1996

Oral History Interview: Michael Thomas

Michael Thomas

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MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY OF APPALACHIA PROJECT

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

with

MICHAEL THOMAS

by Jackie Fourie

Marshall University, Huntington, WV

April 23, 1996

Jackie: This is an oral history interview with Michael Thomas on the history of the Civil Rights Movement in Huntington, WV, in the 1960's. Today's date is April 23rd [1996] and I'm interviewing Mr. Thomas in Old Main in the College of Liberal Arts Conference Room. Mr. Thomas, do you give permission for this interview to be taped and to release the transcripts for public domain?

Michael: As long as it's used for strictly educational purposes. Is that correct?

Jackie: Yes, that's correct. First of all, give me a brief history, a family history background of yourself.

Michael: I was born and raised in Huntington, West Virginia in a small community [audio interference]...Congress decided to integrate schools, I went to Guyandotte Elementary in the 3rd grade, prior to that I went to Barnett Elementary in the 1st grade and 2nd grade. They integrated the public school system, desegregated the public school system in 1954. Myself and two cousins went to Enslow Junior High School, a predominantly white school. We went to Huntington East High School, predominantly white school, entered Marshall University in 1964, of course, a predominantly white college. Finished Marshall University, a degree in English Literature, a minor in Speech Communication, I'm married, I've got two sons that both just recently finished hitches in the Air Force. I've got three grandkids. My job search took me away from Huntington in 1974. I was transferred from Ashland, Kentucky Coke plant to Detroit, Michigan, where I began the first African-American general foreman in the history of that plant in Detroit, Michigan. Ten years later, I was promoted to the Personal Safety Manager and transferred to St. Louis, Missouri, where I became the first African-American, that title as Personal Manager

and Safety Director in the history of that plant. I bounced back and forth between Detroit and St. Louis, working for an Allied Corporation, climbing the corporate ladder. In '88, I became a little tired with the big city life and bouncing around between the two cities. I gave my resignation after seventeen years with Allied Corporation, came back to Huntington, West Virginia in December of, in July of '88. I was appointed Housing Director by then Mayor Bobby Nelson. I still hold the title of Housing Director for the City of Huntington.

Jackie: That's great. When you talk about the (the Allied Corporation) Corporation, can you elaborate a little bit on that? I'm trying to think exactly...

Michael: The plant itself, my first assignment, if you will, is to have met a quota to, I was part of several African-Americans that were given the opportunity of applying for a job at a traditional historically white plant in Ashland, Kentucky. They, because they had some federal dollars into the corporate structure of Allied Chemical, they allowed ten or fifteen African-Americans to apply for six or seven positions within their plant. I was one of the fortunate ones that began to work within the plant, became the first step-up foreman because I had some college under my belt at the time. They were looking to give certain opportunities and promote African-Americans within the system of Allied Corporation. I worked a summer or two as a step-up foreman. After two years I was given the opportunity, based solely on job performance, to become the first African-American foreman in the history of that plant in Catlettsburg, Kentucky. It was very trying for management, as well as myself. The whites in the plant were not accustomed to an African-American giving them instructions and job

assignments and telling them what to do on a daily basis. It was really a trying, trying time for the organization as well as myself. I had to face racial innuendos and verbal threats on a continuous basis. They would drop water buckets on my head, of course, slur my name and innuendos like "nigger, go home", and things of that nature, on a continuous basis. It finally got to the point in time that the company I think more than any reason whatsoever decided it was time that I move on, it was becoming very disruptive within the plant itself. So they gave me the opportunity of moving up, becoming a general foreman at the Detroit, Michigan Coke Plant, still with Allied Corporation. And just for the record, coke is carbonated coal, where they take coal and they heat it for 18 to 20 hours in blast furnaces of 2,000 degree fahrenheit. They actually cook the coal, and the biproduct that results from cooking it for 16 or 18 hours was what is called coke and coke is a raw product that's used in the manufacturing of making steel. All steel mills have to have coke in order to make steel.

As I said, I was the first black foreman in the Detroit, Michigan plant. For about ten years I worked there. Then an opportunity came up for me to transfer to St. Louis and from there to St. Louis as a personnel manager and safety director. That total was seventeen years in a private sector in management positions. I just got tired of the big city life. It just got to be so overwhelming. And when you're climbing the corporate ladder, once they see that you're willing to make changes in your life, they don't hesitate to come to you and say, "Hey, look, pack your family up and hit the road, let's go." So, after three moves, I was just at a point I knew they were coming to me to ask me to

locate to Buffalo, New York after I'd gone to St. Louis for three or four years. And I wasn't ready to make that move, so I just gave my resignation. I gave up a $42,000 a year job, came back to Huntington unemployed, went through the system here of course. It took me six months, eight months to get a job. I was fortunate enough to apply for and get the housing director job for the City of Huntington.

Jackie: That's great. [clears throat] We're going to focus now on the Civil Rights era. And I'm gonna just...general questions. I understand that you were the president of the NAACP at the time (I am still president) I'm sorry, and you still are. Okay. And...I'm just curious on some things here. I understand that Douglass High School was at that time closed down eventually to, due to the integration. But was it closed down right after...? I mean, did it still stay open?

