

Oral History Interview with Stephen Niamke

Interviewer: Kerri Taylor

Interviewee: Stephen Niamke

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Transcription prepared by: Kerri Taylor

KT

0:00- My name is Kerri Taylor and I am interviewing Stephen Niamke today at the Melrose Rugby Center and we are going to ask him about his experiences in North West Roanoke. (the date is April 19, 2017)

KT

0:09- Can you tell me about your childhood?

SN

0:11: Uh, that's kind of broad. Well I did grow up here in Roanoke, here in Northwest Roanoke. I live in the same house that my parents moved into in 1962. It's about eight blocks north of here, so I have a lot of memories about this neighborhood. That building over there—that store there used to be an ice-cream shop. I used to ride my bike down here and get ice-cream.

It was a very active neighborhood; we had a lot of children about the same age on my block, which is Franwell Avenue. So we would play football in the street in the summertime and we would play Monopoly in the basement and basketball in my backyard—we had a basketball court in the backyard.

I played on the football team starting when I was nine; I practiced right up the street about two blocks up the street where the school that's there now is, that's called Roanoke Academy, which wasn't there at the time. It was a school called Monroe Junior High School. There's this huge field that's still there and we'd practice there. So what I'm saying is that it was a very active neighborhood. I've ridden my bike all over Roanoke, particularly this neighborhood when I was a pretty small kid.

KT

1:40- Is the neighborhood still active?

SN:

1:42 It's not even close to where it was. You know, it's not just the neighborhood, this neighborhood. It's the whole culture [that] has changed. Children aren't outside playing in the street like they used to. So no, it's not. This neighborhood is totally different than it was when I was a kid and even as a young adult.

How would I describe the difference? Oh, there are so many things. Number one, you don't see children outside playing in the street and if you do, my guess is that somebody might complain about the fact that they are making so much noise. I mean it's just a different culture. I don't know the percentage, but I think it's mostly renters here rather than homeowners. So that aspect has changed, which means that—and this is my bias, but I think it's pretty accurate—is that I don't think renters invest as much in their community; they don't care as much. I think that is reflected in what you see in terms of upkeep of the houses.

There's clearly more criminal activity. At least I'm more aware of it, maybe there was more then, but I don't think so. My mother was never, my mother and father, mostly my mother, was never worried. If we went bike riding, you know, she wasn't worried we were going to disappear. I

mean we literally rode our bikes. I had a friend when I was 13 years old I had a friend named Ricky and we would literally, one summer we tried to play basketball at every court we could find in the city of Roanoke. It was just, "Mom, going bike riding." That was it. And you just can't do that now. Particularly if you are a younger child, I think I was 13 then, but I was bike riding when I was nine or ten years old and I was a little guy, so it's just the whole sense of the environment is different.

SN

4:00- The classic example that it is the fact that we don't have a grocery store in this neighborhood. If you go over here to this CVS, which is about a block away, there used to be a Kroger and then there was a Super Rx Pharmacy. I don't even think Super Rx exists anymore. But that's where we did our grocery shopping.

If we wanted to do grocery shopping, or I need to, if I want to go out and buy some eggs real quick, I can't run down the street like I used to when I was a kid and my mother would say, "Go ride you bike down the street and go get me some eggs and a pack of cigarettes." I can't do that now; I have to drive all the way over to Valley View or Towers or something. So the entire flavor of the neighborhood has changed in terms of the interconnectedness and the activity and the family orientation. All of that has changed.

KT

4:54

Do you have any children? And if so, can you describe some of the experiences they've had versus some of the experiences you had growing up?

SN

5:01

I have one child; she's probably about your age. She's probably a little older than you are. She's about to turn 27. In terms of her growing up, we, she was born in Ohio and we moved back down here when she was 6. At first we moved to Martinsville, and then we moved over to the Raleigh Court neighborhood near Patrick Henry, and that's where she grew up. Yeah, I would say that her childhood was considerably different from mine. Partially because of who she is.

