CARVER LIVING NEWSPAPER PROJECT: ORAL HISTORY

Interview with Doctor Roy West
Interviewers Carolyn Hawley, Carver resident and Kathy Colwell, VCU research associate
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(Interviewers questions/comments are bolded)

Today is April the 5th, and we are interviewing Dr. Roy West, and I am Carolyn Hawley, and Kathy Colwell is here. So, Dr. West, we’d first like to thank you very much for participating and if you would give us an introduction of yourself, and just briefly tell us a little bit about yourself.
I’m Roy West. I’m a native of Richmond, Virginia. I graduated from Maggie Walker High School, and from Virginia Union with a BS, New York University with a Master’s, and George Washington University with a doctorate in education. I have been in public education for 32 years. Classroom teacher, central office administrator, school principal of high school and middle school. I’ve also served as adjunct professor at Virginia Union. I have two children, my wife passed away about two years ago. Two grandchildren, and I’m retired, and it’s the best job I’ve ever had. That’s my life in a nutshell. I served time in the army, I volunteered in the army, and that’s it.

And your political life?
I was elected to city council in 1982. I served as mayor from 1982 through 1988, I served on the council from 1982 to 1994. There were good years and bad years, but the good years came about because I worked with Carver, and that did an awful lot to me. Politically speaking, I did that because I felt that we needed change, we needed a new flavor of government, a new style of leadership, and hopefully I achieved my goal, maybe not the goal of others, but I achieved my goal.

And so you mentioned Carver. When were you first involved in the Carver community?
What were your perceptions of the Carver community when you first came into office?
Having grown up in Richmond, I knew Carver. Not intimately. I knew some people who lived here. I saw a neighborhood that had begun to deteriorate. Having been at Maggie Walker, I knew some students who lived in this area and they had an awful lot of pride. And that pride was quite evident when I was elected to city council. So I actually started working with Carver from the very inception of my political involvement, in 1982. Right up until the time that Carver was taken out of the 3rd District and put into the 2nd District. But even then I continued to work because I had established friendship, connections, and there was a mutual kind of understanding between those who lived here and my interest in this community. So its an ongoing love affair.

Who were some of the people that you knew or that you had established relationships with in the community?
Madeline Peters was obviously a strong advocate for community enhancement. Helen Smith was very strong. Barbara Abernathy was very much a leader in this community. And there were some others with whom I worked, their names slip my mind, but they were some of the people I worked with. But I think it’s the unknown individuals and persons that helped me to help Carver.
Because there were so many of them who really wanted the community to remain closeknit, but at the same time realizing that it had to grow outside of this cocoon to bring resources here, and they were willing to do that. I look at Carver as being the type of community that every elected official should represent at one time or another. Because of the responsiveness here, the humility, the pride. Very strong people, strong individuals who will not compromise integrity. And that meant an awful lot to me. Because when I sat at the table, and discussed what was possible for this community through the Richmond government, they were understanding of the limitations, but at the same time no nonsense about what they needed. And I appreciated their candor, I appreciated the vision that they had for their home community. It was a beautiful relationship that I had with this community. It wasn’t one of condescending because we were all equal partners in this affair.

Did you ever wonder what were some of the things that they had pride in? Two or three things that you can think of that probably instilled that pride.
We talk about that it takes a village to raise a child. This was a tent, and it covered all aspects of the community. The young people, an awful lot of pride in the young people. Whenever we had clean up campaign, there was a good turnout, a healthy wholesome turnout. The civic meetings were well attended. People took time to come to those meetings and to have meaningful input. Not END, but IN, input. And they knew what they wanted, they knew how to go about doing it. I was also impressed with, and I don’t mean to talk in a condescending fashion, but the intelligence they achieved, the common sense balanced against intelligence. That combination I thought was healthy for a community. And then you had the longitudinal aspect. Those who were raised here and left and came back. They brought back to this community all those experiences and skills that they had attained in other phases of their lives. That reversion aspect is so important to the survival of any community.

Thank you for those comments. Those are some of the things that we would like to instill in young people today. When we met with Laura Browder today, she talked about an approach, or a beginning to the play, because some young people had been interviewed, and some of the things they said, about love and pride and different things like that, and that’s their perspective, and she talked about having their perspective and then introducing them to some of the history and character that went into some of those intangible bonds that you mentioned. You mentioned earlier about the deterioration in the community. How did you see it before, and what aspect of that do you see disappearing?
I don’t think the deterioration was as much the fault of those who lived here as it was the fault of government who completely bypassed this community in representatives as well as the city administration bypassed it, and that deterioration fed on itself, and it started to downward spiral. It just continued momentum, despite pockets in the community that tried to keep civility, that tried to keep the ambience here. But the deterioration was so massive that those pockets of enhancement weren’t obvious, unless you came in and talked with people, you walked these streets to see what was going on. I just thought that the city needed to come in and do basic things, like street cleaning, code enforcement, provide financial assistance for the revitalization of the community, the conversational idea here. And that I felt was probably the most important aspect, to point the way to these resources and these programs and let the initiative and the volunteer nature of the people take over. And that happened here. All they needed to know was Is it available? And if so we want it so we can get not a handout but a hand. And the
deterioration again came about over many years, and I guess people who lived here just settled back and said well, we’ll do all that we can, but there was a limitation on what they could do. I’m not sure that drugs were responsible for the deterioration, the inception of that, but I think that once the deterioration had begun, drugs did come in. It was a habitat for drugs and other types of activities. But I didn’t see any moral deterioration here, per se, it was physical more than moral.

