Interviewee: Reginald Shareef
Interviewer: Anne Stuart Beckett
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

It is October 19, 2006. We are here at the Gainsboro Library in Roanoke, Virginia.

RS: Good morning.
AB: Good morning. Dr. Shareef, can you tell me where and when you were born?
RS: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, April 15, 1951.
AB: How long have you lived in Gainsboro?
RS: Through my early years, we lived over on Harrison Avenue for about 5 years and I went all of my elementary school days at Harrison School so that was kindergarten through 6.
AB: Did you graduate high school here?
RS: Yeah, I graduated from Lucy Addison High School in 1969.
AB: And then did you move away after high school?
RS: Well, I went to college. I went to Virginia State College which is now Virginia State University and I finished Virginia State in 1974 and I went back and got a Master's at Virginia State after that. Then, I moved back here and started working and married and raising a family. Then, later on, I started working on my PHD at Virginia Tech.
AB: That's a lot of hard academic work. Could I ask what inspired you to go with that path?
RS: My family – I came from a working-class family and my family put a lot of emphasis on education. The one thing that my father would always support you in was going to school. Otherwise, when you got 18, you were on your own. But if you went to school, he would support you. (laughing)
AB: That's a big difference there.
RS: Yeah, that's a big difference. My mother was also a librarian. She was the librarian at Harrison Elementary School. I watched my mother work to get her Master's Degree.
AB: Wow. That was good.
RS: Yeah, quite an accomplishment for an African-American woman in the 1960s. Virginia Tech and UVA would not - They were not really receptive to blacks during that period.
AB: Right, especially black women.
RS: Especially black women. It would be what you would today a "hostile environment". So during the summers, probably from 1960 through 1965, my mother used to relocate during the summer and go to Ohio State in Columbus to work on her Master's in Library Science. She would take me, my cousin and my – My brother and sister were 8 and 9 years older than I was. So, when we initially went, she took them and they watched us. Right. But during the later years, they were gone to college so we went and my cousin and I – He was 2 years older than I am. She would just rent a little apartment and catch the bus. My mother didn't drive. Actually, this is my mother here.
AB: That's your mother there.
RS: That's my mother.
AB: On the cover of this book that you wrote.
RS: That I wrote.
AB: Roanoke Valley's African-American Heritage.
RS: And so she would just catch the bus to Ohio State and she would take 6 hours a summer and my father would stay here. He worked for the railroad. And so, actually when I was going to graduate school – When I initially went to graduate school, I wasn't married. Then, I actually picked up another Master's after I got married and started on my PHD. But anytime I thought about how difficult my struggle was, I would always think back to my mother and it relatively – It was hard but relatively it wasn't because she went through a lot more trying to get her Master's Degree.

AB: And a lot longer.
RS: A lot longer, yeah.
AB: It would've been easy to quit many times for her along the way.
RS: That's right, yeah. So she was very inspirational. My father was because he really supported her. He wasn't threatened by the fact that she was getting a graduate degree. So, I had a family structure where we all really supported one another in our endeavors. It was difficult but coming out of that context, it always gave me a point of reference to say that I had it a lot better than my mother.
AB: Without that support, none of you would've achieved what you have.
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RS: Exactly. Exactly. You have to – I really believe that and I think one of the strengths of my family and other families I grew up around was that people really were supportive. If you were doing something positive, you got a lot of support. And I've carried that on. I was just telling Alicia that she's born between my two children. My son was born in 1979 and my daughter was born in 1982. My son just finished Law School and my daughter's in Medical School.
AB: Good Lord.
RS: But its the same type of support and people often ask me now because Malique is 27 – He just finished Law School and took the bar and they were saying, "Well, isn't it time for him to do this or do that?". But still, we supported him as he tries to venture out and do some things that may not be so conventional at this point. In a couple of years, if that doesn't work, he's gonna have to do more conventional things but, right now, we support him. Again, just coming out of that background, that cultural background I guess you would call it.
AB: A lot of us don't have that, didn't have that support. Black or white.
RS: I think you know when you're growing up black, you tend to think that all whites have it. And one of the things as I've grown up – In fact, there was a man that recently died in Salem, Morris Elam. And Morris Elam, his son and I are good friends and he probably owns more property in Salem than anybody. And so when he died in September, Joe Kennedy wrote an article about him in the paper. I wrote Joe Kennedy and told Joe that I really liked the article and that Mr. Elam had always been like an inspiration to us. This is a guy that loved jazz. So, most people didn't know that. For the last 25 years, he went to Nice, France, every year for the Jazz Festival. He loved jazz, right. And Joe Kennedy said the same thing back to me. He said, "You know, I _____ don't know anybody like that.". So when you grew up in a segregated society, and you don't interact with people who are different from you, you tend to think that other people have all of the advantages.
AB: Exactly.
RS: Then, as you grow and you talk to people and you talk about your life experience, something that was very, very common. The three people I interviewed, they all had a lot of family support and aunts helped 'em and all that. We just kinda took it for granted and we just never knew until we got older that people that we thought had more privilege or advantage didn't have it.
AB: That they didn't. So you think the segregation typically would bring families closer together. Is that what you found out?
RS: Yeah, because you couldn't survive without it. You could not survive. My family, my father had a philosophy that, although he loved us all, that you couldn't do anything to take away from the family. So, my older brother, for example, sometimes would get in trouble. Interestingly, he would get in trouble helping other people. But he would get in trouble nonetheless. And I can remember once we had to put the house up to bond him out of jail. My father told me, "If you do this again, we're not going to get you out of jail because it really endangers all of us.". And so, we grew up like that and you really, you had to to survive. There were no credit cards. There was nobody to borrow money from so you had to be frugal and do these type things and at the time, because everybody else is doing 'em, you don't think anything about it.

