A TEI Project

Interview of Owen Knox

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (October 28, 2008)

Stevenson

> Good morning. I'm conducting an interview with Dr. Owen Knox on Tuesday, October 28, 2008. First I'd like to ask you when and where you were born.

Knox

> I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and my birthday is October fourth, 1918, and this October fourth I became ninety years old.

Stevenson

> Congratulations.

Knox

> Thank you.

Stevenson

> Okay, if you could tell me something about your parents and your grandparents, even your great-grandparents, your family history?

Knox

For what I know, first, my father was a day worker in a brick-making factory, and he had very little formal education. My mother was a housekeeper. She never worked, and she had an eighth-grade education. Her name is Hattie Knox. I called her Sha, because I'm from Louisiana, and Sha is Creole for dear.

Stevenson

And that's S?

Knox

Cherie, Cher, Cherie, Sha. We lived on Railroad Avenue, named Railroad Avenue because the railroad--the train passed twice a day in front of our house. And my maternal grandparents, I'm named after one. His name was Owen Williams, and he was a laborer. I haven't been able to find out in what field he was a laborer. And my paternal grandparents, I only knew one, and it was my father's mother. Her name was Sarah Knox. From what it appears to me I can remember, because my father died when I was seven years old, so I didn't get a chance to learn a lot about his parents, and I've been recently doing some research, and I'm getting some names to follow, but I can't find anything about them, so I'm working on that now.

Knox

My grandfather on my mother's side was of mixed race. It's obvious that one of his parents was a slave and the other one was free, and his mix, in fact, I'm not sure of what the other one was, because being the son of a slave, it's obvious that he had some mixed blood because he was very fair, and so was my grandmother. My grandmother Sarah worked for LSU, Louisiana State University, in the cafeteria department, very strong, both strong-willed as well as strong in body, because one of the reasons we did well during the depression was that she was able to bring home food from the cafeteria to us. So she would walk about two and a half miles with the food, and we would run to meet her, because we knew that meant we had dinner that night.

Knox

My father, his name is Samuel [Knox], who worked in the brickyard, died when I was seven, as a result of what I recall, I guess you would call black-lung disease now, because in the brickyard they made the bricks out of clay, but

the dust from the clay sometimes would be two or three inches deep on the floor where he worked, and as a result he died at an early age. My family lived together. My grandfather, Owen, bought two lots and built a home on one of the lots, and when my parents married they took his other smaller lot and built a house on it. So we were considered pretty well off, because we owned our home. Nobody else in that community owned a home.

Stevenson

So that was unusual then.

Knox

Yes. By the way, you can stop me anytime, because I just like to reminisce about my own family.

Stevenson

Keep going.

Knox

But when they bought this home he built, my father and his friends, which was what happened then. Everybody'd come in the neighborhood and all the friends and build your house for you. And they built the house, what was called a shotgun house. But my father didn't like the idea that a shotgun house was one where they said if you shot a bullet through the front door, it would go straight through all the doors and come out the back door. Well, my father was innovative, so what he did was put one door as you entered. You entered on one side, but when you left that room to go to the second room, you had to go to the other side of the house, and so he alternated them like that, so his was not a typical shotgun house. Anyway, but the fact is that we owned a home, and the lot was a long lot, so that behind the home we grew our food, or lots of our food anyway.

Knox

But I remember my childhood as being very happy, because I have four siblings. I had two sisters and two brothers older; I was the youngest. They're all deceased now. But my mother and my father also, with their friends, they left one Baptist church and built a church, and by building a church it meant I was in church a lot. So we had all kinds of concerts and poetry readings and

things, and because I was their child I was involved in all of that. But there were two great experiences there. One was the Christian experience, but the other one was the camaraderie. I had lots of friends and lots of buddies, and we grew up together, and then I went to a segregated school, obviously, in Baton Rouge. And that was one thing--like I say, stop me anytime you want, because I just love to reminisce.

Stevenson

Okay. Well, I do have a question. How was it that your parents built the church? How did that come about, them building the church?

Knox

Well, they were members of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, one of the largest Black churches in Baton Rouge, and my--I don't know what exactly Kin is, but he had something to do with my grandfather, because my grandfather Owen lived in his house. His name was Headley, H-e-a-d-l-e-y, and I notice when I'm doing the research that my grandfather lived with the Headleys, and one of the Headleys was a preacher. And Pet Headley, the preacher, was also a member of Mount Zion. He's also a member of my family in some way I'm not able to discern yet, and the two preachers of the Mount Zion Baptist Church had a difference. As that difference grew, each one had his own constituency, and Pet Headley's constituency included my family. So when they could no longer get along in that church they left and decided to start a church of their own. So they built a church called the Progressive Baptist Church and it still stands, and when I go if I go to Baton Rouge I go over there, because on the plaque on the outside, my father's and mother's names appear. But they built this church and at least one time I think I remember going to a prayer meeting at five o'clock in the morning, Sunday school at nine, regular church at eleven, and BYPU, Baptist Young People's Union, at four-thirty or five, and then back at church at seven again, so there were days when I spent the whole day in church.

Knox

But what it did for me, though--well, first, let me tell you, my mother in that church became I guess you'd call her an evangelist, but that has connotations I don't like. But what she was--we couldn't have a speaker full-time, a preacher

full-time, so our preacher would come to us maybe two times a month and go to some other place, another church, just to make a living, because we certainly couldn't pay him a lot, and when he wasn't there, my mother, who was one of the leaders in the church--my father was a little reticent. He wouldn't take the leadership. He did the work, but he wouldn't come take the leadership. But my mother took the leadership, and she preached [unclear]. And I can remember sitting there in the front row, in one of those chairs in the front row, listening to my mother, and it still enthralls me, a lady who had only an eighth-grade education, she could move the crowd as she wished. Her words and the way she expressed them could move the crowd.

Knox

Then I noticed something, that she would get the daily paper, and the family of us in the evening, especially in winter when we could only use the fireplace in one room, we couldn't use it to have everybody in every room, and that was the only heat we had, except in the kitchen, so after supper she would read the newspaper to us, and she would make those characters in the newspaper come alive. If it was a crime scene or whatever it was, whatever the news was, she made it come alive, and I remember just being entranced by the fact that she could do that. I also remember when I was in high school she would come to me and tell me, "Now, look. I'm going to give this speech. I want you to read it and I want you to be sure I say the right words and that I have the right grammar."

Knox

And then one other thing I need to say about this. I went to our school, our local elementary school, started the first grade, because they didn't have a kindergarten, so it was my first day to go to school. Now, the first day of school you had to provide your own books and you had to provide your own--so I had a Big Chief tablet, a pencil, a McGuffey Reader, and an arithmetic book. The McGuffey Reader and the arithmetic book were handed down from my older brothers. I got my little package and went to school. My older brothers were still in the elementary school, so I felt safe, I went with them. We went to school and I can remember being just afraid. I didn't know what school was, and I didn't know how you acted, what you do. But I'd been running around with some other kids a year older than I was, my age and a

year and two years older than I was, and they had gone to school the year before I did. So I went into this classroom, Miss Helen Black's classroom, first grade, and I took my seat at my desk. The desks were in rows throughout the classroom, and some of my buddies that I ran with in the streets, who had failed previously the first grade, sat behind me. Well, they were used to school, and I was scared. So I sat there staring at Miss Black, and she was writing. She was looking up and she was writing, and she was looking up and she was writing, and then Oscar and Pickett behind me were laughing, talking. They were comfortable in school. But I was staring straight ahead, and I noticed Miss Black was frowning as I guess she was taking names in the register or something, or counting students, but she was frowning.

Knox

And I noticed she was frowning because they were making noise behind me. I saw her reach down in the desk, and when she came up she had a razor strap. It was just used to sharpen the razors, a razor strap. And she came--it was folded up in her hand, and she started down the aisle to my left, and I watched her and I thought about it. They're making that noise, they're going to get it. And she got out of my peripheral vision, and suddenly the strap landed on my shoulder, the first time and again the second time. And I remember that I was completely confused. I didn't know what to do. How do you react to being struck with that strap? What do you do? I didn't know what to do but just automatically, I guess, I picked up that five-cent Big Chief tablet, my McGuffey Reader, and my arithmetic book, and my pencil, and I stood up and started out. And Miss Black told me, "Owen, come back and take your seat. Get back in here." And I could hear her yelling at me as I went out the door, went down the hall, went down the steps to the street and walked the two blocks to my house, and I never cried. I couldn't cry. I didn't know what to do. So I just walked in the house with my stuff, and my mother asked me, "What are you doing here? What are you doing home from school?"

Knox

So I told her, and she told me, "You sit there." And she put on a jacket and she left. When she came back, she never told me what she did or said, but when she got back home she said, "You're not going back to school." I said, "But what about--?" She said, "You're going to stay right here." But the deal was,

when my brothers got up, got dressed, I did. When we had breakfast I had breakfast with them. They went to school. My mother told me, "Get the reader out," and she would make me read to her, and she knew enough to do that little arithmetic, and so for that year and part of the next year I was home taught. Strangely enough, my sister became a teacher after she went to Southern University and got a degree. She became a teacher at that same school, and she became a very good friend to Miss Black.

Stevenson

And the name of the school?

Knox

Reddy Street School, R-e-d-d-y, Reddy Street Elementary School. And I can remember Miss Black coming to visit my house and never, ever did I stay home when she came. When she walked in and greeted my sisters and the family, I walked out the back door, down the walkway, and went with my--and I never was able to speak to that lady in my whole life until I left Louisiana. But that was my family. It was a happy family, five children, and so the children took over, and my mother, because she spoke, she went all over. She became president of the Baptist Home Mission Society, and then there was a state, a Louisiana Baptist Conference or Convention they called it, I believe, and she became an officer in that.

Knox

I remember once--and she spoke all over, and later on I went to some of those meetings where she was speaking, and when I was able to drive, I used to drive her to some of those meetings, and I sat and heard her make all her speeches. Now, the son of the preacher of Mount Zion that they cut off from, became a friend of my brother Willie [Knox], who's next to me, three years older, and they became very good friends. His son's name was Gardner [Calvin] Taylor, G-a-r-d-n-e-r Taylor, and I believe to the day--I'm certain he's the greatest preacher I have ever heard, not the greatest Black preacher, but the greatest preacher I have ever heard. I think he's the greatest preacher the United States ever produced, and he's still alive now. Anyway, that was my early family, a happy family, but it took me a long time to understand what I

wanted to do with my life, and realized it was because of what happened to me and what family I had and the church that I was in when I was a child.

Stevenson

Okay. Let me ask you this. Can you tell me about the area where you grew up? It was a rural area?

Knox

No, no. I was on Railroad Avenue. There was a station, a train station on the east of us and a train station on the west of us, in this little city of about 200,000, of about 60,000 or 70,000 then, but the capital of Louisiana. So we were kind of in the--we lived in both--South Baton Rouge, where most of the Black people lived, was just south of us, and where most of the white people lived was north of us. The fact is, our backyard--I told you we had a big backyard and we grew produce and corn and stuff back there. But on the next street north of us was South Boulevard, and that was a street where the white people lived. Now, the back of their backyard and our backyard came together, so we knew them well over the back fence. We knew them well. The fact is, I played with their children, and you could do that, Black and white playing together, until, well, we used to say until you're ten years old, but it was really, I realize now, until puberty, and at that time you had to be segregated.

Stevenson

Right. Exactly.

Knox

But what was great about that for me, it seemed to me some of the worst things that happened to me were some of the best things that happened to me, because when I went to high school, McKinley High School, when I went to McKinley High School, all Black, and we were in this neighborhood where white and Black are kind of mixed together, when the white kids got out--at three o'clock both schools let out. And here we are walking, all Black and all white, and some of us had to pass each other to get home, and fairly regularly it resulted in some kind of a confrontation. I can remember sometimes somebody, some white kid would say, "Nigger," and that would start a pretty

good fight. But anyway, when the school district realized that we were having these conflicts, they decided to keep the Black children in till three-thirty. That gave the white children time to get out. And we were all so mad about that. And now when I look back upon it, we had no curriculum for three to three-thirty. We just had Black teachers and Black kids in a classroom, so the teachers became creative. They taught Black history.

Stevenson

Interesting.

Knox

But they also taught poetry and art. And I can remember a couple of my buddies--I ran around with what somebody would call a gang today. We didn't call ourselves a gang then, but it was my buddies, we ran around together. But I can remember one of them was "Doom." Everybody had a name. Nobody was called by his regular name.

Stevenson

Right, a nickname.

Knox

I mentioned Pickett earlier. Pickett's real name was George Douse, but we called him Pickett because he was skinny. And this fellow named Doom, and one kid was named Easter, and Dirty Red. Dirty Red's real name was Oscar Alcorn, but Dirty Red, and anyway this group of kids. But I mention all of that to mention Doom. Doom was in this class with me when we went to three to three-thirty, and I was amazed at what he would do. He was creative. He would just stand up and start talking, and he would build a whole world in his imagination and explain it to us so that we enjoyed it. I don't even know anybody today that can just stand up with no preparation and just start talking and talking to you and take you on some imaginary journey with him, and so I just waited for three o'clock to come so Doom could talk.

Knox

Or some of the kids made up poetry, and we had in that class, we had a kid named Alexander, who was mentally retarded. If we had had a facility, he would have been in some special-ed class. But we didn't have, so he was in

class with us, and he used to recite poetry. He could recite poetry. He couldn't learn arithmetic and stuff, but he could recite poetry. Now, he amazes me. Then we made fun of him. But one day I can remember, and this happened more than one time, he stood when the bell rang and we were all coming in the class, and this was about fifth grade, I guess, he stood at the door as we walked in, and every person he made up a rhyme with his name. In fact, I remember today, what mine was. I mean, nothing elegant, but Alexander, when I walked up coming into the door, he looked out and said, "Owen Knox caught a fox, put it into an old wooden box." Now it amazes me. Then I laughed at it. But anyway, I came up with a group of kids in the streets, some of which caused me to get in, well, fairly serious trouble.

Knox

But I learned a lot. In fact, one of my best lessons I learned was one day when we went to what's called the Community Store, which was the biggest store in our community then, called Community Store, and we decided one person would buy something, and the rest of us would steal something in that store. I don't know if this is what you should be putting here, but anyway it happened, so I'll tell it to you. So I picked up a little bottle of cherries and put it in my pocket, and other kids got whatever they got, and we all went up. There were, what, five of us, and certainly I know we had to be suspicious, one person bought something when five of us come in the store. So we walked out. Now, we had a plan. If anybody follows us, we're going to run in five different directions, and he'll have to decide which one--and it happened. We got about half a block away from the store, and one fellow looked back and said, "Here comes Mr. Man," whatever his name was, and he was the store manager. So we all broke and ran, and he followed me [laughs] with this bottle of cherries. I threw them over in somebody's yard and I kept running.

Knox

But the strange thing, when I looked up, I'm running away from this fellow who's following me, and I looked up and I'm in the block where my house is. I can't run past my house with this white man chasing me, so I stopped and he caught me. He took me back to the Community Store, and he made me sit on a big--it wasn't a crate, it was a sack of onions. He made me sit on the sack of onions, and he sent somebody to tell my mother. We lived about three blocks

away. And I sat there until my mother arrived, and here she is a leader in the community, and she came in and she walked in and she walked to me. She didn't say anything to me. She looked at me; I could tell she was displeased. She just looked at me, and she asked the man, "What did he do?" And he said, "He stole--." By that time they'd found the cherries. "He stole some cherries." She said, "Well, how much is it?" So the fellow said, "No, we're not going to charge you anything. We got the cherries back. We just wanted you to know he was in here," and he mentioned the others, "with Dirty Red and Pickett, and we wanted you to know it." So she said, "Does he owe you anything?" He said, "No." She said, "Can I take him now?" He said, "Yeah." So she said, "Come," and she started walking, and I walked behind her, and we walked those two blocks. By that time, everybody in the neighborhood is out at their front fence or front door, looking as we walked down there.

Knox

She took me home and we walked in the door. She pulled up a chair--her chair was a rocking chair, and she pulled up a chair for me, and she sat facing me. And she was about to lecture, I guess. She was about to say something to me, and she couldn't. She started crying. And I started crying, and she cried, and we hugged and cried, and then when we finished that she said, "You know what you have to do." I didn't know what I had to do. So she took me to the front door. By that time, Dirty Red and Pickett and Doom and all those kids were across the street on the corner, and she said, "You know what you have to do." And I didn't know what I had to do, so I stood there a minute and then I guess a light came on. I realized what I had to do. So I walked over to the guys and I said, "I'm not going to be able to play with you anymore." And they said, "Oh, yeah?" and they made fun of me, and fact is, they named me "Cherry." "Okay, Cherry," and they laughed and they made fun of me, but I turned around and went back home, and it saved my life, I believe, because Doom was killed when he was in the eleventh grade. The charge was that he was stealing chickens in a white man's backyard. Actually, he had been going with their daughter. They had been in secret trysts back there. Dirty Red may still be in prison if he's still alive, but he became--he had a drug habit. In fact, this Christmas all of them--I won't say all of them, but very few of them lived to be twenty-five years old. But anyway, that's another--as I said, some of the worst things in my life turned out to be some of the best things for me. So I

know a little about gangs, about trouble. I know a whole lot about religion and education.

Stevenson

Okay, well, I've got some follow-up questions for you. Your neighborhood when you were coming up. You've said a little bit about what you did for recreation and that sort of thing. Can you tell me about some of the other families that you grew up with?

Knox

Yes, I knew all of them. I lived at 835 Railroad Avenue, and that was kind of on a rise, on a hill. In fact, it was called Swartz Hill is what it was called, S-w-a-r-t-z, Swartz Hill, and we had the last house on the top of the hill, not a big hill, but just an incline. The next one was a grocery store, Baddocks Grocery Store, by the white fellow who lived in the neighborhood. But going down that hill for the full block, there were shotgun houses all the way down, and all the people were renters, and occasionally the white owner would come and tell them, "You didn't pay your rent," and take all the stuff and put it out on the sidewalk. I call it sidewalk now. We called it banquett then, that's kind of Creole or French. But he'd put all that stuff out on the banquett. It would be b-a-n-q-u-e-t-t if anybody would spell it. We never did. But that walkway, sidewalk was the only thing that was paved. The street was gravel with the railroad track in the middle.

Knox

But all the way down there were families, many of them about the same general age as my family, with children about the same age as my family, and they all were laborers. Almost all of them were laborers, and there were a couple of very elderly ladies, spinsters we called them, never married. Two lived in the homes down a bit. Since that was the only paved place, one of my Christmas presents was--one of them--sometimes the only Christmas presents was a pair of skates. So I'd get these skates and go down on this banquett and then skate all the way down to the next street. And I remember one of those elderly ladies--both of them sat out on that porch. We'd wave at them, "Hi, Miss such-and-such." As we went by, they'd wave. But one of them was not a pleasant lady. She was not pleasant at all, and the fact is, what she did to keep

us from skating in front of her house, she took sand and put it on the banquette in front of her house, so your skates couldn't roll over that sand.

Knox

But the next lady next to that one--I wish I call their names--she was a pleasant lady, and every now and then she'd get some lemonade and come out and give it to the kids and get some cookies and give them to the kids, and it took me a long time, and I think maybe my mother explained it to me, but I couldn't understand how these two ladies were so different. One is mean and the other is so happy and pleasant. And I guess it was my mother--I can't remember how it came about, this knowledge, but one had been--the lady who was the kind lady had been what they called a fast lady. She wasn't a prostitute, but she partied a lot, and she had many men, male friends and never married. The other one had been a spinster all her life, never had a husband, a boyfriend, or any, and my mother explained to me, or somebody, I don't know where I came to this knowledge, but this lady didn't do anything with her life, and so her life became what it is, and the other lady, even though you might not approve of what she did, she felt that she had lived her life, so she was happy with her life, and the other was displeased. It taught me a lesson, and it kind of says, you've got a life, you've got to live it. You've got to do something with it, so that when you cannot do anything more at all, you can look back and say, "What a good time I had." You have some memories, or you have something, or you have some triumphs, or you did something worthwhile you're pleased with, and so you're pleased with yourself for having done it, and that's part of my philosophy. Do something worthwhile, enjoy something, enjoy what you do.

Stevenson

Okay. Let me ask another follow-up. Now, you mentioned about Black and white kids being able to play up until puberty, and then you mentioned this young Black man that was killed and that he was having a--

Knox

Yes, a white girlfriend.

Stevenson

Right. You came up during what we call the Jim Crow period.

Knox

Oh, yes.

Stevenson

How serious was that? I mean, were there other incidents involving, let's say, mixing of the races, which was, of course, taboo?

Knox

Well, there was very little mixing of races at all. When I came up, it was the serious segregation. The fact is, it's had a serious effect upon me. I'll tell you, one time my mother--well, to go downtown nobody had money to catch the streetcar, so we walked about two and a half, three miles. We'd walk downtown and back. One time my mother was taking me down to the shopping downtown, and right before you get there was a huge square, a block square. In the middle of that square was the courthouse, and some white kids and police hung around out there. Now, there was a path diagonally across the square. My mother took me by the hand, and we walked all the way this way and all the way that way, and we did not take that diagonal path, so I asked her why. She said, "Well, you don't want to get in trouble with those people," and she was talking about the white kids or white adults really. And I guess that's one of the things.

Knox

The other one was occasionally our recreation included getting on the trolley, and the trolley would go all the way around and round and come back to where you were, and you had to go to the back of the trolley. It had this thing that you perhaps know all about now, because of what happened in Alabama, but they would take this marker which says "colored and white" and put it wherever they wanted to. If they moved it to the back, that meant all the Black people had to stay back there whether they had a seat or not, and there could be seats for white people and you couldn't have those, you'd just have to stand back there. But occasionally for recreation we would get a nickel and go get on a trolley. But I remember having to sit in the back, and only one time that I was on the trolley with my father, and I could tell he was not pleased

until we got off and he muttered something, but I don't think he cursed ever. I never heard him curse, but I could tell that he was very displeased because we had to sit in a little cramped area when there were other seats in the front. But for transportation, that's the only thing I remember about.

Knox

Except another traumatic thing happened to me with race, well, several things, but this one. Huey [Pierce] Long [Jr.] was shot, and his body was being viewed in the rotunda of the capitol. I don't know what you know about Huey Long, but what I know about Huey Long is Huey Long was trying to serve the poor people. But who are the poor people in Louisiana? Most of them are Black. He didn't make a discrimination there, so when free books came for the poor kids going to school in Louisiana, Black kids got free books. That was the first time we'd had free books. And so when he improved the roads, many of those roads were roads that Black people used, so we considered him a friend. Now, he never--he wasn't for any liberation or anything for Black people, but what he did affected and improved the life of Black people.

Knox

And so a lot of Black people got in the line to view him in the rotunda, and one Black woman was in the line, and I wasn't even in the line. I don't know what I was doing, I was so young. But I was standing outside the line just looking at all that long line of people several blocks long, and this Black woman stepped out of the line. There were these police officers guarding the line all the way, and this police officer with his jack boots on, kicked this Black woman in the behind and told her, "Get back in line." She looked at him and so did every Black person in the group. If looks could have killed him, he'd have been dead that moment, and she got back in the line, and that was one of my traumatic--the fact that I remember that little incident now, and I was a small kid.

Knox

But the worst one I saw and lived with with the school. Our school, an all-Black school, was the only all-Black high school in Baton Rouge, so all of the Black kids came to the one school, McKinley High, and the superintendent of schools would occasionally come out to our school. When he did, he, my Black principal, and the people I guess he brought with him would sit on the stage,

and all school stopped. The whole school came out, filled up the auditorium and sang for him, and he sat on the stage and smoked a cigar, and I sat there hating him just as much as I could hate anybody, because here we were, we had to do what he said to do, and he had no respect for us at all. But anyway, that and the other thing I mentioned about the students and the from three to three-thirty experience.

Knox

By the way, we could sing. I exulted in hearing that huge crowd of Black people singing a spiritual. But anyway, the last one I'll tell you about is when I graduated from Leland College, which is a Black college, a Black Baptist college--I couldn't afford to go to Southern. Leland is only five miles from Southern, but Southern cost too much for me to go. And my mother had sent my oldest sister and there was no way she was going to be able to afford to send another, because my father had died when I was seven. Anyway, when I went to Leland, all-Black college, I learned stuff that I didn't know anything, had no idea about. I took a course in chemistry, and this Black college was so important to me, because my chemistry teacher, Dr. Owen, and I could sit on the steps of his cottage after school and just talk about chemistry, and talk about world science and all. He had been all over the world, and it was wonderful that I could have that relationship with my professors, which I could never have had at any larger or any white university.

Knox

By the way, there's one person you might know who was also a student there at Leland College, and his name was Eddie, Edward G. Robinson. Eddie G., coach of Grambling [College], and he was the tailback of our school. Anyway, when I graduated from there, I was looking for a job, and there wasn't one. There was nothing in chemistry at all, so I went to education and I got a job in Mansfield, Louisiana, fifty dollars. I have the telegram now saying, "You have been selected to teach at our DeSoto Parish Training School in Mansfield, Louisiana. Your salary will be fifty dollars a month." So I went up there and I taught science. They didn't have a chemistry lab, so I taught science and math.

Knox

One Saturday Oliver Baham, my roommate, and I went downtown. He wanted to buy a white shirt, so we went downtown in Mansfield to this white store and told the white clerk, "We want to see some white shirts." So he brought out white shirts and hung about four of them on the counter. Oliver looked over them and he said, "Um hmm!" And the white clerk said, "Niggers don't say um hmm to me. They say sir." So smart aleck I had to be, I said, "He wasn't talking to you, sir. He was just making a remark about the shirts." And that made him mad, and he started yelling at us, and soon there was a crowd of white people all around us. So Oliver leaned over and said, "I think we'd better get out of here," so we started for the door. We didn't run, but we walked and they parted and let us out." Now, that wasn't the trauma. We went back, and we were not unused to abuse and racial abuse, but we went back to the school. That was Saturday. That Monday the Black principal of the school, Mr. Johnson, called a meeting of the faculty, and an opening remark was, "Some of the members of our faculty have been downtown antagonizing the white element of the city." And I said, "I don't believe I can stay here." But I taught until May that year and then I went home, and I was talking to my mother and I told her about it, and she said to me, she said, "Well, what else can you do?" I said, "Well, I think I'll just see if I can go some other place, maybe Los Angeles, California." She looked at me and she said, "Owen, I can live in the South and you can't. I don't want you to go, but I think you'd better go." It took me a while to realize when a mother tells her youngest son to leave her, it's important. So that's why I came to California.

