chicago has a lot of power with the state legislature, which is not true in California, and could get money out of the legislature just by dint of being the mayor.

Stevenson

That's very different.

Thompson

Very different. So this mayor decides that maybe this is something he ought to look into, and I noticed pressures beginning of turning the budgets over to schools. I said, "Before you turn the budgets over to schools, you've got to train these people. They've never done that, and you're talking about a budget of hundreds of thousands, millions in some cases, of dollars. I don't have any problem with that, but we've got to do it the right way. You can't dump this on a principal that you're saying should be out there checking instruction and this and this, and then start dumping all this administrative stuff on him or her and not give them any training." "Well, you've got to make it happen." I said, "Well, I'll make it happen on my watch, but the proper way. I want the training."I talked to Henry, my chief financial officer. He said, "Sid, even in a directed situation like we have now, where we're directing, they screw up something fierce." He said, "And the reason is they, one, don't have time, or, two, many of our administrators are not at all trained financially. They're trained in education, this and that and all that, but they're not trained as budget directors of their schools, which they should be if that's what they're going to do." And I said, "Henry, you're right. What we want to do then is to start a training process for them to do that, but we aren't turning the budget over until that happens."

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[This portion of the text has been sealed at the request of the interviewee.]

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Thompson

I wouldn't have retired. I would have gone on and tried to push more LEARN schools. But I could see the handwriting on the wall, and what they did, they used Belmont High School to get rid of Ruben Zacarias. That's all that was. They knew they could build a school there. That's a bunch of nonsense. I went to school on that site at old Belmont, and it's on that same oil field, so that's

nonsense.It was used, and that's the way money works. It was used by [Eli] Broad and these people as a way to get rid of the superintendent. They then got rid of the chief legal officer, Rich Mason, Richard Mason. They got rid of the chief business officer, Dave Cook, and they got rid of--and, oh, Henry knew what was coming on the chief financial officer, and he retired right after me. So I had a view from a superintendent position of how the political structure works. One of the board members called me, one of the good board members, who worked hard for kids and so on, he called me and he said, "Sid--." Now, this is after I had left. And he said, "Sid, I am not going to be on the board anymore." And I said, "What are you, retiring?" He said, "No. I'm going to get beaten." I said, "Why? What are you saying? You're incumbent. Good God, you've been there for six, seven years." He said, "They just spent $200,000 on my opponent." He said, "Two hundred thousand dollars in an election of a school-board member wins it. I can't match it." He was right.And what did I learn in that? It was an ugly--that like it or not, these things can be bought. With enough money they can be bought. And they got rid of all the people I mentioned. They bought out a couple of board members and brought in some others. I don't mind about the ones--some of the ones that came in were good people. I have no problem with that. It is the process that worries me, that the control was not by the people, the control was by those who could manipulate the people, by signs and little things on TV and radio and so on, with money, with enough money, and they did it. And it just--it was a lesson.But you know, I wasn't bitter about it in a sense, because I said, "You know, it is the way it is." Had I been in Chicago's politics, I would have accepted it right at the gate, because that's the way it works there. But it didn't work here, by the way, because the mayor, while they were getting all these votes, couldn't get the four together that would have put him in business, so it didn't work anyway. But it changed the whole face of the board and who was running it and all the rest of it. I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing. It's just that, again, it is that happens when it's controlled by serious money being used to manipulate the way that they perceive it ought to be, and these people, "Because I'm a billionaire, I know best." Well, you're a heck of a good businessman, that's a given. But anything beyond that, no, not necessarily. But they don't see it that way. This ego goes and pretty soon they begin to believe that they are the one to dictate what it ought to be, and that's the part of politics that's a problem.So it didn't end in an ugly way,

really. I retired. I could retire. I was in my late sixties, and so that wasn't all bad, and I went to work then out at UCLA, and that's when I came here, and I've loved every minute I've been here. I like the stuff I've been doing, and have I learned by being here at UCLA and looking back, is there anything? Oh, god, have I ever. I would like to think that I would be a far different superintendent if I were to go back, if I were young enough to go back now.In fact, one of the things I discovered--I was saying that to somebody. It's just too bad that when you're in the job, there isn't a way to let you take a month to step out and look back at it. You're always buried in it, and you react, react, react, you know, bankruptcy, this, that, lawsuits, board, political whatevers, the mayor and everything else that happens until you're inundated and you lose--it's hard to keep your focus on where you wanted to be, which was kids, because most people don't see that job as about kids. They do as this, on the big, but they really see it as, what are you doing with the adults in this process? And it's about teachers, and it's about custodians, and it's about police officers and bus drivers. You know, that district runs more buses. They ran as many buses--we were running as many buses as MTA at the height of all that busing of kids, voluntary-integration stuff. We had 2300 buses. We chartered some of them and released some and did all kinds of things, but we had a bunch of buses running kids.So it's massive, and that's another thing. Because it is so massive, there are a lot of people that put their fingers in that pie because it is massive, and there's a lot of money involved, and you always have to be very careful about that. And I've seen across the nation where superintendents have gotten in trouble because they didn't watch that, and they might have had somebody they had their back to who they shouldn't have had their back to.