AB: 'Cause everyone else is doing the same thing.
RS: Same thing. Yeah. I mean we were working-class and actually we were economically better off than a lot of other people. One of the real interesting things about going to all-black schools, right, especially Addison High School because no matter where I've gone since I left Addison High School, there was more diversity in Addison High School, although it was all black. The diversity was based on class lines.
AB: Class lines. Economic class lines.
RS: Economic class lines, yeah. So, you had kids there - like my father worked for the railroad. Both my parents worked.
AB: That was a good job at that time to work for the railroad, that was prestigious.
RS: Exactly. Exactly. We had regular income. Parents struggling to send you to college. But then, you would go to school with kids from different parts of Roanoke who didn't have that. And so we were always taught to be thankful for what we had.
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AB: And a lot of people aren't.
RS: A lot of people aren't. One of the things I never knew, for example, and probably one of the reasons I get chilled easily is that I grew up in a house that had a furnace in the middle room, right. So the back rooms, where the bedrooms were, actually, the rest of the house was always cold. But that middle room was warm, right. But I didn't know any different. All of us had the same situation.
AB: Every house was the same.
RS: Every house was the same. So when my brothers, sisters and I got up in the morning in the winter, we would go and stand over the grate, right, and we would literally thaw out. I didn't know. (laughing) So being so much younger than my brothers and sisters – When my sister finished college in 1965 -
AB: Golly, that's admirable.
RS: Yeah, my parents were all excited about we're going to have baseboard heat. And I'm like, "What's baseboard heat?". Right?
AB: Sure.
RS: And so all summer, these men put this heat in and I can remember, you know, sometimes, we used to go to bed when it really got cold, we used to go to bed. It almost looked like you were going outside because it was cold. (laughing) I can remember my father telling me, "You're not going to have to do that.". And then, that winter, when it was really cold outside, ever room in the house was warm. And then I figured out what baseboard heat was. So now, sometimes, I sit in my house and my children have never experienced this. My children have never. I mean we've got forced air and air just flies out, hot air, right? (both laughing heartily) So all those kind of experiences bonds you. It gives you what sociologists call a "shared reality".
AB: Shed reality?
RS: Shared reality. So growing up in that environment, all of us had a shared reality that we can all relate to that. If somebody else was around and I was telling that story, they would say the same thing. Very few houses had heat in every room. Radiator heat or anything, forced air, anything. Yeah, in many ways, there were some strengths in growing up in an environment like that. You were taught to really appreciate things. You were around people who didn't have. You learned to respect them. You learned to evaluate people not based on material acquisitions but who they were. So, in that sense, you know, it gave you a lot of strength. It gave you a lot of character. It prepared you, I think, to come out into a world that, at that particular time, sometimes was hostile to you. So, again, it had its strengths and its negatives. Of course, the opportunities weren't there.
AB: What were some of the weaknesses Dr. Shareef?
RS: That would be one. I mean, I think that one of the things when you grow up in a segregated society, people who are different from you are very mysterious to you.

AB: Do you mean white people?
RS: Whites or Asians.
AB: Anyone outside of this neighborhood.
RS: Outside of the group.
AB: 'Cause you stayed in this neighborhood, right? Basically?
RS: Yeah, for a great period of my time. Except, I went to work. I went to schools. I began to often be the only black in these other environments. And one of the great things I learned through that, of course, was that human beings are human beings. I think that's one of the great strengths or arguments for diversity today is that when people interact with one another and socialize with one another and work with one another, I mean, you really see this notion, this reality that there is really no race but the human race. But as long as people are separated, you don't know them. So they're kinda mysterious and you operate off of stereotypes and things like that.
AB: Fear.
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RS: Yeah, fear. Anxiety. Just a whole lot of things because you don't know. There is the unknown. And so I think that growing up, again, in a segregated society, you pick up a lot of attributes but its also good to be more inclusive and to begin to interact in a broader context. So I think that sometimes I often think about that now when, for example, young blacks will still go to historically black colleges. And I have mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, I went to a historically black college and it was a great experience, a very supportive experience. Yet, at some point, there is this larger world out there and now when we're talking about diversity or we're talking about a global economy, we're not just talking about whites, we're talking about Asians, Arabs and all these people who have different cultural patterns. At some point, you have to become immersed in that. You have to go out there. You have to take who you are out into that broader world. So, I was at a historically black college last year. I made a short presentation and I mean, its a very, very supportive environment but I left just having mixed feelings because those kids also are going to have to come out and interact and socialize and work with people who are very, very different. And you just don't do that. Its learned behavior. I think that would be one of the weaknesses. I guess, maybe because of my parents, I was kind of pushed to do that. To go out, venture out.
AB: Do you think that was the exception though or do you think that other kids had the same type of parents? Or are you special there?
RS: I don't want to say my parents were exceptional but when I look at the things my parents were doing, I don't know other parents that were doing that. I think in one sense they were. They were always affirming who I was and who my brother was and who my sister was. We were just as good, just as intelligent. We could do whatever we put our minds to. I know I've carried that over into the raising of my children and in many ways, my children have often been the only African-Americans. We're also Muslims.
AB: Even today?
RS: Even today. My son went to Washington & Lee Law School 3 years ago.
AB: Yeah, he was definitely a minority.
RS: My daughter is at Marshall University School of Medicine and when she started, she and another black guy were the only black kids. And this is 2 or 3 years ago. In many ways its carried over. But the children were raised. Now they really got a heavy dose of that "Its a diverse world and you have to go out in it and there's nothing to be anxious about or fearful of. They're just people. They may do things differently, culturally.". I think that that's real important. Its extremely important.
AB: OK. Now, do you still live here in Roanoke?
RS: I live in Roanoke, yes.
AB: And your children, they're at college. Do you expect them to come back or do you think they'll