Michael: Historically, hopefully you'll get some individuals that did attend Douglass High School. My mother and father went to Douglass High school. I didn't know much about the true history of Douglass High School. I do know that as I was attending schools and integrating schools that Douglass was still up and going. To my knowledge, probably the late '60's and I can't be quoted on this. But Douglass was, during integration, Douglass still existed and some folks decided to go to continue their education at an all-black high school as opposed to integrating into white high schools. Because of the economics, trying to maintain Douglass High School, it was not feasible in Cabell County to maintain the all-black high school when the mode at the time was integration (right). Integration served to be a two-sided sewer for African-Americans, historically speaking. As a people we fought to have

the right to go to white schools and enjoy the same educational process that whites enjoyed. It proved to be not so much of a positive effective mechanism in the history of the African-Americans. What it did it took the brightest of our African-American students away from the high schools, it took business opportunities away from black business ownership. It took our housing initiatives away from the African-American community, and blacks couldn't wait to go integrate into a simulated white mainstream. Integration was supposed to be an equal thing where blacks and whites shared common denominators. But historically as you look back now, integration...while we as a people were determined to integrate and to enjoy the American way of life, just as other ethnic groups have done, historically speaking in the country. It served as a deterrent also in as much as economically. If you look in the majority of the African-American communities across the country, you'll find that integration served to hurt the community. It took the economics away from the community. Blacks were not able to sustain businesses of their own. And history speaks for itself. If you look at the number of the successful African-American businesses in the city of Huntington, and we're concentrating our conversation right now with the city of Huntington (right), you'll find that there are not very many successful black businesses in the city of Huntington.

Jackie: And there were at that time, before integration.

Michael: Oh, doctors and lawyers, dentists and apothecaries, cabs, our own hotels, our own movie theaters, you know. But those things that we need to begin to look at reality checks and begin to re---implement and revitalize our communities. Jobs are very important, but ownerships of businesses to create jobs and to deal with those

individuals that are willing to make partnerships with the African-American community is of utmost importance right now. (right) Jobs again are important, but if you are the owner of the business, then you can create the jobs and give the jobs to the African-Americans and keep the money in the African-American community. The African-American community generates in the United States over five-hundred billion dollars a year annually, with the largest consumers of tennis shoes in the country. It's nothing for a black family that has a struggle eating of days, to see their kids wearing a hundred and fifty dollar sneakers, okay. And I'm not saying that's good. But what I'm saying is that we do put money into the economy. We're the largest consumers of theater tickets. More African-Americans on a per capita basis go to the movies on an annual basis. When you look at the use of beer and alcoholic beverages, and again I'm not saying this is good by any stretch of the imagination. But they've created a 40 ounce beer solely for the urban areas of African-Americans, that have been known historically to spend a lot of money in our country. And when we learn to keep some of that money in our communities, other ethnic groups have learned to turn money over, five or six or seven times in their community before it leaves their community and goes out to the mainstream. The Jews do it, the Chinese do it, the Japanese do it, the...the Arabians do it, the far Easterners do it, not the American Indies, but the far Eastern Indians. (right) And they've learned historically to generate money in their community and turn it over time and time again, supporting and demonstrating economic determination. We the people have lost that, primarily due to integration. Our successful businesses were not able to sustain themselves, and unfortunately the history of business ownership has

began to wane in the African-American community, so... That's one thing that Lewis Farrakahn mentions, he's got a terrible reputation in the at-large community, primarily because he's looked at as a racist and anti-semitic. He's a man that does believe in self-determination and control, instilling self-esteem into African-Americans and to look at the economics and to develop our own mechanisms, as far as economics go, so. A lot of the thought from the national organization of the NAACP was quasey influencing the newly elected president and chief executive officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have, has began to turn inward, and looking at what we are not doing as a people, as opposed to pointing and criticizing the white folks for what they are not doing for us, that it's important that we do for ourselves. We began to build partnerships, and we began to develop economic determination initiatives that's going to create opportunities for us not only have jobs, but to own the businesses to create the jobs. (right) So that in part we can go back historically now to integration at the time our forefathers felt something to fight and die for, for us to begin to integrate the American way of life. Integration again was supposed to be a two-sided street where blacks and whites integrated collectively and shared each other's culture and traditions and began to respect and understand one another. Well, this didn't happen with white folks. Blacks ran to the whites, blacks took their money to the whites, blacks in essence, gave up their self-identity. There's even, there was even a crisis at a movement where and it's still this way in our society where fairer skinned black people are treated more expeditiously than darker skinned people, based on skin color. We even want to change the texture of our hair, straighten our hair so

we can assimilate and look more like the master, like the white folks. Well, there's been a change there. (right) You'll see now that white folks are laying in the sun and going to tanning booths and doing the things they can do to get as dark as we are, okay. So it's very hypocritical there inasmuch as basing humanity by solely on skin color. (right) I think we need to change things but skin color and just deal with people as individuals.

Jackie: Right, you're right on that. And also, you know, I noticed that they have a lot of programs, programs in government housing they have a lot of programs. A lot of people say they're positive sides and there's negative. What's your feelings on that? The programs that have been initiated with...