Stevenson

Let me backtrack. I have some more follow-ups. In your home when you were coming up, did you ever, you, your mother, your brothers and sisters, discuss race? What did your mother tell you about race in terms of what your place was, and did she relay any of her experiences?

Knox

We never had any formal discussion like that. But what she would do is when there was an instance of something, something happened and she was discussing it, what she would really say to us is, "You must know how to act. You must know what to do. And you can't--." What she was really saying now I realize, "You can't just have a pattern--this is what you're going to do. You

have to be able to read it and decide what is the best thing for me to do in this," and I think that's what she was really telling us. There were those Black people who out and out resisted it, and many of them were incarcerated and some of them died. In fact, as I remember, when I was a little kid asleep early in the morning, and I would hear some hustling and bustling moving in the house, and I'd wake up. Sometime later I asked my mother, "What was that when every--," and this is when I was grown, "--every now and then there was a noise going on, and people running back and forth, and somebody at the door and all, and then after that it's quiet and everybody went back to sleep?"

Knox

She said, "Well, your father is a member of a group," I'm trying to think of the name and maybe I will, "and whenever a Black person is in trouble with the white people here, officials or not, they, this group of men," Odd Men it was called, O-d-d--she said, "The Odd Men, they would go from house to house and get a dollar or fifty cents or so and get enough money to catch a bus and get out of town." She said, "And so what you heard were those fellows who were in trouble with the police, in trouble with the white people, and they had to get out of town, and they would go from house to house with the Odd Men. The Odd Men would give them money, and they'd catch a bus and go."

Stevenson

That's interesting, almost like an Underground Railroad.

Knox

That's what it was.

Stevenson

Interesting.

Knox

So that's another thing I learned about race. Most of what I learned about race had to do with my own experiences, and that three to three-thirty school gave me a chance to learn about Black people I'd never heard about, that's outstanding Black people in all areas of endeavor. My mother was never--I never remember seeing her more than angry, and she was not the kind of person to talk about the white devils and that, and she's certainly not the kind

of person who would say, "Accept your place." And my father, that was not what he--the fact is, he was one of the leaders of the Odd Men, and one of the most unfortunate things is here are these stalwart, hard-working, God-fearing people, who have to accept or perish, and that struck me, too, because my father wasn't the only one I knew. My father's friends, some of them I used to like to kind of sit down like I'm reading and listen to what they're saying, and some of them were revolutionary. But there was never any act in my family, only resentment about the racial things.

Knox

But let me tell you, what my experiences taught me, to hate white people. My experiences said, hate white people. My family said, not all white people are bad, and it took me a while to kind of process that, because I came out of the South mad. I was angry. When I came to California, I was angry, and my first experiences here were not that much better, so I was getting angrier as time went on.

Stevenson

Okay. I'd like to ask you what your experience was then within your family with other Blacks, in terms of what I call the dynamic of light and dark skin color.

Knox

Oh. Well, in Louisiana that's a big case. In fact, probably because I was fair, I'm fair--my father's dark. My father's dark. His mother is fair. Her father, from the little information I have--I think his name was Dixon, but I'm not sure about that. I'm looking it up now--was dark. My mother's father was Irish and Black. His wife, and I don't know which wife, but she was part white and Indian, oh, and Black, and so my mother had long hair and she was about my color. My father was very dark, a handsome dark man. And I was Baptist, my family built a Baptist church, so I was Baptist. When I was in high school, all the kids in Baton Rouge went to one high school, and so those in that Creole section, very fair, long, beautiful hair, fair women, they also came to the same school. There was a girl named Alice that I became enamored of, so I asked her if one Saturday she would go to the movie or Saturday matinee, the movie with me,

and she said yes. She said, "But you've got to come by my house and get me." I said, "Okay." She was Creole.

Knox

So I went by Alice's house one day on Saturday, and I walked in and her mother came to the door and said, "Have a seat." I sat on the couch. She said, "Alice will be with you shortly." And she went, the mother went in the kitchen and came back out, and she had a cup of coffee and a glass of milk, and she brought them and set them down. Now, I just believed the milk was for me, the coffee was for her. She sat across from me and she didn't touch the coffee, so I didn't touch the milk. She took a spoon, and she took the coffee and got a spoonful of coffee, and she dropped it in the glass of milk and stirred it up. She said, "That's how much Negro my daughter has in her." I didn't know what to do then. I just, yes, you know. And she said, "Now tell me, what are your intentions?" Well, this was about tenth grade, eleventh grade, high school. By that time the Creoles are getting married. What she is asking me is what by now I know, I didn't know then, but now I know she was asking me what are my intentions. Do you want to marry my daughter? Is that why you want to take her to the movies, take her out? And I thought about it, and she was staring at me waiting for an answer. I said, "Well, my intention was to take her to a movie," and that's all I could think of. So her mother told me, "Okay, go on," and Alice and I went to the movie and came back. It wasn't dark when we got back.

Knox

But when we turned--she lived in this cul-de-sac, and when we turned into her block, her whole family was standing out on the banquett looking for her. So I walked her all the way down to her house, I told her goodbye, and I left. I never took her out again. But as fate would have it, many years later in California, in Los Angeles, I'm driving down the street and I come to Broadway and about 41st Street. I'm on 41st and I have to wait then this crosswalk while the people pass across, and I looked at them and there's Alice. So I waved and said, "Hi, Alice!" She looked, she turned, and she walked on away. And I found out later she was passing for white out here.

Stevenson

Interesting, very.

Knox

And she wasn't the only one. Her close friend of hers, who lived in the same community where she lived--I became a real estate agent out here, and I had to go to Bank of America to get the real estate agent to sign the papers for me. I went to one on the corner of 54th [Street] and Crenshaw [Boulevard], the Bank of America. Then I walked in with my papers--escrow is what I mean, escrow officer. I walked in with my papers to give it to the escrow officer, and out walked a girl named Dorothy, who was a classmate of mine at McKinley High School. She looked at me and I looked at her. Now, then, they don't have any Black people on that side of this counter, and I knew, in the moment I saw her I knew, and the moment she saw me she knew that I knew, and so I said, "I have these escrow papers. Will you process them for me?" She said, "Sure I will," and she went on and did the processing and gave them to me.

Knox

I was talking to--telling her boyfriend, who by then lived up in Seattle, so I said, "Clyde, you know who I saw?" And I told him. He said, "Yeah, I know. She's passing for white." He said, "What you don't know and she doesn't know is the white fellow she married is passing for white." [laughs]

Stevenson

Wow.

Knox

I don't know, Clyde tells all kinds of lies. I don't know whether that's true or not. But I said, "Oh, my god. They could have a baby that's Black." But anyway, yes, I had lots of experiences, because in Louisiana, in New Orleans it's worse than Baton Rouge. In New Orleans I would visit--Baton Rouge is a bedroom community, and New Orleans was the only place you could find fun, so New Orleans was the place where we went to have fun and dance and party. For Mardi Gras I went there to--in fact, I took my wife about five years ago, took her back to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras, and I showed her the same thing I saw when I was there. There was the club, they call them clubs, and they would have parties during Mardi Gras time. We went to one big party--I can't

remember the name of the club now. But it was a big party, it was a huge thing, and they had it in the big auditorium, and it was a huge, beautiful affair. I think [Riley B.] "B.B." King sang there, and it was a great party. In fact, it was like a picnic indoors. Everybody had a table with all their food and drinks on it, and another group of people with the party and the dancing, and we had a good time.

Knox

And my wife and I--this had happened to me when I was there, but I was showing her it was still the same. Almost all the people there were dark. Now, in the hotel we were staying in, there was another party. I had been invited to it only because I was Black. But I took my wife there, I said, "Let me show you something." We walked in, and this is kind of a sedate group. I walked in and I asked my wife, "Have you noticed anything?" She said, "No, I don't know anything, except this looks like a lot of white people." I said, "That's the difference. These are Black people, but they're all fair at this party. The other party we went to, they're all Black, and that's how New Orleans is," and that was just four years, five years ago, or about six years ago.

Stevenson

Interesting. So it's like in the past or even now it sounds like the Creole community is self-segregating to a point.

Knox

Oh, yes. There's a lot more, just like there's Black-and-white intermarriage and intermingling, but a lot more of that among the Creoles and Blacks, but it's still separate. In fact, color of skin is still a major factor in Black life. In fact, for a long time the only fair Black people who did well--the only people who did well in this society, both nationally and locally, were fair. In fact, there's a lot of--California, a lot in Los Angeles, early people--

Stevenson

Early Black Los Angeles?

Knox

Early Black people were fair who did well here in California, except for those organizations and particular churches, and churches are the most segregated

of any institution we have, except for those coming out the churches, they became [unclear], they could be dark. But the society itself did not promote dark people for a long time.

Stevenson

Okay. Could you tell me what emphasis was placed in your home on education?

Knox

In every home that I knew anything about when I was coming up, like I told you, from first grade on, there was never any question about getting an education. There was never any discussion about it. In fact, there was never any discussion about whether you would go to college or not. The question was, how? The question was really, "How are we going to get you in? You're going to college, but how are you going to get there?" And my mother told me, "That's not your problem." And I asked her, "Well, you know--." First I wanted to go to Southern. No, first I wanted to go north, I wanted to go to some college in the North. In fact, the one was Michigan State, because I wanted to be a doctor, and I had heard that that's--and I thought I was smart. LSU wouldn't let me in, Louisiana State University wouldn't let me in, so I applied to them. Now, what I had heard is that if you qualify to go to one of those schools, rather than letting you come to their school, they'll pay your tuition at another school up North, and it was being done. Particularly in Mississippi, a lot of that was being done, so I thought that's what I was going to do. They didn't even respond to my application.

Knox

But like I said, there was no possibility of ever my paying tuition in any one of those schools, because we couldn't pay tuition to Southern University, and that was the lowest tuition anywhere. But my sister had gone to Southern. But my mother, being in this Baptist thing, conference and all, that conference contributed to Leland College, which was a small Black Baptist college, and since she contributed, and she spoke for them all throughout the state, that was available to me, so I went to Leland. I'm glad I did. Even Southern was too big for me. I needed Leland, a little school. But in no family that I know--well, I think maybe it was this. The only way out of the situation Black people are in

is education, and so there was never any question about the fact that no matter whether you could do well or not, you're going to school.

Knox

In fact, in my community, if you were walking around and you're school aged and you're walking around, anybody in the community would tell you, "Get yourself back over to that school. What you doing down here?"

Stevenson

What do you think the roots of that is, why there was just no question?

Knox

Well, with my family, what they saw is if you're going to better--and, of course, that's the way they say it, "If you're going to better yourself, you've got to go to school." But it wasn't any problem with me. First, I told you, for a couple of years, the first two years I was home schooled, and there wasn't any question about it. To me, my mother was one of the best teachers I ever had, and she didn't even know the mathematics. She didn't know. But what she knew is, in fact, she'd tell me, "If you don't know that, when your brother comes home, ask him." Then I was sent to Catholic school. She wouldn't let me go back to public school right away, so the next year after she home schooled me, I went to Catholic school, and they're very strict, very strict. So that was a good education. Then I went back to the public school and that was good for me, because by that time I got some excellent teachers. Maggie Nelson, that's an excellent lady. She was the fifth-grade teacher, and most of those teachers, there was something about the way they revered education, something about the fact that this is important, but it's not just important, it's, well, almost fun.

Knox

Like I remember one time this Miss Maggie Nelson had put me in a play. [laughs] The play was musical. I learned something there. My part was to play--it was a Japanese play, and my part was to play this big Japanese person in charge, and I was to sing my part. And I can remember that about the third rehearsal Miss Maggie Nelson, a very nice lady, came to me and she said, "Owen, I think we're going to do it like this. When it comes to your part, I want

you to speak it." I realized that, "You can't sing." And what I spoke was, "For I'm a royal cuss, and you are but dust." [laughs] Anyway, that has nothing to do with this.

Stevenson

Okay. Another follow up I have, you mentioned when you were in high school and they required the Black students to stay that extra half hour, and that the teachers took advantage of that time to teach you Black history, poetry. Could you tell me about some of the highlights? What type of Black history did they teach you? What type of poetry did they teach you?

Knox

Yes. Hmm. The poetry was across the board, but I remember some of it. I remember one of them was called, "Woodman, spare that tree, for in my youth it sheltered me, and I'll protect it now." And there was another one, "Invictus." "Out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul." Now, you can see what they're doing with that kind of poetry. They're saying, "You are important. You are somebody important." And then one of the teachers had read about--I don't know if she had ever seen anything about it--the Harlem Renaissance, and so she taught us about all of those outstanding poets, writers, speakers, musicians. And just recently I read [Kareem] Abdul-Jabbar's "On the Shoulders of Giants," and in it, it talks about the Harlem Renaissance. But the Harlem Renaissance, there was a Renaissance basketball team, which was the first Black pro team, and I was visiting a friend who was in Xavier University in New Orleans, and that weekend the Renaissance team was playing Xavier, and Xavier had an outstanding basketball team and an outstanding tennis team and players. But I went to see it, Xavier and Renaissance, and Xavier almost beat the Renaissance team that day, but the Renaissance team could only go to colleges and local places to play, because there was no organized Black basketball at the time, and you couldn't go into the pros.

Knox

But anyway, those kind of things the people taught us, but one other thing they did, they let us be creative. They said, "Write your story." Or they'd give

you a topic and say such-and-such a thing, "Write a story about it." So we just wrote a story out of our own imagination, and that kind of education wasn't going on anywhere. I mean, it was what the book said.

Stevenson

Right. So teaching the Harlem Renaissance, and what year would that have been around? When they were teaching the Harlem Renaissance, that was fairly recent history.

Knox

That was history then. That was then.

Stevenson

Right, as it was happening.

Knox

It was happening then, yes, because, well, I don't know what the period of the Renaissance was, but I know it was early in the century, and I was born in 1918, so it was still going on.

Stevenson

And the Black teachers that you had, were they encouraging you as students to pursue a college education?

Knox

Oh, yes. Everybody did, everybody did. In fact, they used to say, "If you don't stay in class, if you don't learn this stuff, you're not going to be anybody, so you'd better stay here and--," and so it was pounded into us all the time.

Stevenson

Were there any teachers who stood out that you remember particularly, and were some of these teachers trained at Black colleges themselves?

Knox

All of them were. All of my teachers, they went to Black colleges, because all of them came from the South. When I went to Leland, some of the teachers were from all over, but when I was in high school and elementary school, all of

my teachers were from Black colleges. Most of them were from Southern University, but some of them were also from Jackson State [College]. In fact, it was not Jackson State, it was Jackson College then, from Mississippi. Oh, and one other place. Let me see if I can call it. Tougaloo [College], Tougaloo in Mississippi. I remember a teacher from Tougaloo. The reason I remember that is when I went to college, my football team went to Tougaloo, and I became student manager. I was too small to play football, so I became student manager, and I traveled with the team. I went to Tougaloo and let me tell you, I walked across--I would go before the team got there and prepare for the team, where they're going to stay and the equipment and all of that. So I had done all my work and it was early afternoon before the game in the evening, later that afternoon, and I walked around the campus, and it suddenly shocked me. Every girl I saw was pretty. I'd never seen this. Later on I said, "Tell me, what kind of recruiting do you do that you get all of these beautiful girls to come?" One fellow said, "It's in the contract." They said, "No, it's not in the contract." But I was amazed. Well, I just feel like saying it.

Knox

But that afternoon I walked into the auditorium, huge auditorium, just to see what the auditorium looked like, because at Leland ours was a little auditorium. This was a huge, beautiful auditorium, and when I went in I heard music. I looked down and I saw a piano player, a Black fellow playing the piano, and so I sat in the last row of seats to listen to him practice, then play. He never said a word. But across from him was a nun sitting at the organ, and after a while she picked up and played the organ, and he played the piano. They never spoke to each other. One of those moments in life that I'll never forget. I just sat there and listened to this music of these people who were communicating with each other through music only. Nobody spoke, no other sounds were made, and I just sat there, and that was at Tougaloo. I had a great time at Tougaloo. But that's where most of our teachers came from. So you see, if you ask me a question I'll be--

Stevenson

No, that's what I want. Okay, this is a good-- [End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (November 14, 2008)

Stevenson

Good morning. I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Owen Knox on Friday, November 14 [2008]. I've got some follow-ups from last time. Could you tell me more about your brothers and sisters, your siblings?

Knox

Yes. I'm one of five, and I'm the youngest. My oldest sister had a lot to do--both of my sisters, but particularly my oldest sister, had a lot to do with bringing up the family really, because my mother was active in many organizations, particularly religious organizations. She was president of several groups and she was in many, and she spoke throughout the state and local community, so she was gone a lot of the time. The fact is, one of the times I missed her most was it seemed that every September there was some conference somewhere that she attended, and that's the beginning of school, and so my two sisters really got me ready. I'm the youngest, and she got me ready to go to school, even through college for that matter.

Knox

But they were both really instrumental in a lot of what I did, because they assumed the parent--my father died when I was seven, and Eunice, my oldest sister, was one who really helped me through the early years. My next sister, Rosalie, she was the one who had an occasion to go to college. She was the first one of my family to go to college. She went to Southern University, became a teacher, and even taught at the elementary school that I attended before I left elementary school; also a great help to me. Particularly, both of them were of great assistance to me when I went to college, because of the limited resources. By the time I got to college, they both were employed, so they were able to help me through the college, early college years anyway.

Knox

My oldest brother--three males--my oldest brother, Sam, named after my father, he had great difficulty. He was an excellent person, but had great difficulty with the regimen of school, and he really dropped out of school when he was in about the seventh grade. My mother had, as I think I mentioned, an eighth-grade education, and so he was closer to--my two brothers, older than I am, were closer together, and I was kind of the baby of

all of those. My other brother, Bill, who was only three years older than I am, he was in school almost with me through--he was up ahead of me in elementary school. We went to McKinley High School in Baton Rouge together. He was ahead of me, and we went to college at Leland College in Baker, Louisiana together.

Knox

Let's see. All of them are deceased now. My sister--one of the interesting things about family is when my oldest sister married, she and her husband moved in with us, so [unclear]. Then when my next sister got married, she and her husband moved in with us, which helped pay, because my mother never worked and my father died when I was seven, so that helped pay the mortgage and all the bills. And my two brothers-in-law that I had at that time, were very instrumental and very helpful to me in guidance and the like, because my older brother was not giving me guidance at the time, but my two brothers-in-law did. And then the fact is that we all had this big family now, and we all ate together, and I think the family life did a lot to shape both my career and my life.

Knox

My mother was very religious, as I have said, and so that my sisters and when their husbands came, they became participants in the church, and so a lot of discussion around the dinner table, which was really a tremendous learning experience for me being the youngest one and all of these older siblings and their spouses brought a tremendous breadth of experiences that they had to the table, that I listened to as they discussed them. So a large part of what I believe and think and do had to do with that family, my siblings and their spouses.

Stevenson

Can you tell me a little bit about your sisters training to be teachers?

Knox

Yes. My oldest sister also trained to be a teacher, and I think she taught for a short time. She went to what was called--let me see, what did they call that? I can't think of the name of it right now, but it was a two-year training school

for teachers. My next sister, Rosalie, she went through to Southern University and the full four-year course, and she became a teacher and remained a teacher until she retired. That was both good and bad. It was good for me in that they assigned her to the school where I was a student, and so whenever she disciplined or gave a grade to a student that the student didn't like, the student and I most likely would meet after school about that, because they'd take it out on me. But that was both good and bad, too, because having a sister on the faculty I think had a lot to do with my behavior at school, but having also a sister gave me some problems with some of the other students who were her students. So at that time, it was considered the way to settle your differences was to have physical combat, and so I had to engage in several fights after school.

Knox

When I was a young, very young child, I think even before I went to school in my community I described before, we lived kind of on a hill, and all the houses down from us had children, and so we'd gather. But there was a lady three doors down from us who liked the group of kids, and so she took the little kids and sometimes in the afternoon before they had to go in for supper, she would sit and tell us tales. So we would gather on her porch, and she would just tell us stories, and many of them I guess she made up as she went, but they were interesting to us. But I remember one time sitting on a chair, and this wicker chair had a seat that had tacks that held the seat down, and I picked up one of the tacks and while she was talking to us, a story, and in many of the stories there was a frightful kind of thing, and I swallowed the tack. Now, that stayed with me for years, because it lodged somewhere inside, and it stayed with me for years, and the reason I'm telling all of this is because it had something to do with my health. I had a cough, and so I wasn't a good fighter and I lost a few. I just can't remember many of them that I won.

Knox

But another interesting part of that is it prepared me for the kind of violence that you find in the poverty community, and even though I wasn't always or very seldom victorious, it at least told me how to protect yourself in an environment like that. And so I think it helped me a lot, particularly when I was grown up and I was in threatening circumstances, and I remember it

helping me very much when I was principal of the school during the Watts riot in South Los Angeles. That ordinarily would be an extremely frightening situation to be in, but I think some of that early life where there was some violence prepared me so that I knew that you don't panic, and you try to calmly figure your way out and how you're going to save yourself. But anyway, that was my early childhood.

Knox

By the way, I swallowed this tack and about two years later, maybe three years later, maybe more, I was reading the newspaper--I was an avid reader, and I was reading the newspaper on my knees with the paper on the floor, and I was bent down, and I started coughing and the tack came up.

Stevenson

Wow.

Knox

Reading has all kinds of values to it. That was one. But now--at that time perhaps I didn't value some of those kinds of experiences. Some of them would be considered negative experiences, but I think in my later life each one gave me some kind of a strength or knowledge or attitude that helped me through problems later on.

Stevenson

Would you say that your sisters being teachers strongly influenced you to go into education?

Knox

It perhaps did, but I think less--I never thought that it did a lot. The first--my brother had a doctor is named after the doctor, one of the few doctors in the Black community, Dr. Murray, and Dr. Murray was a friend to my family. He was not just a doctor, he was a friend. He knew everything about all of us from birth, and he was just a tremendous friend, and he was somebody I admired. Not having a father, whenever he came around he was always friendly, and so I always looked up to him as being one of the really positive people in my community, and I think I wanted to be a doctor more than I thought of ever being a teacher. As a result, I took science courses, throughout college I took

science courses. The fact is, my major is chemistry and my minor is mathematics, and I think it had to do with the fact that I was thinking of being a doctor, and less thinking of being a teacher.

Knox

What I think propelled me into being a teacher was that when I graduated from college with a Bachelor of Science degree, there was no place in Louisiana for me to do anything. That didn't lend itself to any employment. So I decided that I would go to the North. The fact is, the first thing I did, and maybe I mentioned it, I applied to Louisiana State University, LSU, in the hopes that--I knew I would never be admitted to the segregated school, but in the hopes that what some of the universities were doing in the South then when a Black person applied, they would steer them to a northern school, and the state would pay their tuition, and I thought that would happen to me. Well, at LSU it didn't. They didn't even respond to my application.

Knox

But so I decided that I would go to the North and see if I could just find a way to get into a medical college. I think the name of the college that I wanted to go to was Rush Medical College. So I went to Chicago, and I could go to Chicago because one of my uncles' family, his children, my cousins, had moved to Chicago. So I wrote to them and they said come up and I could stay with them while I decided what to do, and I did that. I took what's called the excursion train, which means you pay so much money you can get a round-trip ticket, and it's during a certain sale that you could get the ticket at a reasonable price. So I did go to Chicago, and my intent was, and I'd thought this through, I said, what I will do, I will go to a medical school and I will sit on the steps until somebody asks me, "What are you doing here?" and I'll say, "I'm trying to get in, but I don't have any money," and hoping that maybe somebody would say, "Well, come on in."

Knox

Well, I got to Chicago and I spent the week there trying to figure out where everything was and how to go about doing this, but during that time, walking and traveling around Chicago, particularly in the community where I was, I noticed that the people were particularly, I don't know if it's called incested.

The fact is, I walked one time, walking down the street about a block from where I was living, and there was a big fight in the middle of the street. Some fellows were fighting, and they were beating each other up. But I noticed that nobody gathered around as they had in the South. When we had a fight, everybody would gather around and cheer for one of the combatants. But I noticed that the people in Chicago walked past and nobody even looked. They just kept going and let the fight go on. And after I thought about that a little while I realized, I don't think this is the right place to sit and wait for somebody to notice you and be sympathetic to your cause.

Knox

So I devised another system. I went to the local bank, and the bank, Manufacturers and [Merchants]--I can't remember the name of the bank, but it's something like M & M, Manufacturers and something Bank. I went in and I asked to see the president. They looked askance at me, and I said, "It's important [unclear]." So they smiled and finally they said, "Okay. We'll let you see the president." So they called a young man out, and the young man came out and he was not a whole lot older than I was. He came out and he shook my hand and he said, "I'm the president's son," and he introduced himself. "My name is Solomon B. [Smith]," I'll have to think about what the last name was, and I really think they were just humoring me. But we got to talking and he said, "Come on in the office." So I went in the office and sat down. Smith, Solomon B. Smith was his name. We sat and talked. He sat at his desk and I sat across, and I was thinking, this is amazing. I'm in the president's suite. And he said, "Well, what do you want me to do for you?" And I told him, "Well, here's my plan. I will take out a will. I will take out also any other papers that secure this, but I would like a loan from the bank to send me to medical school, which requires that after medical school I pay the loan back to you." And he said, "Yes, but on all our loans we require that you have something substantial." I said, "Well, the only thing I have is me, so what I'm offering you is me as collateral, and you make the loan, and I will pay the loan back after." He said, "You know, that's interesting, never heard of that before." He said, "But unfortunately, I'm the son of the president. I'm Solomon B. Smith. That would have to come from Solomon A. Smith, my father, who is in Florida."

Knox

So he told me, "But he'll be back after vacation." So I waited and I went several times, and Solomon A. Smith had not come back. Fact is, as far as I know, Solomon maybe even never came back, or I was never notified, and I went to the bank several times. But one day, and by that time it was late September in Chicago, I walked out of the flat where I was living with the boyfriend of one of my cousins. I walked out and the sun was shining bright. It had been a cool week, but the sun was shining bright, like a beautiful day, and I turned to the right and turned to the north, and that's when I learned what the hawk was. I had heard it, but I didn't know what it was. The hawk is that cold wind that comes off Lake Michigan that sweeps right through the streets of Chicago, and I remember it was so cold that I bent over and for a block or two blocks I was bent over, and I remember my stomach hurt because I had bent over leaning into that wind, and I decided the weather's not going to get any better here, so I went back to Louisiana.