She just has a whole different set of interests. She's a musician. I'm not a musician. She was not into sports. I was very much into sports. I have a twin brother and two older brothers; we were all close together in age and we all played sports and she was an only child. So I think her experience was not, was more oriented towards the school, where mine was more oriented toward the neighborhood. I don't know. I was pretty active in the school too.

We went to a small private school: Roanoke Catholic, right over here by the Civic Center, so I kind of lived the divided life. There was a—the neighborhood was an African American World and the school was a European American world. And school was dominated by playing basketball and football and I got involved in some elected positions too like I was treasurer of the class. So her life was considerably different.

Clearly, there was more diversity amongst her friends than there was about mine. I mean Roanoke is very segregated and my lifestyle as a child really showed that and it continues to be very segregated, but I think she had a broader spectrum in the relationships that she developed. But for the most part, I think those are the most obvious differences.

KT

7:28- Can you explain the African American roles you were talking about when you were growing up?

SN

7:31- Well it's a black neighborhood. I mean, it wasn't that there weren't any white families there, but there were very few. I mean I could, on a weekend, I could come home from school on Friday and if I stayed in the neighborhood all weekend, I wouldn't see a white person unless I was watching TV.

And on the other hand, if I was at school, I remember there was a time when we were going downtown, from the school, from Roanoke Catholic, we were going downtown to some kind of event in Downtown Roanoke and we had to walk through the Gainesboro neighborhood. We were going to walk from the school to downtown and I remember one of my classmates asking, they were afraid of walking through a black neighborhood, they asked if they could walk with me. Like first of all, I told them there's nothing to be scared of, and number two, if there was, there's nothing I can do for you.

But it just shows the difference between how concentrated the neighborhoods were at that time. And you know, when I think about it now, you know the Melrose Rugby neighborhood Forum, this neighborhood group is an all-black organization. And there's no white members right now. There's some people that come by and I think we are about to have somebody join. That's not an intentional thing on our part; it's just the makeup of the neighborhood. So it may be a little more diverse than it was, you know forty-five years ago, but I don't think it's that different.

KT

9:19- You mentioned that Roanoke is still segregated. Is it this part specifically or more areas that branch out?

SN

9:26-Northwest is black and relatively poor. Southeast is white and relatively poor. Southwest is white and relatively rich, and Northeast is probably the smallest area and more industrial, but I think it's probably predominantly working class white. I think if you ask any Roanoker who's been here for any appreciable amount of time, they'd pretty much give you the same description.

KT

9:56- So have you noticed any differences between your neighborhood and some of those other neighborhoods? And can you describe them?

SN

10:04- Differences? Yeah, I mean what I just described. Number one, there are economic differences. There are racial differences. And Southeast and Northwest actually have a lot in common. I wish I had this; I met with a city council member yesterday and gave him a list of twelve concerns that I have for the neighborhood and there are things like there are problems with crimes, problems with drugs, there's dilapidated housing, there's transient populations. I don't think we have the issue of homelessness here that they do in Southeast, but that's because there's a homeless shelter. There's a program that feeds off of the homelessness for lack of a better description. There's, this is a food desert, I believe that's, no I don't think Southeast is a food desert. [cell phone rings] sorry about that.

KT

It's okay. His phone was ringing.

SN

11:21: I will turn that off.

KT

11:24- You're fine.

SN

11:25- This is a food desert. Okay, that's my client calling me, she's going to have to wait. There is...

KT

11:39- You were talking about food deserts.

SN

11:41 Yeah. There is a food desert and I am trying to remember those twelve things I listed for the city council member. Actually, I may have it in my car, but those are the major issues. I think there is some employment issues. There's some transportation issues. And the biggest thing that concerns me about this area, and the same kind of thing exists in Southeast, and because it is a food desert, you have these little mini marts like these stores right here and there, the proportion of healthy foods that they provide compared to the amount of alcohol and tobacco that they sell is a concern. It's a major concern.