That’s one thing Barbara talked about today.
One thing feeds on another. If you don’t have what we call a broken window concept, then you aren’t going to have immorality creeping in and causing problems. But if you don’t have what I call the broken window mentality on the part of government, you are just inviting the kind of immorality that I see flourishing in this community and others around.

At the time that you became involved in politics in the early 80s, at that time were there funds available for low income families to do some renovation, or did that continue to be a problem, and outgrowth of the redlining of earlier years?
No, I live in a community called Washington Park, and we went through the throes of conservation and tapping into funding for low income people. So I knew these sources were available from the government. But those resources had not been directed to this community. The first thing that was necessary was for Carver to come out as a conservation area. That was very important, and once that was done, you almost had a pipeline to HUD to get the funds in here. But you had to go through that process first, and that created some apprehension because people thought that conservation meant that I’m not going to be able to do with my home as I see fit. There’ll be too many restrictions placed on me. But through an education process, and meeting and greeting folks, people got to accept the conservation idea, and once that happened, then that opened the door for federal funding, and then the city coming in to do some things at the same time. The conservation plan I was familiar with, and my goal was to insert that into this community if that would have been acceptable to the people here. And they did buy into that.

You find out that in some communities that its either conservation or a historic district. But it has helped. And just to make a little insert on the tape regarding being a conservation area, with this being the case, developers have a proposed plan to put some apartments in the entire 700 block of West Marshall Street, and that certainly does not enhance the overall.
What you want to do with conservation, you don’t let inertia set in. You don’t do a portion of it and stop. You must follow through on each phase. And that involves, that will of the community to stay on task, and to keep the government on task to carry out the plan that has been formulated. Its very important that the momentum be maintained. If you don’t, if you don’t have someone on city council that’s going to propose and those types of things, its going to lose momentum, and once it loses momentum, there is no way to rekindle it.

What year did the conservation district designation take place, approximately?
I don’t know if it happened, after 1982, I know that.
Somewhere around 1985.
The actual designation I don’t remember. But it came about after many meetings with the community, and give and take, going back and forth with what was involved and with what
people wanted. I think what’s important with conservation is Do the people want it? If they want it, and in Carver they wanted it, so that pride went to a high level, went to a very high level, because they weren’t satisfied with what was going on, they knew it could be better, and they wanted it better. So once again, its one thing to have the concept of it, its something else to have the concept adopted by those who live in an area. And that to me was a very important thing here in Carver. People had the foresight, they were inciteful enough to buy into that.

So basically when it was issued it was a new concept?
It was a new concept in Carver. But not for the city of Richmond.

In technical terms, from your perspective, what is the definition of a conservation area?
Obviously, semantically speaking, we talk about conserving what’s there. What is rehabable, we will rehab. But most importantly, you are conserving the ambience of the community for those who live here. Because unless you are able to preserve and conserve for those who live, who maintain the community in whatever shape you have it now, it means nothing. Because actually you aren’t just talking about bricks and mortar, you’re talking about the lives of people and the future of people. So conservation means in essence whatever is there that is healthy that has the potential, you try to build on it and you try to improve it. Rather than bulldoze it means you go in and haul it out if possible, and then build on the hole. That’s conservation in my estimation. And I think in contrast to a rehab, rehab is based on bulldozing more than anything else. I think conservation has a higher calling. And that calling goes to the future of people, the people who live in the community, and unless you have that kind of impetus, the project is not going to have any meaning to people.

Some of the reading I’ve done, just recently, on the evolution of this kind of a project in Richmond, it appears that there was a time, I believe in the early 30s or 40s, when the African American community was very vocal about the location of some of the public housing that was proposed, and actually was able to block some of it. This would have been before the expressway was built. And then the city had the attitude that we can’t tolerate so much public participation, we want to do what we want to do, and they became quite heavy handed. And now do you see, or by the time that you became really actively involved, was there a patience again, and an understanding of community involvement, or has that always been a hard sell in the city?

It’s interesting that you broached that, because there was a high level of suspicion, but what drove the suspicion was the compaction of Blacks in Gilpin Court, Creighton Court, Moseby Court and Whitcomb Court. And there was a very strong suspicion that anything the government had to propose would continue that kind of a process. So there had to be a selling to the community of these new programs that were coming on board. The government was guilty of a heavy handed approach. It was guilty of moving in and saying its our way, or no way. And that was endemic with the housing authority and its approach to the idea of community redevelopment. And it was only when the housing authority realized that people weren’t going to sit down anymore and take this, that they were willing to bypass their local folks and go right to the source, go right to Washington. Go right to Philadelphia. Go right to HUD. And I know because we experienced that in Washington Park. Where the housing authority came and said we’re going to do it this way and unless its done this way we’ll do nothing at all. We’ll just come in and condemn everything. And what we did, we had people in the community who worked for HUD, and some
contacts I had, and we bypassed the housing authority and went right to Philadelphia. And Philadelphia’s response was what he’s trying to do is not the way the thing was designed, its not designed to do that, and it was only with that kind of courage on the part of the community that the government backed off and then became a partner with the communities and did what was good for the community. But it did also impose on the community the responsibility to be responsible. You know that there are needs in this community, there are resources out there, so you don’t just stand in the door kind of a thing and don’t let those resources come in. And so it was a dual kind of interaction, it had to be because if the government relented in its heavyhandedness, and the community still stood there and would not allow resources to come in, then they showed a kind of lack of pride and lack of maturity for the community. But I think we’ve had an evolution, a revolution, its at a point now where I think there is understanding on the part of the government, that we’re not going to move in and do our own thing based on some kind of sanitized plan. The plan’s got to be warm, with heart in it, and soul in it, and the people. And you’re quite right about that historical perspective, that that was the case, government was responsible for that kind of inhibition on the part of people to participate.