Knox

But when I got back to Louisiana, I still had no job and I had no schooling. So I received a telegram from a school superintendent in northern Louisiana, which offered me a job teaching, and one of the reasons that that happened is because several other people in my graduating class had become teachers, teachers and preachers most of them. And it offered--and I still have the telegram. It offered me a position as a teacher in DeSoto Parish Training School, in Mansfield, Louisiana, northern Louisiana, for fifty dollars a month. I accepted, and I went to Mansfield and accepted that position, and I taught science and mathematics at DeSoto Parish Training School, and that's where I learned a lot about teaching, because you had to do everything. Very little was prepared for you, materials and the like. You had to almost invent them.

Knox

But the year of teaching was all right until I think we discussed the last time I was here, until they told me I was then antagonizing the white element of the city. I went home and I discussed this with my mother, and she told me, as I believe I told you, "I can live in the South and you can't." So one friend who taught with me in Mansfield and another friend who had graduated from--both of these had graduated from Southern University, and another friend who had also graduated from Southern University but couldn't find a job--he

was a cook on one of the ships in the Mississippi River, and the three of us sat down and talked about it and said, "Well, for one summer let's go to Los Angeles." And Carl [Thomas], one of the fellows, had a brochure from USC. So we decided that we were coming out here and would go to a summer session at USC. The three of us caught a [Continental] Trailways bus, and I refer to that as, I escaped from Louisiana on a Trailways bus. The three of us took a Trailways bus to Los Angeles, and we came here, and one of them, Earl Walter, was one of the fellows, and Earl had a distant cousin here, living on East Adams Boulevard, and the three of us moved into a room in her house, and the three of us enrolled in USC and we went to USC for the summer semester.

Knox

And it really hadn't occurred to me that I only bought a one-way ticket to Los Angeles from Baton Rouge, and we found ourselves--the fact is, I enjoyed going to USC, but it was a major change, because I had never attended a class with a white person before, and in this one I was the only non-white person in the class. But it was a class in chemistry, and there was another amazing thing about it is that chemistry lab that they had did not resemble at all the one I had seen at Leland College. In fact, I actually had to get a catalog so that I could identify all the equipment in that one, because most of it I had never seen.

Stevenson

So it was more advanced equipment?

Knox

Yes, the equipment, the beakers and all the chemical equipment they had was exotic to me. I knew the basics, because that's what I had learned. But anyway, it was a good semester. I learned a whole lot, not in chemistry. I learned a whole lot about living at [U]SC then. By the way, SC at that time was not the liberal university it is now, and so I think I knew every Black person on campus at that time. But that's how I became a teacher. But when I went to SC, I'm still taking science with the hope that I can still get into medical school. I finished that summer semester, but I didn't have tuition for the fall, so the three of us had to figure out what else are we going to do, but we had decided

by that time we were going to stay in Los Angeles. So we had to decide, now how will you do that, and each one of us had to go out and seek a job.

Knox

I got a job with the Youth Administration, it was called. Anyway, it was, I guess, make work, because my job was to go into a public park and pick up papers, and I did that for extremely low pay. But the interesting thing, though, was an unfortunate thing for us, is the three of us that were living there, the lady would let us live there, and they'd let us cook, but we had to provide the food. Well, for those who've lived in Los Angeles for some time, they remember that down on Central Avenue there was a huge marketplace, and there they took the produce that was sent in from all around Los Angeles and shipped it to the East. Well, they couldn't ship ripe fruit or vegetables, because they'd spoil on the way. So they had to ship them just before they ripened, and all the ripe fruit and vegetables were available to the workers. Well, we found out we could also go down there and get them. So we went down and whatever was available, that's what we had.

Knox

What was really fortunate, and I believe I told you that Lloyd--Earl, his name is, Earl Walter, the fellow who had been cooking, he became our cook, just for the three of us. He cooked, and the lady allowed us to do that. So he would cook whatever we could find at the open market down there, at the big market, we called it. Whatever we could find in the big market, that's what he'd cook. Whatever that was, that's what we had, which meant we had excellent food, because most of it was vegetables and fruit. But we had a difficulty. They didn't have meat that they were shipping, so we didn't get meat. And now and then we'd put whatever little money we had, and we'd go down to the market down on Central Avenue and get whatever meat we could purchase.

Knox

But one day--this does not sound truthful. One day we had no meat, and what they had down at the big market, what we had collected at the big market was a vegetable, let's see, what do they call that, what's zucchini? What is it?

Stevenson

Zucchini, squash?

Knox

Squash. They had squash, thank you. They had squash, but they had a lot of different kinds of squash, and so we just brought some of all those different kinds of squash home, and Earl made us a squash meal. Now, this only happened once, but I'll never forget it. It was amazing. What we did, we had one squash, a zucchini squash, and then we had that other round--I don't know what that name was. But that zucchini squash, he took it and he made something out of it that made it look like meat. It looked like--I don't know how to describe it. It looked kind of like a sausage. And then he took--what's that little round squash? I don't know the name of that--and he cooked that, and that was our vegetable. But there was this what they called summer squash, that yellow squash. He took that and put some sugar on it and made kind of a batter like, and that was our dessert. Excellent food, really, but amazing, and at that time we laughed at it and thought how awful this is that we're--but I realize now how wonderful it was to us.

Knox

We were a close group there, had to be a close group, because we had to support each other. But the three of us, we survived. Carl Thomas became a lawyer, and Earl Walter became a court bailiff, and the three of us became community activists. In fact, during the time of the Civil Rights marches in the South, Earl was a leader in an organization called Call Off the Dogs, which had to do with what was going on in the South at the time. Unfortunately, the two of them--all three of us were smokers, but both of them died as a result of smoking. Earl died of cancer, and I recently went to his son's funeral, and Carl died of heart attacks, both of them having had previously successful lives after a very difficult start, and I'm the sole survivor.

Stevenson

Okay. I have a couple more follow-ups now. One, you talked at length about your mother being an evangelist. At the time she was doing this, would it have been unusual for a woman or particularly a Black woman to be an evangelist?

Knox

Yes, but she wasn't an organized evangelist. She and some other women had an organization called the Women's Auxiliary, and they worked on what they called the Home Mission Society and then the Foreign Mission Society, and she was a leader in all of those, and as a result she spoke all over. In fact, before she died, no, just before the Second World War began, she was scheduled to go to Europe to a World Baptist Convention, and then the war started and she didn't get to go. But anyway, she was not an evangelist like going out preaching to crowds to get converts and all. She preached at our church. Now, the reason she preached at our church is our church, I believe I told you that my father and his friends and their families built this church, and when they built it, we couldn't hire a regular preacher, so he came and he'd preach two Sundays a month, and the other preacher, well, not a preacher, he was kind of a layman who became a preacher, and he preached. But sometimes neither one was available, so my mother gave the sermon. But she didn't have a church, and she was not, certainly not a televangelist, but she was not an organized evangelist. She was a religious woman who spoke. She never said she preached; she spoke. But it was all through her religion. Your question was?

Stevenson

Well, even though she was informally an evangelist, would it be unusual for a Black woman to--?

Knox

No, there were quite a few Black women. Fact is, if you remember the history of Black people, it's that the Black women took the leadership in almost everything--

Stevenson

Yes.

Knox

--anti-slavery and that. One of the reasons was that segregation and all that it implies was more directed at men than women, and so it wasn't unusual for women to take leadership in many--within the Black community, not generally but within the Black community. So no, it was not unusual or strange that she

would do so. It was somewhat unusual that she would be the religious leader in the church, because that was kind of reserved for males.

Stevenson

Exactly. Yes.

Knox

But a lot of what she did--I guess I listened to her speeches, I guess, as much as or more than anybody else, and I'm impressed. I have some of it at my house now. It was amazing to me to see how she could get a crowd, a group of people sitting there, and how she could use her words in such a way that they came together for some purpose. It just intrigued me that she could do that, and that's just by words. She didn't do anything. She just used words, and they could have that kind of effect, and that had a tremendous effect on me. I realized the power of thoughts and thoughts put into words.

Stevenson

Okay. There was a great migration of African Americans, I think both after World War I and World War II. When you were still in Baton Rouge, were you seeing a lot of people in your community coming out to Los Angeles?

Knox

Yes. And fact is, one of the reasons I found friends here is because they had been part of that migration after World War I, and here in Los Angeles a lot of the leaders, [Augustus Freeman] "Gus" Hawkins and many of those leaders came right out of the South. In fact, many of them came out of Louisiana.

Stevenson

Exactly.

Knox

And some of them were friends of my father, so when I came out here, I could find some of those. In fact, there are some of those places I ate Sunday dinner. In fact, the three of us used to say that come Sunday we could get meat, because somebody was going to invite us to dinner, because there was a large group of--and still is--a large group of Black people from Baton Rouge and surrounding Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Baton Rouge, who live here that

knew us and knew our families, that we could find friends with out here. So a lot of the times we joked about it. "Who's going to take us to dinner this Sunday?" But we joined a Methodist church. I was Baptist in Louisiana, but when I came here, the first time I was invited to church after I came here was to the Methodist church. And my two brothers who came out here previously, their families had been Methodist in Baton Rouge, and so we kind of gravitated to the Methodist church, and three of us became youth leaders in the church.

Knox

We established a church newsletter we did at Earl's home. We produced this newsletter. And I remember one day we were preparing it. It was a Sunday, and it was a Sunday morning. We were going to take the newsletter to church, and about five-thirty we were doing it when we heard that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, and so we couldn't get it in the print, but when we went to church we announced to people there that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Hamilton [United] Methodist Church is where I attended, we attended. But the church people knew that we were kind of orphans in the city, and many of them invited us to their homes. I think back on those as some real formative days, because of the experience the three of us had together, and being from the South we were having personally having experienced the segregation of the South. Then being here in California, I think that the three of us just felt an obligation to do something in support of the people in the South, and so we worked that at heart. Also, that association with the two of them and with our previous experiences in the South kind of shaped some of what--well, it certainly shaped a lot of my attitude about discrimination, but it also shaped some of my actions as well.

Knox

I have fond recollections of those times, because--let me give you one. When I came here, having left Louisiana where I was old enough to vote but couldn't vote in Louisiana, when I came here I was looking for somebody to vote for. I was just, "I can vote here," so I was looking for, and I was reading the paper, and the big paper at the time in the Black community was the [California] Eagle. I looked in the Eagle and I saw that the Eagle newspaper supported a young man who was running for the Assembly. I looked at his picture and I

thought he was white, and my immediate reaction was, I don't want to come all the way out to California, the first vote is going to be for a white man. His name was Gus Hawkins. And so my first vote ever was cast for Gus Hawkins.

Stevenson

This was the election where he unseated Fred[erick] Roberts?

Knox

Yes. Fred Roberts was a Republican, wasn't he?

Stevenson

Yes.

Knox

That's the one. In fact, I was talking to Gus Hawkins one day. He was sitting and talking with a group of us, and he said he had no intention of getting into politics, but when they told him about Roberts and his Republicans, he figured somebody needs to do it, so he did it and became one of the greatest politicians who we've ever produced.

Stevenson

Certainly. Definitely. Okay, well, let me ask you this. When you got to Los Angeles, what differences did you find in the African American community here as opposed to Baton Rouge? When you came here, what were the differences, and also differences in the larger L.A. community?

Knox

Well, my first, and I can understand why I had this disappointment. I left Louisiana, and for some reason you get an idea that California is the land of freedom, and everything is open and free and available and all, and it wasn't long after I arrived that I realized that, and it was made apparent to me that the freedom I anticipated was not even in Los Angeles, California. For instance, at that time I had a Bachelor of Science in chemistry, and I applied to everything that they had in the library. There was a library right down on Central Avenue, and in the library they'd post all the governmental positions open, and I applied for everything that's there, particularly anything that was similar to my training, although I did apply to a lot of them that were not,

because I was looking for a job. But I found out also, one of the first things I found out is that that wasn't open and free to everybody.

Knox

Just to give you one example, there was something, I guess it's called the CSI [Crime Scene Investigation] now. It was called--I'll think of the name of it. But anyway, it was where they analyzed areas of criminality or some murder scene. I can't think of the name of it now. But anyway, I said, "That's a good fit for me. I'm a graduate chemist." So I applied and took the exam, and I placed third on the exam. The number-one person was placed in another position that he preferred, so he did not take this position, and number two, I don't know what it was about number two, but then somehow number two either did not pursue it, so I became number one. I went to my interview, and I was told just flat out by the interviewer that this position had been reserved for number five, I believe, or six. And I said, "But you can't do that, because I'm number one now." And they informed me that, "You're only number one because these others did these things." They said, "But this fellow has been in this position, had been working in this position for years, and so we're going to place him there." So I argued about it and said, "No, you can't do that, because I'm number one." And they showed me the law where whoever makes the choice can choose one of the top three, and I'm now just one of the top three, and I guess he got the job, I don't know. I know I did not get the job. Then I realized that's not like I had thought it might be.

Knox

And I had another bad experience, too. I still didn't have a job. But a dentist in a downtown office advertised for an assistant. Well, I'm not a dental assistant, but I figured my background is enough for me to be considered, and I went down to the interview with him, and he selected me. I don't know who else he had interviewed, but he selected me, and he told me to start on Monday, come in on Monday. And my job as he described it was, whenever he finishes an office, he leaves all of his tools there, and what he was saying, "You take all of those and you sterilize them, and then you place--," and he told me how to do all of this, so that was my job. This was a downtown office, and he had three offices, and what he would do is get one patient and put her in one

office, and then when he'd finish with this, he would leave that office and go to the second office and another patient.

Knox

So one day, this is about the third day I was there, I noticed that he had used two offices and he was on his third office, and he does have another client, patient. So I not only took the equipment and sterilized them and did everything I was supposed to do, but I noticed that there was a little trash and stuff, so I'm on the floor and so on. So I got a dustpan and a whisk broom, and I went around doing that, cleaning it up, and when I got to the second office, he came out of the third office into the second office. I was whisking this and he said, "You're taking your time doing that." And it suddenly occurred to me, that's not my job. This building has a custodian. He'll clean up the floor. That's not my job. So I told him, "Now, this is not what I'm here to do. I'm doing this just because you've used your offices." He said, "You're still taking your time doing it." So I stood up and I was angry, and I looked at him and I said, "I am not supposed to clean your place. You've got a custodian. You've got a janitor. He cleans your place. I'm supposed to do this." I don't remember his words, but in essence he said, "Well, you're supposed to do what I tell you to do." And by that time another dentist from across the hall came in, and he heard the discussion, and he tried to talk to the dentist, who for some reason, I'd never seen him angry before, but he was angry with me.

Knox

And one of the things he said I'll never forget. He said, "Joe Louis wouldn't come here and want to go swim in the Pasadena swimming pool." And just somewhere in my mind I knew that there was something about segregation of the Pasadena swimming pool, and it sounded like the South to me, so I gave him some smart answers. And first, I remember part of my answer was, I said, "Joe Louis is an ignorant man. I am an educated man, and you can't compare me to Joe Louis." And the fellow standing there said, "He's right," and that made the dentist angrier. He really got mad. So I took my--I had a little green jacket that I wore. I took my little green jacket off, and I took this dustpan and I reached them to him and he took them, and I said, "Goodbye," and I walked out. Now, the problem was I still had no job. [laughs] Hadn't been paid for that

one yet. But anyway, I had several experiences like that, that reminded me that there's a lot to do in Los Angeles.

Knox

And that carried over to when Martin Luther King [Jr.] came and spoke at Wrigley Field. I was there, and when he finished his speech, someone who had introduced him said, "Now, Dr. King, what can we do to support you in Alabama?" He said, "What you can do to support me in Alabama is do something here in Los Angeles," and that stuck with me. I said, "That's what it is. You've got to do something here. You don't have to march, you have to do something here." And so I joined the group of people--I wasn't the leader, but I joined the group of people who on a Sunday afternoon left Wrigley Field and marched downtown, only, I guess, about thirty or forty of us, but we marched downtown. Now, this is purely symbolic. We went down to city hall and downtown on Sunday when there's nobody there. But we marched anyway, and then subsequently we had some other marches, too, to the Board of Education and the like.

Stevenson

So did this group have a name?

Knox

No, that group didn't have a name. This was just a marvelous group just came out of the speech. After that, then lots of groups formed. Marnesba Tackett and several of the people, well, after that they got to be--by that time I was a teacher. A lot of groups had gotten organized at the time, and I joined many of them, too. I'm trying to think of the names of some of them. Go on.

Stevenson

Okay. Yes, we can talk about that, because one of my questions was to ask you about your involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in L.A. and who were some of the other people that were involved with you, some of the people that were leaders, that sort of thing.

Knox

There were, well, put this all in context. Later on I went back to SC and I got a teaching credential, and then I got assignment to a school. I should mention

about LAUSD, because I went back there, say, I got a teaching credential, and I took several tests at LAUSD for a position as a chemistry teacher and a science teacher, and I wasn't placed in any of those. I was a substitute teacher in chemistry, but that was because I wasn't a regular teacher, and the people who were not certified as regular teachers in LAUSD could act as substitutes whenever LAUSD called them and sent them in. So I taught one class as a substitute at Jefferson [High School], but it occurred to me that there were fewer high schools than elementary schools, and so the likelihood of being hired was much better at elementary schools, so I got an elementary credential, and I was assigned--I graduated with the whole group, all-white group, when I left SC, and I went down to LAUSD and applied for an elementary position.

Knox

I was sent to three schools. They were three schools in South Los Angeles. None of the other white students who graduated, who got their credentials with me, not one was assigned to one of those South Central schools. They were in West Los Angeles and the Valley and other places, but not in South Los Angeles, and that was another time when I noticed that this Los Angeles is a good place, but it's not yet a great place for Black people. Anyway, I went and I became an elementary school teacher, and also all the schools that I had interviewed in, the teaching staff was predominantly Black, the students were almost 100 percent Black, but all the principals were white, which is something that occurred to me. By that time I was extremely sensitive to race. And so I was assigned to 79th Street School it was then. It's now McKinley Elementary [School].

Knox

I had an interesting experience, because some of the teachers were white. Most of the teachers were Black, but some of the teachers were white. But I got another perspective there, because the principal was white and some of the teachers were white, and then among those white teachers were some people who were as dedicated to the Black children who attended that school as were the Black teachers, in fact, in some cases even greater dedication to them than the Black teachers. In fact, it occurred to me sometime later that they were there by choice, and I was there, as well as many of the Black

teachers, by assignment, and so I got another whole perspective on race. I had learned earlier that my mother had taught me, "All white people aren't bad," and so I understood that to an even greater extent when I taught at that 79th Street School.

Knox

But I did have several experiences that kind of directed me in the school business to do something about discrimination in the school district, and one was that the schools in South Los Angeles, it occurred to me, were not receiving the same level of financial support as the schools in other parts of the city. And some of the people, some of the teachers there were being successful, some out of their own dedication rather than out of the support they were receiving from the downtown office. Then I noticed also that the assignment of teachers, there was some disparity in that, because when it occurred to me anyway that a teacher was in some trouble at some other school, that teacher was reassigned. But it seemed to me that to an inordinate degree, those teachers were assigned to South Los Angeles. So some of that I noticed, so after a period of time it occurred to me that as a teacher I had some influence on a group of students, but the way to have an influence on one's school, you needed to be an administrator.

Knox

And so I went back to school and got an administrative credential from Cal State Los Angeles, and I got a general administrative credential, which meant I could be administrative elementary, middle, or senior high school, and that led to my becoming an assistant principal. And when I became an assistant principal, I made the list of assistant principals with another group, first the largest up till that time, the largest group of African American assistant principals on the list that they ever had had, and I think that was about twelve. My first assignment, I realized there was a whole lot here that I didn't know about, and not just about race. I mean, about instruction that I didn't know about.

Knox

So a group of us decided, those of us who made that list as assistant principals, when we got on the job we found a lot more to being an

administrator than we thought, and we thought we needed to get together and discuss this with each other. So the twelve of us got together and we discussed it, and out of that discussion came the feeling that we are all assigned to South Los Angeles Black schools, and our experience is that what we have known about the district is there is not parity in the distribution of resources to schools in South Los Angeles [unclear]. At that time they were building schools rapidly. The influx of students here was great, and new schools were being built. But it seemed to me, and I'm not sure about this, but it appeared, and the group confirmed this, that we received even the equipment that had been used. In fact, in some cases books that were being used. And by that time, the only Black history that was being taught was what was found in the history books, which they were selling to the South, and so the publishers had to be cognizant of the desires of the South not to include all of these contributions of Black people, and so the books were limited to the few outstanding anti-slavery people, and that was the only mention of Black people.

Knox

And this little group of us started looking at all the kind of disparities we saw, so we started a discussion among ourselves about what ought to be done about this. And by that time there was a lot of Black activity in Los Angeles, and so the school district in response to the Black activities in Los Angeles had established an organization downtown called Urban--I thought I had that with me. I can't remember the name of that one, but are we going to have another session?

Stevenson

Oh, yes, yes.

Knox

Then I'll bring that with me, because they established this Urban School Policy something. Anyway, we'll discuss it later. But in organizing that, they brought in the fellow named William [Bill] Bailey, a Black secondary administrator I think, or teacher, and they put over it a Jewish fellow named Sam Hammerman, over this organization, and it was kind of, "Look into relations and the charges being made by Black people about the school district." So this

little group of us went to that office and figured we can get some assistance about these disparities. And so Bill Bailey, the only Black person in that office, he had a series of meetings, and they were with the group of us, and there were by that time some Black principals, mostly female, and he put together a meeting of these young new assistant principals, and those Black principals had been there.

Knox

Then the second meeting he added the white principals of Black schools, and we sat and had conversations. At those meetings I was really dismayed at what happened, because what I heard being said did not fit the truth that I knew, and so the group--we were supposed to come together to coalesce and be a constructive group, but I didn't see that it was forming that way. Anyway, we had several discussions, and I guess the last one of those discussions that I attended almost by invitation--I was not invited again. But I was sitting there listening to this discussion, and there was a white principal who was over two Black schools, because they were small schools, and so they gave one principal two schools. Now, when he was doing his two schools, he had to have somebody he'll call a lead teacher or something left at that other school. In case of an emergency, that person took care of the emergency while he was at this other school. And he was saying--and he chose a Black woman named Mrs. Johnson. He chose her to be over one of the schools while he was at the other school, and this went on for a full year or maybe two years. And while he was sitting there talking about it, he said, "Well, look." All the white principals were showing that they were not racist, and he was describing to us what he had done. He had selected a Black woman to be the person over that school.

Knox

That day, that morning I got a call, and it said they had decided that the two schools had grown, so they wanted a principal at each one of the schools. This white principal had chosen for the interim period the person to be principal of that other school, he chose a white probationary teacher, male, and Mrs. Johnson had been there doing this for him all the time. And he was standing there praising himself and her for doing that, and that day I heard that, and that's when I couldn't take any more of that, so I stood up and told him exactly

what happened. I said, "And that is racist," I said, "because this young man is a probationary teacher. He shouldn't even be in this position. Here is a credentialed teacher who's been doing the job, and you've been praising her for it, and instead you took a white person and put him in." And he was livid, and everybody started yelling and shouting at each other, and the Black principal whose house we were meeting in said, "This is a good time for us to stop and eat. Let's all go eat."

Knox

And as we were walking toward the table, she came over to me and says, "I am displeased with you. You came into my house and disrupted," and she gave me a dressing down. And I told her, "I'm sorry," and I walked out. Now, this white principal followed me, a huge guy. He followed me out to the street and he said--and I thought she was dismissing me and she was, so I left. And he came out to the street, out to the sidewalk, and he said, "If you ever make charges about me--." I said, "Look. If I ever am able to prove what I think, you're going to be fired." And he sputtered off, and I walked away, but he didn't know I'm a southern Black man who's mad. Well, anyway, following that we organized what became COBA [Council of Black Administrators], and if you don't mind, I'd like to reserve talking about COBA to another time.

Stevenson

Yes, let's do that. I have another question for you. So you came into the district when, chronologically? In the fifties?

Knox

Let me see. I believe I put down here--I brought this because I can't remember dates anymore.

Stevenson

Good, good.

Knox

My employment record [turning pages]. I started teaching in 1952.

Stevenson

Okay. You've talked about what the conditions were when you came into the district, so there were no Black principals or administrators at that time.

Knox

No, there were. As I said, there were I don't remember how many, because I remember we called them all together. At secondary there must have been two or three male principals. At elementary there were, well, not quite a few, but say seven or eight female principals of elementary schools, and one male principal of an elementary school. Yes.

Stevenson

So there were some when you came in, but you talked about other things like lack of resources, getting--

Knox

Disparity in the allocation of funds.

Stevenson

--used books and things of that nature. So at the time that all this is going on, what was the composition of the people at L.A. Unified in terms of the board, superintendent?

Knox

Well, let me see. I knew all of the elementary superintendents. They had areas, and the superintendent of each area, and at that time when I came in, they were all white. By the time I was talking about when we were having these meetings, there was one superintendent, elementary superintendent, Josie Bain. Jim Taylor, James [B.] Taylor, was in a position at the time, because I remember he was part of some of this discussion from their side. I mean, from the administrative side, James Taylor. And I don't know where he was, but there was another administrator, Llewellyn Mazique, M-a-z-i-q-u-e, and there may have been more. But those I remember particularly, because I saw them. There had been one member of the Board of Education who was Black.

Stevenson

Was that Faye Allen?

Knox

Faye Allen, that's her name, yes. And I remember the second time she ran, a white woman in the Valley was also on the ballot called Faye Allen, and that split the vote, and Faye wasn't reelected.

Stevenson

I see.

Knox

As I remember it. I hope all of this isn't allegory, but it is as I remember it at that time.

Stevenson

I see. Okay, well, maybe this is a good place to stop.[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (November 20, 2008)

Stevenson

Good afternoon. I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Owen Knox on Thursday, November 20 [2008]. I have some follow-ups. In terms of your first teaching assignment, could you tell me about the curriculum you were teaching and about the quality of the academics?

Knox

My first regular teaching assignment in Los Angeles was at the 79th Street Elementary School. Since then it's been renamed to McKinley Elementary School. I first taught fourth grade, and then I taught fifth and sixth, and subsequent to that I taught first and second. That was an interesting experience, because many--at first I was surprised at the quality of the teaching staff, because I knew even before I got there that many of them had been assigned there without a choice to go anywhere else. I anticipated that all of them wouldn't be happy to be there, but I was surprised at not only the academic quality of the teaching staff, but also their dedication to the children of the South Los Angeles community, which was then and is now still a socioeconomically depressed area.