Michael: Well, I see a significant need for us at this point in history to, to say that what we're going to do is just get everybody off of welfare road. I think that's, I think it's ridiculous. We find as many white folks, particularly in Appalachia, that are low-income that need that governmental help. Okay, where we've made our mistake historically with blacks and white people, you need that initial help is that we continue to feed them the insecurity and take away their, their lack of self-esteem by handing out things to them, and not requiring them to put anything back in return. Okay? There is a point in time in the history of our country when people need certain help and the government can give certain help. But when it's only a handout and nothing's given back, then I've got a problem with that. I don't think we can effectively go in and just cut people off of welfare without first giving them the opportunity of education, training, jobs, security (right). It's got to be a gradual thing. If it takes two years for some people, it may take as long as five years

for other people. But there's no excuse if you let folks know on the front end, "Look, the government's not going to take care of you forever." You know. (right) If you're going to college and you need four years to get yourself straightened out or five years to get yourself straightened out, at some point in time you have to be determined enough to remove yourself and be productive enough to make it on your own. Again, it's going to take some people longer because they've been entrenched in that system for so long that it's impossible to believe that you can remove them from that system overnight. So it's going to have to be something very gradual. And something that you can't undo. If we can break down the communist wall without firing a shot and killing folks over in the, in Europe, we can do the same thing with breaking down racial barriers and socioeconomic barriers, and we can do what we set our minds to do. It's just a matter of realizing that certain things have to be done and in a timely fashion to get it done.

Jackie: Right. That's true on that. Also, you know, I've noticed in the civil rights era, the role of the church played a big part in...the civil rights era, can you kind of give me some information regarding churches and how they participated in the civil rights era?

Michael: Probably the most aggressive organization and the most sustaining organization in the civil rights movement was the church. You'll find that most of the leaders that are initially came from a church background. Reverend Martin Luther King, for instance, the most noteworthy of history speaking individual that came through the church. Historically though you can, the Southern leadership conference, the NAACP and some of it's early leaders came from within the church. And the Corps of Racial Equality and

SNCC and we could go on and on and on. (right) Even the Black Panther party, there were individuals that their early upbringing came through a church. That was one place that we *could* go as a people, discuss events without white folks listening and (right) and taking advantage and plotting against when, when the white racist ultra-conservative, bigoted minded individuals wanted to attack the credibility of African-American determination. Oftentimes it was done in the form of bombing the church because that is where the central African-American activities spawned from, was from the church, so. When they attacked and blew up a church and killed folks, they felt like they were effectively defeating the morale of African-Americans. And it almost worked. In some instances it, it set back the civil rights movement in Mississippi, and in Alabama, and there were church bombings. It did set the community back. Still yet, within the United States of America today, coming from the Civil Rights Days of the early '60's, the '70's, the African-American Church is probably the most wealthy institution in America, as far as African-American dollars go. Though it has been said that uh, economically speaking that over two million dollars a week is generated in our African-American churches. That's each and every week, over two million dollars that people are donating within their churches, or giving to their churches. We need to look at a mechanism where we begin to, where we begin to address our economic side of uh, realizing mainstream acceptance of becoming more active in American society by using some of those church funds to address issues of economic worth. A lot of our churches do help the needy, just as the white churches do, and help with feeding the poor and clothing the poor. But we need to look at those monies as a more aggressive, economic

determination to, to apply those things in partnerships and generate that money and use that capital as equity and start building a housing complex (right) and start building our own banks, and start building our own movie theaters, and start building our own hotels. [both speaking at once] There's nothing wrong with that. All these ethnic groups in the United States do that. They come together collectively. We have, for whatever reasons, primarily for racism and hatred and bigotry. When we take four steps forward, we usually take four steps backwards because of just a few people in America that control the hate machine. (right) They control the war mongers, that are still are managing to control the relationships between blacks and whites. And when the average educated white man decides to put his foot down and quit denying that we've got basic problems between black and white America in this country, and they don't deny that those problems do exist, they make up their mind to really do something about it. Then I think in my lifetime I would hope in my lifetime I would get to see when blacks and whites are a little bit more respectful of one another. (right) So the church has played an important role and continues to play an important role.

Jackie: And I understand there were a couple of restaurants, Bailey's and there's another restaurant that at the time of the civil rights era that blacks were not able to go in and (that's correct). And ...

Michael: White Pantry.

Jackie: White Pantry. Okay.