If you walk from the CVS right here, down to 11th street, there are six businesses and their primary product is alcohol. And even if you just go and I actually counted the steps one day and did a presentation in city council expressing my concern, if you just go from CVS to 17th street, which is a distance of four blocks, no it's not even four blocks— let me think, CVS, it's just two blocks—there are 4 establishments that primarily sell alcohol. So when I did that presentation, I think it was primarily to the board of zoning appeals actually, the question I asked was if they were proud of the fact that they were concentrating this area with alcohol sales and what were they trying to accomplish?

You don't see that anywhere else in Roanoke. Well you might see it in Southeast, but so to get back to your question about what the neighborhoods have in common, it seems to me like the poorer neighborhoods have issues with high alcohol sales and it's just not healthy, you know? My angle with that presentation with Board of Zoning Appeals is you get, you know, if we really want to be proud of Roanoke, let's be proud of all of it, you know? And I was sarcastic and I said something like, "welcome to the city of Roanoke, we poison people." You know? Cause that's the message that's being put out. Literally less than a block from where we are sitting right now.

SN

14:40- Then on the other hand you have some neighborhoods that are very wealthy. Greater Deyerle, I mean the houses there are incredible. Old southwest is not necessarily a, the housing stock is not the same as Greater Deyerle, but they see older houses that people have really fixed up and have taken pride in. Old Southwest has some issues too, you know, they have some drugs and some prostitution, and some of these little stores that sell high volumes of alcohol, but they also have people who are organized around those issues and are more aware of those types of issues.

There was a neighborhood leader who you may have heard about who recently passed away, who she was very dynamic in starting Old Southwest as an organization back in the seventies and it continues to be strong. So then I think about Southwest, the part of Southwest that is near the hospital. There's a lot of money in that area too. The point is if you look at the income levels of the people that live in the neighborhood, then you can see that there's some differences in terms of how planning is taking place. You wouldn't have a concentration of four businesses that serve so much alcohol within a two mile radius in the Southwest or Carillion area of Southwest. It just wouldn't happen.

KT

16:35- Can you explain to me what it is about the alcohol selling that really seems to bother you? Is it just the health thing or does it go beyond that?

SN

16:45

Well, it goes beyond that. What bothers me is, I don't understand the rationale for that kind of planning. If you have that volume of alcohol in front of any group of people, there's going to be a higher group of people who consume it. Plain and simple. And that to me is a problem. It suggests one of two things; it suggests either the planning is done without any forethought by people who just don't care. If you want to sell alcohol, sure here's your license, but here's your store so and so. Or is done with some forethought, that somebody would like for it to be that way. I would hate to think that that would be true, but it raises that question. Why? Why is this deciding that way? That's what bothers me.

You know, I know some of the city planners. I've known them for years and I would consider some of them to be friends of mine and even though we can maintain friendships, every once in a while there's a clash. Right now there's this issue of it's called, there's this rezoning that the city wants to do where they are dividing units of property into five thousand feet instead of seven thousand and it creates the opportunity to build more units and the city wants to move forward with that.

Well the neighborhood's not interested in that because then you're going to have more congestion and most people know, I personally have four cars, so it's not uncommon for an adult or a family to have multiple cars for a single household. So you're starting to put in new households and people are having the same amount of cars, where do you park all those cars?

And so now, we have issues with—and you may noticed coming up and down the street people just park on their front yard and it just kills the grass, and it makes it muddy and it make property values drop and all that stuff and again the point is, what is the forethought in the thinking? On the one hand, I can see you have more properties; you have more taxes, that's more money for the city. But what's the quality of life in the neighborhood? You know? So it's that type of thinking that we kind of go back and forth on. Sometimes they just don't seem to get it and they're probably saying the same thing about us.