1.7. Session 7 (May 26, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm completing an interview with Dr. Sid Thompson on Tuesday, May 26, 2009. I wanted to find out if you wanted to say more about your tenure as superintendent of schools.

Thompson

Well, there were several things that come to mind when we speak of that period of time. I think I may have mentioned this, but one of the ones that just stands out to me is somehow when people take those kinds of positions with all of the political implications and the needs to work with boards of education as well as in the case of [unclear] a huge staff, and above all, mountains of children who need a lot of help. I look back on that period of time and I just always have felt a little dissatisfied, frankly, dissatisfied that I look back at some of the problems that existed when we came in, and we never seem to quite address them and get them fixed, probably that's the word. We don't seem to get them fixed.I've reflected many times about why that is, and I think a lot of it has to do with our inability to fight the culture, to change the culture. It's deeply embedded, and the culture isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is the way business is done, and when the business being done is not necessarily successful, then there is a need for finding ways to make it change. It's a lot easier said than done, because I've noticed over many, many years living in this state, for example, that increasingly people in authority, whether they're legislators, superintendents, or whatever they are, there are processes of behavior that are expected, one, that's good and bad, and number two, over the years I've noticed the, to me, growing lack of leadership, including me and everybody else. I'm not letting anybody off the hook in this.I'm looking at this current condition of the State of California, and it's been a while getting here. It didn't just happen in the last couple of years. But the fact that there is little to no leadership, beginning at the top, and Arnold Schwarzenegger notwithstanding, I think he came in, he wanted to do a lot of things, but there was an inability to do it, and the inability is locked up in the processes by which we bring about change. People talk about one of the key things as a superintendent that you face in that job is always budget and money, and especially in a huge district that has increasingly become poor. It is not a middle-class-to-up district any longer. It has a few enclaves that are that way, but in the main it's a poor district, and therefore money becomes a very important driving element. It says how many teachers you can hire, how much you can pay them to attract them, all those kinds of things. And in looking back, I've realized over the years that we've kind of lost touch with the kinds of leadership that are necessary to cause change.I think I sat in on one of the key periods in time when there was such a thing. I had Willie Brown, and so did the union, to mediate our dispute on how to handle a major budget crisis.

I don't know who you'd call on today to do that very thing. I don't know if there is anyone that has that kind of respect. And he did not always do what his Democratic Party wanted him to do, and he certainly didn't do what the Republican Party always wanted him to do, but he worked between those to make things happen, and I think that's a signal to the ways that a lot of us should be working. We should be working between issues, within cultures, pulling out the best and causing those changes. But what typically happens is that it's a political process, and it acquiesces, and when you have four board members required before an action is taken, you almost inevitably deal with the politics of that board and who put them in office and who they answer to, because that's going to determine in many ways how they're going to react to things.So when we talk about change, when we talk about the things we ought to be doing, there are things that do happen. I see some signs coming out of L.A. Unified that are good signs. They're talking about small schools. I love that. But for the kinds of changes that I am talking about, the need to change the entire culture--let's stay with that word--around our teachers, how we attract them, who they are, and inevitably in this country how we pay them--but we're in a time where everybody wants everything, but they don't want to pay for anything, and I don't know how you bring those to some kind of a solution. But you're not going to get something in this society for nothing. It isn't always money, but you have to be willing to say, this is important enough that we need to make sure it works, and we have not done that. We're laying off teachers now with all the mess that's going on with the money in Sacramento. It's a tragedy.But that's not all. It's all the other things that are happening, and invariably, to me, they attack those most ill equipped to deal with that kind of a process, a problem, our poor, particularly our minority poor. They don't have a lot of ways, places to go. All they know is more of the same. "I'm nothing, there's nothing for me, therefore I will find ways for me to survive," and they do that. As a superintendent I look back and I think the one that hurts the most is that teacher thing. We have not been able to respond to getting good teachers in front of kids most in need, and quite frankly, that hurts and it always has and always will.I did a lot of things I thought were good, and there were things that I thought were not what I really, looking back, would have wanted to do. Sometimes we acted out of necessity, because there was no other way to get this, much less this, and sometimes you have to do that. You have to accept this to begin a process hopefully to

address that. But a lot of times you get that, and that's as much as you're going to get, and that part really does hurt in terms of a career as you look back to the kinds of things you would like to have done. I did meet some wonderful people in that job, and I'm ever grateful for that, and some of those board members, presidents of the board were just wonderful people, and I thank them for that relationship that we had to see that, because otherwise you get very bitter and you start thinking everybody is bad and nobody wants any--all that stuff. And that's not true. I'm even convinced that the worst teacher wants those kids to learn, the worst teacher, unless he or she is sick, and I didn't meet too many of that.So that's the one thing that stands out in that process. We battled to try to raise the standards for the youngsters, that they would seek to attain those standards in order to become more viable as potential college students and then later on to go on and be something of some success in the greater society. But in looking at these youngsters, I've really come to understand in my own thinking that this world of education has to deal, like it or not, has to deal with schools, with the powers that enhance those schools, state, it's there, the district, it's there, and it's an entity designed originally to assist in all this, but it's the schools and the school districts, those entities that support it, meaning the state and local government, and then it's two other elements that I mentioned before that are just absolutely critical, and that's parents and community and the students themselves. And until we get in these kids that they are not born dumb, they are not born unable to learn, they're born with certain God-given mental capacities, but the fact is we're not getting to those capacities, and they've got to figure how to do that.And we've got to get to the parents, even if the parent was a complete washout in education. That's not the issue. The issue is, what do you want for your child, and what do you insist has to happen for your child? And in insisting, those parents will go after schools as they should. Those parents, though, will also go after students as they should, and themselves in terms of what this kid needs that sends him or her off in the morning with a viable realization of what they're about when they go to school. And that's a whole area--we just haven't dealt with it. We talk it, but we don't get in to do what we really need to do to cause those kinds of change.That's something that I've used in my doctoral classes here and I've used with these Principal Leadership Institute [PLI] cohort members, the ones that are going to be administrators, that that is needed. You cannot play this