keep going? Do you want them to come back?
RS: I don't know. I don't know.
AB: This is confidential. They won't hear this. (both laughing)
RS: I have mixed feelings about it. I mean, sometimes, I think Roanoke is a great place, probably, the Roanoke Valley is a great place to raise a family, cost of living – Those type things. Culturally and socially, maybe not, maybe not so great. So, I'm not really sure. I think my, Faye and I, my wife made it our goal to get these children through their education. My son always wanted to go to law school. My daughter always wanted to go to medical school. We've done that.
AB: Not many families like that.
RS: So, when they finish – When he passes the bar and when she finishes, wherever they locate its fine with me.
AB: You think it'd be a bigger city then? Most likely for what they're doing it seems.
RS: Well, it may. I don't know. My son's been here and he recently, while waiting for bar results and stuff, he sees a lot of opportunities. Again, as an African-American in Roanoke, if you're educated, there actually is a lot of opportunity. Number one, its very few of us. And so, he's seen that. Now whether he wants to stay or not is a whole different question.
AB: That's up to him. How many siblings did you have?
RS: I had a brother and sister.
AB: And they were older than you?
RS: Yes, 8 and 9 years older than I was. So almost -
AB: Almost like an only child. Once they were gone, it was just you.
RS: When they went away, its was like just me. In many ways, I had a lot of benefits they didn't have, right. They were adults and out working when I became a teenager and so, we laugh and joke about that now. But, ironically, I spoke at - my brother's deceased – but he finished Addison High School in 1960 and when they had their 40th class reunion, his classmates asked me to be the speaker at the thing, right.
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AB: Wow, that's big.
RS: Yeah. And the interesting thing I found was that I probably counted 10 people, at least, in his class that I knew that had brothers and sisters my age. So that gap wasn't that unique. Here you are talking about a time before birth control pills and oral contraceptives and all of that and so, it wasn't that unique. And all of us kinda benefited. We kinda can laugh and joke and say we benefited because they were gone and there was more money in the house, living conditions improved.
AB: There was heat.
RS: There was heat in every room. (laughing) So, it was a big difference. It really was.
AB: Now did they go to school? You said your sister went to college too.
RS: Yeah, my sister finished North Carolina Central College in Durham, North Carolina, and she was a librarian like my mother and she retired from the DC public schools maybe 5 years ago. She's 62 I think.
AB: Yeah, that's right. She's older.
RS: I'm 55 so I guess she's 63 now. And my brother went to college. He didn't finish. He is deceased.
AB: Sorry.
RS: It's OK. Thank you.
AB: You said you lived on Harrison Avenue and your father worked for the railroad. Did you live in a railroad house? Can you describe the –
RS: No.
AB: So it wasn't a railroad house like on Gilmer and Patton?
RS: No.

AB: Was it brick or framed? Did you have a garden?
RS: I think it was – It wasn't brick. I mean I can see the house now.
AB: So it doesn't exist any longer?
RS: It exists, yeah, it exists. I'm not sure what that house was constructed of but it wasn't brick.
AB: OK.
RS: A few of the houses on that part of Harrison Avenue are brick. You can ride up Harrison Avenue -
AB: Its mostly frame houses.
RS: Mostly frame.
AB: Was it 2 story?
RS: No, it was actually a one floor house. But, again, it was really interesting even though I moved from there when I was 5 years old -
AB: Oh, that's right.
RS: People in that community who still live there, still remember our family living there. I can go there now and people will say – Its really interesting – Wherever you lived, you became part of that community for the rest of your life.
AB: For the rest of your life.
RS: For the rest of your life.
AB: That's unusual. I've never heard that before.
RS: Its at least 3 families that still live on that block on Harrison Avenue and I can go there now and they'll still say, "Boy, I remember you when you were this and -". So that was real interesting and so every community I've lived in, I claim that community and that community claims me.
AB: Wow.
RS: That's the other thing about growing up in Roanoke, at least for me. You were always rooted somewhere. You were always rooted in the community. People knew you whether it was the high school or the elementary school.
AB: I didn't have that growing up. That's unusual. I lived in the suburbs. No downtown where I grew up. Just have on your own.
RS: Well, see, it was the exact opposite. That's what I was saying. My brother -
AB: So you couldn't get in trouble. People knew you.
RS: You couldn't get in trouble and people would protect you, yeah. That's what I'm saying. I could – My carcass stopped on Harrison Avenue now and I know people that I could walk to a house and knock on the door and they would let me in and do anything in the world for me. And the same thing in the other Northwest neighborhoods I lived in.
AB: Where did you move to after Harrison?
RS: We moved on 13th Street, Northwest. That was right off of Rugby Boulevard. That was in 1956 and we owned that house. My father died in 1987 so that was 31 years and we sold the house in 1990.
AB: That was tough. So that's where you grew up, down on 13th Street.
RS: That's where I grew up.
AB: Why did he move? He moved farther away from the railroad then.
RS: Well, yeah, but I mean this was the time that Northwest Roanoke, the better houses, - whites were moving out those houses -
AB: Out of Northwest?
RS: Out of Northwest beyond 10th Street.
AB: Near Rugby?
RS: Yeah, Rugby.
AB: That's a nice area.
RS: And so again, the houses were better. The neighborhoods were better.
AB: That was probably a brick house then.