Michael: I have recently been criticized from segment of the African-American community, I had a grandmother who worked for forty years, over forty years, at Bailey's Cafeteria, and she

couldn't even go in the front door. She cooked for white folks, they had white folks for forty years and she'd have to go in and out the back door. Two months ago, because of who I am and where I am in my life right now, there's a new owner at Bailey's Cafeteria that the old racist regime has long been away from Bailey's Cafeteria. And a young, new, white has taken over the ownership and as a sign of my personal evolution and my decision to set aside some of the old racist attitudes that my people have had as African-Americans, I reached out to that young man and I told him, I said, "Look, I'm getting ready, I've never been in this place before, I've never eaten in this restaurant primarily because of historically we were denied the opportunity to eat in this place." And I said, "I'm willing to transcend those limitations and my grandmother was a Christian lady and she would probably want me to do this. And I'm going to reach my hand out to you as a human being, as president of the NAACP, and to show the type of compassion we as a people have, that I am willing to come into your restaurant and sit down." They did a, the newspaper thought that was a big deal, they did a big spread on the front page. Some people like Phil Carter and some of the other people that had, that had fought vigorously for us to be able to sit down in those restaurants, and they were denied, they were somewhat upset with me because I made the decision to transcend that limitation and the perception was from the white press, that all was forgiven. I said, "Well, I didn't forgive anything historically. I had a grandmother that worked in this place. I mean, I was never denied the opportunity to eat there because I never did go." But my grandmother worked in the place. She washed dishes, she cooked for white folks and had to come in and out the back door, okay. So

this was an enormous, it was an enormous undertaking for me to go in that restaurant. I mean, I really had some reservations about sitting down in that restaurant.

But this in fact, is something that we have to learn to do as a people. We have to move ahead. If we continue to, to, history is extremely important. Without the history and without the shoulders those people who have laid down their lives, I wouldn't be where I am now. I know that and I understand the history of America and the relationship that African-Americans have had in this country. But we have to learn to live, we're in nearly the 21st century and if we're going to continue to harbor ill-feelings and because a white man is having one bad relationship with an African-American, or because an African-American has dated his daughter, and if he's going to hold this against all mankind, and all African-Americans because of one incident that may not have been quite favorable to them, if every African-American carried a grudge on their shoulder for the indignities of what some whites have done to African-Americans in this country, then there would probably be a continual blood bath. (right) But we have transcended that as a people. We've learned to live and we've reached out and we've learned the white man's language. That's something that the white man's going to have to do. They're going to have to learn our language and when I say our language is what I mean by that is we're going to have to learn to understand and appreciate cultures and the traditions that are different. You know, when I walk in more than often 90% of the time my dealings are with white folks. My banker is white, my CPA is white, my attorney-at-law is white, my paper boy is white, my grocer on the corner grocery store is white. I learned their language, I learned

to deal so when I walk into their place and I give them my hard-earned cash I can talk with them. Those very same people, aside from me in dealing with a few other minorities in a city like Huntington, West Virginia, where there's a small minority population, they can go home. They don't have to deal with black folks. Their lawyer is a white folk, their banker is a white folk, their corner grocery store guy is a white folk. They don't have to deal with blacks like we have to deal with whites. So therefore, we have to learn the language. When I go on a job interview, I might like to have dreadlocks and I might like to wear a gold necklace around and I might like to wear traditional African attire. But I know that if I'm going to get that job and be successful in that job, that I had better look as close to the man or woman that's sitting across the table from me as I can because I want the job. (right) Now once I get the job, if I decide to let my dreadlocks go and stuff and wear my traditional attire, then that's a different story. But you have to understand the language and you have to do what you got to do in America. Okay. Now, if I'm fortunate enough that there's a black employer, again we're getting back to economics, if I'm having enough to go on an interview and a black man owns the business, if I would walk in in dreadlocks or an African attire it might not be so offensive to him, because he understands the history. We have a rapport, we have a language. But the average employer, the average white employer, they're going to feel threatened if I go to a job interview with dreadlocks on and gold and African and Godsheshe whatever, okay. So we can't do that. (right) We can't do that. Ninety percent of the time we can't do that. At some point in time in the history of America we may be able to do that, I may be able

to be comfortable. I might be in a position where a young man comes to me with dreadlocks and I see that, that I can transcend the dreadlocks and deal with him, based on the qualifications that he's going to bring something to my company and help my company, then it's not going to make any difference if he's got long dreadlocks or what, you know. I'm looking for him based on his skills. So, the language and understanding and respecting one another is extremely important, too.

Jackie: Right, adapting to.... You know, at that time, too, there was a war on poverty issues, 1960. There were programs that were initiated in Huntington. And I'm trying to think what the names of the programs were exactly. But there were food programs, I think. Were they very successful in helping some of the...less fortunate ones? I'm trying to...

Michael: You know, it's strange. In the history of our country, particularly in our society here, right here locally, you'll find that there's more similarities between blacks and whites than...than non-similarities. In other words, we were probably all vying for the same jobs in a small community. We want our kids educated in the best of schools. We want the job opportunities. We want the availability of affordable housing. Huntington has always been a pretty tight-knit community. I can, I can vaguely remember some of the pantry programs where you could go get food. Of course, there was always the federal government came in with commodities or (right) where you were given some cheese and some bread and some peanut butter. I can remember as a kid eating some of that stuff myself, you know, for whatever reasons. Evidently my family qualified for it. But I always enjoyed the cheese. I thought the cheese was excellent and the peanut butter was