game of, "We welcome our parents," when you don't mean it or you don't do it. It means you've got to work. You've got to work at doing that, and like it or not, sometimes you're going to have to go to those homes and those places where these people go, to get in their heads. But a lot of us find ways to avoid that. We can't avoid it anymore. If we really mean that we want to address the issues of the education of those lowest on that totem pole, we're going to have to really work to get them involved, and that goes for every facet of this country, from the president on down. You talk, talk, talk.I don't mean Obama now. He's saying a lot of things. I'm not sure I agree with all that's being said there or with the Secretary of Education. I have some real questions about commitment to public education, and I don't think we're going to address the ills of our kids, our poor kids, if we don't address public education. These kids are not accepted into private this and that and all the rest. They come in there talking non-standard English and looking scuffy, and nobody wants them. It's reality. So who's dealing with them? Well, the public schools. Okay, but if we're saying that the public schools really aren't up to snuff, then what are you saying? These kids are forever doomed to be in a system that will fail and will fail them? Can't work like that. We can't mean that. And you know Alva, that's still tied to the whole world of poverty, too, which we haven't solved and I'm not sure is a priority for many people either. Again, I hear a lot of talk, but I wonder. Those are just some thoughts.

Stevenson

Okay. Last week the May nineteenth election we saw Propositions 1A through E fail, went down. What is the message there from voters, California citizens? Just in general, what is the message, and in particular, because so many of those Propositions have to do with monies that would go into education.

Thompson

Boy, we've sure been reflecting on that one. I put it in two words, "Fed up." The public is fed up, but they ought to be fed up with themselves, too, because they're part of the problem, a big part of the problem. Again, we want everything, but we don't want to pay for it. Well, okay. You want to fix the infrastructure, you've got bad roads, you have bad bridges. I'm going to digress for just one second. I told you early on in these discussions the one thing I really fear and we all fear is a major quake. I think of something like

that and I think, what is this state going to do if it's really hit by something of that magnitude? It's scary.But people are fed up with--they want leadership. I think they want the right things. They just need somebody to tell them, "Here's what you have to do." But every time somebody comes up with a message that, "We need to do this and this, and we've got to pay for it," you've got the Republicans on one side saying, "You can't spend a dime to do it. Fix it by taking money from your bureaucracy," and the other side, Democrats saying, "You can't do it without that." Well, somewhere in between there must be a middle ground. I think back to the likes of Pat Brown and people like that. They thought ahead. What we have going on right now is people think about today, me. They don't even think about their own grandchildren. What is going to be there for these youngsters who are now coming up? I have great-grandkids at this height and age, and I think of them and I think, what's there for them besides being saddled with some monstrous bill that we took as a loan to get around having to pay now for what's really needed.So I think what happened in 1A through E, a lot of that was people were fed up. And nobody--I don't recall, Alva, anyone saying, "This is what this is about. Look. Here's the problem. Now, we're going to take these measures to meet it, and here's how we're going to meet it," and really take the time to explain it. That was jammed on the public, and the public reacted with, "Oh, no, you don't. You've been doing that to me all along and nuts to you and all of your camels you rode in on. I don't want to be on that. I'm not getting in that." And they voted it down. They weren't anti-education. Most of those people are not. They're just anti- being fed a line of nonsense about how this can be fixed. I looked for leadership from the governor, I didn't see it. I looked for leadership coming out of the legislature, both the Assembly side and the Senate side. I didn't see it. It fell flat on its face because people are tired of it. But again, none of them blamed themselves either, and they should have, because they're part of the problem.But until we--I'm beginning to think that this state is going to have to go to rock bottom and swim with the alligators and then maybe people will start to say, "How can we fix this?" You noticed in that 1A through 1E, nothing in there addressed the two-third vote of the legislature for the budget. Is that a major issue? I think so. We're one of three states in the whole union that does that, and we all gripe about it, and it didn't even appear. If some things like that had been in there, people might have said, this is real. What they saw was another dodge, finagle with it, borrow,

move, shell game and we'll get through this, but we won't solve it for next year or the year after. And I think again in two words, people are fed up. They're tired of it. And they're not sure what the answer is, they just know this isn't the answer.

Stevenson

Very true, very true. Something else I wanted to ask you. Given the similar history of struggle between blacks and Latinos, during your career how did black and Latino administrators, teachers work together on issues related to both groups over the years that you were in the district?