Regarding your being an educator, during one of the interviews, it was mentioned that there was a suit of the schoolboard, of some sort, where the teachers sued for higher pay. Do you recall that situation, and somehow, particularly in the Carver community, it enabled people to buy homes and I’m not sure if that affected the community, do you recall that?
There was great disparity between the payment to black teachers and the payment to white teachers. Black teachers were far more qualified than white teachers. This is true not only in Richmond but its true in the state of Virginia. But they were way underpaid. The last historical thing I read about the disparity, I remembered it but I wasn’t in education because I was too young at the time. But in reading about the fight for equal pay, black teachers were paid 65 cents on the dollar compared to white teachers. It was that kind of disparity. Despite the fact that black teachers weren’t paid on par, they still did with that money great things in terms of buying homes and educating the children and having a good style of living. But that was such a dastardly proposal or idea in this state and in my case when I graduated from Union I wanted to go to graduate school and the state of Virginia would not allow blacks to go to graduate school. You could go to any graduate school, you could go to Virginia State, which had a very small program, but if you wanted to go into higher education, into medicine or law, the state would not allow you to go to any of these schools. And the state paid my tuition to go to New York University, that’s how I got to go there, because I couldn’t go to VCU, I couldn’t go to William and Mary, I couldn’t go to VPI or UVA. None of those schools, and I finished college cum laude. But they wouldn’t allow me in because I was black. And they paid tuition to go anywhere in the world that I wanted to go. Those persons who were in my vintage in my era had Masters from Oxford, NYU, Columbia, Michigan, Indiana, they went to the largest schools in the country, and this state was so short-sighted in doing that, because it sent us out and we got a good education and came back and dismantled the system. And they couldn’t see that they were spending millions of dollars to defeat themselves. So this disparity was real, it wasn’t an imagined thing. And it was done by design.

What year did you leave the state to go get your master’s?
1960 – 1963. That was after Brown versus Board of Education. And the state was still denying blacks the right to attend its graduate schools. In fact it was so restricted so that when the state wanted to expand our DE program, that dispirited education program, they wouldn’t allow the teachers in Newport News, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Portsmouth and Hampton, to go to VCU, so the state board organized a special program on Norfolk State Campus and I went down there and taught those teachers to start new programs across the state.

**Wow. And the idea was to prepare them?**
At that time Armstrong High School had the only DE program in the state of Virginia. I was the only black coordinator. And the state had a nice dream where the wanted to expand that into other black schools. And they did it in Hampton, Portsmouth, as I said, Newport News, Norfolk, and Chesapeake, and they opened a special program on Norfolk State’s campus, I taught it right in the Votech building. And I taught it in that building, summer 1963.

**Distributive Ed (DE) is like vocational ed?**
Its in the vocational education field, its designed to teach our youngsters the process of selling goods, retail, wholesale, what have you. And then you place them in jobs to apply what you teach them in the class room. And they are graded on the job as well as what’s happening in the classroom.

**Sounds like good information.**
This state was famous for its restrictions on blacks to do what blacks couldn’t do.

**What turned the state around finally?**
It was a gradual process. People sued to get into the state’s graduate schools, and after the state lost so many cases, it came to its senses. And I think that Governor Holton, who was elected governor, who enrolled his children in public education. One went to Moseby, I forget where the others went. But I think it was that kind of a leader that came on the scene that indicated we’re going to save public education, we’re going to dispense with this mess you’ve been doing for the last hundred years, slavery is over, we’re not going to do it anymore. So it was a gradual process and of course we’ve still got some remnants of that hanging around now. But it was the invasion of people like Holton and some of the other folks. When you had people in this state who coined massive resistance. Here you have the supreme court in Brown v. Board of Education that says its unconstitutional. And this state coined massive resistance and stood at the schoolhouse door to keep blacks out. This state had so institutionalized it. Other states had done the same thing, but Virginia was so famous for it because they didn’t hide what they were doing. They did it legislatively speaking and they didn’t have any shame, any embarrassment, not at all. I know its mind boggling. That’s why to me affirmative action has to stay on the books. Until we can get out of that mold we will need that equalizer.

**And the story needs to be told, too.**
It needs to be. Because it really put a damper on what blacks could do, and despite that, those of us who came through fought it and survived, some didn’t survive. I think that’s spawned some loss of pride, some loss of accomplishments.
Can you recall some experiences from the massive resistance locally in Richmond during your high school days or during your college days?
The massive resistance movement exemplified itself in the lack of opportunity for black kids to go to schools near their homes. Before they had freedom of choice they had a [fine?] plan that forced you to go to a particular school that was segregated. A part of the massive resistance program was the closing of schools in Warren County, in Norfolk – rather than integrate, they closed those schools temporarily. But the most famous of those school systems that were closed was Prince Edward County. That was part of the massive resistance movement. In Richmond, until those two black girls entered Chandler, that was the first public integration of Richmond schools, I don’t remember the year, it was in the early sixties, about six years about Brown v. Board of Education. This city did all that it could to keep black kids out of those white schools. And its only when those two black kids entered Chandler that there was sort of an opening of the door. But that was because this city was faced with suits. The Supreme Court had ordered the deliberate movement toward integration. And this city as the capital of the state was recalcitrant. It dragged its feet, it wouldn’t move. And it was only after Oliver Hill and his crew of NAACP attorneys filed suit after suit after suit did they get the message.