RS: A brick house, yeah. And so, again, as working class people my family social and economics were improving. We moved from there and we moved into another neighborhood and again, most of the people were working class. A lot of school teachers. So it was a step up.
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AB: In '56.
RS: Yeah.
AB: That's a nice neighborhood. Yards to play in and nice wide streets.
RS: Exactly. Eureka Park was right behind my house so it was a very nice park, a baseball diamond and so, again, it was really a step up. I mean, it was not unusual when you look at demographics or what urban planners look at in cities, when one group moves out, another group moves in. So, in larger cities, of course, its more diversity. Here, it was just whites were moving further -
AB: Out of the city. Where were they going?
RS: Well, they were initially going further up in Northwest. And then eventually out into the county, Northwest County and all up there.
AB: And that was '50s, '60s, '70s?
RS: Mm mm. Yeah.
AB: OK. I guess getting more land and bigger houses and further away from the core of the city, downtown.
RS: Core of the city, yeah.
AB: So that gave you the opportunity to buy the house.
RS: Exactly.
AB: That was pretty prestigious in '56.
RS: A big deal.
AB: Did your dad have a car back then or did people walk or take the trolley?
RS: My father didn't have a car until 1960.
AB: And you remember that?
RS: I remember the first car. Oh, yeah. It was 1960. And, of course, my brother finished high school in 1960 so he really felt like, whoa, right. Until then, we didn't have a car and -
AB: How did your dad get to work?
RS: He rode with other men from the railroad. Somebody else in the neighborhood would come by and pick him up. I don't really remember him riding the bus a lot. The same thing with my mother, another teacher would pick her up and they would go down to Harrison.
AB: And where was she teaching at the time?
RS: She spent the whole time at Harrison Elementary where I went. Didn't mean I didn't get in trouble. It just meant that when I got in trouble, I got double the punishment but I got in trouble believe me.
AB: You should, you're supposed to. (both chuckling)
RS: Yeah, that was the logic. I didn't quite understand it but, OK. It was always this tension. I mean you had the guys – I wanted to be one of the guys but I was also a teacher's son and so that inevitably led to me having to prove myself sometimes.
AB: Or over-prove it and get in trouble.
RS: And get in trouble.
AB: She understood that I'm sure.
RS: Well, she did, but she couldn't show it so when I got the spankings or the punishment -
AB: Is that what she would do? Spank you?
RS: She would and whatever teacher that when I acted up would -
AB: Oh yeah, that's right. They could spank you then.
RS: They would spank me, yeah. There was corporal punishment.

AB: In front of other students?
RS: Certainly.
AB: Ooooo.
RS: Oh yeah.
AB: I bet they were laughing. Did they laugh when you got punished? The students?
RS: They would, yeah, they would laugh but you know as a guy you kinda earned your stripes like that, right. So when I was Addison High School in fact, one time we got – My father would always say – He would tell us, "If something happens in school, don't call down to the railroad for me.", right, because he didn't want to have to ask to get off. My father did not – The racism was so bad. Like you said, the job was a job that provided for his family so, he didn't want to ever have to go to his boss.
AB: No trouble.
RS: I can remember once when my brother got in trouble at Addison High School and they had to call my father and my brother who didn't fear anybody at Addison High School, literally hid when my father was coming over there. 'Cause he was a big guy and he didn't take a lot of stuff. So, 8 years later, I got in some trouble and I can remember getting called to the Principal's office. It was 4 of us. We thought – We didn't really realize we had done something as bad as we did but before that – This was a new Principal. Before that, the most that anybody – The old Principal would put you out of school was 3 days. So we get in the Principal's office and he's just so angry with us and especially with me because I had really disobeyed something he told us not to do. I went ahead and did it anyway. So he said, "I'm gonna put you out.". He knew my parents and he said, "I'm gonna put you out. All 4 of you, I'm gonna suspend all 4 of you.". So we were waiting for the 3 day thing. He says, "2 weeks".
AB: Oh!
RS: Yeah, and he said, "I want all your parents to come over here and Reggie I want your father, not your mother, your father.".
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AB: This is bad.
RS: I remembered my brother. I said, "Well, I'm not going to run and hide. I'm not going to punk out like that.". What I did was I went to the front of the school because I said if my father hits me, only the people on this side of the school will be able to see it. But he didn't. He was understanding actually.
AB: Were you still suspended for 2 weeks?
RS: 2 weeks.
AB: I bet your mom was unhappy about that. That was worse with your mom, wasn't it? Get that silent punishment or -
RS: No. As long as I got my work.
AB: So you still did your homework.
RS: Yeah, you still got your homework everyday. But I think – I really believe in the history of Addison High School, that was the longest suspension of anybody. 2 weeks was a long time.
AB: He made a good point then.
RS: He made a serious point. He made a serious point.
AB: You haven't forgotten that one.
RS: I haven't forgotten it. Never forgot it. Tell the story all the time. (both laughing) I used to see the Principal after I got to be an adult and would ask him, "Did you have to put us out for 2 weeks?". But he felt it was so egregious what we did that it called for that. And it really did. It sent a message to everybody -
AB: To the whole student body.
RS: To everybody else. So nobody else ever quite pulled that stunt again.
AB: What did your father do at the railroad?
RS: He was, for many years, he was a cleaner or a janitor and then -