Thompson

Well, as in any large collection of anything, I always like to say if you have a large collection of saints, probably 20 to 25 percent aren't, probably 20 percent are, and then falling in between are varying degrees of yes and no. In a large group like dealing with the Hispanic population here, both teacher and student and administrator, all of that, not both but all of that, and in dealing with the African American side, one, I have been very pleasantly surprised that there has been more cooperation than not, even though they had separate organizations. For example, there's the Council of Black Administrators [COBA], and there's the Council of Mexican American Administrators, and they operate as two separate groups supporting their particular group of people.But I have found that they tended to work together many, many, many times, and as a superintendent I was very concerned that we had the balance, including the Asian population, because that's a growing population on the Eastside. In San Gabriel and that area you have a lot of Vietnamese and all kinds of folks, Hmong. You've got everything. Well, that to me, if we're inclusive we've got to think of all of those, and that means that we need to think of them in terms of inclusion just as the president did today with putting Sonia Sotomayor up for Supreme Court. He says we have to look at the total population and then say is this representative of that population? And I don't care what the right wing and other, the Left and whatever say, that is important. They have to be included. And I found more times than not they realized that they were in the same canoe with the leak, and they'd better help bail. So I was pleasantly surprised by that. I thought there may be some problems.Now, we had individuals that did play that. We had blacks who were

saying, "The browns are coming in and they're taking over all of our houses and they're kicking us out of our community." Well, yes, but a whole lot of blacks chose to also move east. They made that decision. Whether it was for the fact that there were a lot of Hispanics now in their community or they just felt, we want to get into the greater whatever, middle-class America, and we're moving out to Covina, well, however they did it, they did it. So in a nutshell, I was surprised pleasantly by the, in the main, cooperation that existed between them and seeing the greater good that comes to all kids, not just the ones that are of one color or another. They're different, and so there's always human beings being human beings. There's always a problem because it's different, both ways, but more towards the good than not. It was a pleasant surprise.

Stevenson

Maybe you can talk a little bit about--you retired when you left L.A. Unified as superintendent, you retired and what you did after that.

Thompson

UCLA?

Stevenson

Yes. Yes, and on several fronts I see from your resume that you were an instructor of doctoral candidates, coordinator of a joint UCLA-USC program--

Thompson

Yes, we're still doing that.

Stevenson

Right. The Center X program with LAUSD, Principals Leadership Program and also senior fellow. If you could talk about the range of your assignments and experiences here at UCLA--

Thompson

Most of those assignments dealt with--I always think of myself after retiring from L.A. Unified as being in three primary areas, all of them UCLA-associated. That's the association I chose, and they chose me. Number one was when I first began, was the Educational Leadership Program, which is a doctoral

program, and that was a formal teaching assignment with another professor, and we co-taught that class, a beginning class of what the world of administration and educational leadership looked like. That was major and in my mind remained as one of the major things I did, and I did that all the way up till I retired just a year ago. That was very fulfilling, and it was fulfilling because we had in those students generally younger, and anybody under sixty is young for me, generally younger students that gave me hope. They were bright, and in the main they are. They're selected. They come with a host of experiences that they've had as teacher or whatever, all the in-between jobs they had as a coordinator, as a department chairperson, whatever it was.These students give you hope because they were bright, they were willing to listen to the kinds of things we do as a matter of course and why they have heard us, or why they haven't helped us as much as they should have, all of those things, but I also liked hearing them talk about their commitment, and many of these young people have strong commitments for change. They get very frustrated with the leadership they find sometimes in their own schools, and they get frustrated because they see a leader who's like this, tunnel. "I come in at seven-thirty, I leave at four-thirty, I attend the football games, I attend the basketball games, I go to the assemblies, I do all of the administratorial things," but they don't seem to find the burning desire to go in and do what I was complaining about myself, about our ability to cause change. And the hope for change to me will come in their leadership types, and then I'll go to the others, because they're very much related. Their leadership types were generally a lot of principals, so they were at a certain level, not all, because we had people in educational industries who were in that program who wanted a doctorate, sometimes for their own good, sometimes because they wanted to know more about educational leadership. So the leadership program was at this level.The Principal Leadership Institute, that's the second of the major two that I've been in, the Principal Leadership Institute takes people in the field that are at this level. They are in the main teachers who want to be administrators, so they haven't gone that other step. Now, some of them are going to leapfrog and do--they get their credential, they get their master's. They're going to leapfrog and want to go right into the doctoral program. I've had a few do that, a few try but didn't make it, didn't get accepted. It's tough competition to get in there, probably fifty, sixty, seventy applicants, more like seventy, and they might select twenty-six or