Now speaking of schools, you attended Maggie Walker High School. Yes I did.

Was the classic going on at that time? (re: football)
What she is alluding to is the existence of only two black high schools in this city. Maggie Walker and Armstrong. And each year, the Saturday after Thanksgiving, there was a grand affair. There was a football game between the two schools. And it drew more spectators than any other event in the entire state of Virginia. It drew 25 or 30,000 people to the city stadium. It was more than a football game, it was a reaffirmation of the struggles we had to go through to get an education, and the pride that was displayed on the football field was symbolic of the pride we had in those two schools. And those two schools fought each other on the football field, I don’t mean physically speaking but athletically speaking, the bands were beautiful, the school queens were queenly, the cheerleaders were exciting, and in that mix was a sense of belonging, a sense that this is ours, that noone can take it from us, nor will they ever take it from us. So it was more than a football game. It was a society saying to the other society that you may have segregated us but we are still a classy group of people. And this classic is designed to do just that. And it was very effective in sending a message to this community that those two schools possessed the wherewithall to put on an exciting event such as that. And it was quite elaborate, lavishly done, and we lost something when we lost that. But ironically, and I think this is important to insert in history, ironically the demise of that event came about not because of the white power structure, but because of the emergence of the black power structure. That substituted one fanatical approach for another.

What do you mean?
We had a group of politicians in this city who were so anxious to prove to the powers that be that we can manage, we can lead, we can administer objectively, that we are willing to even close our own schools to prove a point that we are fiscally prudent, that we know what we are doing. And then when there was protest from the black community to black leaders, it was sloughed off because black leaders during that era politically wanted you to worship then. They wanted you to serve them rather than they serve you. When that failed, then a tyrannical approach set in, a
fanatical approach set in, absolute power. It wasn’t just retribution against the whites, but it was control also over blacks. And I remember when we had what we call a Plan G which was the reorganization of our high schools. I was the principle of John Marshall High School at that time and I knew that once you set up this kind of a thing to bring about the combination of high schools someone is going to get lost in the shuffle, and it was the black high schools that got lost. Maggie Walker was paired with John Marshall, and Armstrong was paired with Kennedy and Huguenot and Jefferson were paired. It even got to where they wanted to eliminate the name Walker from the Marshall/Walker complex and call it John Marshall. Eliminate the Walker name altogether. And black politicians bought into it. I know its befuddling but its also frustrating, and it has angered me that no one has questioned those guys about what they did during that era.

I graduated from Maggie Walker in 77.
That was the first year that I was a John Marshall in 76 through 80, and the complex really got started around 78, 79, because we were still planning in the 76-77 school year. So it really didn’t get off the ground until 78-79.

You said a couple of very interesting things, because it has always concerned me and been a heart matter and constantly I would say well if we as black people were more involved in city government or politics something like this would not have happened. And we know that Hunter was the superintendent, and a lot of people have the notion that he sort of pushed to make the decision, and then when the decision was made he left.
It was a black superintendent, and I’m not going to mince words because you need to know. Black chairman of the school board and a black mayor. Under whom the demise of our high schools occurred. And it was because they ruled with an iron hand. It was their way or no way, and despite the fact that there was protest about what they were doing with this particular thing, it was called Plan G because they’d gone through all the plans A through H and Plan G was the plan that Richard Hunter wanted to install, and the school board bought into that lock, stock and barrel.

So how do you think the concept arose?
Plan G?
Yes. For people to buy into.
None of the practitioners bought into it. It was imposed on all of us by the school board, by the superintendent, and those of us who protested that out of concern for public education and needs of our children, those of us who protested, Herman Carter was the principle of John F. Kennedy, he was moved. I was principle of John Marshall, I was moved. Because I said its not going to work but I’ll do the best I can to make it work. And what they were doing, they were instilling fear in those who weren’t moved, either you fall in line and make it work or we’re going to move you too. And it didn’t work. And they had to revert to the old high school alignment. That stayed on board for about four years. But in the midst of that conflict, students graduated, and didn’t know from which high school they had graduated. All the diplomas had Marshall/Walker, they didn’t know which one. And I saw things, I would write a book on this and the title would be How To Destroy a Public Education with Confidence. And that was when they really started the downward spiral. Because those youngsters who came through that confused environment translated that confusion to their children who are now in our public schools. And you’ve got that transmission going on, and thus its impacting our current generation. Because those parents
came through a situation that was uncertain. And they made the lives of their children uncertain also. So there is a direct connection there. Direct. Its not indirect, to me its direct.