Knox

I received another surprise. It was a diverse staff, because there were white and African American teachers, and I think there was one Hispanic teacher, and there was a white principal who was very strict, really. I didn't appreciate that quality in him when I first went there, but I learned to respect it, because his intent was to get the best education he could out of the students, teachers and students that he had. I was also impressed with the diversity in the kind of approaches that the teachers had for the students. Some of them were very strict, and some of them were very academically oriented, and others had more social conscience about the community in which they were teaching. But all in all, it made a very good staff, and I learned a lot about teaching. The fact is, I learned most of what I knew about teaching in that first assignment. I had taught at a secondary prior to that time, before I left Louisiana, but elementary was a new experience and one I really learned to appreciate.

Stevenson

What was the neighborhood surrounding the school like, and what was the level of parent involvement?

Knox

Well, this was a socioeconomically depressed community, high unemployment. But there had grown up around the school a parent group that was very supportive of the school, even though in the general South Los Angeles community there was great distress about the quality of education in the community at that time, which was 1952, but the parents in this immediate community were very supportive of the school. Not a large number of them, because it didn't attract a large number of parents, but for those parents who did come and participated principally in the PTA, the Parent Teachers Association, we got quite a bit of support. That was evident also in the celebrations that we had. In the elementary school they celebrate every holiday and some were not holidays, and those celebrations, for instance, Cinco de Mayo was celebrated there, and it was a tremendous outpouring of community coming to see the dances of the students.

Knox

And we spent some time preparing the students for that celebration and almost every other holiday we celebrated, and that brought the community in

support of the school, even though as I said, there was growing disturbance in the general South Los Angeles community about the quality of education in all the schools, and it had to do with a lot of things other than just what happened in the classroom. It had to do with the quality of the structures. At that time, Los Angeles was increasing in population. The student population was increasing rapidly, and many schools were being built, new schools throughout the community, particularly in West Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley ,and because these schools in South Los Angeles were old schools, had been there a long time, they were not the same quality of building as you had in the new schools that were being built, and there was some dissent.

Knox

But at this school we got quite a bit of support from the parents, and I'm pleased with the education I got just being assigned there, this was my first elementary assignment and just being assigned there, and I learned a lot about education and particularly the importance of early education.

Stevenson

You mentioned that your colleagues, the teachers at the school had different teaching styles, and you in particular mentioned some with a socially conscious style. Could you give me an example of that?

Knox

Well, primarily I guess that was exhibited in the contact with the parents of the students. What some of the teachers saw is that it took more than just what the school could do to prepare these students, coming from their socioeconomic environment, for success in school and success in life, and so some of the teachers spent a lot of time with the parents, explaining to them the importance of the students getting their homework done and attending school regularly and attending school on time, all of which at that time we had problems. In fact, they still have problems with that. But another one was, I'll give you one example. There was a young student who had some behavior problems, but he did show some interest in music, because at that time the school district had a music program, and he had shown some interest in it.

Knox

So one of the teachers, having some contact with some member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, got a trumpet and gave it to him, and this changed dramatically this student's behavior. He became so interested in music that he also--and as part of being allowed to expand his music knowledge, he had to improve his behavior, and he did. I always remember him as an example of, you have to go another step, a little farther than what you do inside the classroom to be able to have all students succeed.

Stevenson

You mentioned and, of course, we know South L.A. at that time and still is an economically depressed area. What were some of the issues with the children that you were seeing as a result of this?

Knox

What I saw was a wide range of interest in education. I'm sure it exists today. I'm sure that when you live in a depressed area such as that, which wasn't, by the way, the most severely depressed area in the city, but when you live in an area like that, it's sometimes difficult even for the parents to understand that education is a way out. In fact, it is until now there are still some parents who live in economically depressed areas who have difficulty seeing that education will change the condition under which they live, and that was not understood, I believe, by the general educational community, because their focus at that time was that once you entered the school there are all of these rules, regulations, and procedures that you had to follow, and the purpose was to be able to go to college and to advance yourself economically in community and world life, and that's a long perspective from where you are when you are in a poverty area in the conditions under which you're living.

Knox

So what I observed was that there were a few people who recognized that and decided that they had to do more than just teach a class, and then there were others who felt that, "Come to school, follow the rules, learn what we teach you, and that'll benefit you in life." It was interesting to me, and it shaped, I guess, my educational philosophy, because I saw both sides of this in my earliest teaching experience.

Stevenson

Okay. You mentioned that there was concern in the community over the quality of education. How did that distress manifest itself in terms of organizations formed?

Knox

It wasn't a generally apparent concern to that extent in 1952, but it was an organizational concern. At that time it was the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, but there were other burgeoning organizations within the community that were saying to the Board of Education and attempting to say it to the community, that this should be unacceptable. You should have the same quality of buildings and of instruction and instructional materials as any other school in the city, regardless of where it was placed, and I'm witness to the fact that there was a vast difference in the allocation of resources to schools in South Los Angeles, even in the allocation of teaching quality in these schools, separate, different from that allocation of teacher quality in other schools.

Knox

Luckily for me, my first experience was with mostly--in my first assignment, everyone there was a certified teacher of quality. Later on, as the school system increased in population, many teachers of less experience were then assigned to South Los Angeles, and I did notice even then that some teachers assigned to South Los Angeles were teachers who had had difficulty succeeding in other areas of the city. And some of the organizations noticed that and were holding meetings and discussing, and even some were approaching the Board of Education and the superintendent to make changes.

Stevenson

You mentioned there were some burgeoning organizations at that time?

Knox

Well, those were burgeoning organizations, but those organizations solidified later on, and those organizations shaped what became the dispute that became of great activity in Los Angeles Unified School District, and it led to other organizations within the school, the Council of Black Administrators [COBA], as well as organizations outside the school, but as time went on, not

at that early time in 1952 to '54, but later on toward the sixties, when throughout the United States there was rising dispute and discussion and activity about the quality of life of African Americans in the United States. So organizations within Los Angeles followed that same pattern, and I can remember some of them.

Knox

One of them was the United Civil Rights Committee of the NAACP. Mrs. Marnesba Tackett was the leader of that group, and her attempt and the NAACP's purpose was to bring together the organizations that were having this dissent and organize them into a force, and that's called the United Civil Rights Committee. But then later I remember Miss Margaret Wright organized what she called a Black Board of Education. She said, "The people in the school district downtown shouldn't be running our schools," meaning Black population in South Los Angeles. "We should run our own schools." And she organized what she called the Black Board of Education, and she and Assemblyman Bill Greene tried to organize this group into being a force in South Los Angeles, and then there were all kind of others.

Knox

I remember one particularly that should also be mentioned is Walter Bremond. He had what he called a Black Coalition [Black Congress], and he was doing something similar to what United Civil Rights Committee was doing, getting organizations and people who were expressing this dissent to come together and organize together. Walter Bremond is kind of an unsung hero in that, because he persisted until his death to organize African American organizations and people in South Los Angeles. I think his daughter [Charisse Bremond Weaver] is now still following his lead in doing things that he started in South Los Angeles.

Stevenson

Okay. Before we move forward talking about L.A. Unified, you talked a little bit about your community activism. I'd like you to go into that in more detail and how your early life and your experiences in Louisiana sort of informed your activism, your attitudes.

Knox

Well, I'm glad I never really escaped from what I perceived as the lack of concern and the lack of assistance and the lack of even respect that I had seen in Louisiana for African American citizens, and I'm glad--it would have been easy to come to California, I believe, and have tried to forget that and be a different kind of citizen, but I'm happy that that didn't happen, and I'm pleased with how that did affect me. The fact is, those organizations I just mentioned, I attended their meetings and I was an active member of the United Civil Rights Committee, because it was so easy to see the disparity in the treatment of African American students in Los Angeles, which had some relationship to the disparity in education of African American students in Louisiana, not as severe certainly, because it wasn't as severely segregated, but there was enough similarity for me not to be comfortable with it, and that led me to participation with Margaret Wright's group and with Walter Bremont.

Knox

And there was another one I need to mention, because it got so much publicity at the time, was [Maulana] Ron Karenga's US. That's Maulana Karenga's US group, which was very active also during that time. What I guess shaped some of my activities during that time was the fact that I had previously seen such abject discrimination in Louisiana, and I was seeing something similar to that in Los Angeles, and the effect that it was having particularly on young students. Part of what those organizations pointed out to the community was that there was a such a great disparity in the allocation of resources to South Los Angeles schools and those West Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley schools, and that had to do with books. Even one of my observations at the time was that the books that we sometimes received were books that had already been used, and I knew that the state allocated new books. And yet we were receiving in some cases books that had been used. And something similar happened, I believe, in furniture and other allocations to schools in South Los Angeles, and I was particularly, since I was in the school noticing this happening, I was particularly sensitive to the fact that there was this disparity.

Stevenson

Just a follow-up to something earlier. What were some of the philosophical differences in terms of education of the community's children between, say, Margaret Wright and her group and, say, the Urban League and NAACP? I imagine there were various--

Knox

Well, the first was a similarity. They could see the physical differences in the allocation of resources. They also could see the difference in a classroom. For instance, it became much more evident later on, but in high school the courses in South Los Angeles were less rigorous, and even some of them not even available. Some of the courses leading to higher education were not even available in South Los Angeles. Now, those things were kind of visible. You could see they were there. But there were other differences that were not as visible, and one was the difference in the allocation of actual finance, because when South Los Angeles received new, inexperienced teachers, they were also teachers of very low pay, when other schools had experienced teachers whose pay was higher, which really means you have an allocation of resources with a disparity. Despite the fact that what was so visible, that is, the books and materials and the quality of the buildings and all, that's very visible, but what it appeared to me is that outside of education the protest was mostly on what was visible, what was physically visible in the disparity. But inside, there was less protest, it seemed to me, and maybe it was just because it wasn't as visible, was that the difference in the quality of the education that the young students received in the classroom, which I, being on the inside, could see, and in my participation with some of these organizations, I tried to bring that to their attention. But I wasn't the only one. There were other people who were doing the same thing at the same time.

Stevenson

So there were various viewpoints on how to fix the problem, I imagine.

Knox

Yes, there were.

Stevenson

And a whole range. Could you maybe tell me about some of these? What solutions were people suggesting in the community?

Knox

Well, as I mentioned, Margaret Wright said, "Let's have a separate school district for South Los Angeles for African American students." But then there were others who had separate agendas really. Some people concentrated on the buildings and the quality of the buildings, and well, no, some of the same ones--you can't really define them as closely as being exclusive of each other, because some of the same ones and some of the others were more concerned about the quality of the instruction and the quality of the teachers who were assigned, and the experience of the teachers who were assigned. And what United Civil Rights Committee, Marnesba Tackett's group and Walter Bremont's group, the Black Coalition, wanted to do was put all of these together as one big protest, but that was a lot more difficult.

Knox

It was easier, never easy, but it was easier to get a group to concentrate on a visible disparity rather than the less visible disparity of instruction. I can't separate them definitively, but in the discussions that I participated in, it was wide-ranging disparity, along with just, I guess, a historical objection to being singled out. It appeared to be of less importance to the district, the state, and the nation for that matter, as though the African American students and African American people were of less importance to all of those entities, and I think that general kind of, well, anger it was, it was anger. I started not to describe it as anger, but that general kind of anger at these just blatant disparities, as though you really don't count, and I think that coalesced many of those groups to the extent that there were marches on the Board of Education. While there were marches in the southern states, there were also marches in the sixties, too, in Los Angeles, against the Board of Education and the city for that matter.

Stevenson

You mentioned going to a rally where Martin Luther King [Jr.] was speaking at Wrigley Field, and he told the audience that what would be most helpful to

what was going on on the nationwide scene was to do something in Los Angeles.

Knox

Yes. Yes, he was asked, "What can we do to help you in the South?" and he said, "You can help me by helping yourself if Los Angeles."

Stevenson

Okay. So with that as the backdrop, other than education, what were some of the other issues people were organizing around, having to do with bias and discrimination in the city?

Knox

Well, the major one was about employment, the fact that there was discrimination in employment. In almost every employing area, there were fewer African Americans and fewer African Americans in a leadership position, and that was very apparent. So many of the organizations were, well, I won't say less interested in education than in the general employment and quality or equality in employment and in promotions in almost every field, construction. In fact, as new schools were being built, even when the new schools were being built in South Los Angeles, the workers were not African American, and the companies assigned to build those buildings or to improve those buildings did not hire any of the local people, nor did they hire African Americans who were qualified, even if they didn't live in the local community, and that was a major problem particularly of the NAACP and Urban League.

Stevenson

In terms of housing, I know that there was a court case, Shelly v. Kramer, that actually struck down the restrictive housing covenants in '48, but that, in fact, it took several more years for people to have the freedom to move where they wanted.

Knox

Yes. Well, housing, well, obviously you know about the litigation that went on because of restrictive covenants in the sale of homes. When I came to Los Angeles, the Black community was confined largely between Alameda on the east to about, well, actually it was to Main Street. But there had already been

filtered in areas all the way over to Western Avenue of African Americans, particularly the farther west you went, the fewer African Americans, but the higher socioeconomic level, the higher economic level of those people who lived farther west than Western Avenue were most likely to be lawyers, doctors, and actors and actresses. I remember when I first came here, people drove me over to see the beautiful homes of some actors and actresses who lived pretty far west then, and it was interesting--it's been interesting all the time, for that matter--to see the African American movement, first with the removing of the restrictive covenants in the sale of homes, to the west, and the places that were--in fact, not long ago I read in the paper that there was some activity, of some criminal activity, and it said in South Los Angeles, and that was on LaBrea, and that could not have been South Los Angeles until now.

Knox

But that migration was interesting, because when I came here, when I first came in '52, Watts was a changing community toward African Americans. But as African Americans appeared to have moved west, those of Hispanic origin have been moving west from the east side, where they were predominant, and so now Watts is predominantly Latino. Of course, naturally it's a good thing to have these other areas open to those African Americans who wanted to live wherever they wanted to live, and that's the good thing, but the bad thing was by the African Americans being dispersed throughout the community, they lost some of their political power, because when they were concentrated in that first area I mentioned, from Alameda to about Vermont, say, they could elect their own representatives, and so many of the early successes of African American politicians occurred because there was that voting power in that compact community. I think Gus Hawkins was one of the recipients of that, and we all should feel blessed that he was.

Stevenson

What about in those years access to public accommodations and also being served at business establishments, for instance, being able to use the swimming pools and those sorts of things; were they still having issues, were African Americans in the city having trouble in this area?

Knox

I believe I mentioned earlier that when I came here, one of the first jobs I got--I didn't last long on the job, because it became a discussion with my employer. The fact is, I didn't last a week on the job, because of discussion with my employer, because he was telling me that, in essence, you ought to be like Joe Louis, because you shouldn't want to go swim in Pasadena swimming pool, because at that time in Pasadena the swimming pool was not available. But there were not enough swimming pools to worry about in Los Angeles, except one down on 20th Street, which was in the heart of the Black community, and there was no way for it not to be open to the African American students. But all others--for instance, eating places. Wonderful eating places down Central Avenue and all around that area were owned by Black people, and that's where Black people congregated and Black people ate.

Knox

But I went to a restaurant, in fact, when I finally did get a pretty good job and had some money. I decided I wanted to go downtown and eat at a restaurant, and I did. I had a girlfriend, and I took the girlfriend along with me and made a reservation and I went down. The first thing I did was I stood waiting to be seated in a line. I wasn't first in line, but people behind me were seated while I wasn't. Finally I was seated, and then it took a long time before I was served. My girlfriend was very disturbed about it, and I was very adamant about it. I said, to me I just felt, "You're going to serve me or call the police and put me out, but I'm going to sit here till you serve me," and they did. The food was good. By the way, my girlfriend didn't eat anything. She was so disturbed by the fact that everybody stared at us, and I just enjoyed eating the food, watching them stare at me enjoying my food. But anyway, that's just an example of the kind of thing that was going on at the time. While we had access to some facilities, there was still a lot of discrimination going on in eating places. In fact, it's almost in everything.

Knox

The one thing that I can remember, and maybe it's because I came from Louisiana, where to go to a movie in New Orleans, which is a big movie house in New Orleans--from Baton Rouge you'd go to New Orleans, but we had to sit up high in what we called the crow's nest. We couldn't enter the main theater floor. But one thing about downtown, those huge movie houses at the time,

which was also places not only of the movies, but they're also places for--the bands came and they played in between movies and the like--I never personally felt discriminated against at all. I went to those often, because that was the source of some of the greatest musicians ever, especially in the jazz world, and I never felt any discrimination at any of those big theaters downtown. And even though the theaters on Central Avenue, which is where all the African American theaters were at the time, even though they had movies that were not first-run movies, there were so many of them and they had such a wide variety, I enjoyed myself on Central Avenue going to the movies. Also, some of them had some of those movies, especially the Lincoln Theater, had vaudeville like they had downtown and with some of the same outstanding musicians and singers and dancers. And then I could always have all the fun I wanted to just going down Central Avenue to different--it's hard to say what they were, because there was a tremendous amount of outstanding talent. Many of those people, those artists, were not able to make a living in the general community, but they were able to do pretty well in the African American community, and so I saw the greatest bands and the greatest performers and the greatest singers right on Central Avenue. When I came, I lived here. I lived right off Central Avenue on Adams Boulevard, and on a Saturday afternoon it was necessary to go out and stroll Central Avenue.

Stevenson

So I know that Central Avenue really started its decline when people were able to move west. What do you think the implications of not having this, and not just an entertainment district but a business district--you had your doctors, lawyers, businesses. What were the implications of that, do you think, for the larger African American community?

Knox

Well, for the entrepreneurs and the business people, African American business people, it allowed them to get greater opportunities going west, and so Western Avenue became also--and now that movement has even gone farther west, and African Americans had an expanded community for their buildings. But for the small businesses it was devastating, because small businesses, when we're in a very compact community, they thrive. They were thriving then. But when the African American community moved west, the

small businesses found fewer customers, but the large buildings, the large businesses, Golden State Mutual and the like, they moved west and served the larger community, and it was a great improvement for them. The greatest impact, I believe, the greatest negative impact, was the political influence, because having a less-compact community meant we had less-concentrated political power, and so African Americans lost a lot in political power. They lost a lot in small business development, gained a lot in large businesses--well, gain, well maybe say a lot, because when you look at Magic Johnson's Theater, that was then far, far west, and yet it thrives where it is. But it was devastating to some.

Stevenson

Okay. Staying in the fifties, could you tell me what was the local impact of Brown v. Board of Education in terms of the students in our community, the schools? I mean, what trickled down from this nationwide case?

Knox

Well, you see, the changes were so slow when it came to the changes in the population of schools in South Los Angeles that Brown didn't have a very tremendous local impact. What the impact was nationally, and even though in South Los Angeles we supported all of that activity, we were not the recipients of a tremendous amount of change or immediate change then. The fact is, they used it for whatever political purpose they could, because now you have the national law to draw upon when you talk about, to anyone in power, when you talk about local disparity, and so it was more an advantage to us to use it, rather than its immediate effect upon the local schools and the local school community. But nationally, it was among the most historic changes in national attitude toward African Americans and should be celebrated as such forever, really.

Stevenson

I'd also like to find out, in the early sixties you're starting to see Gil Lindsay, for instance, being elected as the first Black councilman. You're beginning to see more and more Blacks being elected. Gus Hawkins goes to Congress in '62. What were the effects on the quality of life in the African American community when we started to see--

Knox

Well, the first thing was, I have to perceive that as, what did it do for me? And I had, having come from Louisiana, having seen early discrimination in Los Angeles, personally I could feel that there was a change in what was going on in this country. There was a change that affected me and the people, the African American people and all people of poverty. And when I looked at now even nationally, for the presidency of the United States, there is some concern about the African folk, about African people. It came as somewhat of a surprise to me that some of the richest people in the world running for office nationally, understanding that they are not going to be elected by the Black vote, were courting the Black vote, and then they're proposing legislation and activities that benefited African American people, and that in my mind, except maybe Abraham Lincoln, I hadn't looked at national people having that concern of the African American people.

Knox

But that and then other Supreme Court decisions about discrimination, outlawing discrimination, and those had a personal effect upon me, because I had seen so much of the opposite that it was good to see some burgeoning change in the perception of African Americans. I guess the word to me was respect. There's some respect for you as people, even if you don't have the political power that someone is seeking to get elected. There's some respect for me as a voter, as a person, as a citizen, and I had some personal--and I'm sure that there were other people who had the same feeling. The fact is, now when I talk to my friends and there's such a joyous thing about [Barack] Obama being elected president, I remember having the same kind of feeling as each one of these changes came about nationally, and even though some of them had less effect upon my life, they still had a great effect upon me, because I perceived this change in how African American people were being perceived.

Stevenson

I'd like to talk about the Watts rebellion of 1965. Could you tell me, what are your perceptions of the causes at the time? Did you see it coming? And then if you could move forward and talk about the rebellion itself.

Knox

I remember my first reaction was "The Fire Next Time." And I kept thinking, it's not next time, it's now, that there had been every kind of an indication that would predict that the situation as it is is going to cause us a major social upheaval, and when it did come, I watched it carefully, and one of the things that struck me so vividly is--can't remember the names of the people now, but I remember that this fellow was driving his car and he was stopped by the police and he was beaten, but that isn't what struck me. When they took him to put him--and this is on TV--when they took him to put him in the paddy wagon, the policeman who put him in kicked him, and my feeling was, you don't know what you just did, that it wasn't his arrest, it wasn't his being handcuffed. It was your kicking him in the behind which said to all African Americans, "You have no respect, and as such, you should pay." My personal feeling was, I wish I could make you pay for what you just did, for one other reason is you don't understand what the symbolism of that is.

Knox

And I believe I mentioned to you that when I was a child I saw this lady who was kicked by a policeman, a state policeman in Louisiana, who was standing in line to see the body of Huey Long after he was assassinated. All of that said to me, you don't understand. You have no idea what that means. But I didn't even then predict that that would lead to the kind of uprising that there was in South Los Angeles. I was working. I was a principal of a school in the Valley, in San Fernando Valley at the time, in August 1965, and I read that teachers and principals in South Los Angeles who were white wanted out. So I went to my area office and I told them I would volunteer to be a principal to take the place of one of those white principals who wanted out of South Los Angeles, out of Watts really. And I wasn't assigned, but I was told to go and visit this school. I went to visit, and I went and I knew the principal, because we were in the association together, so I went and I told him that I was there because I would replace him if he'd wanted to leave, and he was upset. He was white, and he was upset. He said, "I didn't say I wanted to leave." I said, "But they told me that you wanted out." He said, "No. I asked for a school a year ago that was closer to my home, and so I'm waiting for a school closer to my home to open, because I live in the Valley and I wouldn't have this long commute." He said,

"But I'm not leaving because of the Watts uprising." So I respected him for that.

Knox

And so I went back and told them. I said, "No, he is not leaving," and I said, "Another thing is, I am not going to replace somebody to make it convenient for him. I want to replace somebody who wants to leave because they're afraid. Now, if you don't have one of those, I don't want to go." So I went back to my school. Later on I got a call and they said this fellow had asked for it, the 102nd Street School, and I went, and he was surprised. But it wasn't that he had expressed himself that he was afraid, he had expressed to his superior that he was afraid, but he was surprised that I was coming. When I went there, he said he didn't know why I was there. Why was a principal of another school visiting me? And I explained to him, but then he really did want to leave, so I was assigned as principal at 102nd Street School. That was the first month of 1966.

Knox

But what isn't known is that in April of '66 there was another riot. It isn't publicized very much, but there was another uprising in South Los Angeles, and I was there at the time it happened. But your question was what led to it, and what led to it was a series of national and local incidents and activities of the government, local and state and national governments, that were unacceptable to African American people throughout the country, but particularly were distasteful in a place like Watts, as well as in Detroit and some other cities, too, when at that time we were in the midst of affluence all over, except for African Americans. What really led to it is a perception that things are getting better and better, but not for me. And I think as awful as it was in the loss of life, in the loss of property, but it was inevitable, and without some major changes in national, state, and local conscience about African Americans and poor people for that matter, this was likely to happen anyway. But it didn't just happen in Watts, it happened all across the country.

Stevenson

Were you involved--there was a lot of response by various organizations afterwards. Were you involved in any of the response? And could you also talk about what response there was in terms of L.A. Unified?

Knox

Well, the first response from L.A. Unified was to increase the security at the schools in those areas, and the second response was the organization of an office in downtown called the Office of Urban Affairs. That was the response of the school district, was we've got a problem, we've got to make an office to see what the problem is and what we should do about it. They organized this group and put a man named Sam Hammerman over the organization, and he selected William Bailey, Bill Bailey as an assistant, a white, Sam Hammerman, and then he selected a Black, Bill Bailey. At the same time that this happened, a group of us in education had been meeting, and our concern was this disparity that we saw. The fact is, I remember that a group of us, when we took the elementary assistant principal examination, and the largest group of African Americans ever to pass that examination was the one that I was in, and when we first got assigned it suddenly occurred, you know, we've been teachers for a while, but we haven't been administrators. It's a lot different once you're in this position.

Knox

So we decided to put a group together. The group of people, of Black people who were successful on that examination got together, and we started discussing some of the--what we really got together about was how to help each other in different--what do you do when this, what do you do? And that's why we got together. But when we got together, we started talking about this disparities we saw in the education of African American students, because a couple of us were assigned to schools that were partly African American and partly white and Hispanic, but most of us were in schools that were predominantly Black, and we noticed that things are not equal here. They're different here. And so we started talking about the differences, and soon the discussion wasn't about how to help each other in the position, it was, what's going on in the school district and these disparities? So we had several meetings. We met at several different places.

Knox

We had one at my house and we met at other homes, and we discussed and finally decided, well, when they had this organization of Urban Affairs, we said, "Let's take our problem to Urban Affairs, but we're not going to handle them unless they go to Bill Bailey. So we called on Bill Bailey, and Bill Bailey said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll get you a group together," the group of administrators, of principals--we're assistant principals--a group of principals, some Black, a few Black, mostly white, who are principals of schools, predominantly African American. And so he got those groups together. We met at his house. We met at several other homes, and we discussed these disparities with them, and it was nice to talk about, but nothing happened.

Knox

And so the group still met, and I remember one time at Jefferson High School on a Saturday afternoon a group of us met and decided, what we need to do is go to the superintendent. So the group said, "Let's select somebody to go, and these are the things we want you to do when you go," and they selected four of us. Fred Dumas was one. He was a principal at the time, the only African American principal, male principal of an elementary school. And Verna Dauterive, she was a principal at Main Street School, and Llewellyn Mazique, who was principal of Fulton Junior High School, and I was the fourth one. Our idea was, here's what we want you to go and talk to the superintendent about.