twenty-eight, so there's a lot of cutting there, and it isn't a given that you will be doing it if you just decide to do it.And that one, the Principal Leadership one, which is a notch lower because they're teachers--I say lower in terms of hierarchy of leadership--the teachers that are in that program, same thing. Many of these people sit and they're very concerned about what they see, both in terms of the administration and not just the school but of the district, with, "How can they think like this and here we see that?" But also they tend to be, the ones that are, to me, really critically looking at society, they're critical of their peers, and they will come in and say, "I see people that don't want to do a blessed thing. 'Leave me alone. I'll teach my 150 kids a day in high school and that's it.' Yeah, but don't you--'I'm not interested in change.'" And there are people like that.Fortunately, some of these folks don't give up, and I love it when I'm working with them and they'll say to me, "Guess what happened?" "What?" "The biggest opponent of this proposal that we're trying to bring before the faculty just came up and said this, and, 'I don't want to get into fights over this. I want to do this really. I fuss about what you're doing, because I'd like to see it done a different way,' that sort of thing," so they're learning. And this person I'm talking to, the student, says to me, "My God, I couldn't believe it. He or she actually came around." And I'm saying, "Yeah, because you made sense maybe? Because you were persistent," and above all they're not people given to failure, so there's a good side to the job of teaching that can sometimes help. So again, two different levels, but both of them I have found an overwhelming concern, not every one of them, some play the game, but generally speaking an overwhelming concern to deal with the issues of poverty and the issues of non-involvement for African American, Hispanic youngsters in particular.By the way, I noticed when I left the district there was a growing recognition in the Asian community that, "You know, we always believe that all of our kids want to work cooperatively and they study hard, and we've got some kids that aren't making it, that are off--they've picked up the American style, rap." That doesn't mean bad, but sometimes it takes over, and while you think every Asian kid sits down and is just academic as the devil, not true. We've got a lot of kids that aren't, and they're a problem for themselves, for their family, for the community. So there's a real need with this. Of the three things I've done I gave you two. One was the leadership here, the principal leadership here with the level of where the people are in the educational hierarchy, but all of them striving to ultimately do the same

thing, because they want to be leaders and they want to cause change, and they recognize it's not going to happen easily. It's a struggle.I told them I looked at the same problems fifty years ago when I came in the district. I was a student in the district, and I haven't seen a real ability to cause change, and yet some funny things happened on the way to the forum. There are changes that are occurring. All of a sudden L.A. Unified is talking about going to small schools. Formal, this is not a--they took a stand saying they're going to build small schools, and they are. And I happen to think there's few things we can do more significantly than that. Stop this 5,000-student high school. It's immoral, purely immoral. It does not belong. It doesn't help kids; kills them. So there's some good things that come out of that.Now, it happens that the third thing, the doctoral, the PLI, and then the third thing is the collaborative that I do with USC with a fellow by the name of Bob Baker, who is a true researcher. I'm not. I'm an operating type of person. I was an operating superintendent. In other words, I'm more interested in the delivery end, but Bob Baker is more interested in the research end, and we're a pretty good team that way. He's SC, I'm UCLA, and just to refresh you, back when I was superintendent I was looking at this monster longitudinal database that we were developing for kids, 700,000 kids and we were developing a data system that followed them from here to here. And I was thinking what an incredible instrument, and so I came out here and talked to a former superintendent, Harry Handler, who worked with Jim Taylor and all those guys, and also I then was introduced to Bob Baker at SC, and I said, "I want this to become a research tool for the major universities, to support the kinds of things we need for our kids."I always remember going before the board talking about smaller class size and all that stuff, and we had no basis in fact that it would do this, this, or that. We didn't know. We were shooting from the hip. We were talking empirically, just by doing it many times we felt. But I remember I was up there one day talking about bilingual education, and I was saying to myself, "I feel all alone up here." So where are the major institutions? Where do they stand on this? And that's the kind of thing I'm still not there. There are people out here that don't want to get involved. Some have the kinds of feelings that lead to the non-decisions that you referenced at the beginning of this. But the two deans, SC and UCLA, went with it and said, "Okay, you want to do it? We'll form an MOU with you," and that's part of the reason I came out here.So what do we have? We have this desire to make systematic change, but we also with that third thing, the

collaborative, we are hoping that the longitudinal data available regarding these kids begins to show us why it is that youngsters do very well in Pre-K, K-1-2. We know in 3-4 they begin to go into parts of the curriculum that are more esoteric, that are the kinds of things that demand reasoning that's a little different level to, "This is yellow, this is green," that sort of thing, so we know it is different. But our kids begin to show the elements of failure at that level, and then there's, of course, the big jump at adolescence from 10-11 to 12-13. We found, for example, that--I'm digressing, but it sticks in my mind--we found that the seventh graders that failed seventh-grade math and seventh-grade English, they are going to drop out almost 85 to 88 percent. They don't recover from that. Well, that should have real significance.But what are we doing with middle schools? Nothing. We've been fighting the fight up here in high school and down here at elementary. In here, to me, is where the real--I began as a middle-school teacher, junior-high teacher, so it sort of sticks with me. That's where they are falling flat on their face, and I don't see the attention educationally being directed at that. So this third thing, the collaborative, to me is incredibly important, but I worry. I worry because I'm seventy-eight, Bob Baker is eighty-one, and unless we find ways to get younger professors at both institutions involved in this, it won't continue, which is another problem. We get things, they look good, they look promising, but they die out. Other people come along and say, "I don't have time for that."

Stevenson

Could you talk a little bit about how to attract young people not just into teaching but into educational administration, and particularly young people of color? How do we attract them, since you mentioned this problem of getting more people into the upward stream?