AB: Did he work at the shops or at the general office?
RS: No, he worked in the general office building down here.
AB: Do you know if it was the north or the south?
RS: I can't remember now but I know that he worked in the old building which was -
AB: The first
RS: The one where the condos are now.
AB: Which is now 8 Jefferson Place.
RS: Yeah, OK.
AB: Those are the condos. That's the older building.
RS: That's the older building. They used to call it the old building and the new building.
AB: Oh really? I never that. Old building, new building.
RS: At the time, they still carried mail on the trains. So a better job was to be like the mail clerk that sorted the mail and put it in the bag so they could put it on the train. So he did that and then in the late 1960s blacks were allowed to have clerical jobs, salaried jobs.
AB: In the '60s.
RS: Late '60s. He was one of the first blacks to get one of those jobs.
AB: So he had been at the railroad for a while so he earned that.
RS: He had been at the railroad since 1942 so we're talking about 1968, so '52, '62, 25 years to get that job. Those jobs weren't open to blacks.
AB: Right.
RS: Only hourly janitorial type jobs.
AB: But he got that. That was big just to have that position with the railroad. Very prestigious.
RS: So he had a shirt and tie job and, you know, again things were just improving. That was – I finished high school in 1969, so he had a salaried job. So I used to look at my brother and sister and say, "Hey, its great here. Its more money.".
AB: Do you think he started that job right out of high school?
RS: I know he did because his father worked there. My grandfather was a janitor there and he got my father -
AB: Helped him get the job.
RS: My father went in the service – got drafted during WWII and he got out of the army, I guess, in 1946. He was gone 3 years.
AB: Came on back home.
RS: He came right on back.
AB: And started working there.
RS: Yep.
AB: That's interesting. I'm not from here but my mother's brother ended up here.
RS: OK.
AB: And my uncle, he worked in the old building all of his life so it would be funny, they probably knew each other and said, "Hello" and here we are today.
RS: Everybody in those buildings knew my father. He was a big man. He had a lot of self-pride, a lot of dignity. In fact, people tell me my son - People that knew my father – my father was also a very good basketball player around here – and they'd tell me my son reminds them so much of my father because he's tall like my father was. He's 6'4" and he's built like - I mean he's got a lot of pride and carries himself a particular way. So all the old men see him and say, "I know that's Elmer Thomas' grandson. It can't be anybody else.". Right?
AB: Elmer?
RS: Thomas.
AB: That was your father's name?

RS: That was my father's name, yeah.
AB: Now how did you get your name of Shareef? Oh, because you became Muslim.
RS: I accepted Islam in 1977.
AB: So you changed -
RS: I changed my name then.
AB: And what was your father's name?
RS: Elmer Thomas.
AB: Thomas. So that's how you grew up though was as Reginald Thomas.
RS: Reginald Thomas.
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AB: When did your father pass away?
RS: In 1987.
AB: That's right, you told me that.
RS: My mother died suddenly in 1970.
AB: Oh, so young. I'm sorry.
RS: Right there in the library. She has an asthma – My mother had asthma. She had a real bad asthma attack.
AB: Right here.
RS: She left out of the library and they were trying to get her to the hospital and she died in her car. They didn't realize that the asthma attack was that bad.
AB: That's horrible.
RS: Mm mm.
AB: So she was fairly young though.
RS: 47.
AB: Younger than me. That must've been really hard for you.
RS: Its the only thing in life – I was telling my son yesterday – My father really trained us to be strong. He wasn't a man that tolerated any weakness whether it was physical weakness or emotional weakness. He didn't tolerate it. I had gone back to college for my 2nd year and my mother and I were extremely close and I spoke with her the night before she died and she and I were going to meet that weekend in Washington to see my sister. And so, I got a call about 4 o'clock the next day and when I picked up the phone – They said that there was an emergency call for me. I guess the dean came and got me and I picked the phone up and he said, "Reggie, I hate to tell you this but your mother just died." And that's – He said – He had a friend in Petersburg and he said, "I'm going to have Mr. Heath come over and a bus leaves coming back to Roanoke at 6 o'clock.". That's the way he did things. I mean, you just had to deal with it. And I cried all the way back for 5 hours, right?
AB: All by yourself.
RS: All by myself. And I often tell my children, "Look, if something happens to your mom, I'll come and get you. I won't do you quite like that.". But that was the way he did things and I came home – And that was on a Wednesday night and she was buried Saturday and Sunday, I was back to school. And I just couldn't deal with it because she and I were so close so I called my grandmother's and I asked them if I could -
AB: So you still have both grandmothers?
RS: At the time.
AB: At the time.
RS: Could I come back and live with them because he – You know, it was like, look -
AB: To come back here -
RS: To come back here just for one year.
AB: You didn't want to come back to live with your dad. You wanted to -