Knox

So the four of us made an appointment with the superintendent. He saw us at five-thirty in the afternoon one day, and we sat and talked with him, and it was amazing to me. We were there ready for all kinds of problems, a little fearful about our own careers and all, because we were going to talk to the superintendent and give him nothing but negatives. And he listened. He sat and he listened, and he asked questions and all, and we told him what was wrong, and we gave him incidents of disparity and all, and at the end he said, "Why didn't you come earlier?" Well, that had an effect upon me, because they're saying, "You were expected to do this. You should have been doing it a long time ago."

Knox

So we went back and decided, now let's--oh, yes, by the way, nothing happened as a result of that. He listened. But when we went back we told the group, and the group after some discussion realized nothing is going to happen, come out of that, so they said, "Let's organize ourselves into a group," and so that's how the Council of Black Administrators [COBA] was organized. And as a result of that organization--remember, now, the times. Those were turbulent times, because this was right after the Watts riot, the second Watts riot, right after Detroit and other places, and all kinds of upset was going on. We then decided to be an organization called the Council of Black Administrators. Well, Black was not the very popular term at the time. It was Negro. And so some of the people who had been meeting with us did not like the fact that now we're calling it Black. That was a small group of not many people, though.

Knox

There was another group, a part of people who were in the discussion said, "But we can all get fired," and we could. So for self-preservation, some of them decided not to be affiliated with it. But also it was considered a separatist group. We called ourselves Black, and that was at a time when the other organizations were separatist groups, the Black Panthers and many of the others. And they said, "We don't want to be affiliated with a group. We want to be an American group. We don't want to be affiliated with a separatist group," and so they didn't, and so we lost some of our membership at the time. But the ones that stayed got more important than the ones who left. They organized the Council of Black Administrators, and in December we're going to have the fortieth anniversary of that organization, which has been fighting for equality of services and the promotion of Black educators all of that time.

Stevenson

What was the original charge of COBA, or mission, goals?

Knox

When we got organized, Dumas was selected chairperson, and we told Dumas that we had to go to the school district and let them know we were organized in this. And he said--well, among the things he said I can almost quote, he said,

"This group intends to take positions on those issues which affect the education of Black children or the services of Black personnel, and hope that this may be done within the framework of the institution." The implication there is, we're going to do it whether it's within or without, and I thought that was very impressive then. By the way, not long after that, to some people's surprise, even to mine for that matter, they unanimously agreed to make Council of Black Administrators a part of the school district, and so word went out that this is an organization that's approved by the--by the way, that approval wasn't unanimous now. When I said unanimous, I take that back, because there were several members who were--well, I don't use the term too often, but I'd say there were some racist members of the Board of Education at the time, and they did not vote for it. But at least it passed with a majority. I want to be sure to correct that; it was not unanimous.

Knox

But that organization has been working over time on the two things it said it wanted to do, one, improve education of African American students, and two, improve the selection of African American administrators of quality in the school district, many of whom had been discriminated against. When positions came up, if it wasn't in South Los Angeles they didn't get the position, and I think COBA has changed that to some extent.

Stevenson

Okay, probably a good place to--[End of interview]

1.4. Session 4 (January 7, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm continuing an interview with Dr. Owen Knox on January 7 [2009]. I have some follow-ups from our last session. First, I wanted to find out what was the impact on the African American community and the schools of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., but also of Robert F. Kennedy. What were some of the impacts?

Knox

Well, those tragedies had a tremendous effect on everyone, I guess, but particularly on schools during the time when they're fighting and searching for success for poor children as well as both of those persons gave such great hope to African Americans and African American students and their parents, and so the assassination of Martin Luther King was just one of those shocking things that almost everything came to a standstill, in education as well as everywhere else, I guess, just trying to process that assassination. What happened after his assassination was a tremendous amount of resurgence in the things that he had involved his life in and a greater interest in what he had done historically and what he had done up until his death and what he intended to do, expected to do.

Knox

In schools there were pictures. The fact is, I presented to the Board of Education a set of pictures that were donated so that Martin Luther King's picture could be put in any school that requested it. By the way, there was some resistance even to that from the board. That was a conservative board at the time, and there was some resistance because there were those who felt even until his death that he had other motivations other than just the improvement of life in the United States.

Knox

What also happened is there was a greater interest, it seemed to me in all of education, in the life and the life of his times. That's about the extent of the positive that came out, because the negatives were so tremendously effective. Education itself, if you can think of anything good that came out of those assassinations, I think education itself profited by bringing to the forefront the dreams and ideals of Martin Luther King. What was kind of a surprise to me was the extent to which the assassination of John [F.] Kennedy had an effect upon the African American community, because somehow there was the belief that Kennedy stood for better times for African American people, and it was like losing a member of the African American family when John Kennedy was assassinated, and also maybe almost an equal extent to the assassination of Robert Kennedy.

Stevenson

Just to follow up on the particular day of the assassination, was there a concern with keeping peace in the schools? And sort of a second part to that question, I know there were efforts made to keep people in the community as well.

Knox

Yes. I mentioned some positives that came out of very tragic events, but as you know, throughout the country the assassination of Martin Luther King brought riots and uprisings throughout the country, particularly in Detroit and in Washington, D.C., but throughout the country and even in Los Angeles. There was this malaise that no matter how much you try, there's some event that stymies your efforts to bring about improvement in the life of American people. At the schools it was necessary particularly to do a tremendous amount of counseling to prevent the death of Martin Luther King from being entirely disruptive in the educational process. Throughout the country and throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District there were efforts, there were counselors, and there were obviously additional security personnel at almost every school. And it had some effect. I think the counseling had a great effect, because in the counseling in the schools it was more, "Now that he's gone, we have a responsibility." That kind of counseling was very effective.

Knox

But it was such a tremendous blow to African Americans that it was very difficult to keep things quiet in the Black community; not quiet, keep them from exploding really in the African American community, because it was such a tragic loss and such a loss to hope. I think that was as great as the loss of life was the loss of hope and expectation that things were going to improve. But I do give some praise to the Los Angeles Unified School District in the efforts it made to keep the schools at least operating to what extent it could during that tragic time.

Stevenson

Could you talk a little bit about what the effect was on both the schools and larger community of the rise of local Left-leaning groups such as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam?

Knox

Yes. The Black Panther Party was just one of those that had an effect upon the schools particularly. One of the good things about it, the Black Panther Party organized breakfasts for kids, because one of their assumptions was students of poverty, particularly Black students of poverty, can't learn in schools when you're sitting there hungry, and so they organized breakfasts at local churches and local halls, to give breakfast to the students before they arrived at school. Also, the Black Panther Party brought an awareness to the disparities of services in the community, although some of its actions as reported in the news anyway, were considered revolutionary, and the fact is, maybe they considered themselves revolutionary. And that kind of publicity made almost everything that the Black Panther Party did a negative. Later on there were certain other kinds of activities reported in the news that were considered not just revolutionary but also criminal by the Black Panther Party, but out of all of these there's always the negative and the positive, and I felt part of the positive was that they brought to attention to everybody that there were huge disparities in the lives as well as in the education of African American people.

Knox

There was another group called the Simbionese Liberation Society [Army], and that group, which got a lot more publicity because of its activities that had to do with banks and other institutions, it had less effect upon education than did the Black Panther Party, in my opinion, because their focus was more on what they called the liberation of African American people than upon education, and the Black Panther Party had both, but it also had an interest in the education of African American students.

Knox

There was another group, Dr. Maulana Karenga's group, US. At that time, US was one of us, and the Simbionese Liberation Party and the Black Panther Party were in the communities, organizing the people for what they promoted was justice and equality for African Americans and all people. But that one also, Karenga's US Party was also very active at the same time. In fact, there's some time during that time that the Black Panther Party and the US group had a confrontation on this campus. At that same time, Marnesba Tackett had something called a United Civil Rights Committee of the NAACP, and the purpose of that group was to bring together all of these disparate groups that

were fighting for the same thing, for equality for African American students and African American people, and she was attempting to bring all of these together in one considered effort. It was not easy to do, but what was effective about the United Civil Rights Committee was that it had a focus on education, and Marnesba Tackett's, many of her presentations--by the way, she died last year--her many presentations were before the Board of Education. So her group's effectiveness was greater on education itself--[unclear] on education, because it went directly to the Board of Education and to the schools in the local community.

Knox

And there was Walter Bremond. Walter had what he called a Black Coalition, and he was also attempting to do the same thing of bringing together the disparate groups in the community that were fighting for equality. The fact is, at that time there were so many groups that I remember also there was a Mothers of Watts after the Watts riots, and the Sons of Watts, and all of these groups were active at the same time. But what's interesting to me about that is all of these groups were--this is around 1966, and during that time we were having these discussions, a group of us, educators, Black educators were having the discussion about the inequities in the schools that we who were educators could see directly.

Knox

And one of the persons that I knew well and met often with at that time was Fred Dumas. Fred was from New Orleans, where he had attempted to become a principal. He became a teacher in New Orleans, and he found the same kind of a disparities as we were talking about in Los Angeles were even greater in New Orleans, and so he organized the teachers in New Orleans. The purpose was to get equal pay for Black teachers to that of white teachers in New Orleans. But then he was inducted in the Army, and he came out and he tried to become a principal in New Orleans, and they refused to give him a principalship, and so he came to California and he became a principal. The fact is, he became the first African American male principal of an elementary school. There were some female principals at the time, not many, of elementary schools, I mean, because there were male principals of at least

several senior high schools and middle schools--at that time they were junior high schools--in Los Angeles.

Knox

But he and I and a few other people who were in the schools looking at those inequities, we got together and during all of this other discussion I told you about, these other organizations in the community, we decided to organize the administrators in Los Angeles Unified School District, and that became the beginning of the Council of Black Administrators [COBA], and Fred Dumas became the first president of the Council of Black Administrators. But at that time in the early and middle sixties, it was a time of great turmoil in Los Angeles, particularly in education.

Stevenson

What would you say his legacy was on the education of Black children, but also on L.A. Unified?

Knox

Of Fred Dumas?

Stevenson

Yes.

Knox

Well, among many things, I just admired Fred because what Fred brought that I couldn't bring was a quiet strength, and I had difficulty with the being quiet. What I admired Fred for is he made tremendous presentations before the Board of Education. One of his first ones was called "Corporate Image." And what he depicted in Corporate Image in his presentation to the board was how the school district looks in the eyes of people who are suffering some discrimination or inequity in the district, and that, I think, was perhaps the first time--I hadn't even thought of how the school district looked. But when he talked to them about, "Your corporate image in the community, not just in the Black community, when you allow these discrepancies and disparities to exist," and I thought that was a tremendously powerful presentation. But he made quite a few more, and one of them was--these were made as a representative of the Council of Black Administrators.

Knox

He made several others, and one of them I also remember was the one for--and this was early in this history--for the establishment of a holiday, a school holiday on the birthday of Martin Luther King, and he was one of the first to say this. So your question was about his impact. I think it was tremendous at the time, because here was a professional, thoughtful, scholarly presentation about the same things that were going on in the community, which were explosive and considered themselves to be revolutionary and certainly disruptive, and I think the fact that Fred took that tack in dealing with discrimination made him very effective, and I think that effectiveness remains to this day. I think that because of the method he used at that time and the way he went about making his presentation caused the school board to take a look at itself, rather than justifying some rebuttal to the complaints that were being made at the school district.

Stevenson

Mr. Dumas headed up Urban Affairs, is that right?

Knox

Yes, at a time--well, let me tell you what happened. My memory is that the school district in responding to all of these demands for equity made a loan of Fred Dumas to I guess the city or state government, and he headed up an office whose name I can't recall at this moment, but to deal with the inequities not just in the school district but in the city. He stayed there a while and then returned to the district. As I remember it, he was displeased--well, he was not comfortable in doing what he was doing, because if I remember correctly, he thought it was ineffective, and that's part of the reason he requested that he be allowed to return to the school district as a principal. By the way, he returned to be principal of Crescent Heights Elementary School, and the reason I know that so well is because my son was a student there.

Stevenson

So the Urban Affairs Department, what was the charge of that particular department in L.A. Unified?

Knox

Let me see if I can remember. Well, let me put it this way. First, he was not in charge of the Urban Affairs Committee, the school district. He was in charge of this special office, political office about the school district. The Urban Affairs office was within the school district, and the Urban Affairs office was--there was a fellow named Sam Hammerman, who was put in charge of the Office of Urban Affairs. The reason for having Office of Urban Affairs is because of all the complaints that were coming to the school district. This is different from what I was just discussing, the political office and the school district's Urban Affairs Office, and Sam Hammerman hired as his assistant Bill Bailey, William Bailey, Bailey being Black and Sam Hammerman was white. They were working in the Office of Urban Affairs, and their business was to respond to the requests of these groups of Black administrators and United Civil Rights Committee and all these other groups. And by the way, that's one of the ways that the Council of Black Administrators became organized, because we went, the Council of Black Administrators went to the Urban Affairs office and discussed with the Urban Affairs office what the problems and disparities and inequities were.

Knox

And part of it had to do with the promotion of Black personnel. It was difficult for a Black person to become an administrator or even a higher office than principal of a local school, and so that was one of the requests they made to the Office of Urban Affairs. The other request was that there were inequities in funding, as well as in practices and even materials in the schools that were predominantly African American. And so the Urban Affairs office's purpose was to see how to respond to these demands, and the Urban Affairs office then had several meetings, in homes, in the community, to discuss some of these. I'm not sure what the purpose of the board was in establishing it. I'm sure that they were under great stress and pressure to do something about inequity, and as a result of these meetings that were being held, that's how the Council of Black Administrators--well, we were not a council at the time. But it went before this group, and we made our presentation before the group of Urban Affairs. But having met several times to get the presentation together kind of assisted us in becoming an organization. We were just a group of people who wanted to say something about the disparities. But in

having this series of meeting it brought the group closer together in its planning.

Knox

And so then in about 1968 we went to the Board of Education and asked that the Council of Black Administrators be accepted as a unit within the school district, and after some discussion and a series of meetings, in August of 1968 they decided to do so. And so the Council of Black Administrators really was assisted in organizing itself by the fact that it had the Urban Affairs committee working. That was not one of their intents, but it was one of their results, and Fred Dumas was selected to make the presentation in 1968 to the board and became the president of the Council of Black Administrators, and that was forty years ago.

Stevenson

Okay. One more thing about Mr. Dumas. I understand that he was involved in creating some what they would call today diversity programs or cross-cultural programs?

Knox

I'm not as aware of--in his local school he perhaps did so. I remember when he became a region or area superintendent in the Valley, and I think that's the place from where he retired. I remember that in that office he did a lot to bring the groups in the Valley, predominantly white groups in the Valley, and now that we were having integration, a lot of students and some teachers who were African American were then sent to the Valley to integrate some of the schools. Fred then got a core group in his area where he was superintendent that did a lot to kind of bring some, well, let's see, it wasn't cohesion. I don't want to use the wrong word, because it wasn't that. It brought together some people of good will, both white and Black, and as a result of that, part of the integration in the Valley went a little more smoothly than it would have gone otherwise.

Stevenson

Okay. I want you to talk a little bit about the process of having more Black vice principals, principals and administrators then, and who all was involved in that effort, including parents and community groups.

Knox

Well, all those groups I mentioned earlier had some effect upon that, because it set the stage that something has to be done, and so some of the results of those demands, even after some of those groups were no longer in existence--I think the one that survived was Karenga's US and the NAACP, but its United Civil Rights Committee did not survive. But all of that activity from all those different groups set the stage for there being some consideration for the promotion of African American educators to higher positions of authority, and also to lessening, not diminishing, the disparity in the services that were provided for African American schools and others in the school district.

Knox

What appears to me is that without the kind of tumultuous activity in the early sixties, some of the gains that African American educators as well as African American students made would not have happened. For instance, the amount of money spent on schools in South Los Angeles--it was South Central at that time--in South Central Los Angeles was far less per student than the amount of money spent per student in the Valley and West Los Angeles. By the way, that disparity still exists, not to the same extent it was then, but it still exists. And some people said, "No, well, they've built new buildings in South Los Angeles, and so they improved." The major difference in the amount of money spent, it seems to me, has to do with the teaching personnel. Because of an agreement that the school district has with the union, the teachers can to some extent select where they want to go to teach. And so for whatever reasons, and it may just be fair, and it may be difficulty of the job or for whatever purposes, most of those teachers who get any tenure move out of South Los Angeles to other areas of the city. Well, that means experienced teachers are constantly moving out, which are being replaced by inexperienced teachers, and as a result inexperienced teachers receive less money, experienced teachers receive more money, and so more money is spent on schools not in South Los Angeles, and that exists until today. That disparity has not changed.

Knox

The other one that hasn't changed very much is the success of African American students in the schools in Los Angeles Unified School District. In the present day, African American students have the least amount of success of any ethnic or racial group in the City of Los Angeles Unified School District, and that's on almost any measure of academic success that you use, and that's the reason the Council of Black Administrators--and I just wish all the other organizations would join in the fight to change that, because what bothers me most about today and that disparity is that there is no concerted community effort that I know of to bring about the change. What's really devastating about it to me is they're beginning to blame the victim for his own plight.

Knox

Well, when you--even some of our Black national leaders are beginning to say, are saying, not beginning, are saying that Black parents need to do more, Black students need to do more, and maybe part of that is true, but that's not the major problem. The major problem is the effectiveness of education of African American students, and unless you believe that African American students have a diminished capacity to learn, unless you believe that, the scores we see in the schools should not exist. And I don't hear anybody saying, "I believe that African American students are less intelligent." But I don't hear the same people saying that it's schooling that makes the difference, and I'm sometimes not popular in saying that, but when you say that the students are at fault, why? Well, they sit in class and they pay attention and all the kind of things they say about African American students in schools, that's the result of the failure of the schools prior to the time that he got to school, and were the result of the failure of the schools to succeed with his parents, and the failure of the schools with his parents' parents. And so sometimes to me it seems we are blaming the student for our failures, for generations of our failures in schools.

Knox

The other part of that is the promotion of African American personnel. When you look at just a few years ago, following all the upset about the disparities and the like, and all the community activities, when you look at that you see what happened then. Well, at one time Los Angeles Unified School District had in its top echelon of administrators, even the superintendents themselves, an

African American male, the CFO, Chief Financial Officer, an African American male, the finance chief or assistant chief financial officer, was an African American male, the head of classified personnel was an African American male. Now look at it. That was just a result of the tumult of the early sixties and middle sixties. Now look at it. Above the position of area superintendent there is one African American male in the downtown office, an assistant superintendent, and I don't see any clamor as we saw in the sixties for that disparity.

Stevenson

Then and now, what effect would you say changing demographics, racial-ethnic demographics in the district come into play?

Knox

Well, that's one of those two-edged swords. What happened in Los Angeles is--this has happened in Los Angeles for a long time before. In the 1960s and all earlier than the 1960s, most of the African American population was, say, east of Crenshaw, east of Western even, and so it was a compact area. And getting protests at that time was fairly easy, because African American people lived close. Then after some legal success by NAACP and Urban League and several others, the rest of the city was open to African Americans, and so there was this local diaspora, and Black people moved west. But in doing so, they joined other communities and so their political effect became lessened.

Knox

Now, let me hasten to say that that's also a perception, because even now African Americans have a political, I wouldn't call it power, but a political voice to the extent that it can still elect white personnel to higher positions in the state and the city. But nevertheless, it lost a lot of its power by this dispersal of the population throughout the city, and maybe that's part of the reason it's difficult right now to get protests for African American students not succeeding in the Los Angeles Unified School District. I know that some of the leaders, NAACP and the Urban League and some other groups, I know that they meet privately perhaps with the heads of all the departments and schools and in the city, but what it appears to me that's needed is a mass, a massive protest to the devastating effect that a failure of educating the

African American youth in Los Angeles Unified District has now and will have in the future--and let me hasten to say, to educate African American students is not difficult, unless you believe it's difficult, or unless you believe it's impossible.

Stevenson

Okay. Maybe you could tell me in all of this about your first position as vice principal and principal.

Knox

Yes. When I started district, I really started district at secondary. My major in the university was chemistry, and I had great difficulty trying to get a job in the district. The closest I came is I was substitute teacher at one of the high schools. I returned to college and got an elementary credential and started teaching at elementary school, and I was told when I started that what you should do is aspire to some of these positions of authority in the school district, and I was also told it'll take about eight years as a teacher before you can even apply. But anyway, I took all the tests for assistant principal and principal, and I was assigned as assistant principal to South Park Elementary School in the first promotion that I received.

Knox

Prior to that time, though, one of the ways to get there was to teach as a training teacher for aspiring teachers who were working for a credential from the universities, and so from UCLA and SC, Cal State and the like, their students would be assigned to some of the schools for some hands-on experiences. And if you became what they called a training teacher, that was one step to become assistant principal, so my intent was to become a training teacher, and I found that extremely difficult. One time I was told that for--by the way, the schools, UCLA and SC and Cal State, ran these programs with the school district. I applied to be a training teacher, and I was told--it was at USC's training program. I was told by a person who may or may not have been telling the truth, but told me that my application was turned down because as the person in charge of the program said to this person who was telling me, "We have never had an incident with our young female aspirants to teaching, and we don't want to have one." What that said to me is, I am Black, so

therefore I shouldn't be trusted to be a mentor or a trainer of these young white females, because there may be an incident.

Knox

But later on my application was still there, and later on a Swedish principal of a little school in Hollywood called me and asked me if I would be interested in an opening at her school. And I said, "Yes, I would, but I think you should know that I'm Black, and you should know that before you even interview me." She said, "I knew that before I called you. Will you come in for an interview?" And I went in and this lady told me, "I'm not interested in your race. I want to know can you teach, and can you teach young people how to become a teacher?" I said, "That I can do." She said, "Then you're hired." I did that for a couple of years, and then I took the assistant principal exam and I passed, and I was assigned to South Park Elementary as assistant principal, and subsequent to that I took the principal's examination, and I was on the list. They make a long list of about fifty people, and I was on the list about fourth down, I think. And as openings occurred, they filled them.

Knox

In my memory, they filled all the positions above me until they got down to my name. The next school, at the 75th Street School, the principal position was open. I was called and said, "Be prepared, because you may be assigned to that one." And I was never assigned to that one. Then what happened, the next opening was in San Pedro, and I didn't get that one. It went to somebody below me. Then there was one somewhere in the Valley, and I didn't receive that one either. By that time, three positions below my position had been filled, so I went down and talked to the assistant superintendent, who was in charge of personnel, and I was told that they tried to choose the person who best fit that position. So I said, "Well, wherever the next vacancy occurs, if I'm not assigned to that one then I will make whatever legal protests need to be made, because I'm being passed over when other people who are less qualified according to the list are being assigned."

Knox

And I was given the next one, the next opening for principal. It was El Dorado School. Now, El Dorado School--I still lived in South Los Angeles--is the last

school in the northern end of the Valley. If you miss getting the off ramp there, you're going on to Bakersfield. Well, anyway, I'm not sure I was told. People have speculated that they figured I wouldn't accept it because it was so far away, but there was no chance of me not taking it, and I did. By the way, there were some concerns about how the community would feel about having--they'd never had one at this school, an African American, and certainly not an African American male. It was a tremendous experience, a wonderful experience. I was welcomed by all the people. I never at any time felt at all that I wasn't the person they would like to have at that school. It was a wonderful experience for me, because it did something for me. I went with some trepidation, too, because I said, maybe they're right, maybe the people don't want the Black man in these schools. It turned out to be just the opposite.

Knox

It wasn't that the communities weren't ready. It was that the people who made the assignments weren't ready, but the communities were ready for integration and so I had a wonderful experience, and all of my experiences as an administrator from that time on have been positive.

Stevenson

That's interesting, because Jim Taylor relays his experience being vice principal and principal at [unclear] in the Valley very similar, had a very nice experience.

Knox

The problem was the fear was more in the minds of the people who made the assignments than it was in the communities, and by that time, with all the kind of activity that had gone on and all the problems of race that happened throughout the country and locally, those communities were saying, "We're not those people. We're not standing in the doors to keep Black people from coming in." One of the other positives was that in the Valley the CSUN, Cal State University, Northridge, they were working also on the same problem of race, and so they were very helpful. They were helpful to me and helpful to the whole community. In fact, I think they had a lot to do with the fact that those communities were no longer fearful of African Americans or other than white administrators and teachers in their schools.

Stevenson

I do have one follow-up from earlier when we were talking about the different organizations, Black Panther Party, etc. Were you aware that any of the organizations recruited inside the high schools? Were there student members of these organizations?

Knox

Oh, yes. I had an interesting experience with that. During this time that these organizations that I mentioned, the Black Panthers and all the others that we talked about before--one other that I didn't mention was the Communist Party.

Stevenson

Yes. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Knox

The Communist Party, or the people I met, I don't know about the Communist Party, but the people I met who considered themselves communists, who were going to assist Black people in getting equality, were university students. Just the ones I met; I don't know about the others; the ones I met. One of the experiences I had with them was I was--at the time then, I had been asked to do a special project for South Central Los Angeles for the school district, called the Jordan Educational Complex. The purpose was to see if we couldn't change the organization, because the regular organization of the school district was senior high school, separate division, junior high school, separate division, elementary school, separate division. They had separate superintendents. They had their business separately.

Knox

Well, this was not the way students go through school, so the purpose was, can you reorganize this in such a way that the elementary, middle, and senior high school are in an organization together? So we tried that with the Jordan Educational--Jordan High School, its feeder middle schools and the feeder elementary schools, so instead of those people meeting separately, the principals and the other officials and the teachers of senior high school and the middle school and elementary schools all met together to plan. So we

organized that one, and the fact is, it preceded the reorganization of the school district in some of the ways it is now. But while I was working at that organization, there was what they call a blowout. That's where the students just walked out of school one day. All of them left the school one day, and one of the schools that they left was Fremont [High School]. Fremont had a walkout.

Knox

So I was dispatched by the school district to see what can you do, what should we know, and what's going, and how can we handle this? So I got involved with it, and to get involved I had to go to some of the community meetings, because these didn't just happen in the schools. These happened in the community and went to the schools. And I found out there were a few people in Fremont--I don't know about the others. There were school walkouts throughout the city, senior high schools throughout the city. But in Fremont I found that the leaders were young, white students who went to the schools and went to the communities and organized the communities and organized the walkout.