KT

19:56- So, the city planning that you mentioned, I looked at a document that talked about Williamson Road, what are your thoughts on the city planning of Williamson Road?

SN:

20:07: Hmm Williamson Road, the way I see it, is a business district. It's a strip of businesses and then there's neighborhoods outside of those businesses, that's fine. Um, in fact I wouldn't have an issue with Orange Avenue becoming more like that, where there is this business community. The one, the caveat for me is, I want, I'm trying to get the money to stay in the neighborhood. I don't know how or if that can happen, but I'm trying to get the money to stay in the neighborhood because that will address things like dilapidated housing or vacant lots or just how people take care of their beautification and curb appeal of the area. So I'm fine with Williamson Road. I don't spend a whole lot of time over there so, I mean I have some clients that live over there over that way. I actually have one client that lives on Williamson Road, so I don't have a real strong opinion of it.

I've had some bad experiences over there as a child. I remember, and this again illustrates how segregated Roanoke was, the same friend named Ricky that I played basketball with, we went bike riding and found ourselves over in that area. I guess we were about thirteen to fourteen years old and didn't really know where we were and these two, this car full of guys called us the 'n' word (nigger) and started chasing us.

KT

21:50- What year was this?

SN

21:52- This would have been, let's see '74 '75. In fact, I posted a tribute to him. Ricky passed away when he was twenty two, and I posted a tribute to him a couple years back and I told that story about when we were riding bikes and these, I'm assuming these guys were in their twenties maybe, they were old enough to drive. They called us the 'n' word and we got out of there as fast as we could. You know, what I liked about it was, we went cutting through the alleys and all that, where they couldn't drive their car, but what I liked about that story was Rick and I stayed together, you know, he didn't go one way and I went another, we stayed together and basically got out of that neighborhood.

When you mention Williamson Road, that memory comes to mind for me, automatically, but as far as how it's designed and the city planning, I don't seem to have an issue, it seems like it's a thriving. I mean there's an organization Williamson Road Area Business Association, I believe is what it's called WRAPPA, it's been going strong. I mean it's got good leadership. Wendy Jones is the president and has been for years. They have good leadership, but it seems like they are very organized about how they promote and maintain their businesses and I would love to see something like that. In fact, my meeting with a city council member yesterday was about replicating the business incubator in Vinton that was started about two years ago. I want to, I am very good friends with the woman that runs that program and I want to bring that to Northwest Roanoke to just kind of stimulate the economy and bring some creativity and bring some organization to this area.

So we're looking at this property that this city council member just bought that's on 11th street. 11th street used to be a thriving, kind of economic center for this neighborhood. And right now, it's not impressive at all. I have a client; I have two clients that live in an assisted living place, two blocks from 11th street. I'm over here all the time. I will be over there; I'm going to take one of my clients out there this evening. It's nothing for me to get approached by a woman who is trying to make some money and it's nothing. That happens. It happens right here, sometimes. That again kind of reflects what's happening in the neighborhood.

KT

24:49- So the way Grandin is set up, it has businesses, it has a movie theatre, it has restaurants all in that area. Do you think that that's a better model for a community or something like Williamson is?

SN

24:55- Yeah, it's beautiful

SN

25:01- Clearly I like Grandin better.

KT

25:05- Okay, so if you had the choice, you would pick something like Grandin?

SN

25:09- Yeah, because Grandin— okay so I'm also chair of the Roanoke City Democratic Committee, so I'm involved in local politics and we just set up an office over in the Colab on Grandin Road and part of the reason we wanted to be over there, number one, we had a member who was generous enough to fund that office space for us, but we like that environment because you have the Grandin theater, which is family oriented, but also very progressive. You have Roanoke Natural Foods, that is health oriented, and I used to be on their board; health-oriented, family-oriented, progressive, and conscientious. There's my other phone (ringing). It's that sense of community where people are coming together and organizing themselves around their values. I clearly prefer that than a business that's there just to make

money. The impression that I get, and again I'm a thousand times removed from Williamson Road, but they are businesses for the sake of business and those businesses you described over on Grandin are over there because of people and values and community, totally different concept.

KT

26:39: What are some of the values in this area? Some of the people and concepts

SN

26:45: You know, I don't think, well here's the thing, I mentioned that I'm chair of the Democratic Committee, here's what people aren't paying attention to, is Republicans and Democrats aren't as different as everybody thinks. Young people and old people aren't as different as everybody thinks. Black people and white people aren't as different as everybody thinks. Yeah, there are cultural nuances, you know? I'm not real excited about St. Patrick's Day, it does nothing for me culturally, but when my family, when I've led Kwanzaa celebrations for the city, I see white people get excited, because they appreciate what Kwanzaa is about. So my point is, that the values we hold as human beings aren't that different. So what's valued on Williamson Road and what's valued in on Grandin Road and what's valued here are all the same stuff.

People want their children to be healthy and happy. People want to be able to work jobs that they enjoy and also meet their needs. People want, this is going to sound political, but people want health care. You know? When you get to be, I'm fifty six, when you get to be my age, you begin to look at life a little bit differently. You look at retiring and you look at, you know, how long am I going to be here, until I'm eighty, ninety, one hundred? You know what is it? Everybody as they approach those years, they look at it the same way. They want health care. They want to be able to retire comfortably. It's not that the values are different. It's about how we get there. This is what we disagree on.

SN

28:28- I just had a conversation with my daughter and her fiancé about their relationship and they have hit a couple of bumps in the road and I basically explained to them that relationships are about agreeing on how. How will we, what are our values, and how will we express those? How do we live those out? How do we relate? What are the things that we're doing to promote those values? So the values are the same, its people value spirituality, especially here in the South. You know, religion is a big deal. People take a different approach to it. People value their health. People value their family. People want security and safety; it's all the same stuff. It's just about how you move forward in making it happen.

KT

29:20- What is currently under development in Northwest to change the area?

SN

29:28-Okay. Wow, okay. Right now, this is a target area for community development block grants, what we call CDBG funds. The housing authority has applied for this multi-million dollar grant a couple of times and has been denied a couple of times. The idea is to address the condition of the housing and to promote health care. There are a number of organizations. There's United Way, Healthy Roanoke Valley, neighborhood groups like this one, there's an Invest Health initiative. They're trying to bring a grocery store here, possibly a co-op. I'd like to see a co-op. So there are clearly some discussions and plans in their infancy I would say to address some of the issues that we have already discussed.

The question once again is how, do you make that happen? How do you involve the people who already live here, which is, I was glad that the city council member was willing to meet with me.

One of the things he asked me was where do you live and I said I live right here in the neighborhood about six to eight blocks that way. And then he talked about two other leaders who I believe both of them live in this neighborhood; I'm not exactly sure where they live. But his angle was I want to involve the people in the neighborhood.

SN

31:20- So I think there is clear recognition that there are things like the fact that it is a food desert and we need access to healthy food and reduction of alcohol and tobacco sales. I think people recognize that and there's some work in place. In fact there have been a couple of surveys that have been put in place and that have been put out and there is one we are getting ready to put out as well to try and collect that data about how people feel about living here so that things can be addressed programmatically. But it just hasn't gotten to the point where—I'll give you another example real quick.

32:02- There's a nightclub about five or six blocks this way that has had issues with opening and closing because people were in there doing illegal activities, you know, selling drugs or alcohol or whatever. Okay, well, Second Harvest Food Bank has taken over that building and they want to put a community kitchen in there where they teach people cooking skills, which I think is incredible. It's just another example of something I think real concrete is happening on a broader institutional level to address the specific problem in this neighborhood. But what I was just about to say is this hasn't gotten to the point where these programs are really in place and have started having an effect, it's just a lot of—there's some plans and some talking, but we just haven't gotten to that place and I think, what I'm curious to see is obviously there's going to be some disagreement as ideas come forward. I'm curious to see how that gets negotiated and I want to be involved in those discussions. We're helping to facilitate some of those or work some of those conflicts.

KT

33:21- So you mentioned when you were growing up, this store right here was an ice-cream store?

SN

33:30- Yeah, Hoss!

KT

33:31- There was a Kroger and there was a pharmacy? What do you think was a reason that these businesses just seemed to be pushed out and...?

SN

33:43- I can tell you why, at least I can tell you what I've heard about why Kroger left. What I heard was and I think I witnessed some of this too, is that there was, there were more disturbances around the store. I remember coming down here and just looking at the parking lot and just seeing that there was trash and broken glass and stuff like that. So there was and I can't tell you what the source of it was, I was too young, and you know, I was caught, from age fourteen to—I left Roanoke when I was nineteen, I left to go to Virginia Western Community College for my first year of college, but from age fourteen to nineteen I wasn't caught up in what was happening in the neighborhood.

I was caught up in playing football and basketball, so I wasn't paying attention to all those things, but what I heard was that there was so much disruption in the neighborhood that the store, I don't know if they had some financial problems and felt like they needed to move or what. I don't think it was the city planning thing, and I'm trying to remember if the store, I think it sat empty for a while, just a building was there and then they eventually came along and then I think just paved over the area, just crushed the building and it was just a vacant lot. Then CVS came, I can't tell you what year. This may have happened when I was, I went off to college and then I went and worked in Ohio State for a while. Then when I came back, everything was

different. There was a CVS there and then they built the fire station. So I don't know exactly why.

SN

35:41- What concerns me again, it goes back to the planning, is someone should have been paying attention to talking about and addressing the fact that all of a sudden there was no grocery stores there anymore.

KT

35: 57- How does the community feel about that? It must be very frustrating having to travel long distances to go to the grocery store.

SN

36:04- I can't say that I've had concrete conversations with people about how they feel. I can talk about how I feel as a current member and as someone who grew up here. You know, its, my feelings, I have two things when I think about my feelings. Number one is: How healthy can we be under those circumstances, particularly if there are other related issues like, people don't have cars or so they don't really have, they are forced to have to grocery shop at this store right here and feed their family from this store right here. That's the first thing is that that really bothers me. And the second thing goes back to what I said a minute ago, is you, I see the city of Roanoke.

I love Roanoke and I love the people on city council and the administration, so I'm not talking bad about anybody, but I'm looking at things like, we rebuilt the library downtown. Raleigh Court got a new library. Williamson Road is in the midst of building a new library. They're talking about rebuilding the library here in Melrose. Vinton got a brand new library. Wonderful. I mean I spend a lot of time in the library, I love it, you know? But, couldn't that same energy be put into building, doing something to address housing or the fact that we don't have a grocery store in an area. So the energy, my feeling goes back to where are we putting our energy? What are our priorities you know? I mean libraries are important, but I think food is more important. If I had the choice between a store and a library, a grocery store and a library, I would choose the grocery store.

KT

38:23- what do you know about the history of the neighborhood you live in? And since you're president of the neighborhood forum, also about the history of this area that we are in?

SN

38:32: Okay. Well they are the same. Where I live and this area are the same neighborhood. I know that, okay the city council member I met with yesterday, his name is John Garland. John and I have a good relationship, we kind of laugh at each other because I am chair of the democratic committee, and he'd beat out one of our candidates out and he barely won. He also jokes about being republican, but we still have a good relationship.

Yesterday he talked about the fact that he grew up in this neighborhood. He actually grew up in the Williamson Road area. So he knew this area very well; he wants to try and bring it back. But he described, John's a little bit older than me, he described the neighborhood as being all white and he said it changed because, and this isn't just him talking, I think it's a pretty much well documented fact. It changed because what he described as white flight, which isn't a term he coined, it's a common description. So this neighborhood used to be all white, the house I live in was built in 1941. I assume that the people who built it and the first family that lived in it was white. And we bought it from another black family, so I assume that, I could probably go back through the records, somewhere in the 50's the neighborhood began to change and I think the

story of my, the house where I live, is probably pretty typical to what's happened throughout the neighborhood, because now clearly, it's not predominately white.

40:28- And then I understand that the city literally moved some black families from the area of the city where the Civic Center sits now. That whole area used to be predominately black or all black and now it's the civic center and these other businesses, the post office and all that, and so those families were all relocated. Some of them came to this neighborhood, some of them went to other areas of the city so I know that kind of history. I don't know, I haven't done any reading or hard research, it's just something you just kind of know, you hear about it. I know some of the older African American people who are still here kind of still angry about that. So I know that kind of stuff. I know that Roanoke has a history of violent racism, where there were lynchings and things like that.

KT

41:33- Are there elements of that racism still around?

SN

41:38- Of that kind of bigotry and hatred?

KT

41:42- Not as violent, because people can't lynch anymore, some lasting elements.

SN

41:49- I think racism is kind of like a chameleon, I mean it's still here, it's just changed form. Just recently I was driving; I went to a funeral in Southwest Roanoke and on my way out of Roanoke somebody drives by and sticks the confederate flag out of their window. So I mean racism isn't gone, so when you say elements of racism, sure is. It's just not as overt and when I think about, when I go back to the designs and the systems and the fact that we have four businesses that sale high alcohol sales in a neighborhood, this isn't, that ain't Williamson Road out there, it's in a neighborhood.

So, these four businesses are literally surrounded by people's houses, I mean there's a couple churches there too, that to me is institutional racism and it's not that anybody sat down and said okay, how can I create alcoholism in the Northwest Roanoke, I don't think anybody sat down and took out a pen and mapped out their strategy, It's just a lack of valuing people that leads to a lack of forethought, that leads to that type of planning. Or actually, it's probably more accurate to say it's a lack of planning because the city planners that I know, if they really thought about it and looked at how the pieces of the puzzle were kind of falling into place, they would say, "Woah! Hold on a second, we're not, we don't want that in Northwest Roanoke!" But, when you have a prejudice or a bias, it comes out in everything you do. When you, because, you don't have the ability to plan anything else.

SN

44:07- Okay, I'll go back to politics for a minute. Let's talk about women's rights and women's reproductive rights and you talk about a government that is dominated by men, okay? Can they effectively plan health care for women? No. They can't do it, you know? If, let's go back to the questions that you are asking me today. If we want to fix this community, who are the best people to be at the table to plan that? It's people that live in the community. You're not going to go to Richmond and fix together a committee and say, "Hey, let's fix Northwest Roanoke!" because they don't have the perspective, so you gotta have the people who best know the issue or the problem to be involved in the solution. So when I talk about institutional racism, I'm not pointing fingers at somebody and saying, "What's wrong with you?" I'm saying do you recognize what your prejudice and your bias is and have you taken steps to counteract that so that when you develop a plan, it doesn't carry your bias, okay? So

KT

45:35- What does the word Oaklands mean to you?

SN

45:37- What is it?

KT

45:39- The word Oaklands.

SN

45:51- Oaklands? Like Oakland California Oakland?

KT

45:45- It's the right word, but not Oakland California.

SN

45:47- Nothing at all; I don't know that word, that term.

KT

45:50- Okay, well Oaklands was a plantation that was slave owning and it was right near Rockland Avenue. It used to be owned by the Watt's family. What kind of feelings do you get knowing that there was a slave owning plantation in the area?

SN

25:05- Oh it gives me the creeps. I went to a, I'm a trainer— all this stuff here on the table is my team building stuff and I went to a training, I did a training in South Boston, which is close to, kind of like half way between, kind of closer to Danville. It was on a plantation and they talked about the fact that there were 300 enslaved Africans that lived there and I swear that night—that night I spent the night there. I swear that night I could hear voices. I don't know if it was literal or not, but it really gave me the creeps.

So my gut feeling is how creepy that is that people actually owned other people and regarded them as property. I mean that just blows my mind. I remember when I first heard about the KKK I was like that can't be, that can't really be an organization that just hates people because of their skin color. It just can't be. And then when I found out it was real, it was the same kind of feeling. It was like, really? I mean—so my reaction to that again, it goes back to that question of how can, how did this kind of mentality come to be? And really just being amazed by the impact of that thinking that for centuries, entire generations of people never earned a wage, never owned property, were subject to any form of humiliation or violence that just blows my mind. So when you tell me Oaklands, what that does is tells me the history that kind of brings it closer to home, it makes it more concrete, but it's not a new concept you know?

KT

48:34- And the last question I am going to ask you, well I have two more questions. What do you feel you have contributed to the area that you live in. You're very active in this community.

SN

48:45- Not as much as I would've liked. I mean, I put in a lot of time. I'm not sure that I've seen the impact that I would like to see, but what a few people have said to me recently is be patient, you know. You plant your seeds and you don't see your results right away. Developing relationships with the right people who can hear the message that needs to be heard on behalf of so many people who either don't realize that there's a problem, don't care there's a problem or don't believe the problem can be solved because the bulk of the people, not only in this neighborhood, but people in neighborhoods throughout the United States are so caught up in, okay, 'I work my job and I take care of my family and I go to sleep', and they don't they get an inkling of what is happening on the political scene, more so now than in previous years, but they don't even know what to do about that.

People, I'm also an election official and the reason I'm an election official is I want to be sure the polling places are run well. And most people don't know how to register to vote, or don't know how to ensure that they're properly registered and then if they do go to vote, they don't know

much about the candidates. People have no idea that politics is always taking place. I didn't know. I wasn't involved with the democratic committee before. They approached me and said, "Hey I understand that you have some pretty good," this is basically what they said; "you have some pretty good leadership skills. Will you come lead us?" That's basically what they said. I said, "Well I've never been involved with politics before, but I'll do it." And I've clearly made some mistakes, because you do when you take on something new.

But the point, I'm using myself as example, of somebody who was active in the community and thought I was doing the things that I needed to be doing and came to realize there is this whole other set of things I need to be doing that I wasn't even aware of. So the average person is, I put it this way, there's this expression that I heard and is a lesson I continue to use, there are those who don't know and don't know they don't know, and there are those who don't know and know they don't know, and those who know, but don't know that they know, and there's those who know and know that they know. I mean, you transcribe it, you'll appreciate it more, but there's just this lack of awareness that the average citizen has.

KT

52:28- And the last question I have for you is is what is something only an insider to this neighborhood would know, or if you want to interpret that a different way, what do you want outsiders to know that they don't know?

SN

52:41- I want people to know that it's really not that bad of a place to live. It's not the prettiest neighborhood; it clearly has some issues, but it also has a lot of potential, and its home. I hear people talking about Northwest Roanoke like they are scared to come over here, like they might get shot or there might be a drug deal or something. I would go anywhere, any time of day with no concern. People talk about gangs, okay, well I ain't seen a gang. I mean there are so people, there's a house up the street I know, right up the street from me that is involved in some drug dealing. I know because the police have told me and I think I have a pretty good relationship with police officers, but I don't think it is gang related. I'm not afraid that my house is going to get shot up. There was a time about four or five months ago I'm laying in bed, I heard gunshots, but that's not a daily thing, you know? So, what would I want, what would I want people to know? I just want people to know that it really is not a bad place to live. I think that is my last question.

KT

54:10- Alright, well thank you so much for interviewing with me, and this is going to be the close of our interview.

SN

54:15- Okay, great.