RS: Well, I wanted to come back and live with him but -
AB: He knew -
RS: He wasn't going to hear of it.
AB: You need to move on.
RS: Yeah, "You were in school and you've got to go on.".
AB: I don't want to go on. (both laughing)
RS: My grandmothers, they both prevailed on him so he said, "OK, well, he can come back but he's got to go to Virginia Western and before he leaves Petersburg, he's got to make sure that everything he takes at Virginia Western transfers back. And that's how I got back. And that year, I really needed to be around family. Its really the only thing in my life that has ever thrown me and so I tell Malique and Amira all the time – But actually, yesterday, Malique told me, he said, "You see, you're just like granddaddy.". We were talking about something and I was telling him, "You just gotta fight through it.". That's the way he delivered information and I guess for the past 20 years, I'm 55, so since I was about 35, I've been sorta like the patriarch of my extended family. And I'm telling you, when somebody dies, that's the way I deliver news and, you know, I don't know another way to do it. And everybody always comes back and says, "Well, you're just like your daddy.". He would just, whatever it was -
AB: Simply say it, that's what my mother did, just say it.
RS: Yeah, just gave it to you. He was a real strong guy. Wouldn't let you back down. You had to be a man. I call it Elmer Thomas' boot camp. He trained you to be a man. (both laughing)
AB: We could all use that really.
RS: I think also again, it was his experience being black. He knew that there would be times out here when you'd be disappointed but you just couldn't fold up. You just had to deal with it. I'm so thankful he did it. I'm so thankful he did it because it just gave me a lot of strength to deal with things that you and I deal with things now, right.
AB: So you think he learned that from his father?
RS: His father and his experience.
AB: Did his father live in Gainsboro?
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RS: He actually lived – My grandparents lived in Northeast what was Kimball.
AB: Oh yeah.
RS: Yeah, the Kimball, they lived there.
AB: And that's now part of the Civic Center, that area?
RS: That's right, exactly.
AB: How did that effect you? Were you here to see that when all that was torn down?
RS: Well, yeah, I remember when my -
AB: That was the '60s?
RS: That was 1956 as well. My grandparents - Patton Avenue extended down into -
AB: All the way through.
RS: Yeah. With the redevelopment, they moved and they moved on Orange Avenue. They were relocated to Orange Avenue.
AB: Did the City do that or the Federal Government?
RS: The Federal Government.
AB: They relocated them.
RS: Well, they came through and using "Eminent Domain", they seized the property and so they bought a house in the 1200 block of Orange Avenue. In the same year, we moved on 13th Street Northwest which was like 5 minutes away. Again, if you look at the demographics of these moves, neighborhoods moved, people moved together.