Knox

So I decided to go to one of their meetings, and I sat in their meeting and listened to them talk about revolution to these young students. Some of the students were student leaders, bright kids. I won't identify them now, but there's one of them, an extremely bright fellow, who led the walkout at Fremont, and I sat and listened to what he was being told, and I couldn't keep my peace. So when they finished talking and saying that what you should do is refuse to go to these schools, I just couldn't keep my peace, because I can't see anybody saying the best way to bring about change is not to go to school. So I had to stand up, and they were talking about being revolutionaries, and I said, "Well, let me tell you what the real revolutionary is. The real revolutionary is one who brings about change, not one who yells and screams and all, but one who brings about change." I said, "And I am about bringing out change and equity in the school district."

Knox

So I was talking to the leaders, the school leaders, and these young communists were talking about their theory about revolution, and I said, "Well, I'm going to bring about change. Therefore, I'm a revolutionary." I said, "But my change is going to be in the school, not in the park where you go when you leave, walk to school. It's going to be in the school. So if you want to meet with me, meet with me in the school, and we'll sit and talk right there about how to bring about change in this school." And when I went back downtown, the school district had had someone else who didn't identify himself as being with the school district, listening, and he reported to the superintendent that I went into the group and told them I was a revolutionary. And the superintendent called me in and said, "I understand you stated yourself as a revolutionary." And I said, "Yes, I did," and I explained to them the context in which I said I'm a revolutionary. And he said, "Well, you've got to be careful. You can't go out there representing the school district saying you're a revolutionary." I said, "I understand that," I said, "but you understand the scene where that's said and what I really said and meant by it." Well, anyway it didn't matter with me anymore. Nobody ever mentioned it to me after that one time with the superintendent.

Knox

But I explained all of that to say that I had one experience where the Communist Party, at least these representatives who said they were representatives of the Communist Party, were saying that revolution or change would come about if we just refuse to obey the law and just refuse to go to school. Anyway, that young man that I saw as the leader of that group who was listening later on became a lawyer and is a noted lawyer in the city.

Stevenson

I know who you're talking about. Yes.

Knox

But anyway, I was a little surprised about who the leadership was, and in another meeting I mentioned to these African American student leaders that, "You tell me that what you're going to follow is a young white person who tells you, who's maybe now hardly older than you, and tells you what to do? You are a bright, brilliant Black person. You ought to tell them what to do." I

was irate at what was happening to the students, but I was pleased that I got an opportunity to be in the middle of that one. By the way, when I left that meeting, and this may have just been in my own mind, but I drove down Florence Avenue from the meeting, and there was a car behind me. I got on the freeway and went north, and there was a car behind me. I put my right-turn signal on to say that I was going to get off, and the car did the same thing behind me. And I went right to the off ramp and I cut back on. The other person, they cut back on and followed me. The next time I didn't put my signal on. I just went very fast--they went fast--and when I got to the next off ramp I waited till the last minute and I cut off, and they went on straight. Now, they may have not been following me, but I was concerned because I'd just left this meeting. These people who called themselves communists were displeased with what I had said, and I was worried because that was not a safe time in the city anyplace. But like I said, that just might have been my own fear. But I'm saying that because I think part of what happened in other schools was similar to what happened at Fremont.

Stevenson

Right, because they also had the blowouts in some of the East L.A.--

Knox

Yes, the first one was out in East L.A., and then it happened in several others. And I had another experience that may have nothing to do with this, but Hamilton had a walkout. My son was going to Hamilton.

Stevenson

What year was that?

Knox

I think it was the same time the others happened.

Stevenson

Maybe '71?

Knox

About that.

Stevenson

Yes, because I was there.

Knox

Oh, you were there?

Stevenson

Yes.

Knox

Well, my son came home--when I came home that night, my son was waiting up for me. At that time we had to go to meetings every night almost. And I got home, he was waiting up for me, and Margaret, his mother, said, "He wants to talk with you." So I sat down and said, "What's going on?" He said, "Well, today we walked out." I said, "You did?" "Yeah." I said, "Why did you walk out?" He said, "Jefferson [High School]," on the other side of town, "walked out, and therefore we thought it would be a support to Jefferson if we did." I said, "And so what do you do?" He said, "We walked out." I said, "Well?" He said, "Later on we went back to school," and he said, "but the principal said we were suspended, all of those that walked out were suspended." And I said, "Okay. So what's next?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, let me tell you. If you're asking me to give you some advice, you should have asked me last night before you walked out." I said, "So you must have had a plan of some kind. You wouldn't just--I know you had a plan." I knew he didn't. "So whatever your plan was, use your plan. You walked out. You want to go back in?" What he was thinking, I'm an official downtown, I could reinstate them. I said, "So tomorrow night when I come home, tell me how did you get back in school." And I was scared all day long. I said, oh, my God, I don't know what's going to happen.

Knox

I got home that night. This time all is quiet. He waited till I'd had dinner and he said, "Oh, Dad?" And I'm still worried. I said, "Yeah, how did it go?" He said, "We got back in." I said, "What did you do?" He said, "We went, a group of us went to the principal and sat down and we explained to him why we did it, and he put us on probation, and he said that we could come back to school

but we're on probation, and if we did anything like that again we'd be expelled." And I said, "That's right." I said, "You decided to do it. You have to figure out how to undo it, and I'm glad you did that." I wasn't going to say a word in his behalf, and I made it extremely careful. I even told my secretary, "If the principal calls here, tell him I'm busy. I'm not going to talk with him, because I know he would want to know what I want to do. I don't want to tell him." But I was so pleased that he did it himself.

Stevenson

Just to follow up, when you were dispatched to Fremont by L.A. Unified, did they give you any instructions?

Knox

No, they didn't. What they were saying is, "We need to know what's going on. What caused it?" And what they wanted me to do was just find out what it is and come back and report to them so they could take whatever action was necessary, and since I was known in the community, because I'd been a principal in the community, I'd been assistant principal, principal, and a teacher all in that same community--South Park is one of the feeder schools--so they didn't give me any instruction. They just figured, just collect information, and they didn't expect me to say anything. I don't think they expected it. They didn't tell me to say anything, but I couldn't sit there without saying it.

Stevenson

So what was the response when you did report back?

Knox

The first response was the one I gave you. "What are you doing calling yourself a revolutionary?" What he thought is I was identifying myself with the communists, and I had to explain to him, "The report you got didn't tell you everything that went on." But I was irate, though. I was irate when I sat--here are these nineteen-, maybe twenty-year-old white girls and two white fellows, telling a whole group of Black people what to do. And my first reaction was, this is inappropriate. This is totally inappropriate. And maybe that triggered whatever else I was to do in that meeting, because I was just irate when I sat

there and said, Black people almost the same age--these are eighteen-, seventeen-, eighteen-year-old students, and here about twenty-one-, twenty-two-year-old white students are telling Black people that you know better what Black people ought to do than Black people know themselves, and I guess that was my reaction.

Stevenson

Okay. I think this might be a good place to--[End of interview]

1.5. Session 5 (January 21, 2009)

Stevenson

Good morning. I'm interviewing Dr. Owen Knox on January 21, 2009. I'd first like to talk about sort of as background the couple of landmark court cases. One, of course, is Brown v. Board in 1954, but even before that in 1945 there was a local cases called Westminster v. Mendez, where a Hispanic family brought a court case against the Westminster School District on behalf of their eight-year-old daughter. It was ruled in their favor, and she was able to attend the white school. Brown v. Board, of course, mandated that segregated education was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional, and lastly, Jackson v. Pasadena [City School District] School Board again said that segregated schools violated the equal-protection clause of the Constitution. These nationwide cases, what impact did these national cases have on local education, particularly of African American children, and what were people that you were associated with talking about in terms of how these nationwide cases had a local impact, or if they did?

Knox

Yes, they always had a local impact, because the major impact that I saw, that I observed, was that each one, to what extent you knew something about them, each one served as a stimulus to the local activity, because prior to that time you were just met with rebuttal. But when you have a national case or even a local case that gets publicity locally, the local groups are stimulated, and everybody I knew where I lived opposed segregation. But there were so few opportunities to actually do anything about it, and to have any legal backing for doing it meant that it was less effective and as a result less energy

was put into them, even though there were a lot of complaints. But now, the moment you see nationally or locally or any one place where there's been a victory, then it stimulated the local activity of the NAACP and all the other groups that had any interest in ending segregation.

Knox

What I saw was simply more conversation as a result, people saying, I got an idea that, "Maybe we can do something about it." Prior to that, what I observed was some resignation as though--people used to put it, "We can't get nothing done here," which is kind of a prevailing attitude in the Deep South anyway. But whenever you got that glimmer of hope from some other place where some activity had occurred and had been successful, it invigorated the local group.

Stevenson

So where were and who were the people calling for integrating or desegregation, and how early was that in the district or in the community?

Knox

In Los Angeles, for the time I arrived here in 1940, and I became interested in the school district not long after that, my observation was that there was lots of local discourse, local discourse, community discourse. There was a lot of even local--you couldn't call them protests, because they didn't go anywhere, but a lot of angry discussion in the community about the conditions that they saw. And this grew in the communities, particularly South Los Angeles, to the extent that most of the local groups at that time--the principal ones were Urban League and NAACP, for African Americans anyway, Urban League and NAACP, and the new SCLC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and there was a lot more discussion now as we see some expectation of hope, and then the local cases gave that some impetus, too.

Knox

Almost all the groups that I met with, whether they were religious groups or social groups, there was a seething discontent. But I think the fact that nationally there was legislation, or nationally there was a court decision, kind of coalesced those groups to the extent that they then became a force locally

for desegregation. I remember during the first tentative desegregation efforts in Los Angeles, by court order by the way, that these local groups then coalesced and became a force in the community. I remember in Urban League there were several meetings with and without educators. My interest became that most of the effort for desegregating a school was coming from outside the educational establishment, outside. Educators were not participating to the same extent.

Knox

Now, that had several reasons, I believe, as I observed. One was those educators who had jobs within the school district had concern about how active they could be for desegregation and still retain their positions. I believe we talked about the founding of COBA, because in the beginning of COBA the idea was that even though desegregation was moving, equity was not being practiced. But as the court cases went through the courts and decisions were made and the order was given to the Los Angeles Unified School District to desegregate, it was necessary for COBA and any other educational organization to become active, because some of the demands about what they were requesting, some of those demands were requesting things that were not necessarily educationally sound. They were talking about facilities and the like, but they were not talking about education itself, what happens to a child in a classroom, in a desegregated classroom, and so when educators became involved, the Council of Black Administrators and other organizations became involved, even the universities, by the way, became involved, then it became not just facilities, but it also became equality regarding the quality of instruction.

Knox

The fact is, the integration effort, one of the expectations of that--if a Black child sits in an all-Black class in an all-Black area, the method by which he can fail to get equity is easy, because you can just fail to give the same supplies and activities and all the rest to all of those people in that area. So the idea was, if a Black child then sits in a class with a white child, they cannot refuse to give the same quality education to the Black child, and while that was kind of an impetus for desegregation, it was also short-sightedness in that not perceiving that even though Black children attended previously all-white

schools, they could be segregated on that campus, which amounted to segregation whether they were there or not, and that is what happened in many cases.

Knox

For instance, African American children, students were to a disproportionate extent put into remedial classes and into special-education classes. But besides that, in many cases they were made to feel so uncomfortable that they had to gather together to support each other, and so they segregated themselves on the white campus, and by the way, that remains until today, partially because it was their only support, because they were not receiving equitable welcoming treatment by the teachers. Many of the teachers themselves did not favor desegregation, but they were forced to have African American students in their classrooms, and even until today we have a problem in equality of educational success with African American students even attending a previously all-white school.

Stevenson

What were the viewpoints you were hearing from Black parents in the community?

Knox

Well, that varied. I joined the group that said one of the problems was transportation, because most of the African American students lived in the area that was segregated, and just to be transported to--and in the beginning there was no transportation provided, even in the law there was no transportation provided, to go to a school that was all-white, which was usually quite a distance away. So I joined the group called Transport a Child, TAC we called it, Transport a Child, and we went to the local churches to recruit students, and to do that we had to talk to the parents to have them allow their child to get on a bus that we would provide, that would take the students to a previously segregated, all-white school. But it was interesting, the response we got from parents. Many of the parents did not trust sending their child out of the community where they were not able to be themselves to see that they were treated fairly, so many of the parents turned us down and said, "No, I'd rather not."

Knox

Then there was the other part. There was the feeling that, "My child will not be safe if my child is taken to that hostile territory where this other school is, and so I don't want to trust my child to go." As a result, many of the children on the first bus that we provided--by the way, it came to an elementary school not too far from here. Many of the students who came were children of the people who were working in the organization of Transport a Child, and I remember observing at the time that these children are having great success themselves in their segregated school, and my feeling was that when they go to that other school, they're going to be achieving above the average of the new school, because they come from families that have been doing this and interested in their education for a long time.

Knox

An interesting part of that was that a few of the moving-picture actors and actresses became interested in the movement, and they supported some funds for Transport a Child to get a bus to take the children and bring them home. When the discussion was which school should we take them to, one of the actors said, "The school which my child attends is a good one." Anyway, we said, "Okay, we'll target that school." And one other reason he said so is because, "On that campus we have a bungalow we're not using, so if they claim they don't have space, there is a bungalow there that we can say--." My recollection is that discussion--and by the way, he took it to the school and they discussed it at the school, and the word got out, and my recollection is there was a request that the bungalow be removed from the school so that they wouldn't have space, prior to the time we could get this organized and a bus there. And even though the actor and his wife argued against it, they were still planning to move the bungalow, except since they put the bungalow on, a tree, a huge tree had grown up between the bungalow and the only exit, and they had to discuss whether we remove the tree so we can remove the bungalow. And while this was being discussed--this is somewhat hearsay, but while it was being discussed the bus was provided, and the children came out and were enrolled, and they had a successful experience at the new school, despite the fact that the preparation necessary was not taken by the school and the school district at the school to which they would go, as far as I know, so that the teachers would know they're dealing with another child of another

culture, and there may be some experiences that both the child and you will have that you wouldn't have had otherwise, and you needed to be prepared for that.

Knox

Well, that was the very beginning of desegregation, of actual busing, of busing. That's the beginning of busing for desegregation.

Stevenson

So this program was a pilot program?

Knox

It was a citizens' program outside the school district. It was not a part of the school district. Later the school district, I think by court order but maybe not, I don't know that, but finally the school district organized a whole program for transporting children from segregated schools to other segregated schools for purposes of desegregation, and that became one huge division of the school district and was very successful. Well, it wasn't successful then, take that back. It wasn't as successful as it could have been, even though the school district attempted to provide some inservices to the teachers that were receiving the students. At the major part of that, well, when the court order came that the school district has to prepare a plan for integrating, and they said the names of the schools and the places that had to be integrated and the school district had to prepare a plan, at that time I was working in the Valley. I was assistant superintendent--I was superintendent of a region.

Knox

And so a group of parents and I--parents were upset, even though a senator from the Valley, from San Fernando Valley was a leader in the opposition to desegregation. But what happened is some parents and I sat down from both sides, from the East Side, Pacoima, to the West Side of the Valley. We sat down and said, "If this happens, what are we going to do?" So parents and a few principals and I and some other counselors and I just sat down and said, "Just what would you do if you have to do it, even though you may not like doing it? If the court makes you do it, what should we do?" And so we had a plan. We said how many children from this school, and we took each school

and said, "How many children from this school would go, and to what school would they go?" considering housing and transportation, and what we were looking at is the least distance traveled to get there. And I'm so glad we did that, because later on the school district submitted a plan to the court. It was rejected because the court's response was, "That's minimal compared to what we're expecting you to do."

Knox

But in this area where I was in the Valley, we had a plan, and we were asked what would our plan be. And I, sitting in with the representatives of the court, I was asked, "Is that the best you can do?" And this was asked in front of the Board of Education, really. And for a moment I was stymied, because here can I say, "Yes, I can do better than the district," in front of all of my superiors. But the other answer was to lie, because we had a plan that was better than that. So I said, "Yes." And the court representative said, "How long will that take?" Well, it had taken the school district several weeks, months. I said, "A couple of hours." And they said, "Well, can you do that? What do you need?" I said, "We don't need anything. I just need a calculator, because you've made some changes." So I got my group of parents and administrators and we sat down and said, "With these changes, just with a hand calculator, you can make these changes, and what our previous plan was will work." They accepted it, and we used that plan for a while.

Knox

But I lost some--the fact is, one member of the Board of Education said to one of my parents, who was white, assuming she was a segregationist, I guess, said to one of the parents, "Did you hear what that god damn," well, I'll say bastard, but that's not the words he used, "said?" That was during a recess he said that to one of my parents, and when we got back to the office in the Valley, this parent came--one of my principals came to me and said, "Did you talk to that parent that the member of the board spoke to?" I said, "No." So he brought her in, and the lady could not even say the words that board member used in referring to me for saying that I could do a better program, and I had to urge her until I finally got her to at least let me know what did she really say? And she finally told me, and I was so incensed I had to go and confront that board member, and I did so. And, well, no action was taken against me,

but she refused to admit that she had said that, and they wanted to--"Let's call in the parent." I said, "No, we'll let it go," because she was almost in shock when I asked her to just tell me what the board member said.

Knox

But anyway, that was part of my initiation into the two first efforts at desegregation. One was the Transport a Child program, and the person who really worked hard and inaugurated it, and really it was her idea--her name was Nira Hardon, N-i-r-a H-a-r-d-o-n. I will always remember her, because she said, "If they won't desegregate the school, let's do it." And so she and I and a few others organized Transport a Child, and a few ministers by the way. Well, anyway.

Stevenson

Okay. Maybe this would be a good time to talk about Crawford v. Board, which I believe you were referring to.

Knox

Yes.

Stevenson

If you could say a little bit about the background. I know that it was a student at Jordan High School.

Knox

Yes, it was a student at Jordan High School, and South Gate High School was the adjoining high school. Now, Jordan High School is on 103rd Street in Watts, and its boundary is one block east of the school. Now, you know usually a school sits in the middle of its boundary, its service boundary that is, the middle schools and the elementary schools that feed it. It usually sits somewhere geographically towards the middle of that, but not Jordan. Jordan sat one block west of its east boundary. Starting there going east was South Gate High School. Now, South Gate sat fairly in the middle. Well, it's so obvious that the purpose was to segregate or to separate Jordan, predominantly Black at that time, and South Gate.

Knox

And the student who brought the case, her parents and organization brought the case on behalf of the student, the Jordan High School student, and that was an amazing case to those of us who lived in South Los Angeles, because here's a built-in case for you. There can be no legal reason to set the boundary on one side only a block away from the school on one side and extend far, far west on the other side, and far west is African American population. But that's the case really that brought desegregation to the Los Angeles Unified School District, which by the way in 2009 is almost as segregated as it was at that time. But anyway, that was a case that not only did it invigorate, but it solidified the opposition to segregation in South Los Angeles. It was more than any other single case I know, maybe in California but certainly locally--it had the greatest effect upon the distribution of students throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District, but that was the case that led to that desegregation effort that I described earlier.

Knox

But more than any other single case, and I'm not sure in California. I would say in California, because it was the California Supreme Court that gave the order. But more than any other case I know, it had an effect locally. But all other efforts that preceded it led up to the fact that now you've got a real case. Getting litigants, getting people to want to sue the district was not easy. There were those who thought, "We've got a pretty good school. Let's not endanger it. We'll never win anyway." And others who were saying, "These are outsiders coming to tell us what we ought to do," so there was local objection, but that was overridden easily by many outstanding people, and particularly lawyers who said, "This is our time. This is the time to bring this case, and this is a case like no other that we could find, that's so obviously segregating." I'm just glad all the people, parents by the way also, who decided this is our chance to stop the segregation in Los Angeles Unified School District, and all the parents and all the other activists and organizations.

Knox

It's one of those moments when--not a moment--when it was time in history, when you're just glad to have been there, to have seen how that operates and what could actually come about, concerted effort, legal effort to desegregate the schools.

Knox

What were the schools of thought I think would be the right term, in the Black community in terms of the opinions for and against busing? I know some of the more mainstream groups, NAACP, SCLC, Urban League, supported busing, but what were some of the views of some of the other--I'm thinking in particular of groups like the Panther Party, more Left-leaning groups. What were their views on busing and the education of Black children?

Knox

Well, the dynamics of the community at the time were interesting, because there were so many different points of view and so many different supporters of so many different points of view. There were those who figured, "We're doing pretty good. Let's not endanger that." But they were few, very few. There were those who had for a long time fought for equality, fought for better facilities, fought for better instructors. That was a time when in the school district if there was a teacher who failed somewhere else in the school district, there was always an opening in South Los Angeles for that teacher, inadequate or not, adequate or not. And there had been a lot of different kinds of protests. So there were even people with their job who had fear for their jobs. There were some teachers who were concerned. Fact is, teachers were concerned for a long time, because they knew if the children--if we desegregate the school population, we're going to desegregate the teaching population, which means I'm comfortable here in this school in my community near home. I'm going to have to go someplace else. And so there was great concern over that.

Knox

There was even some, if I remember, some union concern for the teachers' welfare. But that was one side of it, who, "What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to us, and what's going to happen to this school?" The other one was, "Are you going to bring in a lot of white students to this school?" and there was some concern about, "What does that bring to the character of our school?" because when you have an all-Black school, you can do a whole lot of all-Black stuff, a lot of Black history and a lot of celebrations that are identified with the Black community. So there were a lot of unsettling

concerns about what desegregation meant. But the primary one was the bus itself.

Knox

In the white community, it portrayed the bus as a hearse. It's a place where I put my child on and I can expect the child not to come home, because these buses have accidents and they get at--right now they can walk to school. Now they'll get on a bus and go miles to some other place. And both Black and white parents worried about that, but white parents were adamant about that and about the bus itself. But there was also a lot of anti-busing political activity going on, and it was located primarily in the Valley, the San Fernando Valley, but to some extent in West Los Angeles. And so it brought some antagonisms. People were saying, "You don't like busing because you don't want my child to be sitting next to your child in school." And then there was the other one, "I don't like busing because it's unsafe. But secondly, I'm going over to an unsafe area. I'm going over there where from what I read, those people shoot and kill and fight and all kinds of bad things happen," and so the stereotypes were pretty strong on both sides, but to a greater extent, in my experience, on the white side, in opposition.

Knox

The organizations, as you said, all the organizations were in favor of busing, because there's no other way to provide desegregation unless you're going to bus somebody. But what their fear was, and it was well placed, fear was, "We're going to be busing Black kids, but we're not going to be busing white kids, because the white kids are going to go to private schools rather than come to us, and our children will be bused out there," and that has turned out that's the way it was. That's how it was. Later on the desegregation effort took some other turns when the magnet schools, at high school level anyway, they would have a particular curriculum in an area that students would like. You can have an art school, and then you can expect some white students to want to go to a prestigious art school, even if it's in a Black area, and even that did work to some extent, too.

Knox

So some my friends were put in charge of the desegregation effort, and they did some excellent planning to support desegregation without it being just transportation of Black kids, but even now there's opposition. There's opposition to magnet schools or any way of attracting students of different ethnicities and racial groups together, some of which I don't understand, but maybe I do understand it because I lived in the South and there are some vestiges of no matter how good it works, it isn't a good idea. But the yellow bus became a symbol around which segregationists--it's hard to say that, because it's those who oppose desegregation, it became their symbol and they used it effectively, because a lot of people have bought into it and say that the bus--I received a phone call once that said that I was going to be killed, and I was going to be put on the bus, my body put on the bus, and the yellow bus was going to take it down to Johnson, who was the superintendent at the time. Then I received some other threats that parts of my body would be--I would be dismembered and it would be sent to the school district.

Knox

In fact, there was one time I had to have protection. The strange thing I had for myself in that is I was never afraid, and the reason I wasn't afraid is because anytime anybody calls you up and says, "I'm going to kill you," he's not likely to kill you. If he's going to kill you, he's not going to say anything, he's just going to kill you. So my fear was more of anybody who hadn't said anything, but not of anybody who had said something about what--and I received a lot of threats. But, oh, by the way, I didn't mention that that plan that we gave to the court, that the court accepted for the Valley, worked and worked well.

Knox

In fact, several things happened. What we did is took the parents of children who were going to receive some African American students, and parents of schools that are going to receive some white students, and we sat them down. The amazing thing to me was how they became an organizing force. What they said is, "I didn't know that we were so much alike." They didn't say it in those words, but they were amazed to say that, "I have my problem with my teenage kid, and you have the same problems with your teenage kid," and so they started talking about their problems and the things that we shared. And

then they started--they did something I did not offer. They started having meetings where they provided food. The parents on this side of the school would have them come over for an after-school, and they would prepare food, and then would go over to the other one. I was really pleased in the fact that many of the parents--it happened also because CSUN [California State University, Northridge], Cal State in the Valley, several of those professors, male and female, got engaged in the planning, too.

Knox

But the most exciting thing to me was to see a group of parents who'd have very little contact with each other, had in their mind all kinds of stereotypes, and found that we have a lot in common, and the lot we have in common has to do with the fact that I live the same life you do. I just in some cases I don't have as much money as you do. In fact, one of the strange things to me was that when it came to finances, even though most of the parents, the Black parents had limited resources, and most of the white parents in the west part of the Valley were fairly--they weren't all rich, but they were well-to-do. And when they got together, the amazing thing to me was that they found one commonality even in that. The Black parents had trouble meeting all of their bills. The white parents had trouble meeting all of their bills. The fact is, their bills had to do with the fact that, "I was doing fine when I bought this huge, beautiful home. When I put in the swimming pool that did all right, and I put in a jacuzzi and I was still doing all right, and when I bought my Lexus I was still doing all right. But when I got the boat, then I had financial problems. I can't quite afford--I can't meet all my debts."

Knox

The other one has much fewer resources, "But I have the same problem. At the end of the month, I'm having trouble meeting all my debts." And so I'd never thought, it never had occurred to me before that financially they may find a common ground, too. I could see how intellectually maybe, and even culturally they may find all kinds of common ground, but I hadn't figured they'd find common ground in finances.

Stevenson

Was that an informal group? Did it have a name, the parents' group?

Knox

No. No, we just had to do it school by school, so we had to take a school, "Who's sending your children over here?" and they're sending their parents over here, I'm sending their children over here and get those parents together, so there were groups all over, and no, there was no one--I had an office for helping us in the desegregation effort. By the way, Verna Dauterive worked in that office.

Stevenson

Could you tell me whether you had any interactions with Bustop, which was, of course, for those not familiar, an anti-busing group; could you tell me about your--

Knox

Well, yes. Bustop organized a community group, a big community meeting at one of the schools in West Valley, and I can't remember the name of the legislator, but he was the principal speaker. They had this auditorium just filled with people against busing. I wish I could remember his name. Anyway, they had him as principal speaker. Well, I can't remember whether I was asked to go by the district, or whether I just chose to go. I know I would have chosen to go anyway, because I'm the superintendent in that community, and that's one of my schools they're talking about. So I went and the place was full, and I sat in the front row, and the senator who authored the anti-busing law that won, that proposition that won, that stopped, that was the first effort to stop and was successful. But this was before that passed, and he was speaking to the people about it, and he was talking about all the awful things about busing, including the safety issue.