Thompson

It's a tough one, because a lot of times--if you had asked me at age fifteen, sixteen, seventeen about going into education, "Heck no. I'm going to sea." Remember, I told you, so ships, that was my thing. I even told one of my teachers who thought I had some capacity that I was going to be a tugboat captain. I was ten years old. "Tug?" She says, "You ought to be a lawyer. You're not going to be a tugboat captain." Well, you know, there are things we

think when we're little and romantically and all other kinds of ways, and I had to get that out of my system, which I did, luckily. But how do we--I think we do it by example.I have had students I had in mathematics who came back to me later, some of them. We had a reunion. These were kids that were with me in 1957. The reunion was 2004. We met as a group, husbands, wives, whatever. I'm looking at grandparents, and I was their teacher, and I had always told them about teachers that inspired me, some of whom didn't make a lot of sense as to why they were inspirational. Little Miss Sweet, who was sixty-five years old, taught me trigonometry, that big, never married, typical, if you want to use the term, teacher-spinster, incredible teacher, tough as nails, did not believe in collective nothing. She stood up and taught us trigonometry, and I remembered later on of all the teachers I respected, she was one of three, who didn't do anything but the traditional method, but it's respect. And if our kids can see teachers who draw from them respect--I always maintain you're not going to get all of them to go into teaching. You wouldn't want them to. But I think as they see successful people, that draws them to the profession.Problem we have is that they see the profession as one that's second class, and some of these kids that have talent say, "I've got more talent than being paid what a teacher is paid." They respect the job. They don't respect the standard of living it causes, and that is a major drawback to some of the things we try to do to entice them. That's why I believe we need to make it competitive. Like it or not, it needs to be competitive to get the kind of talent that we ought to be having in front of these kids. So I don't see it happening by--there have been a couple of magnet schools that have been formed that are teaching academies, and they've had some success. They've had some of those kids go on to be teachers. But I'm not sure you can really do it by specific calling and saying, "We want you to be a teacher. Therefore, this is what a teacher--."First of all, a teacher needs the foundation, and that means a legitimate education. You need to know your subject field, really know it. Don't play with it, you've got to know it. All of those things need to happen, and then maybe as people see success they will also join in. I can't do it any better than that. That's about what it takes, because there are so many other things that draw kids away that get the spotlight. We all know law and all those things. We've got more lawyers than we know what to do with, but nevertheless, how do you argue it when people see success?

Stevenson

Would you also say that maybe calls for introducing not just education but other fields such as science, medicine, introducing particularly our young children of color at younger ages--

Thompson

Yes. Those are worlds they have no concept of. They do go to doctors, but they don't see research science, for example. Not only do we need to introduce it earlier, but we need to get a position of worth to those things. These kids see worth as Kobe Bryant, whatever football player is the big gun at this particular time, baseball, in other words athletics, and then there's the whole world of entertainment, and, of course, this place is rife with it, L.A., Hollywood and all. And it's awfully hard to tell kids a half of 1 percent might even be able to make a living doing that, much less being at the top of that, to make the millions that they try to see for themselves. How many Kobe Bryants are there in the whole world? I mean, it's that kind of a thing.But we somehow need to get some worth, and that means in recognition. I used to really--I mentioned this to you, I think, earlier. I just couldn't stand going to NAACP [Image] Awards things, and the only thing I saw up there were athletes and movie actors, and these kids are sitting there looking at this and all taken with it. These institutions need to give worth to trades. I would love to see them get some black electrician up there that's been eminently successful. He's making probably a pretty darn good living. Why isn't that--the recognition is this, and why? Because they get money from that. I'm just being a little bit cynical, but not really, because it's true. I've seen time after time where the recognition has gone to those kinds of people and not to the ones that kids really need to know are in the world and where there's more likelihood that they have a shot at that than just being some superstar jock or super actor or actress.

Stevenson

Maybe you could tell me something about your involvement with groups, organizations outside the educational sphere, in the community or in other arenas.

Thompson

They've all tended to be educationally involved. I do a lot of work with institutions I came out of, Cal State L.A., U.S. [United States] Merchant Marine Academy. I've been on committees associated with those institutions. I've been on committees associated with scholarship programs for those institutions. I obviously also told you about my love of sailing, and so I'm on that Los Angeles sail-training institute down in San Pedro. They have three ships that they use to take poor kids generally out on, so they see the ocean. I'll never forget the kid who said to me once, "Is that an island?" "Yes." "What's the name of it?" "Anacapa Island." "You mean that that's it?" I said, "That's an island. An island sits like this." Basic. How old was he? Fifteen. It shows how neglected he's been. So anyway, that's why I'm in that program.They all have an educational bent to most of them. I'm trying to think. I've done other things, but in the main they've been education, and I have restricted the committees mainly because I've been so darn involved with the institutions I've worked in that I tend to throw myself into them, and I don't have a lot of time to spend. I'm on the board of directors of my condominium, for example. Sometimes I'm very jealous of the time it takes, but it's very different and it's totally unrelated to education or anything else. But I live there and I figure, oh, what the heck, go in and help them. So I do, and I take care of maintenance for them for the maintenance company, to be sure they do their job and all that. But I don't get too far afield from education, only because of time, already committed to most of my time.You know, I'm supposed to be working thirteen hours here a week, sixteen hours a week, but I'm actually working more like twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Well, I don't say that with any, "God, I'm working myself to death." I don't mean that. I enjoy it, and I don't measure it in time, so if it takes more time that's okay with me. More money, more pay [unclear] Uncle Sam [takes it], so okay.