super good. (yeah, it was great) And I'm sure those programs were spawned in part from surplus foods that the military had and things like that. They began to move it down to the rank and file low-income, based on your income, you could get these subsidies, or these commodities. It seemed to always be there, welfare seemed to always be there. It, at one point in time, was extremely difficult for African-Americans to get welfare because white folks controlled the jobs in welfare. And they controlled who was going to get the food and the housing. At one time, there was only one public housing facility, it's called Washington Square. Those were the "colored" apartments, as we called them. Marcum Terrace was all white, Northcott Court was all white. Subsequently, the W.K. Elliot, who was named after an African-American dentist. He made quite an impact, a historic leader in the city of Huntington. Sitting on several boards, particularly the Housing Authority. He was a dominant figure there for years and years. When they did build those units, they named him after an African-American. But historically, it was tough for low-income, marginal African-Americans to get public subsidies, because most of them went to white folks. There was only 65 units in Washington Square, and when those 65 units were absorbed, unless a family was fortunate enough to move up and move out of those units, blacks had to wait a very long time to get public housing. Because those were the only ones they would let blacks into. So uh...you know, that has transcended because of certain integration, federal fair housing statutes in '64 and as revised in 1988, that based upon race, religion, natural origin, sex, small families with children, that you cannot be discriminated against. So, in essence, the government provided certain legislation made accessibility more

better for low-income people for subsidized housing.

I can't think of any the foods, specific food programs. (yeah, they were pretty...) Most of the foods, when they did become available, we spoke with the African-American church, the churches were always a melting pot or a resource, an edifice where people could go to get the food and occasionally the clothing, that sort of thing.

Jackie: I know at W.K. Elliot they're very good, the churches give every kid in that apartment complex gets a Christmas gift. (outstanding) They go out and buy brand new clothing. And you're just really thankful, I just thank, (mmm-hmm, that they're there) And they come and pick up the kids and go to church, on Wednesdays, Sundays.

Michael: Are the blacks in that facility?

Jackie: Oh, yeah, I have, as a matter of fact, Shawn's best friend, my son's best friend, is a little black boy named Donte'. And they play sports together and they go to school every day together. I think they spend more time (great, that's important). So it's pretty, pretty integrated. I mean, to me. There's some neighbors that don't accept that belief, but the time will come with them when they'll need to be educated. (sure, yes)

Michael: And association is important (yes, yes). When you see that people are up against the same thing you're up against, and they want basically the same thing you want, they're just in a position in their life that they might need some help. They talk the same language that you do, again we're getting back to language that.... You know, if kids can do it, adults should be able to it. Unless it's pointed out to kids, you know, kids are taught negatively that African-Americans, or if an African-American

teaches their kids that whites are no good, then they don't stand a chance. It's not right for a parent to do that to a child. Most of the racism that we find in the early years of children, if they've got racist emotions, it was because it was taught to them. You're not born a racist.

Jackie: I know, that's very true. That is very true. I'm one hundred percent on that. I do believe in that. You know...I don't know the media, with the media, did the media play...in covering the movement? Or what, did it cover the movement very well here in Huntington? I mean, how did it portray...?

Michael: It, it was not near as sensitive and the media was not...there's a significant initiative within major newspapers across the country. You hear terminology like diversity, dealing with multiculturalism, mainstreaming. In essence, what they do now they look, they realized, the media realizes the significant contribution that African-Americans and other ethnics, other than white Americans, make on a continuous basis, to the betterment of America. Blacks and other ethnics groups that served in every war that's existed in this country, they've spilled their blood, they've given their lives for freedom of quality and justice and come back home and it's pushed in their face. That freedom of quality and justice they've given their life for is not here. (right) Okay. So newspapers have learned that if they're going to sell newspapers, and they're in the business to sell newspapers, that they're going to have to be more, they're language is going to have to be more conducive to and there's going to have to be stories geared toward other ethnic groups. And when you open a newspaper, it's not going to sell newspapers good when a large portion of America is black and Mexican and American-Indian, and

Chinese and Japanese, and other ethnic groups besides European whites. Okay. So they decided a long time ago that in order to sell newspapers that they're going to have to deal with diversity, that they're going to have to deal with multiculturalism. They might have to mainstream, they're going to have to go out and look for every day events, and see that black folks toil and labor and they want the same thing white folks do. Occassionally, they are going to have to appear in the newspaper. That was the exception, rather than the rule in the '60's. They didn't look for the black story. When it was a black story, it was always a negative story. It was the riots in '64, in Newark and Detroit and Chicago that always hit the newspaper. Very seldom did you see the positive stories, the successful, positive stories. They handled Martin Luther King pretty well. We've got a lot of footage during the '60's where African-American's were set upon by police and state and county policemen, and water hoses and dogs syked on 'em. And there's a lot of footage there, so. You can't be denied the type of racism that did exist in our country during the civil war, or during the civil rights demonstrations. It uh, it was very demeaning. It was quite humiliating. There's been a couple of stories in the Herald Dispatch lately, about the phenomenon of lynching. It was a heinous crime that was done primarily to strip African-Americans of any self-esteem that they may have where they actually hung 'em by the neck and sometimes castrated 'em, peeled their skin off their bones and set them on fire. This happened in our country, so there has been some footage of that, of that phenomenon called lynching. So that is very real. It is not a figment of somebody's imagination. It actually happened in this country.