Knox

And when he was about to end, I was about to leave. He had this crowd and they were all cheering him on, and he said, "I see Dr. Knox is here, and he's representing the school district, so maybe he'll give us a rebuttal to what I just said." And my first thought was that I have no rebuttal to that. I only could say one thing, and I said it. I said, "Busing is a political issue. He, the senator, is a politician. That's a political issue. I'm an educator. What I do is educate children, so no matter where the bus stops, when your child gets off the bus,

it's my job to see that your child is safe and well educated. I'm going to do my job in education, and busing is his job, so he'll have to discuss busing with you, I'll discuss education." I didn't get any applause, but I didn't get the derision I expected to get from a group that had cheered every word he said all evening long. But anyway, I escaped that one. But Bustop was really the organization that ended busing for desegregation.

Stevenson

Elaborate a little bit more on that. I mean, Bustop was a grassroots organization?

Knox

No. Well, you'll get me off of grassroots, because Bustop was an organization of those people who opposed busing--they really opposed desegregation, but who used busing as a vehicle to oppose desegregation. They were well organized and stayed well organized almost from the beginning, and they had that political interest as well as their economic interest. They were well financed. They had their opposition, too. There were not-well-organized, not-well-financed groups that opposed Bustop, white groups that opposed Bustop in the Valley, but Bustop was extremely well-organized, well-financed, and they were very successful. They were very political, too, as well as successful.

Stevenson

So speaking of white groups that were not opposed to busing, that were supportive of it and not just in the Valley, just in the district whether that's on the West Side, who were some of those groups? Where did that support come from?

Knox

I wish I could think of a name. There was a group in Westwood here, and I can't think of the name of it. I never went to any of their meetings, but I knew that they were meeting and they were supporting--one person I knew who supported desegregation was Burt Lancaster and his wife. I think her name was Norma Lancaster. There were several others whose name I can't remember now, actors and actresses, but some of them lived in BelAir and Beverly Hills, and so they were supporters of integration. But I can't think of

the name of any organizations. By the way, some people in the Valley as well as some people in West Los Angeles helped finance the efforts of the NAACP and Urban League and its efforts, but I can't think of the names of any groups or any of the individuals other than the Lancasters. They were active. I went to several meetings at their home, where they asked us how could they help, what support could they give, and they then met with other people. I'm not sure. I say Burt Lancaster, but really the moving and that was his wife, Norma Lancaster. She was the one who was the moving force in that, and she helped fund and helped others collect funds for Transport a Child.

Knox

Throughout our conversation, most of what I have discussed with you has been a kind of negative side of desegregation, of education and all, but throughout that time I met, sometimes in Watts and sometimes in South Los Angeles, I met people who were white, who came from the West Side and from the Valley, and who sat and had an idea that a desegregated society was the best thing for the United States and for California and for the Los Angeles Unified School District. I can't think of any names at this moment, but I don't want to give the impression that this was all Black against white, or white against Black. No names come to me at this time. But most of my experiences of race relations have been negative because of when I was born and where I was born. But through that time I've met some individuals and some groups that were white that were supporters of all the efforts that I've ever been involved in for equality in education as well as in life.

Stevenson

Okay. Could you discuss how you feel your own personal background, whether that's your education, your early life, how that has influenced your views on segregation and integration?

Knox

I'm not sure.

Stevenson

How has your personal background, your education, how has your early life affected your views on segregation and integration?

Knox

Well, it started off, I guess, in my household. My father died when I was seven, but my mother was--some of the first memories I have of my mother was of her helping people, and it was not just people, it was the people of the community, it was the people of the church who needed help. But also she was head of the Home Mission Society, it was called, and then she organized a group, she and some other parents and people organized a group called Foreign Missions, so they helped the local people in the Home Missions, and she was also on the board of directors for Blundon School, which was a school for orphans. Then she was on the board of another, what we called the Old Folks' Home. In fact, in all of these activities she was always helping somebody. My father was a quiet man. I don't remember or know a lot about him, because I was just seven, but one thing I remember about him is that when an African American person, usually a man, was in some trouble with the white community, he and another group of fellows--they called themselves the Odd Fellows--maybe I told you about this. Late at night somebody would come by and knock on the door and there would be some talk, and then they would give some money, and this person could go to these fellows and pick up a dollar here and a dollar there and use it to get out of town.

Knox

So my earliest experiences were helping somebody, and I don't remember my mother saying this, but somehow it seems to me she was saying to me when I was much older, "Get an education and help somebody." So in my lifetime, my first influence was my parents and my family, which said, "Your purpose here is to help somebody." The second one, or maybe even the first one was, "You can't do that without an education." So the first purpose you should have is get a good education. The second purpose is to help somebody, and so that was the first thing. But the next, as I remember it, influence I had was living in the South in the segregated--and seeing such wonderful people in my community, such brilliant people, not schooled, perhaps unschooled, but listening to them.

Knox

Because one of the things we used to do is in my neighborhood we would sit down, some of the kids would sit down with some of the old people, and they'd tell us stories, and we'd go to the porches. A lady two houses down from us, we used to do this all the time, we'd go and sit on her porch in the late afternoon, just before you had to go home, you had to be home by dark, just before you went home, and she would tell us some stories. Some of those stories were about things that had happened in her life, or some of them were just fables really. But what struck me was they were able to say those things in such vivid terms that I could live them. I was sitting there just listening and living through whatever that experience was. And so I saw all of these wonderful people, and I saw plasterers and carpenters, couldn't read, but could plan a house, could plan a foundation, build the foundation and put a house on it. In fact, our house was built by fellows who worked all day and came home and helped my father put this house up from the foundation, and later on when I looked, I said, "He can't read and write. How can he do that?" And I thought that's brilliance. It's got to be brilliance to be able to do that without having been trained to do it.

Knox

So all of my previous, early experiences had to do with the fact that we have such brilliant people, and they're treated so mean by this society. They can't get a job that really pays good money, and if they get one they can be fired in a minute. If you get a house, if you're renting a house, you can be thrown out anytime, so that also shaped part of my life, that is, seeing the injustice of people who--but then in my home, the few books we had had to do with Black people. I learned to read early and I'm glad I did, because I read about some wonderful Black people, but I also read about some awful atrocities on Black people in slavery as well as the lynchings and all, and so all of that formed who I am today, and who I am today is--one of the things I learned is in the South and from being Black and being intimidated, one of them I learned is that if in our relationship between the two of us somebody is going to intimidate somebody else, it's going to be you, not me. I am not going to be intimidated by you. You can't frighten me. You can't scare me. In no way can you intimidate me to get to do what you want done. But I'm going to try to intimidate you. If you try that, I'm going to try to intimidate you, so it made me combative sometimes. Sometimes I was overly combative perhaps, but

those things shaped me and my whole life, and as a result I've had some successes, and as a result I knew, as a result of my own attitude toward life, I've missed some opportunities. But it's okay. I wouldn't have wanted those opportunities if I had to pay that cost to get them.

Stevenson

Could you discuss the difference, in your opinion, between desegregation and integration? This came up in another interview, where there was a definite difference. And as it relates to L.A. Unified, what is that difference?

Knox

Well, I use them interchangeably. I haven't intellectually thought about the difference between desegregation and integration. But I've read some other people who have ideas about what that means. One of the ways to look at desegregation is a negative way. It's a negative word, because it says you're going to de-, you're going to stop something. And integration is a positive word. It means you're going to do something, not doing something against, stop something, but you're going to do something. So integration really, intellectually to me, says, we're going to put our groups together for a common cause. Desegregation means, in my perspective, means we're going to forcibly bring groups together.

Knox

The reason I use desegregation for what happened in Los Angeles Unified School District is because it was exactly that. It was forcing people regardless of whether they wanted to or not, for students to be taught in a classroom together. Whether the school district wanted it, whether the teachers or principals or the students wanted it, they were going to do it, and that's desegregation, and that's why it takes the law to do desegregation. It doesn't take the law to do integration. I would have preferred to have been involved in integration, which is working with people who want to work together, but I wasn't. I was in that perspective that says desegregation, we're going to force the people, bus them, to sit next to them, to do whether they like it or not.

Knox

But practically, integration in this school district would not come without desegregation. Without court order and forcible busing and all of that, none of that would have happened. Unfortunately, as I've said before, it did not succeed, because we didn't take care of all of the pieces, and several of the pieces had to do with attitudes. It's extremely difficult to change attitudes, and it takes a long time to change attitudes, and we didn't have a long time to do it. We just had to make teachers teach Black kids who didn't want to teach Black kids.

Knox

I have a kind of objection, I believe, even though I just did it, to making those fine lines between desegregation and integration. It seems to me more an intellectual exercise than it is a practical matter of dealing with human relations, with people relating to other people, and integration wouldn't have come just because everybody loved it in the district. By the way, it had a positive--I think one of the positive things about desegregation was that, as I told you once before about the parents, but also about children. Children who went to desegregated schools learned something about children they never would have learned anything about had they not been forced to associate with, and as a result, a lot of interchanges happened and a lot of good has come out of it. In my discussion, it wouldn't have sounded like I felt that it did anything. It failed as an educational tool, but it didn't fail the society, because it brought people together who never would have been together at all, and learned a lot about each other that never would have learned a lot about each other.

Knox

Even if you take something like Obama. Obama didn't happen because we all remained apart and didn't understand each other. You had to understand a lot and feel a lot differently to elect a Black man, to be white and elect a Black man if you never knew anything about any Black people. So all in all, there were good things that came about, and my evaluation of it as not having succeeded has to do with the fact that it never reached its potential for bringing people together.

Stevenson

In terms of the Black community, parents, students, the community overall, do you think there was a price paid for busing? In the whole desegregation, integration, was there a price paid by the Black community, and maybe even by the school district?

Knox

No, I hadn't thought about that one. I just have to think about how to phrase anything about--the attitude in the Black community about busing was not--overall, I never perceived it as being negative. It was a great concern in the beginning. It was a great concern, because parents had concerns about their children getting on a bus going anywhere. There was another part that the Black community had a problem with, and that is, when I send my child off to that school, I'm not involved in the school activities at all, because I'm not there. One other concern parents had, a legitimate concern, is that some children spend an hour and a half on the bus, and that's not instruction. That's going and coming, not instruction.

Knox

I know some Black coaches of athletic teams, and they were really concerned because what happened is the Black students who were athletes were bused to these schools, and so some of the schools--in fact, that's true as of right now--some of the schools have track teams and football teams made up principally of Black students, of Black athletes, and these were athletes who would have attended the schools in South Los Angeles. So I'm not just speaking about athletes, but also the same thing happened to the band and musical instrument--Locke High School had the best band, marching band in the city, and so they used to have contests, and the best band would represent the school district in the [Pasadena Tournament of] Rose[s] Parade, and Locke did every year. The school district changed the system and said, "Instead of having a school, we will have the best band, best instrument players, band members from all of the schools," and that's what it is today. Today we have--but that wasn't the only reason, just because the school district didn't want Locke to win every year as it was doing, which I think was true. But also, those band members started being transported to other schools, too, and so that's one loss to the South Los Angeles schools, predominantly Black school, was that once you started the busing and once

you started sending the kids around, you also sent a lot of talent to other places other than the local school, and I think Locke is one of the big losses in that effort.

Knox

Washington also, Washington High School, too, because Washington Generals had a great band. But even though there are some negatives to the busing in that I just mentioned, I don't remember any concerted effort in the Black community in opposition to the bus. I know all about it in the other area.

Stevenson

So you don't know of any opinions in the Black community about, say, the quality of education Black children were getting was compromised by the busing in any way?

Knox

Well, part of it was that I didn't have any Black parents say that. I had Black educators say this. What Black educators said was, and what I recognized when I was in the Valley, is that students in South Los Angeles in those segregated schools, when those students were bused to the other school, in the beginning particularly, they were not treated as scholars, for the reason that there was this perception that we've got all these dumb Black kids coming, and so if they come, they're dumb. If they're not, fine. And so some of the kids in the Black schools were likely, because they were expected to by their teachers, were likely to achieve higher than they were likely to achieve in the other schools, because they were not expected to. My premise is it's extremely difficult for students to achieve higher than the expectation of their teachers. It's not easy to do that. And in the Valley and in West L.A. where the Black students got off the bus, that added to expectation of the teachers was in the beginning and perhaps until now, but certainly in the beginning, that expectation for these Black students coming to us is very low.

Knox

Low expectations affected some of the students, that is, I don't have to do as much, because they don't expect it of me. The fact is, they don't even assign me anything difficult, so I'll just ride along, for some of the students. Some of

the others objected, and many of them excelled. The fact is, I was very gratified whenever I went to a graduation in the Valley and found that the valedictorian was Black, and it did happen, but in the beginning it was extremely difficult for that to happen. So I think the perspective of busing in the Black community was different from the perspective of busing in the white community, which also led to a difference in the reception of Black kids in the Valley. We never had the problem of the reception of white students in South Los Angeles, because they never came. That would have been an interesting thing to find out how did the teachers in the Black schools receive the white students from the other schools, but we can't do that, because we never had the numbers to do the statistics.

Stevenson

So what was it that finally sounded the death knell, as it were, for the busing program?

Knox

Well, it was really the legislature, the fellow I mentioned in the Valley. Senate Bill 1 [Proposition] I think it was called, Senate Bill 1, and he was the one who wrote Senate Bill 1 that ended forced busing. That's what it was called, forced busing. And so the school district attempted something very widely, tried, since they no longer could do forced busing, they would do voluntary busing, so you had the voluntary busing system, and it still exists until today, and it's still a fight to stop the voluntary busing. Some people that I know who did the voluntary busing, Ted Alexander, for instance, did a great job of making that whole thing work. Ted did something called the Ten Schools Program that had nothing to do with busing, though. It could have if they had, but nobody--it was just for students in African American area, but Ted had that whole organization, and he brought in the teachers and the people and the consultants and the psychologists and all, and had them assist each other and assist teachers when they were receiving students of a different culture. The district still has voluntary busing, but it's diminishing and still under attack. And we still have a few magnet schools, but they're diminishing, too.

Stevenson

Could you just a little bit for those listening, not familiar about what the Ten Schools Program was--

Knox

Well, the Ten Schools Program--there was a series of protests at the Board of Education about the education of African American students, and each time they made these protests a school got a response. I participated in some of the protests. One of them had to do with the fact that African American students were not achieving as well in South Los Angeles, which by that time was not totally African American, and what the school district decided then--in fact, the proposal was given to the school district saying, "Here are some of the things you ought to do to improve the education of African American students, especially students of poverty, South Los Angeles students." So the school district responded by asking a group to get together and take this and see how you can put it into action, and the Ten Schools Program became that.

Knox

What the Ten Schools Program is they would take ten schools and in those ten schools they're going to try these different procedures to improve the learning of African American students, and several of them did very well. The Martin Luther King [Elementary] School in South Los Angeles did very well, an elementary school, to improve the education by using some of the procedures. And what Ted did was brought in all the resources to help these ten schools figuring that out of what is successful here, the school district will pick that up and use it in other schools. Well, several things happened. One of the things that happened is those schools at the time they were selected were predominantly African American, and the population shift in South Los Angeles changed and they became Latino and African American, and all the same procedures, most of those procedures worked just as well with Latino students, but not all of them.

Knox

But what didn't happen, the school system--is pick out what worked and use that, and they never used those ten schools as a kind of laboratory that was intended when the proposal was made. There was another proposal made to the district called Children Can No Longer Wait, and that program said that

Black children can't just wait until you decide to give them a better education. And that one said, "Okay, we gave a Ten Schools Program and we gave you a procedure to follow to assist those schools, and children can no longer wait. You must, school district must come up with its own program to improve the education of African American students." Well, that one they wrote some material and it was never actually implemented. Nothing happened except they wrote it up and put it on a shelf somewhere perhaps, because nothing ever happened with that one.

Knox

Another one was made by the Western Regional Council on Educating Black Children, WRCEBC, Western Regional Council on Educating Black Children. That's the Western Regional part of the National Council on Educating Black Children, which Gus Hawkins started in 1986, and the Western Regional Council, along with the Council of Black Administrators and Urban League and NAACP went to the board and said again, "African American students are the least successful of any racial or ethnic group, and you must do something about that." So they got a group together and they wrote a pedagogy for educating African American students. I was among the groups making the demand. I never demanded a pedagogy. All I wanted, my personal intent was you can identify the reasons African American students don't learn in the schools. Almost anybody can. The universities did that. Places you can find all across the country, you can find information regarding African American students and how you improve their education. You don't need to invent a whole pedagogy.

Knox

The problem with the pedagogy, when you had this big tome and you try to take that to teachers, they don't have time, they don't have intent, they don't have any incentive. There's no reason for them to take this tome and go through it and make that practical in my classroom, and the district doesn't have the power to make them do it. So anyway, that's where we are today. We have this big African American educational pedagogy that isn't being implemented. Several people tried very hard to get it implemented, but it has an office downtown and that's about the extent of it. By the way, some excellent people, they had some people who had great thoughts and ideas,

and they put them in the pedagogy, but that doesn't make it practical enough to get to a classroom. And so African American students as of today are the least successful in Los Angeles Unified School District.

Knox

Now, isn't it amazing that African American people--there are over forty, and at one time there were one hundred schools for African American students, universities, colleges, throughout the country. They prepare--their students graduate and become the leaders and all across the country in every area you can think of, and you just recently had a superintendent from one of those schools. And now we have a president of the United States who's Black. And in Los Angeles and throughout the country, not just Los Angeles, African American students for some reason are the least well educated. There has to be something wrong with the system, not wrong with the people. But hope springs eternal.

Stevenson

Okay. [End of interview]

1.6. Session 6 (March 12, 2009)

Stevenson

I'm completing an interview with Dr. Owen Knox on March 12, 2009, and I would like you to tell me about your involvement with the Western Regional Council on Educating Black Children and its parent organization, the National Council on Educating Black Children. If you could tell me how the group started, what was the impetus for it, and also about the seminal role played by Congressman Gus Hawkins.

Knox

Well, let's start with the beginning. Congressman Hawkins called a group of educators and organizations and people who should, if they didn't, should have an interest in education. I think altogether about thirty of us were in his office before he retired as congressman in Washington, D.C. We met in his office, and he discussed just a few words to us about the conditions of African Americans, the lack of accomplishment in large urban areas particularly,

throughout the country, and his request was simple. He said, "And you have an interest, all of you have a great interest in education and education of African American students." And his question was simple. "What are you going to do about it?"

Knox

We were such a diverse group from such diverse areas, lawyers and educators and laymen, that we just had a general discussion. He didn't say how you'd discuss this or what. He just said, "What are you going to do?" And we started talking, just talking, and out of that conversation came an idea that some action should be taken. And subsequently, after long discussion, we decided we needed to get together again and talk more about what kind of action should we take and how should we take that action. So Congressman Hawkins called us together again, and this time he had us meet just outside of Baltimore. We went to this hotel, a brand new hotel in a new growing area, but there was nothing else around the hotel. They were developing that area, but the hotel was there and we met there.

Knox

The reason I described the setting is because when I arrived there, I realized that what Hawkins had organized was for us to talk and work and not be distracted by anything outside. There was no other place to go. So he put us up for a weekend, Friday, Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday till noon, and he told us again that we had some discussion, but now we need to say out of that discussion what action should we take. We had a lot of ideas and a lot of different proposals and the like, but somewhere in all of that somebody mentioned the word, "We need a blueprint for what should happen to African American students." So we kind of coalesced around the idea of a blueprint, and so Hawkins agreed. He brought in several speakers. The fact is, he brought in several politicians from around the country. One of them was Mervyn Dymally, who was at that time a congressman from California, and some from New York and other places, who had the same large urban areas that were failing African American students.

Knox

And he had them talk to us from a political point of view, and as lawyers from the legal point of view, and he brought in some outstanding educators and professors and the time that they spoke would be during the time that we had breaks, particularly at lunch and dinner. But what happened there was that ideas were kind of coalescing. We were kind of coming together after many discussions and lots of disputes, really. But what Congressman Hawkins had us do is we had breakfast and then we would have a session, then we'd have lunch, and then we'd have a session. And then I thought after dinner no break time after dinner, another session. We did that Friday and all day Saturday, and on Sunday morning we had an idea about what should happen. We should design something we subsequently called a blueprint for the education of African American students.

Knox

Then Hawkins said, "Well, for all of us to go back to your local areas, get other people, a group to have discussion around this idea from other people when you get back." And when we returned to our areas, we came back to Los Angeles, a group of us got together a discussion group, and we added ideas to the ones about the blueprint. Then at--this was a place called Hunt's Valley outside of Baltimore, we came back together again for another weekend, and this time the discussion was more pointed. Since we had talked about what we needed a blueprint, we also talked about that the blueprint should be a blueprint for whom, and so we had decided all of the constituencies, parents, teachers, administrators, and as we talked we added more, and it became the religious community and the business community and all. So we broke into those groups to discuss those particular constituencies and what would we say to those people about how to improve the education of African American students.

Knox

That time we had just a wonderful coalition of ideas and people. While we had had disputes and differences and great differences in the beginning, now we were coalescing around product, and we did the same thing. We had speakers come in, but we had all day working. But this time it wasn't because Hawkins asked us to do so, it was because we realized we had so much to do that we needed all the time, and so sometimes late at night we were still putting down

ideas. But what came out of that, on the Sunday morning after that second session we came up with a document, and it's now called the Blueprint for Action in the Education of African American Students and being widely distributed. It has been revised several different times.

Knox

But the striking thing to me after it was all over, I thought about it. Congressman Hawkins in the most gentle way got us to work extremely hard over a long period of time, and then I realized that's his mode of operation in Congress. He's quiet, unassuming, but somehow he gets the Congress as well as he got our group to work extremely hard to do something worthwhile. Then one of the decisions we made is that we should divide the whole country into regions. We had a Northeast and a Southeast and a Central and a Southern and a Western, and Congressman Hawkins said in the West group he wanted me to be the chairperson. On the East group he asked a professor who was at Howard University to kind of see that we get organized groups in the East. So we both went away organizing our groups, and so the Western Region Council on Educating Black Children is what I helped formulate in the West.

Knox

At first it was the Far West, that is, Washington, Oregon, California and Nevada. But we had all nine western states, including Hawaii and Alaska and Colorado, so now we have nine western states. By the way, the first meeting we had when I discussed the [unclear] called us together was 1986. Since that time, the Western Region was formulated and immediately after that, about '87 or '88, and we've been having conferences and just completed the most recent conference last weekend. I'm so pleased that I've been involved in this group all the time, because we have been able to get the Blueprint for Action in the Education of African American Students into school districts. Los Angeles Unified School District has adopted it as a working document, but like many large school districts, it isn't widely promoted and distributed, but it is a working document in the school district.

Knox

Very recently, a group of us met with the present superintendent, [Ramon C.] Cortines, of Los Angeles Unified School District, and in response he came to

the Western Regional Conference this past Friday, and he spoke, and he held up the Blueprint and said, "I will see that every administrator in the city gets a copy and implements this in the schools," which was the first time we've been able to get any superintendent to publicly make that announcement, but he did. So it's been--for me personally to see something national as well as regional come together like that on behalf of African American students.

Knox

The difficulty now is getting local schools and school districts to act upon it, not just upon the Blueprint, but upon all the ideas. In the blueprint there are some succinct--oh, by the way, this is what Hawkins said. He said, "I do not want an educational document. I want it easy to read, succinct, and plain, so that everybody can understand it," and that's how it's written.

Stevenson

What are the highlights of that document?

Knox

Well, the highlights, first it starts off with a statement of intent for, say, teachers. Then one part of it has to do with an activity. There's a stated activity, "Teachers should," first basic stuff, "be well prepared to teach in your content, that is, to know the content of the subject that you're teaching." Then it says step by step by step recommendations of what you should do to be prepared, that is, review the literature, make out a plan. A plan should include what your intent in that lesson should be for that day, what is your objective, how you're going to reach the objective, and how you're going to evaluate whether you reach that objective, and what materials you need doing that lesson. Be sure that you're able to achieve your objectives. It does that for parents and it does it for students, and it says such basic things as, "Students, come prepared. Have your books, papers, pencils. Be prepared." And then it goes on down to a little more complicated action.

Knox

But the action item and the little preamble to it, which says, "Overall, what are you going to do?" and then it says, "Succinctly and distinctly, what are the actions you could take to be sure that you do what you're planning to do?"

And since that time it's been revised several times, even included the paraprofessionals, the business community. Some of the ideas are fairly new for a school, especially a school like in a large school district in Los Angeles, where they become isolates in the community. But it says, "It is the administrator's duty to get all of the entities within your community where your school resides to cooperate in some manner to assist you in doing what you are supposed to do," especially in communities where African American students and communities where there are low socioeconomic areas.

Stevenson

In a nutshell, what is the Blueprint's suggestion for effectively educating Black children? I mean, if you were to sum it up.

Knox

Well, what it says, as you've heard so many times, it says, "It's going to take, to educate African American students successfully, it's going to take the whole village." Generally it says it's a blueprint for each entity there, but when you sum that all up, it's the whole population that surrounds the school or within the school district, that you have to harness the abilities of all and information from all of those entities to be able to educate African American students. What I like about it particularly, it says--when Congressman Hawkins was asked why just African American students, his response was--I hope I can come close to quoting him--that what ails African American students in learning in American schools--no, African American students are the proxy for what ails education in the United States. Therefore, if we educate African American students, we will then have educated or have shown a way to educate all students, so all students will gain from educating African American students.

Knox

And the implication is also not only that, the government will gain, because the cost of not educating them is so great. In fact, as somebody has just pointed to me the other day that to keep an uneducated person who obviously has to find some illegal means of subsistence and is now incarcerated, that the cost for one year doubles the cost of the tuition, the cost of educating that person at Howard University. So he said it's to

everybody's value for us to educate African American students, not just because they're African American, but because everybody profits by their education. And overall, that's what the Blueprint is. It's everybody's responsibility for educating African American students, and if you use that responsibility in educating African American students, it's available for use in educating any students. And the Los Angeles Unified School District has now translated it into five languages, I believe.

Stevenson

Okay. As a follow-up, you were speaking about those early meetings in Baltimore to form the organization, and you mentioned there were some disputes. What were the disputes about, and how did the group come together to a common understanding? [NOTE: Knox's microphone seems to become displaced so that he is difficult to hear clearly.]