Stevenson

In regards to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, as compared with when you went into the academy and just that profession as a career, are there more African Americans today?

Thompson

Yes. They're still having trouble getting African Americans into the service academies, although they all are pretty well represented with African

Americans, Hispanics, and so on. That's a good question. Part of the problem is because of a good thing. The competition for these kids has changed. Now the Ivy Leagues go after these candidates, and a kid that has the ability to go to Annapolis, West Point, or King's Point, or one of these points, and the Air Force Academy, the ones that can do that also can have options to go to Harvard or Yale or Princeton and elsewhere. That's a good thing.In terms of careers I would mention, because I happened to be talking to my brother--I have a Navy brother who's retired, and he just walked the marathon yesterday. He's eighty years old and he finished. So I went down to see him last night. We had dinner, he and his wife and me, and we were talking about this. He's a retired naval officer. He was a captain in the Navy, which is like a colonel. He was mentioning that he went to a reunion of African American naval officers. Now, at one time he and I were it [the only black officers] for the West Coast. There were no other black naval officers. That was 1952, '53, around in there. The Commander of the Atlantic Fleet is a black admiral. He heard something that just caused him to pause. He said, "Sid, I don't believe it, only because it would be so few." But he says, "You remember the Mersk Alabam," with the merchant skipper that was taken prisoner, and remember they shot a couple of Ethiopian pirates and got him, freed him and all that? He hears--and I'm saying it for a point--he hears that the commander of the Far East something [Naval] command, that would be the admiral in charge of all of the naval fleets in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, that that's a black female admiral. I said, "What?"

Stevenson

Oh, really.

Thompson

Oh, my god. I almost did a back flip. I said, "You've got to be kidding." He said, "Sid, I don't know whether to believe it or not, but that's the word I have." And he said, "Now, she may have been a flyer." She may have been handling jets. There are.

Stevenson

Oh, there are, yes.

Thompson

Oh, yes. Not many, but they're out there, and that would be one way to command a fleet command is to have been a pilot, because a lot of the fleet is made up of aircraft carriers. Well, all that to say, my god, Alva, that is an incredible change. Good God. It's like we were talking about L.A. and the restricted beaches, the restricted covenants on houses, the area that my parents could not go on Wilshire Boulevard to go to a nightclub. They were expected to go down on Central [Avenue], and they would not accept them anywhere else. The place I tried to go to go swimming on [as Boy Scouts] Vermont Avenue, believe it, Vermont of all places, and we were refused. We had to go to a movie, my brother and I, because we were black. Those things have changed, and they've changed not with a lot of fanfare sometimes. They just happen. Well, that's all good.And I think that I was black and I was a superintendent. They had Brewer, even though they got rid of him, he was a black superintendent. There are changes that have happened in our lifetime, and I think that is also another thing that tells our kids these things are to be done. I'll give you another example. Oh, god, this age thing kills me. What is his name? The new head of NASA [Charles Bolden, Jr.] is a black astronaut. I've met him a number of times, flat-out brilliant, short, a short guy, kind of strongly built, but flat brilliant. This man has commanded four different missions in space, so he's no political this or that. He's a bright guy, Annapolis graduate. Well, that's what kids have to see. They've got to see that and say, "Wait. What? Who is he?" Not to mention Obama, the ultimate. These things will all help us. They all help, not directly, they're very indirect. They don't help us enough if we don't take advantage of them in terms of how we use them to make our kids understand that these things can happen now, but that doesn't mean it's easier. It just means it can happen from a variety of circumstances sometimes.But it also involved being ready for those circumstances, which Obama, I think, was really there for. He was ready for that. Whether he can do anything with the mess he's inherited is another question, just like the state. But I think that those kinds of things, Alva, are very subtle changes for our kids. The thing that worries me in that is when we look at black, African American youngsters, okay, and we start at the top of that, the ones most successful, most can-do, parents pushing them, parents driving education, when you come down from that there reaches a point where the kids at the bottom--again, it's that totem pole I referenced--the kids at the bottom of that totem pole aren't even in a position to know the kinds of things I just

referenced to you, so it has no meaning until they can know it.And I'm not sure that the schools do that. I'm not sure that their teachers, who are all hell-bent for leather on kids reading well--I'm not arguing they shouldn't read well. Of course. But that isn't all. Does anyone take the time to say, "By the way, look at this young fellow here or this man here, look at this young lady, look at this woman. They look like you, too, by the way." See, we have to lead them to that. That's teaching. Teaching isn't just a subject. Teaching is about the whole society. There are plenty of good examples out there now, still not enough, but sure a lot more than before, and nobody's made a big deal of this guy taking over NASA. Everybody's saying, "He's qualified."

Stevenson

It was almost, in terms of the news coverage it was almost--

Thompson

Yes, just happened. Yes. And, in fact, I had to search for somebody to say he's African American. He's kind of light-skinned and it's hard to see in some of the pictures, but he is African American, and they said it in the "Times" on the last article, and I just said to myself, man, this is absolutely incredible. I mean, back a few years ago you and I would have said, "What? No way." Well, guess what?

Stevenson

Okay. I have another question for you, reflecting back on your years as superintendent and being aware of what that encompasses. What is going to be the greatest challenge that Ramon Cortines is going to face in terms of current challenges in the school district?