AB: Its hard to imagine 'cause I've known nothing like that.
RS: I thought it was interesting but I do a lot of reading of an economist by the name of Thomas Sowell. He tracks migrations of people from country to country. And you'll find villages of people like Italians. When they moved to New York, the whole village moved. It gives you a sense of continuity and you know the people. He's tracked Jewish people who have moved. So it wasn't uncommon. You can look at people in upper Northwest now that moved in the late '60s and bought houses in the late '60s. Well, I knew those same people when they lived in Northeast and the whole community.
AB: What was that like for you? What was that experience like? You were young then.
RS: I didn't think a lot about it. I think I looked more at it from – That the houses and the quality of life for people were improving. It was only later that you began, that I began to understand the psychological and emotional ramifications of it. But when I was a young man, things were just better for people. Like you were saying, they were moving from frame houses, wood-framed houses to brick houses. They had central heat, air-conditioning. It was better. But, as I got older, I did a study. I had a grant from HUD in the early 1990s and I looked at the economic and social implications of redevelopment in Gainsboro and I looked at it more from a legal point of view the way the city was getting the property. I looked at Eminent Domain and how I thought Eminent Domain was being improperly used and Eminent Domain as an engine for economic development. Now when I did that type of research, then I could see how people were exploited. And then a few years ago, Professor Mindy Fullilove of Columbia, the world-renowned psychiatrist, she came in and we collaborated on some things because she looked at the emotional and psychological impact when people are forcibly moved. So now, I look at it in a different context. I can't deny that some of these neighborhoods weren't that great from a physical point of view. They were still communities. I testified – I was an expert witness in the Walter Claytor case.
AB: Golly. Just recently, like a year ago or so.
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RS: The way the City of Roanoke and Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority misused Eminent Domain was terrible. You hear about the case out of Connecticut that the Supreme Court - Everybody's upset about that but what happened to the Claytor Family was both illegal and unethical. And so I look at things like that now and see how government officials used the threat of Eminent Domain to get people's property to turn it over. Because the whole thing about Urban Renewal is that it is a partnership between the city and private developers. Private developers want the property. They don't want to pay market value for it so they collaborate with the city to use Eminent Domain. The city has the power under the 5th Amendment to condemn property for public use and then its sold to the developers so the city makes out. They enhance the tax base. The developers make it so that its only the people who are relocated who lose. So if you look at Gainsboro – I mean Kimball down there where the post office is and Magic City Ford and the Roanoke Gas Company, you can see this all across America. That is why people are so angry. In the Kelo case that the Supreme Court decided, the state of Connecticut just blatantly said that property can be seized for economic development. Just blatantly said it. And that was the whole argument. But as far back as 1966 when it was happening, primarily at that time to inner-city black neighborhoods, it was very obvious that it was nothing but economic development. And so, I mean, when you look at it from that point of view, it doesn't look that good and I think one of the best things I've ever done and God put me in the position to do was to be an expert witness in the Claytor Case. Because the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority thought they were wrong. They knew they were wrong. They hired the big law firm downtown, I can't think of the name now. Spending a lot of taxpayer dollars for a case that they knew that they couldn't win. So, it was very fulfilling for me for the Claytor family to win. Very, very fulfilling. Its like I stuck it in their eye and I was thankful to be in a position to do that.
AB: Do you know what will happen with the building with the old medical building?

RS: The Claytor Building?
AB: Mm mm.
RS: I don't know.
AB: I know its not part of the interview, I was just curious.
RS: I don't know. I've never heard Dr. Claytor say exactly what he's going to do with that. The building is in terrible condition. I don't know if it could even be rehabbed. I don't know. But, its a beautiful yellow brick and he's got a wonderful story about how that brick came in on the railroad and he and his brothers had to go down and – I'm not exactly sure how they transported it from the railroad, from the old freight station over here but they helped construct that building.
AB: Oh, I didn't realize that.
RS: Mm mm. Again, it was just – When you talk about entrepreneurialship and all these type things, these people really went through a lot to establish stuff. And I guess as I get older, I can understand why there's a lot of resentment when government entities come in and take it or close it or whatever. I'm probably more sensitive to that now than I was when I was younger. I guess the last 10 years have probably – I have a greater sensitivity for it because I have a better feel for what they put into creating these things.
AB: That's now being taken away.
RS: That's now being taken away and for me, its always the ethical thing of how its being taken away. I mean, and, some of the things that, again, the City of Roanoke and the Housing Authority did to get the property. Just unethical behavior.
AB: When was that? That that happened, the city took that property?
RS: Well, it started in the early – Well, in Gainsboro, it started in the early '70s and Kimball and Commonwealth was in the '50s.
AB: Right. But I mean Dr. Claytor's -
RS: In the early '70s.
AB: Early '70s. Now what happened with his house? Did that burn?
RS: That burned.
AB: And that was just an accident?
RS: Well, -
AB: Was he living there at the time?
RS: No, he wasn't living there but they rented it out.
AB: That's right. But that must've been a big house up on that hill.
RS: It was a big house.
AB: Right over here.
RS: Yeah, right across the street. It was a big house, yeah.
AB: And who owns that property?
RS: They still own that. They own that whole block. On the other side, there was an Esso Filling Station that they owned and the city was determined to get the property. They colluded with members of a local black church to get it. They promised the church – It all came out in the trial. I had heard it for years but that promised the church property over on Wells Avenue if they would support the city getting the property and in effect, turning the community against the Claytors.
AB: Mmm! That's huge.
RS: So when we talk about unethical behavior, yeah.
AB: That was in the '70s.
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RS: That was in the '70s. The Catholic Church wanted that property as well. So you had powerful interest vying for it and nobody really knew. It took 30 years and court subpoenas to uncover all the documents and all the city promised the church the Claytor Property and they didn't even own it. It