But, to answer your question, I thought, I think probably at the time newspapers would probably be filled with the coverage of that. They covered the civil rights movement. It, it probably could have been recorded more expeditiously or the coverage could have been more total. Oftentimes, newspapers were very conservative then. And they didn't want to be known as being too sympathetic to the American, African-American movement, or the colored movement. So, they chose not to, they picked their battles. They covered what they wanted to cover and let the rest of it go.

Jackie: Right. Because I know the Jett magazine was a black magazine (still is) that was very good magazine that publicized some events. You know and a lot...I don't know how bad it was in that time in 1960's, I was probably only two years old, so I'm only But I'm curious on the, the most, the worst experience, the most worst experience that you encountered here.

Michael: Okay. I'm fifty years old and I'm, I'm not young and I'm not old, I guess I'm right in the middle, if you think of 50. Again I am very familiar with the history of Huntington, and inasmuch as what fifty years will allow me to be familiar with, I did integrate schools in 1954, and I heard, I heard language like "nigger, go home," and I heard that word to be used derogatorily from a very early age in my life. And I understood what the implications were. Through junior high and high school there was always that word that was on the fringe. I did, I did pretty well and got along pretty well with most whites. And probably to this day have benefitted from those early integration years, inasmuch it's allowed me to have probably more acquaintances than the average African-American might have that didn't go through

integration. (right) The probably most heinous and worst thing that happened to me was probably cross burning. We hear racial intimidation through cross burnings, historically in the history of this country. I am married to and have been married to a white woman for twenty-five years. And we've known and dated one another for thirty years. That goes back a very long time. It goes back to a time when I would pick her up and she would get in floorboard of the car and hide until we got out of her environment, out of her immediate neighborhood, because if we were seen together by police or anybody else, it wasn't uncommon for the black guy to be pulled out of the car and kick his butt and send the girl home. And she would be banished some time from her household and lose her respect in the community for dating blacks and so forth and so on. Well, that's what my wife and I faced early on. We, we bought a home in a traditional white neighborhood in the early '70's, once I got through college and began working and had a pretty good income coming in we decided to become home owners. We bought a home out in what's called off Norwood Road, what's called Crossroads in Huntington, West Virginia. And we were the only black family for miles and miles and miles. And I was having some conflict at my job, as I told you earlier, I was the first black foreman at the Ashland, Kentucky coke plant. I was having some problems on the job. And they were all race related. And one night after I was working the 3 to 11 shift, I got home about 11:30, it was almost 12:00 and I heard a big explosion out front and I just, you know, the whole neighborhood lit up. I looked at the door and there was a 12 foot cross in my front lawn, and it had been wrapped and soaked in gasoline. Now, they did this between the time I got home and got out of my clothes and sat down at the foot of the bed and

was talking to the wife and going through some mail and stuff like that. So it happened very quickly or either it was there and I just didn't notice it when I came in. But it happened very quickly. And the hatred and the ignorance and the bigotry that I saw in the 12 foot burning cross, I had two young sons that were home, and it woke them up. And of course, they didn't know, they were crying and screaming and I ran in the house and grabbed my gun and my wife said, "Don't go out there, that's what they want you to do, come out with a weapon," you know. "It's going to be your fault, they're going to shoot you dead." So I listened to her, I didn't go out. We called the police. The police came and extinguished it and all my neighbors, we got along well in my neighborhood, the neighbors were just, they were just flabbergasted. They couldn't believe it, you know. This happened in the early '70's. Seventy-one, seventy-two. The police came and the first thing they did was you know, ask me if I knew who would do something like this, and had I antagonized anybody. Instead of asking me more pertinent questions, they were kind of holding me accountable for what had happened, like I provoked somebody to do that. And uh, the FBI got involved, because it was determined to be a hate crime, a cross burning was determined to be a hate crime. They did a poor job. They did investigate, but nobody was ever arrested. And for subsequent weeks after then, my house, someone shot through my front room window. We would periodically go out and on the hood of the car or under the windshield wiper there would be notes saying that I was being observed by the Knights of the Klu Klux Klan, so I better watch myself. I got a phone call one time and on the other end my brother-in-law was there, my wife's brother was there, and we got periodic threatening phone

calls. And....

END OF SIDE 1

Michael: ...Klu Klux Klan and he was sent here to infiltrate that organization. And he said that within the next few weeks, there's going to be an assassination attempt on my life and that the reason they were waiting two or three weeks was they were waiting for a shipment of armor piercing bullets to come in, that way they could get to me whether I was in my car or in my house or wherever I'd be, they could take care of me. And that the assassin was a Vietnam veteran, that he killed before and that he wouldn't hesitate to kill again. And I motioned for my brother-in-law, just so people wouldn't think that I was crazy and this was going on in my life at this time, I motioned for him to go down in the basement. There was another phone in the basement. And he overheard most of the conversation, then he came up. He was red-faced, he's a white man, of course. He was just flabbergasted, of course, and he said, "Tell that mother-fucker," excuse me, you can edit this, but this was his choice of words. "Tell that "mf" I'll tear his head off. I want to know who he is." And he, he, you know, it just upset him so much, I mean, he was emotionally distraught from it, as if it was said to him, rather than me, you know. And I said, "Well, you know, you've got to learn to live with this. I hear this quite often and the basis of it is I'm married to your sister," and it's, that was the primary reason why, I was living, co-habitating with a white woman in an all white area. Folks just weren't ready for it. They just, in the '70's they just were not ready for it. They were not willing to accept it. And I guess the best thing they could do was run me,