What was in the background of the leaders at that time that made them push toward this program?
When you say background what do you mean?
The background. Did they come out of a civil rights movement or black power movement. I mean that kind of what sounds like abuse of power.
It was abuse of power. Some of them were determined to show both blacks and whites that we now have control, and it doesn’t matter what the mortality rate was, black or white victim, we are going to exercise this control with an iron hand. And they did. Let me give you an example, a critical example of how they closed their eyes and minds to what they were doing to people in education. The chairman of the school board came to John Marshall high school to see me because he knew (?) stunk. So he wanted to placate me, and talk to me about the Plan G, and how they envisioned this as saving our high schools, and having larger enrollment so we could have more course offering, and have larger football fields, and larger football teams, and so forth. I said to the chairman I’m going to do the best I can to make the plan work. Its got flaws in it. Great flaws. But I’ll do all that I can to make it work. I said, but would you do me one favor? Don’t rank our kids, because ranking had come down the pike to all principles. We’re going to rank by complexes. Ranking implies that we had been in academic competition for four years. I said don’t rank by complexes, because I had had, I didn’t tell them this, but I had had my guidance coordinator to do an analysis. You tell me what’s happening in the Maggie Walker building. I know what’s happening in the John Marshall building. And Mrs. Spurlock came back and said there’s a black girl at Maggie Walker whose ranked number one in her class. If we rank by complexes, she falls to number 13. Because the population is larger. And I had that in the back of my mind, but I didn’t share that with the chairman because I wanted him to make a decision based on what was right on the surface. Not to have any kind of motivation because he wanted to save one girl. He had to do what was right, in my mind. So I didn’t tell him this. But I explained to him why we shouldn’t rank by complexes. I said that means that all of the kids in Maggie Walker and John Marshall would be together under the complex, but for four years they weren’t together. If you do the ranking grandfathered, those who came in under the complex begin to rank them together, but not when the buildings were separated. He said we’ll think about it. He left the building, and I got a personal memorandum to rank by complexes. And when we ranked by complexes, we robbed that black girl of that badge of excellence for the rest of her life. Because it would have been better to have ranked her #1 in a class of 150 than 13 in a class of 300. That’s the kind of dogged fanatical approach. John Marshall High School, I know we’re on tape but you need to know this, John Marshall High School had a $10,000 savings certificate. It had done well through the years and took its money and put it into a savings certificate. And we took the interest from that certificate and funded student activities. Kids couldn’t go on field trips because they didn’t have any money, we put that money in a student activity fund. That CD was in John Marshall’s name. But because they were so fanatical and so determined to bring Walker and Armstrong (I think he meant Marshall) together, they obliterated everything that had to do with John Marshall or Walker separately and made it all Marshall/Walker. That CD, I was told you must change the name to Marshall/Walker. And I said to my superior, if you do that, it means you’re cashing it in. And if you cash it in before the maturity date, you lose money on it. I said why not let it stay under the John Marshall name and when the interest check comes in, I’ll
put that in the Marshall/Walker student activity fund. And our students can still use it. "No, you must change it." I took it to the bank, and the person said You know what’s going to happen? And I said yes. She said you are going to lose $1100 on this certificate because you are cashing it in before the maturity date. That’s the kind of mindset they had. Its either going to be our way or no way. They spent hundreds of thousands of dollars outfitting boys on football and basketball. They bought new shoulder pads just to have new shoulder pads. They could have used the old ones. Maggie Walker had enough equipment to furnish the Washington Redskins. I’m talking on and on about this.

That’s really good.
(Tape is turned over) Can you repeat what you just said?
I don’t think that the white power structure could have been any more destructive to the aspect of public education than what happened during that era. I really don’t. It was so sad because it came on the heels of the abandonment of segregation. We were thinking we were home free, and in comes this cadre of leaders who had another style of control, and their style of control was to be just as devastating as the other side.

And what were the proposed benefits of Plan G?
Plan G was supposed to enable high schools to offer more advanced placement courses because if you had a school of 700 at Maggie Walker and a school of 1000 at John Marshall, you might not have the population that would have warranted having AP courses in each building, so you would have AP courses in one of the buildings, and you’d bus the kids from one building to the other one. What the bussing was was expensive. See, they’d bus kids from Maggie Walker to John Marshall and from John Marshall to Maggie Walker to take advantage of these so called courses that were offered. That was one of the advantage. The other advantage that was articulated to us was we would have larger bands, so that when we went into the counties, we wouldn’t be embarrassed by our puny, puny bands.

You can’t be serious.
Yes, that was given to us. And the other one was that we’re losing our athletic prowess, so we can have larger football teams and larger basketball teams now because you have a larger population from which to draw. What they failed to realize was that when they brought the two schools together those who had loyalty to John Marshall or Maggie Walker didn’t want to come together. So you lost. So you didn’t bring together those large teams that you had envisioned. And they missed out on understanding the psyche and the loyalty and the emotions that those kids had for those schools. And that to me was a loss of immense proportion that they failed to understand high school students and their loyalty to a particular school. They missed that.

Then the next step is, what does that do to a neighborhood like Carver which has so much pride in the school?
It impacted Carver because Carver was so close to Maggie Walker. It was a feeder community for that school. It created uncertainty, I know that’s a general term. It created confusion. And I think it created a lack of continued appreciation for public education. I think it really did that. And while that may be an intangible, I think nevertheless it was very powerful because youngsters that went to Carver Elementary School may not have come from families that were excited about education because of that Plan G that they implemented. And that’s what I
mentioned early on. Parents of students in a public education setting now came out of that Plan G setting. And I can’t help but believe that the toxic environment that existed during the Plan G era impacted their mindset and what they thought about public education.

You know I heard somebody in the county say You know the city folks don’t have much spirit when it comes to sports. Its almost like you have to beg and drag them to participate. And I said well, with the combination of the schools, that was a break in the spirit. So its almost like they’re starting all over again. And how many times are teachers and coaches positively impacting the students lives? .. A lot of times students will do extra depending on the environment and go beyond the norm because they’ve had that teacher, that coach speak words to them that were meaningful.