Knox

Well, at the beginning, like I said, the group of us came from so many different life experiences, and we were serving such diverse communities and constituencies that each one had a point of view. Some of them said, "What we need to do is get back to the old way that we used to educate children in schools," use more disciplinary action and punishment. And there were other people who had different views. They were saying that what we need to do is have a more modern education, and we need now to think about--at that time we said the twentieth century and what we need to do in the twentieth century, rather than some model [unclear], so we disagreed. Believe me, the fact is we even disagreed on some of the statistics, and so that's one of the reasons Gus Hawkins brought in outstanding researchers in African American education throughout the country, because some were saying, well, there are schools [unclear] do what they do, all over the country. And others were saying, "Yes, but that's one kind of constituency, and these others are another kind of constituency."

Knox

There was also some discussion about the difference in whether African Americans of poverty particularly, because African Americans generally spoke a different language from English, and that was a lively discussion. And as you

know, [unclear] go on in that group of about thirty or forty of us, it became a national discussion, whether there was such a thing as Black English or whether there wasn't; it was just an aberration. And I believe I participated in that discussion quite energetically.

Stevenson

That's actually another one of my questions. I think I'll ask you about that. I see that you were a consultant to the California State Department of Education, developing a policy and program for proficiency in English for Black learners. I'd like your views on what's called Ebonics. Maybe give us a little bit of background on how that came about, and what are your views on that?

Knox

Well, part of it, and one of the reasons I participated in discussions [unclear] is that in my perspective, I'm from the South. I am from a low socioeconomic area in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and I knew that even though my parents did have--well, neither of them graduated from high school, but they had some education. They spoke English fairly well. I knew that I spoke differently. I knew that what I heard and what I said was somewhat different. And so I guess [unclear], I'm not sure about that. But later on I did some reading, and I read some research on language and language development and the like, particularly of African American people, and I realized, well, I concluded that really we do speak a different language, the language you speak, and I'm calling it a language because it has all of the elements of any language. [NOTE: Audio problem increases; interviewee's microphone has probably fallen off. He sounds remote and his audio is often covered by loud scratches and scraping sounds until the end of the interview.]

Knox

And then I did some other research on English and realized that what we have in America is a dialect of English, even English, England, English people speak a dialect that came about because of the different races and the different groups that conquered that area, and all of their languages they brought became what is now considered English, and America spoke a dialect of that. And African Americans had a different language. Although its base was English, it's different.

Knox

And then I had one other thing that occurred to me when I was doing all this research is, what is language? Well, I finally, and I have a lot of definitions for what language is, but I made my own definition of things, and I said, it comes something like this, I have an idea in my head, and I want to transfer that idea to you. So what I do is I make a series of sounds that you then, when you receive those sounds, you construct those sounds in the way that I have then transmitted the idea I had to you. I use as an example, if that's the definition of language is that a language has sounds that transmit thought, then suppose we take a sample of transmitting thought like, let's say, educators [unclear] and they say to each other, "In the context to which you refer, it occurs to me that I have a very minimum amount of the substance to which you refer." That's one way to transmit a thought.

Knox

Another one is, "I ain't got none." Now, I know someone may say, "Yes, but that way is of less value." I say, not if you use that definition. The clarity with which I transmit that thought is better and more clearly transmitted if I said, "I ain't got none," than the previous way of saying the same thing. So in that case, that Black language is more valuable at transmitting thoughts than what we consider appropriate oratory.

Stevenson

So what were the two schools of thought, or differing views on Ebonics or Black English?

Knox

Well, one school of thought was that what you're doing by saying Black language, that there's a Black language, what you're doing in education, you were saying to young people, "It's all right not to learn how to transmit thought with what is called the appropriate language." And my answer is, no. You're not modeling Black language. The fact is, a university even has a course in Black language, and I said, "It's improper, totally improper to have a course in Black language." And somebody said, "We ought to write books in Black--." I said, "No. The student already is proficient in Black language. You don't need to teach him Black language. But what you have to teach him, the

appropriateness of using any language, that is, in the setting, what is it appropriate to do? Or if you're being interviewed for a job, it's appropriate to use what you're calling standard oral English. That's appropriate, because you don't get a job using Black language. But when you are not, it's always, and to me it's not appropriate but it's comfortable for me to speak the language that others in that group sitting with me understand as well, and if I feel comfortable and they feel comfortable, they can use it." And I said, "What has happened to Black people who are successful in school is that they're bilingual when it comes to this." They're bi-dialectal, anyway, because we have learned how and when to speak the American dialect of English, and we have learned also the appropriateness of using the African American dialect of English, if you wish.

Knox

We had lots of discussion. It came to a national discussion. But one of the things that struck me was outstanding African American speakers who spoke the most beautiful American dialect of English. When they're speaking, sometimes when they really--they make the point for the audience to understand, they were not--and they would do something I think is also indigenous, would lean toward the audience and say something in language [unclear] that the audience would respond to. And I said, "In such outstanding speakers as a member of the Supreme Court, I have heard him do that, and I realized all he's doing is using the appropriate language to make his thought clearly understood and felt by the audience."

Stevenson

Okay. So was there ever a real movement in the community or even among Black educators to have Ebonics considered in educating Black children in the district? I mention that because I know in Oakland there was quite a movement during this time.

Knox

It was unfortunate. Some people got very enthusiastic about it, and I think Oakland was one of the examples. It was maligned, by the way, improperly to my way of thinking, because Jesse Jackson and several of the national leaders spoke vehemently of the Oakland project of Black language. What was

misunderstood about what Oakland was doing is that it was kind of promoting Black language in theory, and that's what I think Black outstanding people in the country took exception to, and it was not what Oakland was saying. What I read and what I believed Oakland was saying, "Don't denigrate the person who's Black, the student who's Black, by the language he speaks. Accept it and make the transfer." I heard someone say and I picked it up and I use it in speeches I give was that what schooling does for speakers of Black language, when a child reaches kindergarten, that child enters kindergarten speaking the language of his home. Then he comes into the school, and the well-meaning, outstanding teacher really attempting to do what she believes is the right thing to do in kindergarten, tells him, "No, don't say 'dat.' Say 'that.'" So the little kid, all he knows is [unclear]. That's what he's taught, he's learned at home, and he'll say, "I said dat." And she says, "No, say 'that,' don't say 'dat.'" And he says, "I said 'that.'" Because in his mind, in his hearing, she is saying what you are saying, but that's not teaching. What teaching is, when you tell him, "Instead of saying 'dat,' here's what I want you to do. I want you to put your tongue between your teeth and blow and say 'that.'" If you put your tongue between your teeth, you've got to say "that," which is the "th" sound. That's teaching.

Knox

But just demanding that, "You do what I say do and the way I say it," and I don't know how to do that, is not teaching. But what it is teaching me is that this isn't the place for me. I was comfortable at home. I come here and the first few days in kindergarten I'm uncomfortable. This is an uncomfortable place. First thing, almost everything here is different from my home. All the people dress, the people act, the people talk--this is a foreign place to me. It's intimidating. So the child, before he has even gotten through the first month of school, has found school to be an uncomfortable place where I'm not appreciated, and whoever I am is not the appropriate person to be in that setting, so I hate school. By third grade I'll come on the weekend and throw paint against the wall and otherwise desecrate the place, because it's an alien place to me and I hate being here, but they make me come.

Stevenson

How different was Ebonics from the calls, I think during the same period--would this have been, what, in the seventies? Okay. You were beginning to see calls for bilingual education, and really, I mean, what were the differences? They were calling for bilingual education of Mexican American children. Were there any attempts to say that this was similar or the same as?

Stevenson

Yes, there were a lot of attempts to say this was the same thing. [unclear] that in bilingual education you accept the language and make the transfer from that language, from Spanish to English, and you are trained on how to have the student make the transfer. Even in university courses there wasn't the training to say, "There is a language. Let's make the transition from that language to this." The idea is, "This is not a language, and so all you have to do is learn standard English." Unfortunately [unclear] that I just described. But what did happen as a result of all of that is what I believe is some general sensitivity to the difference. It was not just language. It started off and [unclear] language. But it had also to do with how you do your hair. If hair is kinky, if your hair--fact is, several of us had to make speeches that hair doesn't have character. It isn't good or bad hair. It's different hair. It's curly or kinky or straight, but hair doesn't commit crimes, it doesn't murder or steal, so hair isn't bad. Hair is different. Now, what after--I don't think we made the difference, but after that became part of the general national discussion, it became acceptable. Dreadlocks became acceptable. Any hair style you have is a good hair style. I don't hear people saying that's bad as they did back then, not even Black people.

Knox

Black people are the ones that I first heard say they had good hair and bad hair. But what I think happened that at least partly was motivated out of discussions of differences in language was difference in culture, and that there is no good culture or right culture or bad culture, but a difference in culture, and we have to recognize the differences in culture while we're teaching, and if there are elements of a culture that will keep you from being successful in life or getting a job and making a living, then you have to understand, this part of that culture will keep you from being successful. But it also keeps you from being successful in school, because we have all of these ideas in school about

what you're supposed to look like, what you're supposed to dress like, how you're supposed to be, everything that you're supposed to do. But now we accept a whole lot of differences in behavior, because we understand that differences aren't good or bad, they're just representative of cultures.

Stevenson

Okay. I'd like to briefly go back to the Western Regional Council on Educating Black Children. When I went to the website for the national group there, I think there is mention made in maybe a mission statement about Ronald Edmonds and his education philosophy on more effective schools. Could you talk a little bit about that and how that may have informed some of the philosophy?

Knox

What Ron Edmonds did was he looked at many schools that were successful in educating African American students, and then he made a list of those things that he saw in those successful schools. I can't remember all of them, but one of them was strong administrative leadership. Another one was organized class and school activities, clearly organized, and that organization understood by the students as well as the teachers and the parents. But anyway, he listed a whole list of those, and then he said, "These are more effective schools," so he became a more effective schools advocate, and he said, "Schools should do these things."

Knox

When Gus Hawkins called a group together, one of the first things he said was, "What you need to know is what Ron Edmonds has done and what he has found," and so he had us all read Ron Edmonds, because I had read it, for the whole group to understand what Ron Edmonds did and why he was doing it. You'll see in that quote of Ron Edmonds, where he said, "We know all we need to know to educate all of America's children." How this effects us depends upon how we feel about not having done it before, and what that really says, "How do we feel about not having educated these children?" And if you feel that we have not done something right, then you will then change your behaviors to do something that does educate them. And he said, "That isn't new, it isn't difficult. We already know that."

Knox

One of the reasons I, along with other things about Ron Edmonds' research in more effective schools, but the fact is if we know all we already know, and that makes me uncomfortable when I go to a conference or a lecture, when somebody wants to tell me all the problems, because Ron Edmonds said, "We already know everything we need to know. All we need to know, do, is take some action in those areas that we already know," and that's one of our problems. It still remains one of my problems. The national council is having its conference in April in Washington, D.C.

Stevenson

Okay. Now, I know that there were some attempts to use that more-effective-schools philosophy in L.A. Unified. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Knox

Well, some administrators came to say how closely the schools were hewing to what Ron Edmonds said, but the first effort was one called Children Can No Longer Wait. A group of us went to the school district and said just that. We had a document that showed the failures, and what we said then, and we were loosely basing it upon Ron Edmonds' research, is that, "Here are some things you should do. And what we are saying, the school district should take a school or group of schools and try to implement those ideas that we've gleaned from Ron Edmonds' and other research. You should do this in school and see--even call it experimental and see if it does work." There was a lot of discussion and the school district said yes, and it produced documents. It was never implemented.

Knox

Another one was the Ten Schools Program. Ted Alexander became the head of that group. At that time those ten schools in South Los Angeles were predominantly African American. They are now predominantly Hispanic. But in those ten schools they were saying, "This is a laboratory, these ten schools, where we're going to try all these different ideas," and a lot of them came out of Ron Edmonds. "We're going to try these different ideas," and the purpose was, "and those that work, I want the school district to observe that, and

those ideas that are successful in increasing the education of African American students, then use that in other schools throughout the district."

Knox

Well, with a lot of fanfare the school district opened the Ten Schools Project and only the schools that--well, they were somewhat successful. The school district never used that as a kind of laboratory and used that to attempt at getting the school district to reform itself in educating African American students. But Ron Edmonds' research was used [unclear], neither of which ever actually was used as it was intended by the people who presented it for use in the school district. More recently, a group of people, a kind of coalition called the Summit of African American Leaders on the Crisis in the Education of African American Students went to the board and requested that they improve the schools, and this time--those other two efforts I mentioned, we went with a plan. This time we didn't go with a plan. The idea was, these are your statistics. Your African American students are learning least well of all schools in the school district, even those students whose home language is not English. Even they achieve at a higher rate than African American students in the school district.

Knox

Our question this time was much like the one Gus Hawkins had. "So what are you going to do about it?" So we presented this to them with their statistics at a board meeting. The superintendent then turned to assistants and said, "Meet with this group and let's see if we can come up with a plan," and we did. I've forgotten how many weeks or months we gave them, but we gave them a period of time at which they should come up with a plan, and so they organized a group, and that group got together. But the big difference this time is this is not the community-demand plan. This is supposed to be their plan, and somehow they came up with a "culturally relevant pedagogy."

Knox

It started off for African American students, but with the board somebody else--I assume somebody's influence, it became for "African American Students and All Others," and that's the one that is presently being evaluated. I listened to an evaluation the other day which says that the superintendents,

assistant superintendents [unclear] have been briefed on this program, that the regional superintendents have been briefed on the program. The problem was the schools and teachers had not sufficiently been trained on using the program. But people have asked me--what they were assuming was that the summit made this plan, and I've had difficulty getting people to understand, no, that's the school district's plan. So they ask me, "What do you think of the plan?" I said, "It's not what I think. It's their plan to improve education, so it's easy. Has it improved the education of African American students? That's all. It's their plan. Have they used the plan that now has--." And obviously when they look at the statistics, no.

Stevenson

Okay. I'd like to talk about your role in curricula development during your career. I see that you developed a multicultural pilot to implement the state guidelines on multicultural education. Tell me more about that.

Knox

What I was asked to do, I was asked to work on a commission for multicultural education at the state level, and I did. On that commission all the different ethnic groups were represented on the group, and what we were saying is that the state in all of the schools should have some program that improves the education of all of the ethnicities and racial groups represented in the school district. So our argument, mine in my discussions was that they have lots of languages and lots of cultures and that any program, not just a separate program but in everything you teach, that is, in math, in English, in everything that you teach there should be an understanding of the culture that contributes to whatever that is. In math, well, at that time and currently really, there is very little mention of the African influence in the development of math. I say Africa's influence is the influence that helped Rome and Greece, that's the same--well, there is no mention, even very little mention of math in any textbook I know now of the origin, much of the ideas and mathematical formulae that the Greeks and Romans gave down to the rest of us really.

Knox

We seem to go back and say, well, this originated there. Now, and this is just one little piece of what we discuss statewide, and even now it was

unsuccessful in getting a lot of this understood, it says that in almost all math books, math started with Europe. Math did not start with Europe. There were mathematicians--in fact, the ideas in much of science of that note. What we were trying to say is, "There are contributions to the culture and to the success, to the politics and to whatever America is, that came from other than European people or European influences." We were saying that, "If you're going to talk multicultural, you've got to be multi. You've got to say contributions--and if I am Japanese and I'm sitting in the classroom, and you're only telling me what happened in Europe prior to the time--and your books are all, and your literature is all about Europe, and your history is all about Europe, simply because the Europeans came to this country, and it's not about anybody who was here already--there was a culture here when the Europeans came, and there are contributions to what America has become, whatever our culture is, from the whole world of people."

Knox

And one of the strengths and beauties of America is that it has taken all of that together to make us who we are, and we are now standing historically, we are now standing--contribution to world history. But so far, we are concentrating on the contributions to that culture from Europe, and that's what we were doing on it. Well, at least in some of the schools and school districts and classrooms there is that understanding and that message, but not to any great extent.

Stevenson

Could you give me an example of one of those early African influences on mathematics?

Knox

Well, I wish I was prepared. I was prepared a few years ago, but I can't think of just one major--I'm having trouble trying to get a mathematical concept that I know was developed in Africa, and I don't want to be quoted on this one, but it seems that I am being quoted. But it seems the Pythagorean Theorem in geometry was developed in, it seems to me, in Mali, and was transferred to Europe much later than that. But I don't [unclear]. But there are books around that show that it was the early civilizations in Africa produced a tremendous

amount of knowledge in all areas now being attributed to Europeans, particularly as the Romans conquered so much of Africa at the time, even to the time of Jesus Christ, and the Greek civilization adopted whatever it already found that existed and became an outstanding civilization, particularly in the sciences and mathematics.

Stevenson

How successful were you in implementing the state guidelines, or having some input? Maybe, what were some actual changes as a result of the work you did?

Knox

The unfortunate result is not nearly as dramatic as I envisioned it at the time that some of us worked on it. I didn't do it alone. In every case, I was part of a group. But one of the ones that I helped develop that I am proud of, I did work, was that the Los Angeles Unified School District was organized when I entered, into three distinct entities, one, elementary education, second was junior high schools, and the third was senior high schools, and there were superintendents of these different groups. There was head superintendent and superintendent of the secondary and superintendent of the middle and elementary. I was a secondary teacher in the beginning, so I knew a little about that hierarchy. Then I became an elementary teacher and administrator, and I knew about that hierarchy.

Knox

And one of the things that occurred to me and to others, too, was that that wasn't the progression that students went. They went through, but not in separate groups. What they did is they went in a flow. So it seemed to me the school district could be organized like the flow of students through it, so that there's the integration of all of this as a succession group of those three entities. So I worked with a group and we sought federal funds--at that time they were called Title III funds--we sought some federal funding to organize what they called complexes, that is, an elementary, middle, and senior high school, and that would be the hierarchy. So students entering an elementary school might even have a teacher at the middle school who also taught at the elementary school.

Knox

But as a result, one time when decentralization was just beginning, I mentioned to the superintendent in a meeting that--and I was wrong in this, but I'm glad I said it anyway--that decentralization was going to be a bigger issue than desegregation. And he said, "No, not hardly." And he was right, because desegregation, because it went into the courts, suddenly became a tremendous issue, but desegregation (sic) is the remaining one that went from before desegregation--decentralization has gone through all of that. Now the school district is decentralized in the way that we organized it back when we did the complexes. We had Garfield [Educational] Complex in East L.A. and the Jordan Educational Complex in South Los Angeles, and I think that that has become one success of groups that I participated in.

Stevenson

In connection with that, I see that you developed a successful Title III proposal for decentralizing an urban school district. Maybe first you could talk a little bit more about exactly what Title III was.

Knox

The federal government had not, well, let's go back. Historically, education of students is a state responsibility, not a federal responsibility. It's not stated in the Constitution that it is a federal responsibility. But a lot of politicians over a long period of time have been trying to get the federal government to take a more active role, and so, by the way, Gus Hawkins was involved in it. So in federal funding there was an inclusion of funds for schools and local school districts to do several different things. Title I was for the schools that served children of low socioeconomic status. That gave them lunches and gave them additional assistance in reading teachers and the like. Title I, which still does that, was for that purpose, and I think Title II was for libraries and other institutions similar to that. And so schools and most of the schools built libraries.

Knox

And Title III was for innovative ideas about improving education, and so we took the Title III money and used it to organize the Jordan Educational Complex and the Garfield Educational Complex. I was asked to write the

proposal, to assist in writing the proposal to get that funded, and then when it got funded I was asked to be the head of the Jordan Educational Complex, and through that we developed some ideas about how to integrate the schools, elementary, middle, and senior high schools. And so now the school district is organized in local districts they call it. Prior to that they called it areas, but they are organized as we indicated and had some success in operating in the Jordan Educational Complex.

Stevenson

Maybe as the last thing for us to cover is to tell me your philosophy of insuring school effectiveness. How do you identify and maintain quality teachers, administrators, and how do you ensure that children are excelling academically?

Knox

Well, from all the things I've discussed here you can see that it says that schooling itself is a problem, not that-- this is my philosophy. It's not the parents and not the students, but it's schooling itself that has been the problem with everybody's education, with our lack of being able to be competitive in the students we turn out in the United States, competitive with other people in the world. We keep tampering around with getting parent councils. That's great, that's good, but they are not responsible for the education of students. The students are not--I know we say that, "You're responsible--." Even in the Blueprint it says, "You're responsible for your own education." But students don't have a certificate for learning. Teachers get paid and have a certificate for teaching.

Knox

I go to college, I get degrees, I learn a whole bunch of stuff. I then take an examination that gives me a credential. The state says I can teach. By this certificate it certifies that I can teach. Then I go to the classroom, I am expected and I am paid to do what my certificate says, teach. Now, you have to define teaching. Well, everybody can have their own definition. I have mine. You have taught when someone has learned. If someone didn't learn, you did not teach. Now, my background is in science, and in physics it says a definition of work is the weight of the object times the distance through which

you move that object or foot-pounds, so many feet, so many pounds. I took so many pounds and I moved so many feet.

Knox

Now, that's a formula. Now, they use that formula like this. I pushed against a wall. I pushed all day against the wall and at the end of the day the wall didn't move. Now, with that formula, that's a thousand pounds of wall and zero feet. Multiplied, a thousand times zero is zero. You did zero work. I say when a teacher stands before a class and lectures and uses PowerPoint and the computer and all of that, and I plan, go through my whole plan, and then when I finish I evaluate it, and if the children did not learn, then I did not teach. I know that isn't very popular, but I'm saying if the teachers did not teach, the children got F's, the teachers did not teach. If the students cannot compete in the world of science and mathematics and literature, then the school district, which also has a certificate for running schools and gets paid, and administrators and the superintendent, they all get paid to see that the teacher teaches. If the teacher didn't teach, they didn't do their job. So it's schooling that's the problem. It's not the students.

Knox

Somebody said, "Students should come prepared to learn." No. Teachers should come prepared to teach whoever it is, the student who arrives. Well, you say, "Well, some of these students don't want to learn." Well, do we have a program that gets these students who don't want to learn to want to learn? That's what teaching is. We don't teach because you already learned something. We teach whatever you haven't learned, that's what we teach, and that's what teaching is. So my conclusion is our schools are failing our students. Our schools are failing our society. Our schools are failing America for that matter, and we cannot continue that.

Knox

What we need now is a means by which we learn how to do what we're not presently able--we're able, but not presently successful at doing. Now sometimes through all of this I know it sounds negative, and like there's a lot of my spiritual nature, but I want to complete this by saying I have had a wonderful life. I have enjoyed myself, and the most traumatic, racial or other

kind of difficulty I've gone through has taught me a whole lot about being successful and about being happy. So what I want is a school that then takes students wherever they are when they arrive and moves them as rapidly toward what the idea would be is that they become successful adults, happy, successful adults and contributors to a happy society.

Knox

The reason I find so much to like in my life is that I have seen that happen. In different cases I've seen that happen. Presently I'm on the board of the Watts Learning Center, and I'm one of the founders of the Watts Learning Center, and the philosophy is so simple. When a student arrives--and we are in South Los Angeles, the highest-crime area in the city, the 77th Street Precinct, one of the lowest, perhaps the lowest economic areas in the city, and we're one of the highest-performing schools in the city. And people come and ask me--the other day I took a group of people to see the school, and they said, "Why could you succeed? Because the schools right around you are not doing well, and you've done so well. Why is this school doing so well?" It's so simple. I mean, people seem to think it's such a huge and difficult thing, and like Ron Edmonds says, "We already know all we need to know."

Knox

But what we need to know is little things like this. When a student comes from our area where this school is, in this high-crime area where there are shootings and maybe even he's lost members of his family in one of the shootings, and joblessness and all kinds of problems, and generally in schools we think, "Oh, that poor kid, he has such a hard problem in his life. I'm sure that we're going to have to be very kind to him in school." You don't need to be kind with him, because he's already learned to live the worst life you can live in this city and find joy in it. I mean, those kids are skipping to school. But what happens in school is we think it has traumatized him in some way, and as bad and as awful as poverty is and should be eliminated, the good thing about it is he comes to the school, and we should look upon him just for having survived his first six years or five years in life and still happy, and he comes with that much. That means he has developed a tremendous amount of intelligence, use of intelligence, that all we have to do is transfer that to those few things we try to teach in school.

Knox

> And if you realize that, if you think that when he walks in the door--I say this to my teachers, "This little kid who walked through the door is gifted. He's gifted, because middle-class kids never learned all that stuff. Those kids, parents take them to Little League and to little hockey and to little ballet and everything, and parents do all the work. The kid doesn't have to think. The parents think for him and have him go through those--this little kid coming from a poverty area, he has had to think to survive, just to get from home to school, from home to the store, from home to the park. He has to know all of what's out there and know how to develop a plan to avoid it, so that I can be safe, and if I'm safe I'm happy." And all we have to do is say, "He's gifted." "Come on in. You're gifted. I know you can do this. This stuff is easy." And it is if we thought it, but the fact that we think he's traumatized means that we've already planned for him not to succeed.

Stevenson

> Okay. One last item. Yesterday, President [Barack] Obama gave a talk on education. What can we expect from the president in terms of addressing nationwide inequities in education?

Knox

> I have no reason to believe that the president, so far I have no reason to believe that the president shares my philosophy. What I do have reason to believe is that he's open to ideas about how to improve the country in every area. He has not said, "This is what you do, because I want you to do it." He has called together people who have had experience and knowledge in that area and asked them. Out of that he develops a plan. He is just tremendously capable in taking a lot of diverse ideas and making a program out of it, in every area, in areas that sometimes shock me. There's no way for him to have known that much about the economy that he knows now. There's no way for him to know about any of those other things. He's never even been to war, and he's talking about how we organize the world economically and politically, how we organize the world. So he's open to ideas about how to do it.

Knox

The only problem I have with him--who's going to give him the ideas on education? That's my problem. I'm afraid he's going to go to most of the traditionalists in education, and they're going to tell him such mundane things as, "This is the unions' fault." I'm not sure about that, and I hope--but I have to depend upon his ability to separate the truth from fiction, and I believe given diverse ideas about education of children of poverty, he would be able to--

Stevenson

No, we're still picking up.

Knox

He would be able to come up with a plan, but the major plan has to do with how we train teachers to be successful at teaching, and how we train administrators to be successful at helping teachers understand how to teach, and I have great hopes and I have great expectations that the president will be able to do that.

Stevenson

All right. Well, thank you very much for this interview.[End of interview]

Date:
This page is copyrighted