intimidate me and run me out of town. Well, we didn't, we stayed as long as it took for the job to give me an opportunity of leaving. And that's when the job took me to, when the job transferred me to Detroit, Michigan and we moved to Detroit. So it was a little better in Detroit, a little better there. There was still hatred and ignorance. You know, you can go to any section of the country today and you'll still find indifference and intolerance, insensitivities, and just flat out racism and hatred in our country. What seems to be the gap is widening. From the '60's I can see definitive things happening. I marched side by side in college protests in the '60's, the Vietnam War and the war on poverty and the whole nine yards. I took an active involvement because I didn't believe in the Vietnam War and I stayed in college and that's what gave me my college degree, was probably if I'd dropped out of college I would have been drafted. But I stayed in school, got my education, that was advantageous to me. I love America, but I didn't believe in Vietnam War. And I surely don't believe in racism and hatred and ignorance. A lot of, a lot of people in the '60's decided to come together and march hand-to-hand and side-by-side, to protest some of the conditions that existed in our country. The '60's were, you know...oftentimes young people hear about the '60's, you had to be there to appreciate the '60's. Something that was also significant at that time was the drug culture that came in and a lot of times people used that episode in the history of America, saying that people were out of their minds, they didn't know what they were doing anyway. Everybody was freaked out on acid and smoking pot, and that's not true. You know, some of the baby boomers and some of the people that are leading our country today, some of the scientists and some of the

mathmeticians and some of the people that are in prominent positions are those, that same people that, that went through the '60's and tried to make a difference in the '60's and continue to make a difference today.

But uh, it was probably the most devastating thing, if you ask me, one of the most devastating things that happened to me in my life, aside from hearing the n word on a continuous basis, which I still hear on a daily basis, even as an adult man, fifty years old, I still hear that terminology. But probably the most significant thing that happened to me that showed me that racism really did exist was that cross burning on my front lawn in the early '70's. Jackie: Yes, definitely, gosh. Counter-movements. Were there many counter movements within this area in Huntington? I mean... Michael: No, not really. Everything was kind of on the fringe. If you mean counter movements to the civil rights movement, the Klu Klux Klan, they were always a fringe element you know. Even today, you can walk down town Huntington, and I was just walking down the street yesterday and I saw in one of the manholes that somebody had painted KKK on one of the manholes. Okay. And you go in any neighborhood and (see that...) you can see that stuff. And whether or not it's organized or whether it's young guys that are out sowing their oats and their disillusioned with using blacks as scapegoats or minorities, or gays and women. You know, there's people out there that's just not sensitive to anything. If it doesn't look and smell exactly like they look and smell, then they've got a problem with it. I find ignorance probably, ignorance and fear and guilt complex and isolation and those sort of things as those issues that motivate racism. I find if you bring people out of an isolated area and begin to integrate them

into a diverse culture and they begin.... And that's why universities are so important. A lot of times young college students, they come with preconceived notions about blacks and Hispanics and whatever. And they come into the university environment and they begin to interact and deal on a daily basis with people that are different from them, they begin to be educated. Okay. College is a lot more than just a place where you come and you do dissertations and you do math problems and you know, you write term papers. It's also a micro-cosmo of the real world. It began, that's when I really discovered myself when I came to Marshall in 1964. I began to grow as an individual and I began to deal with things and the university life was significant to me in more than just getting a college degree. It helped mold where I am today and it had a lot to do with my development as a young man. So I think it's important that people do interact and begin to talk with one another and learn to respect their differences. There's so much beauty and glory in the history of all us in this country, whether you're European or African-American, or Mexican-American. We all have made significant contributions in making this country what it is. And for just a few people to drag it down and continue to, to, to look for the obvious differences that, that can generate isolation and polarization of races, we need to lead those people out as people as no way [inaudible]. There's just no way that we can continually be responsible for dragging America down the tubes.

Jackie: You mentioned to me too, that you had, your wife is a white woman and at the time that you were together and stuff, you had gone through, trying to sneak around and be together, what kind of...I mean, and imagine in that time you had to live in the

neighborhood. People were pretty decent that were in that neighborhood, but when you were saying you would go out of town you'd have to deal with people staring and saying awful things.