There are so many voices that have operated in Richmond even since integration set in that a lot of folks that don’t want to face, and I just think that black leaders and their control mentality just missed the boat. They had an opportunity but they missed the golden opportunity to really show leadership, show a sense of belonging, to show a sense of caring. I know whites did that thing to, but my point is they should have been much more adaptive at understanding the needs and working with people instead of working against people. This didn’t set well with the black leaders in this town because they were guilty of destroying what we had. I see persons who served on the school board at that time being rewarded, schools being named after them. They’re in the general assembly now. And it looks to me like the more negative their participation became, the more they were enabled. I’ve been called names time after time by people who operated during that era who have now gone on to bigger and better things. And people seem to have forgotten what they did to us, but I will never forget.

Are they being put into those next positions by fellow African Americans or is it a broader constituents?
No, I think blacks forget so easily when blacks do things to blacks. They forget so easily when blacks do things to blacks, and they tend to not want to hold blacks accountable to the same extent that they hold whites accountable. That’s a sad commentary on the mindset. And black politicians know that. They know that that exists, and they fall right between the cracks and survive and do very well.

At a level I can understand how that comes to be. When you’ve fought so long and you finally have someone that can represent you at least physically on the outside that you just keep giving them the benefit of the doubt.
That’s why public education in my mind is a menagerie of ineptness, lack of leadership from the very top right on down. Its my position that until we get a school board and superintendent with guts to say at each building level we are going to hold every principle responsible for what happens in that building and these are the expectations and they are non-negotiable. But then it does no good to put good principles if you’ve got dummies downtown who are leading the blind. And if you look at what’s happening downtown in our central office you’ve got people there who have failed themselves in a school setting. And now they are devising plans for other people to be successful, that’s impossible, the blind leading the blind. And I just believe that public education is in a sad state in the city. And I’m sick and tired of people saying that black kids can’t learn. They can learn. They don’t learn not because they are unteachable, they don’t learn because they aren’t taught. And that’s the bottom line. When I was at Hill and John Marshall and
Moseby, we did great thing. We, not Roy West, but we, teacher parent student, did great things. We raised the test scores. Raised the level of aspiration. We had a no nonsense approach there. So I know it can be done. But somehow we lost the nerve, the courage, the foresight. All we want is that paycheck now. All we need is a fine bunch of principles. Get a new school board. Get some teachers in there who know what they are doing. Then you’ve got to support your good teachers. It’s always been my position when I was school principle to say to the teachers you take care of things inside the classroom, I’ll take care of you outside of things outside of your classroom. And with that combination, we are going to be successful. But if you can’t work at my school and teach that child, you find somewhere else to work because I am going to find some way to get you out of here. Its very difficult to fire a teacher, but you can make things so rough that a dud is definitely going to apply for a transfer and get out of there.

And Madeline Peters, you mentioned her earlier, she was one of our civic leaders and she was a teacher. Did you know her as an educator as well?
Yes, I was a night school teacher and a night school principle before I became a principle at the day school and as that principle of night school I worked very closely with Mrs. Peters. First as a teacher, she taught an ABE, adult basic education, course, and she taught the elementary grades. And she was so, on the surface she appeared to be hard and cold, but underneath that façade was a warm caring individual who wanted what was best for those adults, who came back to school at night to try to complete their education. Because what she was teaching was the foundation for getting the high school education. Unless they did the ABE alright and did that successfully, they couldn’t do the high school bit. So it took a Madeline Peters and her dogged determination to plan and implement curricular offerings that they could handle and would see some connection with what Madeline is doing with me now and what I want to do to get my high school diploma. So she was quite a person in the sense that she believed in her kids and she became a little feisty when you showed any desire to interfere with what she was doing with those students. And what she was doing was worthwhile. And that’s how I first met Mrs. Peters, as a night school teacher who was par excellence with her concern for the welfare of those who came under her tutelage.

Did most of those students live in the Carver neighborhood?
No, I’m sorry, she’s taught in night school, which was in Church Hill, the night school students came from a broad spectrum of the city. NO they didn’t come from Carver necessarily. Some may have come from Carver but her instruction wasn’t geared to Carver.

She was a resident of Carver for probably 40 or 50 years. She’s deceased, but she lived at 1707 W. Marshall. She was the vice president in title but in a lot of ways the president in action of the civic league for a number of years, and then she was elected president. Mrs. Peters was a very strong force in the community. I was amazed. I’ve known Mrs. Peters since I was a little girl, and she was always friendly. But I was always amazed at the council meetings that when she spoke on an issue, she seemed to have garnered a personal interest, not just a dutiful kind of intention. And the thing that I really admired about her, she had a way of talking about tough issues, and sticking to the tough issues, and disagreeing with you in an agreeable manner. She had such a charm of communication that I really appreciated.
When she would give you that little giggle, you know that she meant business. She would make a declaration, make a point, and then give you that little laughter, and then you’d know that’s the end of it, there is no compromising, I mean what I say, and said what I meant. And you’re right,
she had a way of communicating. When she spoke, people took note. She had a charm about her almost to the point of being accommodating, but she wasn’t. She had a way of ingratiating herself with you and she had a way of tearing her hair out by the roots if you didn’t do for Carver what had to be done. Carver, Madeline Peters would have better been known as Madeline Carver Peters because Carver was in her blood. And I mentioned early on the pockets of ambience in this neighborhood. Her home was one of the pockets. And she wanted that pocket to spread, and to do what she had done in other sections of Carver. And she gave of her time unselfishly. She put in a lifetime not just living here, but working for the community and working in the community, obviously she was quite an inspiration to you and quite a model for you, and the fact that you have come back to this community probably can attribute partly to Mrs. Peters influence on you and what she dreamed for this community. But I enjoyed working with her. She was a delight, and she had class and style. She would have tea and lunches at her home. And when you walked in you thought you were in some castle the way she treated you. She was well trained in the culture, well trained in education and well trained in the community involvement. She was the totality of citizenship in all aspects. There is nothing that was left out in terms of looking at MRS. Peters that you would have wanted her to be because she was everything, she really was. And I enjoyed working with her, and she kept me on task, because there were times when I thought I was busy she would call and jerk me around, and I enjoyed that jerking around because she made me into a council person, she made me more responsive, and more perceptive in terms of what I had to do for the community, and I enjoyed having that governess out there to make me do my job.