was like, “When we get it, you'll have it for supporting us and saying that the Claytor's are only interested in protecting their wealth.”. So they turned people against one another.
AB: Wow, that's pretty powerful.
RS: Yeah.
AB: The Claytors were well-respected.
RS: Well-respected, yeah.
AB: Community activists.
RS: Well, yeah - I think that the Claytors and other black doctors here – I mean, they weren't middle-class/working-class people. They had a lot more resources. And I think that became a wedge issue in this.
AB: Most people were working-class and they were more middle to upper-middle class so the city used that -
RS: Used that against – Yeah, when government officials would come in and they would say, “The Claytors aren't really thinking about you guys. They're already wealthy.”. Well, I mean, that was just a ruse to – Its called cooptation in public administration. You co-op people and you turn 'em against somebody. But the Claytors were always talking about was Eminent Domain. The improper use of Eminent Domain. Again, working-class people just didn't understand.
AB: Sure.
RS: So that's why when I had the HUD grant in the early 1990's and did this study about it, I was able to talk about these things and having some credibility in this community. It was like, OK, well maybe this really is what Walter Claytor's been saying all along. And this is 20 years after he began to say that, right. And it had some validity.
AB: It would make a good movie.
RS: Yes, a lot of things around here would make a great movie. You couldn't dream up this stuff.
AB: No.
RS: You couldn't dream it up.
AB: Interesting. It kinda reminds me a little bit of the Coal Field Wars.
RS: Sure. Yeah.
AB: The working class against the powerful companies.
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RS: Yeah. I think that theme goes on. In a class society, you are always going to have it. And the only protection that people have is knowledge and really in American society and understanding of the Constitution because its the Constitution that really protects the citizens. And I think that if you look at Dr. Martin Luther King, even if you look at groups like the Black Panther Party in the 1970's, they really talked a lot about the Constitution. The police using improper search, the 4th amendment violations and I think that's one of the things that, especially in the black community. Although I've always taught at white universities, or predominantly white universities, and I'm constantly when I'm teaching a course on public policy, I'm constantly hammering away to my students that they need to know their Constitutional rights. Because students ask me every day, “Dr. Shareef, the police stopped me. Was that Constitutional?” I say, “Well, if you knew your rights, you would know if it was Constitutional or not.”. So I think the Constitution is something that most American citizens don't value. For 15 years I've taught – I've been on a staff of a police training institute outside of Harrisonburg and every year I do a seminar on leadership and ethics and I tie the ethics around the Constitution, the 4th Amendment. The police officers and police administrators for 15 years have told me. “We get to search because the citizen doesn't know his or her 4th Amendment rights. And so if the police came in here today and asked and said they wanted to search, we all 3 of us have the right to refuse the search. Once you consent to the search, no matter what's found can be used against you. Now law enforcement will make you think, “Well, if you don't have anything to hide, you should let

me search.”. And its crazy. And so it becomes that type thing that the citizens don't know their rights and then I think, more often, African-American people, because we don't' have a good understanding of the system, we don't trust the system even when we know our rights. And I think, again, that's one of the things that was really validated in the Walter Claytor Case is that he kept on about the 14th Amendment and due process and the 5th Amendment right of Eminent Domain on just compensation for your property. And he screamed it long enough and he won. It took a long time but he won. And I think that sort of validates the fact that you need to know your rights.
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AB: Dr. Shareef, before we close, could you talk a little bit about your book that you've written here, “The Roanoke Valley's African-American Heritage, A Pictorial History”.
RS: Well, I wrote this book almost 10 years ago. That was a dream or a vision of Melody Stovault (??). Melody Stovault (??) was the Director of the Harrison Museum at the time and she really wanted some type of historical book written. I'm not a historian. I have a PHD in Public Administration and Policy so I'm a policy and management guy. But she asked me would I be interested in doing that and she secured the funding for the book from First Union.
AB: That's hard to do. That's an effort right there.
RS: See, on the first page. (Pages flipping) Once they had the money -
AB: I wonder how she did the – why she chose them and why they did that.
RS: I think she went around to a lot of organizations and, again, its good publicity for them to – It makes them a responsible corporate citizen and they put up the money for the book. After that, the only thing I wanted from Melody was just – I want to give you my proposal of how I want to do it but then just let me do it. That's the way I have to work. So, she agreed and I laid out the chapters, what I thought would be the appropriate chapters and she agreed and so, in many ways, its a pictorial history so the pictures in many ways drive the story. But once we got that done, it wasn't that difficult of a task to do. Its just the design, getting buy-in from people who had to support the project. So 10 years later, the book is still selling.
AB: Its still available?
RS: Its still available. They've got a book store up at the Harrison Museum and anytime I see somebody that's been in that bookstore or that works there, they tell me that they're still selling the book.
AB: If I purchased one, could I contact you to sign it?
RS: Most certainly.
AB: I would like to do that. I am a historian by trade so I would like to do that.
RS: Well it was really interesting and the book has been well-received. People look through the book and their history's there that everybody didn't know. Of course there are pictures and people see pictures of people they knew and so its been – It was a really good experience. It was a really good experience for me. Its something I hadn't done before and I was used to more academic writing, journal writing, this type thing.
AB: This is much more fun.
RS: A lot more fun. A lot more fun. A lot more interesting. It went well.
AB: That's wonderful. So you can live on in many ways through your students and your books and your policies.
RS: In many ways. Exactly. And every picture in that book, I placed except the cover. I'm somewhat of a vain guy. But even Reggie Shareef would not put his mother on the cover of a book I wrote. Somebody else selected that. They – A committee did that.
AB: Did they know it was your mother?
RS: They knew it was my mother but they -
AB: They knew that you would want that and she would want that. She would want that.

RS: Well, she would and I think its very appropriate. That's the library at Harrison and, as you can see, my mother was a very attractive woman, and it fit. But that's the one picture I didn't select. I didn't select the cover. But, when I saw it, I was really pleased that they had done that.
AB: Well, that's a great note for us to end on with your mother. I'm sure she's still very pleased with you.
RS: I'm sure.
AB: Thank you for your time Dr. Shareef, its been a pleasure.
RS: Thank you so much, nice meeting you.