Michael: I was, again, I was fortunate in the city of Huntington that integrating schools I befriended a lot of whites, a lot of whites befriended me. My wife had a group of people that she trusted in telling them, "Hey, look, my significant other is a black man and I love him," you know. And when we got married that freaked a lot of people out, even her parents. Her parents slowly care around. They didn't accept me initially. My parents accepted her a lot more readily than her parents accepted me. And that's generally the way it is. For whatever blacks seem to be a little more sensitive to and accepting...not all blacks are that way. Not by any stretch of the imagination. There were a lot of black women that were upset that I chose a white woman as opposed to a black woman. And they flat came up to me and said, "What's wrong with me?" you know. "Am I not good enough for you?" And I would tell them, you know, that was a personal choice that I made. That it had nothing to do with her skin color. She happened to come around me at the right time and we just happened to fall in love. That's the way that it was. It was fate. My first love, love of my life was a black woman. The first significant love of my life. But my first love encounter that led to marriage was a white woman. It just happened that way. But uh, I caught as much, excuse the expression, "hell" from the black community in my choice of marrying a white woman as I did. Catching "hell" from the white community and the hell that she lived through, too.

But you know, we, we had a accord with friends that we felt comfortable around and that's where we stayed most of the time. I

mean, we didn't go out into the elements and put it in anybody's face. Because we understood in the '70's and the early '70's that it was not accepted in West Virginia and the Tri-State area. I mean, there were parts of Kentucky and Ohio where it was even worse than right here in West Virginia. So we had to be careful where we went, particularly when we went together. I can remember, in a restaurant, there was a couple of white ladies that saw us and they actually got sick. They actually regurgitated. I mean they got physically sick, seeing me and my wife together in a restaurant one time. You know, it's...they said, "That's deplorable. This is sickening. I can't sit in here and see them two people, you know, together." They got physically sick. So, you know, my wife said, "Come on, let's go." I said, "No, let them get sick. I'm not leaving." You know. "Let 'em regurgitate. It might be good for 'em, get it out of their system." So, you know, I didn't get up and go. But uh....

Jackie: That's a big decision. But the kids, how have the kids dealt with it? At school?

Michael: They uh...my, both my kids are very fair skinned. That my wife prayed with my first son, she said she prayed every night that, 'cause she was still living at home when the child was born, at her parents home. (okay) And she, you know, she prayed every night that he would be fair skinned and his hair would be straight and his eyes would be the right color, and that sort of thing. My son is very fair skinned and he passed the test of her parents. They didn't, if they did know something, they didn't say anything right away. They never knew me. They'd always seen a white guy pick Robin up. (oh, no!) So whenever we was going out on a date, I had a real close, white friend that he would pose as Mike

Ferrell. And I would send him to pick Robin up. And they thought that that was her lover, okay. So after he got her out of her environment, we would get together and we would do our thing, okay. So uh, they thought that the baby was by a white man. They had no idea. We deceived them. But it was necessary at the time to do it. (yes, there was reason for it) Now, her parents, her father and her mother, they're loving, they were always loving to the kids. It took 'em awhile to come around when they found out that I was a black man. It took them awhile to accept me. But you know, I can't even, they've been so good to me that I can't even remember the negative part of our relationship. (oh, that's great) that they transcended. And I eat and sleep and love 'em and go swimming in their pool and you know, anything that normal son-in-law's do, I do now. So they've learned, they've transcended racism. That's why I know it can happen, from a personal perspective. I know that it can happen. They respect me for the man that I am and I provided my wife with the same thing any other man would, with a house and a family and automobiles and you know. The material things are there, you know. I took care of the basic needs for her so, and the kids are, they love the grandkids to death. We've got grandkids now, so. (oh, gee, oh, that's wonderful)

Jackie: That is, that's interesting.

Michael: So it can happen. And you know, it's not cut out for everyone. That's not going to say...I think you'll find probably in the city of Huntington, that's a unique phenomenon in the city of Huntington, you'd probably find more interracial dating and marriage in this city than probably any city of this size in the country. And I've been, I've been all over the country and lived.

People, if you let people be people in Huntington, West Virginia, you'll find that there is a lot of crossing, that there are a lot of people.... They may not come out with it public, sometimes they're in the closet about it because they're unsure of the environment they live in. But I personally know a of a lot of interracial dating, a lot of mixed, a lot of mixing. My sons, their choice in wives, both of them are married, their choice in wives have been white women. And my grandkids are so white, I mean, they're just about to lose all of the African-American strain in 'em because after so many times, it...it starts to reduce the African-American presence. But they all know that they're African-Americans. Primarily because they were raised that way. That's how I deal with it, you know. They don't try to pass as white. The law says if there's 1/32 blood in them anyway, that they're African- American by law anyway. So they still have 1/32 blood in 'em. That's you know, they, I mean, they haven't seen that and read that and said that I'm going to be African-American because I'm 1/32 black." They deal with that because their father and their grandfather has told them that they're African-American, you know. And they don't have any problem with that. If they want, if they want to grow up later on and pass as white, that's they're determination. But they don't have any problem. They see me as, I mean, there's no doubt, I'm the darkest thing in my family, on both sides, you know.

Jackie: And probably a lot of 'em are all tanning to get your tan.

Michael: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, that's right. Yeah, they're laying out there trying [inaudible]

Jackie: But otherwise, I feel like...God, we have covered so much. Probably just...if we might need you later on for more information or another interview, would you be willing?

Michael: Sure, just give me plenty of advance notice.

Jackie: Yeah, that'd be great. Otherwise we'll end this session.

END OF INTERVIEW