And even with the urban homesteading for instance, I have this house now because Mrs. Peters encouraged me to buy it, and I said oh no, and she kept saying why don’t you try, why don’t you go, and eventually I did. So in other words, whenever I talk about getting this house, I have to talk about Mrs. Peters because she had the foresight and the vision for me when I actually didn’t have it for myself. She was the kind of person, well for me just personally, and how that would translate into the (?), but she brought my world together for me, because growing up, I lived over on Gilmer, and George Washington Carver and B.A. Graves and Maggie Walker, my community, it meant a great deal that you could walk to your school, and see your classmates in your community as well. And then broadened your environment by ______ the community. Well with that environment and always speaking with Mrs. Peters, and then going away and coming back, people who lived her who were educators may have had a broad environment, but I didn’t have that broad of an environment, so as I moved outside my community, in different spheres, I had to know how to connect things. And she was a person that I could talk to that helped connect my experiences outside the community with the me that was growing up. And I remember that she said to me, and I wondered about this even just a few months ago, how did she even know to make this statement or ask this question, she said you know I’ve wondered, it just seems like you just don’t have anybody to talk to, or you need somebody to talk to. And she knew because it was a way, with people experiencing, you have to have a way to bring it all back together. And she was a good person. And I regret, I truly regret, not having spent as much time with her as I could have, should have.

You touched on a very important aspect of Mrs. Peters personality. She was willing to share with anyone all of her experiences, and a kind of guidance you just alluded, were second nature to her. It was natural for her to do that. And she felt good to do that, and it gave her a sense of pride. I’m
not forgotten, I’m not a fossil, I have something to offer, and if there’s a repository I’m gonna fill it. And you are the repository. And she filled it.

Because she sat, not sat, but stood on her porch and leaned on her fence and you could talk to almost anyone who lived in the community and for a long time we called her Ms. – Mrs. – or Ms. Peterson, but in later years I learned her name was Mrs. Peters. But she’s just really a mainstay. She talked with people who basically were drunk, she talked to people who were educated – and she respected everyone the same. And in the civic league meetings she had an ear to hear and made everyone feel that their comments were meaningful, there was a place for their comments. I really thought of her as a very strong and well-respected community leader, and she had the respect of a lot of officials.
She did. It didn’t matter how far she moved in social and professional circles. I would say about Mrs. Peters that she could deal with the masses in the classes. And that I think was a forte that is so elusive and so often we move up that ladder and we get forget those people that we came to the ladder with. And she never forgot. You’re right. Again, you know her very well, obviously, and you’ve remembered her, and you are able to articulate those critical parts of her personality which really impacted so many people.

And she also a student of, or a protégé of, Maggie Walker. I know I was amazed, we really knew her life personally.
She was quite an institution in this community, and really in this city of Richmond, because whenever her name was mentioned, eyebrows were raised, minds were opened, and hearts would just go out to her. She was an institution in Carver, well-known throughout the entire city. She really was. And I think the fact that she was willing to restore her notoriety, I hate to use that word because I don’t mean it negatively speaking, on Carver means an awful lot for her love of this community. She wouldn’t leave.

Mrs. Peters could jerk you around, she didn’t have a problem with saying what she needed to say.
She’d say to me, Roy, don’t forget.

I think she was a person who, even with the additional interviews remaining, that we should ask people about, because even with her not being here, she, to me, would have just have as much significance in the play as anyone else.
It tells us something about the kind of leadership that came out of this community to help stimulate the community’s pride and enable it to go speak before the city council.
It was a lesson in citizenship, leadership, that you mentioned just a minute ago. Not only did she possess the attributes of a leader, but those in the community, who represented her followers, because they knew that she was going to direct them in the right path, but she also knew that they weren’t going to let her go alone, they were going to support her, so it was an excellent partnership that she engendered a sense of friendliness, but no nonsense at the same time. I count it as a gift to me as having had the opportunity to work with her, because she was quite forceful.

Do you remember, I think we had a dedication for her, she had gotten ill and was placed in a community, and one comment that was made about her that I really liked was that she
was very financial minded, and she stayed abreast of the funding, and where the money went, and that gives us an example today.

What would she say today, or what was she saying, about the relationship with VCU, and the kinds of battles that are being fought today and the cooperation that is going on today? At the time that she was president, there was a proposal for the school of engineering, over at Belvidere and Broad, and really, this is my opinion, and I really think the fact that we have relationshipwise with VCU, I think a lot of it started with MRS. Peters, and I think it's a continuation. So there's a lot of dialog, and she had her thoughts, particularly about the school of engineering, she wanted to entertain the idea of it in terms of progressing the neighborhood, but also listening to the community, because there were a lot of fears, VCU coming in, VCU showing up. And the thing that I like most is that she had her preference as a leader, but she would listen to the people and let their voices be heard and be different people than her. We did get a lot more information and the decision from the community perspective was to move against it and was the ultimate force that caused them to move over to the other side. It was a good thing that the engineering school did relocate because its two times the size now that it was proposed. You mentioned Oregon Hill and how the Carver community has formed a partnership with VCU and Oregon Hill has not done so. I think there are two dimensions, or two farther reasons, why Carver in contrast with Oregon Hill has become a partner. No doubt that VCU did approach its proposal into Oregon Hill with an entrenched mindset. Because I was on city council. I also know that Oregon Hill closed its mind to anything that VCU had to offer. And that came about because they probably got burnt. When VCU initiated contact with Carver, you had strong people here who resisted invasion but had the wisdom to understand that peripherally speaking, it could spin off some benefits to this community. With Carver being receptive to common sense on the part of VCU, and VCU having been burned in Oregon Hill, this move here, this combination, was much more healthy than it was in Oregon Hill. I don’t want to point the finger at Oregon Hill because I think there's enough blame to go around. VCU and Oregon Hill. But I do know that some of the things that were proposed by VCU were good things to Oregon Hill. I don’t mean to sound paternalistic, but they were good for Oregon Hill, but Oregon Hill just dug its heels in and said no. We're not going to accept your offer. Whereas Carver I think is the recipient of VCU's getting its fingers burned a little bit. But at the same time, I think VCU probably sees something here that represents an opportunity for its social obligation. Many years ago I remember corporations starting to think about social and cultural obligations to the community. I think VCU sees this as its laboratory. We can really be a partner and let this be a model for the nation. An urban university and an urban center, and what the two can do together.

At the same time how can Carver residents keep from sometimes feeling as though they are in an ongoing studio class? Because I think that can be a very real danger. It's a danger only to the extent that you don’t have leaders here who would lose sight. This community’s destiny and its history. If you allow the community to be swallowed, its this community’s loss, and not necessarily VCU’s radical tyrannical approach. But I think if VCU recognizes that you have people who are not going to let that happen, then they’ll come to the table with their best offer.

There are challenges, from what I’ve picked up in the past week. Yes, it is, and a lot of good things have occurred […?]. I had lunch with a coworker and she lives over on Hanover near Roseneath, and one thing she pointed out, now we have to see
what _______ here we have, the School of Arts, and the Bookstore, and the apartment building that’s coming up. In terms of students changing the nature and the environment of the community, one comment she made related to if you don’t get the buildings you don’t get the students, her suggestion was that we should have said no, because I think Dr. Trani is concerned with what the community thinks, as you state, being a role model, and so other than that we don’t have the funding and the absolute power to say no, they are concerned about the intangible impressions, though the point is there were a lot of negotiations, whereas the community resisted concepts and we thought negotiators got comfortable, got complacent, and thought that we were for sale. We see the activities as good things, and we just need to work out traffic. A lot of the issues relate to traffic and density. But the thing that causes me the most concern is not rejecting the activities or the building that’s come north of Broad, but the residents. Because right in the 700 block of West Marshall is zoned multi-family. And with the proposal for an apartment complex or student housing, technically there is nothing that we can do to revisit that. And that for me is putting a bitter taste in my mouth about these kinds of things. Because I was beginning to get comfortable not to the point of being lax, but appreciating the growth. And now seeing that developers are looking at open space and housing in unoccupied dwellings as opportunities to rent, and with the conservation of the community, the whole plan is not to establish but to continue longevity and to keep the fabric of the community going. As we continue to have a large influx of students moving in, in a year or two it might look pretty, but in ten years, I find myself personally revisiting the concept that you can’t turn the building down but its not a good thing to know that one of the residuals is that they are going to start bringing more students over there. And its not VCU directly, but 2 and 3 people removed. The developer is not directly related but if you go out to dinner or sit at someone’s dinner table, you’ll see that there is a connection.

Well, what you want to do is stay close to the council representative, because if there is need to make changes in zoning or put restrictions into those areas, the council can do that. But I think you have pointed out some negatives of that expansion of VCU. On the other hand, you have a lot of positives in terms of appreciation of real estate in this area. Really, its going to take off. That’s why those of you who are here are sitting on a gold mine. And developers know that. And you just stay the course, and hold fast, and you’ll get the benefit of that. But there’s a flip side of what you just mentioned, and you want to make sure that it doesn’t become a mecca for deterioration and influx of those who don’t have any interest in the community to come in and trash and leave. So you want to do two things. Stay close to the council person so that person can put forward whatever legislation that might protect you. At the same time take advantage of what’s happening from the point of appreciation.

There’ve been activities with Barbara and a couple of other people, meetings and going before the planning commission, and there is a delay, or an extension of the vote at the commission that we would have needed to have passed. No, that’s something different. That’s for zoning up here. There’s a variance for this property that’s at the 1400 block. There is one thing I want to leave with you, and that is from an elected standpoint.

Can I just say this? Now that its before council, there was a continuation.
A community like Carver can have a significant impact on legislations, on proposals, when you go together, and you stay together, and you stay the course. The council that I served on recognized readily Carver. You sent the message through your activities that Richmond would be better if Carver would be better. And you were willing to be an instrument in doing that. You
weren't written off by the council. Madeline Peters was the reason for that. When she came in, when she walked into council chambers, people would say Oh, there's Madeline. But I think she represented the courage of Carver, and you're not going to be ignored when you stay together, stick together, stay on top of things, and make your appearances at council meetings and the planning commission meetings. They have to recognize you. They have to defer to your logic when you present your presentations. I know sometimes you don't get full participation on the part of those, but it's better to have an ingress and move than to have noone and move. I wish you the best of luck. If I can help let me know. Call me.

Okay, I think we will.
Okay, gotta run.
Okay, well we really appreciate it Dr. West.