Thompson

Yes. He's in it now. He is facing the possibility of bankruptcy. He's facing that. We faced it in the nineties, but not to this degree, and I had Willie [Brown] that came down. We had Willie, it wasn't me. It was a union, and he negotiated and caused it to work, but then you had a working legislature. What Cortines has is it's very lonely, because he doesn't have a working legislature. All he has is no money. He's seventy-three or -four years old, and it's a tribute to him. He gets in at six-thirty in the morning and he doesn't get

home till whenever he gets home. I know those hours, that's what it takes. But as a much older man, those things become very difficult. He's in good shape, he's very trim, but he's, I think, beginning to show the seeds of, "Oh, my god, how can you fix this?"And then he becomes a dirty guy. The union wants--"In spite of all that, you've got to give us more money." You can't, you can't. Where's he going to get it from? I think the greatest issue for him right now is the budget, is the money, with a district that needs a lot of help and doesn't have resources for doing it. I'll give you an example. The small schools, they have formally stated as a board policy that they're going to go after small schools and build small schools, which is great. There's no mention of training to run small schools, and is that necessary? Oh, yes, because if not what they will do, the administrators, knowing nothing else will run a small school like he ran, or she, a big school. That's not what the point is. The point to going small is a kind of personal kinds of collaboration and involvement you can get, and if you don't cause that to happen in your school, you haven't provided the kids with a thing. They're still a number, only a smaller number.So Cortines is facing the issue of things he wants to do but can't, and when you have no money that's what you face. You have all sorts of thoughts about what could happen, and I think he's committed to the fact that teachers ought to get more pay, just as I was, and we ended up taking money from them. In this case they didn't take money from them, they just get rid of a whole of them, and that's the kind of stuff which means that the kids will be sitting in a classroom--see, people don't understand. When they cut, not cut, well, they cut the budget and then they say that, "We are going to increase class size by three." Well, yes, but what happens--in a high school there are classes, for example, that have labs. There are classes that have equipment of some type, and there are restrictions on how many, or advanced-placement classes that have twelve to thirteen. When that happens, somebody over here is picking up the other eight or nine kids that aren't there, and that means that some of these people are running classes of forty.In some of the early-day classes in algebra, I ran classes of fifty-two. I had to move chairs in. I taught classes of fifty kids. So it isn't just two or three in every class. It bubbles much bigger in other classes like English classes, and that shouldn't be happening, but it's going to. And Cortines, I think there is no other issue he faces more troublesome I'm sure for him than this money issue, because so much hinges on it. Services, he's cutting services like crazy. After-school this and that, all

the things that motivate kids are going to go by the tubes, art, music, drama. They'll find ways that the people will just be going down to bare bones, and that I'm sure for him--he's an educator, he's been around a long time--I know it's got to be incredibly troublesome for him. But he's not going to be able to do a thing with that till they solve this budget issue for the schools, and I don't see in his lifetime--I don't mean his natural lifetime but his professional lifetime--I don't see that becoming significantly different in the next three years. It's going to be bad news for two, three more years. The full effect of this is just beginning.Remember about this now-ism that we have? Nobody's talking about next year, which everybody who has a brain in their head is saying it can't be better, probably worse. We can't borrow money out of New York, and that's what we counted on. People don't really appreciate that, but you always had a cash-flow problem. When you begin a school year, '09, well, let's go to the other one, '08 to '09. You have a year. The money comes in from Sacramento to support salaries and all the things you do. But that money, there's a shortfall between roughly April and June, when you don't get the money that it takes to run the district. Then you go and borrow. In the case of L.A. Unified, they would go and borrow maybe 400 million dollars to get them through, and then pay it back on the next year's budget. What if it isn't there?And guess what? Generally you go to the money markets in New York to get that kind of money. You can't go too many places. You go to New York. New York is saying, "Oh, yeah, we'll lend it to you," and the interest rate is up here. "You'll be paying us back on that half what you get." Well, you can't do that either, because you cannot operate a school district deficit. You can do this, because there's a provable way that you can show the money is coming in in the next budget. In this environment you can't prove that, and everybody's going to say, "So where's it coming from?" And, "If you want the money from us, you're going to pay for it big time." Well, Cortines is in the middle of that right now, and he has no solution for it. Nobody talks about it, but I'm not sure how they're getting through between here and June. It's going to prove very interesting.

Stevenson

Okay. My last question is, is there anything additional you'd like to add to this interview before we close it?

Thompson

I've had a lot of fun, fun in the sense of being able to dig in and go back and look at some things that I hadn't even thought of until the question is raised, or something that accompanies the question causing another question, and you go, wait a minute. Yes, I remember. So I've had an interesting time with that for me personally, being able to think back on what happened and what didn't happen. So, no, I think I have reached back and pulled out--I tried not to hold anything back. I've tried to tell you exactly what I felt. I am sure only that in the next couple of days something will come to mind maybe, and I may call you and say, "Alva, you know something? I just remembered something." And I may do that if it's okay, but no, I'm fine.

Stevenson

Okay. All right. Well, thank you very much for this interview, Dr. Thompson.

Thompson

Oh, my pleasure, my pleasure.[End of interview]

Date: