Courtney:

Yes. Name, where you were born, year of birth.

Don Edwards:

All right. My name is Mr. Donahue Edwards. I was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1952.

Courtney:

Okay, wonderful. And to the extent that you feel comfortable, all of these questions are sort of structured that way, would you mind telling me a little bit about your parents, where they were from, grandparents, sort of family lineage?

Don Edwards:

So my maternal family is from rural South Carolina, a little town up the Savannah river called Barnwell. Barnwell, South Carolina. That's where my mother grew up. I spent my summers there. I'm getting some feedback. Maybe we can do some adjustments with our audio here.

Courtney:

Let me try muting myself and see if that helps.

Don Edwards:

Well, I don't want you to mute because you should feel comfortable jumping in, but I did turn my audio volume down, maybe that'll help.

Courtney:

Okay. Let me also see. I'm glad you shared that [crosstalk 00:01:16]. Let me go to-

Don Edwards:

Okay. All right, I don't hear it now.

Courtney:

Oh, wonderful.

Don Edwards:

Well, I do hear it.

Courtney:

Okay. Let me see if I can do this.

Don Edwards:

I've turned my audio down about half way.

Courtney:

Okay. I've turned mine down now.

Don Edwards:

Okay. All right, I don't hear it now.

Courtney:

You don't? Okay.

Don Edwards:

Nope.

Courtney:

Okay, wonderful.

Don Edwards:

All right, so my paternal relatives are from, Pineville, South Carolina, which is a little town next to St. Stephens, South Carolina. So you would have a little Black town next to a white town. Pineville was basically the bottom for St. Stephens. And then of course, these people were all formerly enslaved and my mother's people stayed in rural South Carolina. They settled in places like Bamberg, Allendale, Ehrhardt, Hartsville. And then my father's people left Pineville, came to Charleston, South Carolina, and then they kind of established themselves there. I would say what's significant about both of those branches is they went from being property to early property owners.

I have not been able to find out how they were capitalized in order to acquire property, but I understand that my mother's people were skilled laborers. They were like the gardner, the blacksmiths, the butler, the cook. So I'm assuming after emancipation, they were able to use those skills to acquire capital. But the amount that I've researched that it cost to acquire the land that is still in my family, they would have had to acquire quite a bit of capital. So I also have some questions and suspicions about where that capital came from, because they were enslaved by some former Confederate leaders from South Carolina. And I think, in fact, the family's patriarch, the earliest butler, is a white butler who was a former US Senator from South Carolina. Because there's enough evidence to show that they all kind of came out of a place where that family was predominant as property. That would be Edgefield South Carolina.

So I don't know how my paternal ancestors acquired the property, but I do remember as a child going with my father to Pineville, he said he was going up there to see about the land. I just remember that and I accompanied him. The story is that my grandfather, his father, was a truck farmer. He would grow vegetables in Pineville and then bring them into Charleston to sell. I can talk a lot more about this. We've actually done quite a bit of research, so you tell me when to stop or whatever, refocus my attention.

Courtney:

No, this is wonderful. It's so rare for us to be able to trace our lineages past a certain point and to know so much of our formation. So as much as you feel like sharing, this is really beautiful history. Have you been to Pineville since?

Don Edwards:

I'm actually thinking about going there in August.

Courtney:

Okay. Okay. That'll be special, I imagine. So what was schooling like? What was growing up like in terms of-

Don Edwards:

Oh, I grew up under segregation, obviously. And so I went to colored public schools. That's what they were called. And I did that until high school. I was in the class of '64. I entered in the eighth grade. That was the first class in which Black children went from the eighth grade to the 12th grade in the Charleston public school system. So that's the public education from my youth. I went to Rhett Elementary School. It was a colored elementary school from second grade to seventh. And I started out in the Cavalry Episcopal Day School, which was one of the Black Episcopal Churches in Charleston. It had nursery, kindergarten, and first grade.

Courtney:

Okay. What was the name of your high school, again?

Don Edwards:

High School was Rivers, Rivers High School.

Courtney:

Okay. And did you have close friends growing up? Did they live nearby? Tell me about what community was like. Socialization.

Don Edwards:

I had close friends that lived nearby. They were also very different from some of the close friends I had that did not live nearby. So I think one of the dynamics of my life, my childhood, especially was that my mother was a very fair-skinned woman, who was a rural Negro. My father was very dark skin and was an urban Negro. So the inter mix of those two sides of my life, have been a dynamic on a number of different indices and ways of looking at our history. And I had neighbors. I grew up on a street where my great, great grandfather was the first land owner on the street. And his daughter married my great-grandfather, my great-grandfather's daughter married my grandfather. My grandfather lived in the house when I was a little boy and my father brought his bride back from the country to live in the house that his great grandfather had built.

So they had basically constructed a compound. It was the house and then three smaller houses that they rented out to other Black people. So I kind of grew up in a multifamily environment where my family lived on the bottom floor of the big house and two other families lived on the top floor. Then there was two other houses, three other houses in which renters lived. And one of the renters, one of the wives of the renters was ... well, what we called her was, she was Miss Elizabeth Presley, but they called her our housekeeper, me and my sibling. She was the lady who cooked dinner in the house and took care of us because my parents worked outside the house.

Courtney:

Okay. And what were your parents' jobs, vocations?

Don Edwards:

For a good part of my childhood, my mother worked as a secretary for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Companies' branch in Charleston. My father met her at North Carolina Mutual. He left North Carolina Mutual and got a job in the post office, which as you may know, that was a good job, good federal job in the south. Of course, that only went so far. But that was what they were doing. And both of them were involved in different kinds of fraternal, civic, church organizations.

Courtney:

Okay. And were they married for quite some time? Or together for quite some time?

Don Edwards:

Yeah, they got married in 1950 or '51. I'd have to look back. [inaudible 00:10:46] 1950, '51 and then my mom died in 1977. So they were married-

Courtney:

Okay. I'm sorry.

Don Edwards:

... 25, 26 years, which is not a long time by some measures.

Courtney:

I think it is. But yeah, I know what you mean. So you spoke to segregation, tell me about your experience, encounters with transitions from segregation to more integrated spaces.

Don Edwards:

Well, I think the first thing you should know is in segregation, my segregation story can be really encapsulated in the following narrative. Well, I grew up on an integrated street. There were white people on the street I lived on.

Courtney:

Oh, wow.

Don Edwards:

Some were well to do, some were poor. One of my grandfather's buddies was the white man who lived directly in front of us, he didn't live in front of us, he had his little woodworking shop in front of us. And whenever I brought my report card home, if I got all A's, I would have to take it over to him. I was instructed to take it over to him, show it to him and he typically gave me a silver dollar as a reward. Now, right next to him was another white family in the language of the day, they were poor white trash. Bunch of cars in the yard, [inaudible 00:12:31] on the weekends, babies running around dirty, poopy diapers. My grandmother once, on our front porch, pointed over there and said, "Now Tommy, " Tommy was a little white boy my age. She said, "Tommy can come over and our yard anytime that you want. Anytime that he wants to or anytime you want him to come, his parents let him come, he can come. But you," talking to me, "must never go in their yard."

So that memory is my first, even though I didn't realize it at the time, it's just one of those memories that stays with you. Because it was delivered ... you know how people today talk about they're going to do the talk with their children?

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

That was my grandmother's version of the talk. Never really got the talk from my mother or father. Talks came from my grandparents. In South Carolina and in the [inaudible 00:13:47] my sister and I would stay with our mother's mother, our grandmother. School let our on Friday, we were in the country on Saturday. And we were in the country until the Saturday before school started again in the fall. So I spent nine months in the city, three months in the country.

The talk I got from my mother's mother was similar, but a little different. In the town where we lived, Barnwell, you would go uptown. In the city, in Charleston, you went downtown, but in Barnwell you went uptown and you'd have to go up there to get your mail, you go up there and go shopping, you go to the grocery store. Whatever business needed to be conducted, you had to go uptown. Uptown there were two drugstores, both owned by whites. But according to my grandmother's worldview, one was the good whites. She wouldn't say the good whites, she'd say the better whites. And one was the whites, meaning she'd never go in their drugstore. One day, my grandmother had to go in their drugstore because the other whites didn't have what she was looking for.

My sister and I were with my grandmother, we went into the drugstore and it had a luncheonette. I'm a little boy. I'm just like living my life. I jumped up onto the one of the luncheonette's, the little spinning stools that you could sit at at the luncheonette. And I took a little spin around and everything stopped. My grandmother, who was a fair woman. She really went white, all of her color drained, and she literally snatched me off that luncheonette stool, grabbed my sister and we were out of that store just like that. And that was the only time in my life I actually saw my grandmother discombobulated. She drove us back home and she sat me down and she says, "You know," she called me Donnie, she said, "Donnie, there's some places you can't go."

Because I had been bugging her about why can't we go to the pool in Barnwell? There was a colored pool and so I knew that colored people could go to pools. So I asked her, "Why can't we go to the pool?" She said, "There are just some places you can't go in Barnwell." And she also just said, "Don't ever go in that drugstore. You don't ever sit on the stool." So those are my recollections. Now I probably have some others, but they weren't remarkable in the way they are embedded in my mind. I would say that mostly I grew up without really thinking about white people that much. You know, the reality of segregation was I didn't notice that I was missing anything. I had a fully constructed life. And I was aware that there was such a thing as white people, because I saw them. They were across the street. But to depend on them? I had the benefit, and it's shaped my life, of never having parents who were dependent on white people.

Courtney:

Amen.

Don Edwards:

So we did not have the kind of power dynamics. I did not observe or experience the power dynamics that go on in many, many African-American people's lives today, certainly people of my generation. I did not experience any of that. We lived on our land. We lived in houses my people built. And that was on both sides of my family. In the country, we lived on land that's now been in my family almost 200 years. So I've never been in a situation where I was like white people were all that. Not that I wasn't aware of the fact that there something called whiteness and it's got so many dynamics, but from the day to day living, it was not a thing. And it made a significant difference in my development as a person, because I've not experienced, in some ways, the cost of being a Black person in America.

And I did not have to get a job, get an education, get something to make myself a whole person. I have always been a whole person, because my elders could say, "You can go anywhere you want, as long you're on our land. You can do anything you want everyday of your life?" And that's what I experienced in Charleston and in rural South Carolina. I just stayed on our land. And there was a lot of land and I just wandered all over it and did what I wanted to do. And even in the city, I could run literally between the big house and the backyard, that was the backyard for all of the compound. I can just run around all day long. You know, I had no limits. I think all the time about how I represent a good example of what would it have been like if more Black people had grown up the way I grew up. You would have them on their own land. You would have them to be self-determining, self-reliant, but without limits.

Courtney:

Yes, sir. So do you feel that your grandmother's sort of guarding, the letting you know, "Don't go into their yard, but they can come over here.", did those kinds of teachings shield you in a way from encounters with racism, because you sort of knew what was your space and weren't interested in kind of venturing out of that? Did you feel somewhat shielded from encounters with racism?

Don Edwards:

I think I felt it. I think I was shielded, but I don't think I was aware of it because it wasn't presented as a problem. I mean, white people were not a problem. They were a thing in the environment. There was some rules that went along with them, but they did not represent a problem. They just shared my ecosystem a little bit. And I would say that I don't have any doubt that my ancestors were shielding me as I don't have any doubt that there are probably conversations that I wasn't aware of and other decisions taken that ... this is an experience of people in my generation because I belong to that generation that was born in the fifties after World War II, where my parents did not experience the worst of the 1920s, the worst of the Great Depression. They were post-World War II Negroes. I like to think of it this way, when everybody else was a nigger, my parents were colored. When everybody else became colored, my parents became Negroes. So they were always in a little bit of a vanguard. Mostly my mother, my mother was much more of an activist than my father. My father came, his family were Lincoln repub-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Don Edwards:

I'm an activist. And my father, my father came, his family were Lincoln Republicans. My mother was an early Democrat, big supporter of John Kennedy, big supporter of [inaudible 00:23:14] Camelot. That whole thing. My father, [inaudible 00:23:23], but her side of the family, and I'm talking about family in the Southern sense, which it got nothing to do with blood, her family, her sisters, her sorority sisters, aunts, my aunts are deltas just like my mother was a Delta, and they all went to college together and I

grew up where they were my aunts, their husbands were my uncles, their children were my cousins. And so there was that reality. And then there were the people who were my relatives, who I do share blood with, but I did not grow up being close as close to my relatives as I am to my family.

So I use those words very differently from a lot of people, people talk about family, they're really talking about relatives. When I talk about family, I'm talking about the people who love me and I love them because of the way basically I'm determined they live. What was their value system? How did they see themselves? How did they carry themselves? And to carry themselves is New Negroes, I don't know if you're familiar with that term, but that's a term that arose in the fifties. You know, we have a generation of new Negroes, they weren't going to settle for the same kinds of things after World War Two. They paid some prices, but there was New Negroes who did the Montgomery bus boycott, who said we'll just walk. Okay. I was raised by New Negroes.

Courtney:

Thank you so much for that framing. That's so helpful and so powerful. So tell me about, I want to go back to some of your adventures exploring as a kid, having the land and the space to do so. What were a couple of your favorite things to do?

Don Edwards:

Well, exploring is its own thing. Discovery, it's not about the end, it's really the journey. So I spent a lot of time discovering, just wandering around. I discovered, I remember as a child discovering that there was an abandoned house on the property. And I was like, I haven't ever noticed that. So that was like a big discovery, it was like, huh? I also remember discovering the outhouse, which was no longer in use, but I was like this oh, this is the outhouse. Because I remember when my father put in the plumbing for the bathroom. I did a lot more exploring in the country because there was a lot of just land, just went and explored. And my grandmother's house, the property was in this area called Calhoun [Bottom 00:26:52], which was the black people's neighborhood and she was the first house on the road into the bottom. And the interesting thing about it is it was across the street from the chain game.

So every morning we would sit out on the porch and watch the black men come out of the fence on the other side of the fence, chained one another, walk wherever they was going to work that day. My grandmother would go over there and she talked to some white man, he'd send over a black man in chains. It was black and white, coming to chop wood for my grandmother. Or my grandmother would send her sister, my aunt, my grand aunt, over there with the ax and get the ax sharpened. So all of that was like discovery, sometimes my grandmother would have to go down the road, cross the railroad tracks, because we lived, Calhoun Bottom was on the other side of the railroad tracks. I crossed the railroad tracks and go down, and collect rents. She had some tenants and I'd collect rents, but most of the time the discovery was like a pecan tree that I didn't know was back there.

You pick pecans and you sit on the porch all evening, shelling pecans. A big night was sitting on the porch and counting the cars that came by. How many cars came down the road, that was our evening. A big morning would be getting up and seeing how many bushel baskets of produce or watermelons were laid out on the porch where when people would just pop by and just leave them on the porch. I had to play a certain amount with my younger sister, but I didn't play as much as, she wasn't as big a burden when she did what I said, whether she wanted to or not. But there was also a lot of time I spent by myself. Grandmother taught school, in [Button 00:29:51] Elementary school, which had been founded by her older brother. And for two weeks in the summer, she was the colored librarian and they would open up the school, and if you wanted to, your children come and read or check books out. But of course no children came because in the summer what the children do in rural south, colored children-

Courtney:

Were they working the land?

Don Edwards:

They were picking cotton. So me and my sister would be there for two weeks every day with our grandmother, she put in two hours and we'd sit there, and all I did was read. That is where my reading habit was developed. You have to do some reading to sit down when you're like nine or eight years old for two weeks straight and all you do all day is read. We would bring a bologna sandwich and a [inaudible 00:30:55], and my sister and I just read until the two hours was up, then we'd go home. She, my grandmother, basically raised my mother by herself from what we're told, so in her home, and she was a teacher for 43 years in the South Carolina colored school system. And so the reason why this produce would appear on her porch was because a lot of her students were farmers. [inaudible 00:31:39] people, they would just come by and drop it off. They'd just drop it off.

And that was like a lot of fun just to wake up in the morning, okay today five watermelons left on the porch. Then the next would be like, oh, seven watermelons left on the porch. Or there's a bushel basket of beans. I don't know if you know anything about this, but you can do a lot, and you just sit out on the porch there and you shuck. Snap beans, peas, limey beans. And then they store them., they put them up. Large part of my childhood now of course [inaudible 00:32:32] because the butlers, the black butler's with the Bethlehem Baptist church, they contributed some of the wood to build a Bethlehem Baptist church, so my grandmother was a church clerk, so she ran the report every morning of where the church's financial status was at. Went school every morning, I mean, basically that part of the family, they were all educators or preachers, so we was at school or we was in church. And then they had little businesses too. Her brothers were barbers in a little town called Ehrhardt, South Carolina, they only cut white men's hair.

But one of them was also the principal of the colored elementary school. They were classic to me, they were a classic example the contradicts that it was boys in the Talented 10th or Booker T Washington, you had to pick, they combined that thing. They were not strictly the [Boysian 00:33:56] And they were strictly Washingtonians Eagle. They took the best of both, they believed in self-reliance and self determination on your own, leave my people alone, but they also believed in education. My grandmother graduated from college in 1818. So my daughter is the fourth generation of women in our family who are college educated.

Courtney:

Who are college educated.

Don Edwards:

That's rare, that's rare for African-Americans. That gives you some sense of the framework, framework in which I was raised.

Courtney:

Yeah. Certainly, thank you for that. I know that you went to Duke for undergrad, Yale for your master's of science and I also believe masters of public health. Take me kind of through travels where you've lived, where you have ventured to in the world.

Don Edwards:

In my life?

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

Well, I'm a worldly person. I've been to Africa. I've been to Asia. I've been to Europe. I've been to Latin America. I've been around the United States. I have had the benefit of not living in a lot of places, I spent 19 years of my life in one place, South Carolina or Barnwell, South Carolina, I'm not like a lot of people who experienced [inaudible 00:35:52] or they had to go where the job took you, where the parents jobs took you. I had the benefit of growing up in a house built by my great grandfather, my great grandfather. So I had a lot of stability. The first time I ever left home, I went to college. Then I moved to Atlanta, I went from Atlanta to graduate school. I moved from graduate school to D.C., and I've been to D.C. ever since. I've only lived in five places my whole life, which is also very stable and not typical. It's a bit atypical. I went to my first foreign country at 21, not just any foreign country, I went to Cuba in 1973.

Courtney:

You went to you said, Cuba?

Don Edwards:

Cuba, Cuba, Cuba. And that introduced me to the world because there I met people from all over Latin America, South Africa, other parts of Africa, Europe, Asia, Vietnam, and that kind of made it possible, when I came back to the United States from Cuba, I had a world view. I have a world view. Seeing it through the eyes of people who were in the language of that time, struggling against US imperialism, I quickly became in very active in international solidarity. Solidarity with Vietnam, solidarity with Cuba, solidary with Chile, solidarity with South Africa, solidarity with Ghana, Mozambique, Angola, I was an activist as a student so I traveled. [inaudible 00:38:33] I've been on the [inaudible 00:38:35] a long time, so I've worked and lived in Turkey. So for me, part of my experience of being in the history of the black world, reinforced that perspective of a black world, of a world of which I had a place. And then I had a purpose. I've been to China.

Courtney:

Yeah, traveled.

Don Edwards:

I've had the benefit of going around. London, Paris, Berlin, I've had the experience of being able to go places where I read about or saw in the movies or whatever, you just had an opportunity. And where I am in my life today is I am mostly interested in learning more about United States of America, traveling this very, very great and complex country.

Courtney:

Hmm. Thank you so much for that. Yeah. So do you have, of those places, a favorite experience, would that be Cuba?

Don Edwards:

Cuba was a lot of experiences, but I would say one of the profound experiences was going to South Africa. I went to South Africa right after the unbanning of ANC. Activists had begun, unbanning was the, so under their legislation they banned, you were banned from doing this or you were banned from doing that, and your organization was banned from doing this and you individually were banned. But then as apartheid began to be deconstructed, they started unbanning, which meant that people could come out of jail, organizations could come from underground. So I went to South Africa in 1991 when the unbanning had just begun, they'd begun to let some of the early ANC leaders off Robben Island. I went there to spend a month talking about HIV, the HIV AIDS epidemic in South Africa. And then Southern Africa. Because one of the things that the government was saying, the apartheid government's saying was that ANC is responsible for HIV AIDS coming into South Africa.

They were trying to pin that on ANC militants. Because at that time, the militants were beginning to return to South Africa from Mozambique or Zambia or Zimbabwe, they were returning and so the government was trying to say they're bringing HIV AIDS into Southern Africa. So I had a lot of very profound experiences in South Africa. I mean I've had subsequent visits there, but the first one was like very, it made a big impression because it was a country, it was the first place I'd been, which all the white people, all the white men were armed. They walked around with arms all the time. And you know me coming from where I'm coming from, I'm like, I'm a hundred percent free. To walk into an airport and get braced by some 18 year old Afrikaner boy carrying a machine gun is like somebody has to have some common sense here, because this fool, he definitely ain't got no common sense, so which one is going to have some common sense.

And that's how every day was. There was a certain point where I just got sick, I physically just got sick, I couldn't breathe. It was literally just the weight of the oppression, I just couldn't breathe. And I had experienced in that trip there are just, you can read about it, but boy when you have to go through it, there was one time the house I was staying in, because people put me up in different places. I was brought there by doctors and dentists to talk about HIV, but really to talk about solidarity. But I was in one house where there was a white woman, but she had a little mixed child. And one night I heard them talking in the kitchen, so I got up because I was like where I sleep, I might as well get up and go and talk. But she was talking to her child's father, who I later learned had snuck in from Zimbabwe to visit his family.

I was, you can't talk about this. He was a militant who would snuck in and visit them, and the next morning he was gone. I had another experience where they said, Don, we know that you are a comrade, we're going to take you to a special event, blindfolded me, this is a true story. They blindfolded me, put me on the backseat of a car, laid me down, and they just said, we just going to take you for a ride. So we rode for a long time. I only learned later on that we were going to Durbin. I don't know what you know about South Africa, but Durbin it's a city on the east coast of Southern Africa, of South Africa, but the hot bed, hot bed A&C radicalism. And so they said we're taking you here, they got me up, got me out of the car, walked me into a house. I'm just, you've got one on each side and I'm just walking, walked me down some steps-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Don Edwards:

... walked me down some steps, walked me into a yard, walked me into another house, walked me up some steps, and so they sat me down. Now I'm just there and they got the blindfold on me, and they say, "Okay, we have a special treat for you because you're to be a comrade." So they say, "You take your blindfold off." I don't know, do you know who Thabo Mbeki is?

Courtney:

No sir.

Don Edwards:

Thabo Mbeki became the president of South Africa after Nelson Mandela.

Courtney:

Okay. Okay.

Don Edwards:

Okay?

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

He's also the son of the third ranking ANC leader. Nelson Mandela was first, Walter Sisulu was number two, and number three was a man named Govan Mbeki. Govan Mbeki was Thabo Mbeki's father.

Courtney:

Okay.

Don Edwards:

I mean, Thabo was sent to Britain to be educated. Govan was on Robben Island. Walter Sisulu, Robben Island. Nelson Mandela was on Robben Island. Sisulu and Mandela were still on Robben Island but Govan Mbeki had been freed.

Courtney:

Okay.

Don Edwards:

So I'm sitting in the chair, and I look to my right, and there is Govan Mbeki.

Courtney:

Oh my God.

Don Edwards:

That's what I said.

Courtney:

Wow.

Don Edwards:

A big old elderly man, he was in his 80s, he stood up, gave me a, "[inaudible 00:47:49], hi comrade. [inaudible 00:47:51], blah, blah, blah."

Courtney:

Wow.

Don Edwards:

He sat me down ... We sit down and I'm like, "Okay, I know I'm going to make a fool of myself." He said, "So tell us about the condition of the African American struggle in the United States." I'm like ... Yeah, so I gave whatever answer I gave. We talked politics for a little while. I might even asked him a question about how it feels to be out of jail.

Courtney:

Wow.

Don Edwards:

So really like that's the best I could do. At the end of it we take a picture, they tell me, "You can't show the picture to nobody."

Courtney:

That ...

Don Edwards:

How do you forget that?

Courtney:

Oh my God. That is-

Don Edwards:

How can you forget that experience? So it was things like that that I experienced in South Africa, like this here ain't no joke we doing this struggle thing, it ain't no joke.

Courtney:

God.

Don Edwards:

Of course, my time in Cuba that brought a lot of harassment to my family, harassment to IBW. It created some difficult times for a while. So you talk about traveling, yeah you can travel but it's really, for me, are you a tourist or are you there to learn and contribute to people's struggle for freedom? That's what I've tried to be all of my life now. I don't [inaudible 00:49:39] these places where tourists go if I can. I've been fortunate to be able to have relationships with people all over the world where I've had the benefit of mobilize world [inaudible 00:49:55].

Courtney:

Yes. Yes. Which I think made it, when I was reading your bio, really connected the global health piece. If you can speak to ... I mean, I think you've spoken to some of the foundational things that led you to the sciences and led you to the pursuit of public health, but take me through your career trajectory and then into would you describe the work now as mindful development? Like mindfulness in development, intentional, ethical? Those are the words that came to mind when I was reading your bio, but take me through it.

Don Edwards:

I got into nursing ... I wanted to become a physician, like most boys you want to go into healthcare you want to become a doctor. There came a point where I, in my first marriage, got a job as an orderly because in my world view if you want to understand a system you have to look at it from the bottom up. So the orderly is ... You know who the orderly is. The orderly is the person who wipes the butts, changes the beds, moves the bodies, so that's what I did in Atlanta. This was after I had returned from Cuba, needed a way to support myself and my family, after I left IBW due to the harassment that occurred there or occurred while I was working there.

I basically came to the conclusion that I didn't want to be a doctor, I wanted to be a nurse because the one thing you learn when you work in the healthcare industry, because there is no system in this country. When you work in the healthcare industry you learn that it's women, nurses, who save lives, not doctors. So I decided, "Okay, I'm going to become a nurse." So I went to graduate school to become a nurse, a public health nurse, because I wanted to go into the public realm. I didn't want to work in a hospital. I wanted to carry health to the people. There was a book that I had been introduced to at the time called Away With All Pests. It was about the experiences of a British physician during the Chinese Revolution and the delivery of healthcare to the provinces, and villages, of China for the first time.

So I went to nursing school. In nursing school I did my first project for my first year on the HIV epidemic. It didn't even have a name. In 1983 ... And I had moved to New Haven in 1991, I had got my first job working in what was called the self-care project. Well one of the first things that the self-care project was doing was trying to help gay white men who had this disease take care of themselves because they weren't getting no care from nowhere else. So I got exposed to that, which connected me to the fact that my mother, as a child, had had polio. One of the first ideas about HIV was that it was like polio, it was a virus and maybe there was a vaccination that can be given to prevent HIV. But it turned out that that ain't so. But, at any rate, I got involved in that. That was one of the things that got me into nursing.

But the other thing that got me into nursing was I wanted to be a midwife. In Atlanta, before I left Atlanta to go to New Haven to the school, I got thrown in [inaudible 00:54:52] I was having babies. I had three babies in Atlanta, my oldest children were all born in Atlanta. I got introduced to a bunch of home delivery midwives, white and black. I said, "All right, I want to do what you all do." So I went to nursing school. The debate at that time was whether you needed to be certified, whether you just ... In many cultures you have midwives. I come from a county in South Carolina where most of the black children were delivered by one lady, one black midwife delivered all the babies in the county. So I was like, "Okay, I'm going to be a male midwife."

But as I went to school ... I was the first black man in my nursing school's history and I began to say, "You know I think this is a woman's place." I knew the first male midwife who had come out of that program, so I knew that men could become midwives but I made a decision. I said, "I don't think I'm supposed to be doing this. This is women's work. This is their world. I'm going to leave it alone." So I said, "Okay, let's proceed with the public health nursing."

So I proceeded with the public health nursing, got the two degrees, and focused on AIDS. I did AIDS from 1981, basically, to 1991. For 10 years. But I got interested in nursing, just so you really understand, because my mother died from cancer at a very young age.

Courtney:

Okay.

Don Edwards:

So it wasn't like politics, it wasn't I loved everybody. I was angry as hell that my mother died. Now she was a secret smoker and she had her own weaknesses, and issues. And she hid her cancer from my father, and my sister, and I until it was too late. But I will never forget coming home from college. My father said, "You got to come home now." And seeing my mother the night that she died. It's an indelible image. My sister doesn't remember it but I remember looking at my mother and her body was ravaged. Ravaged. I decided to go into healthcare because I thought it was something wrong with ... I mean, really if you look at it psychologically and emotionally it was a bunch of other things but I felt something was wrong that my mother suffered. I had a lot of anger, so I wanted to get into the healthcare system.

Of course, for me it was easy to say, "Well okay, I'm not going to become a doctor because doctors are like part of the problem. So I'm going to become a nurse." Of course, becoming a nurse put me in a situation where I was educated by women. I was exposed to women's leadership. I was the first black man in this program, so they didn't know what to do with me and I didn't know what do with them, and we just had to work it out. The upshot of it was I was exposed to a framework of gender for the first time, in my conscious mind. Now the interesting thing about all of this, Courtney, is that it really was the first time I was conscious of it because I had been raised in a gender framework, because my mother, like her mother, my other grandmother, all are women of my childhood who were members of the South Carolina Colored Women's Club Movement.

Now the Colored Women's Club was different from the National Conference of Negro Women. The National Conference of Negro Women was an umbrella. I don't think a lot of people know that but it was an umbrella and you have a lot of other national women's organizations under it. One of them was the National Colored Women's Club Movement because in the South you couldn't have no club called the Negros but you could have women's clubs called the Colored Women's Clubs. They were all basically organized around church work. But that was the external agenda. The internal agenda was entirely different. They was buying land, they was opening up orphanages for colored girls, they was organizing fundraising clubs for the National Conference of Negro [inaudible 01:00:51]. They were doing all kinds of other things on the down low. But I got exposed to all of that, one little negro boy with thousands of black women. You can imagine, because I'm the president, I'm the state president's grandson, oh my God all them bosoms, getting crushed up in the bosoms and-

Courtney:

All the love. All the love.

Don Edwards:

Yeah, getting all that. All of them smell the same way, like the little rose water. It's like-

Courtney:

Yes sir.

Don Edwards:

... I'll never need to smell that again in my life. But they're just passing you from one to the other, "Oh you Ms. Cornelia's son!" So what I learnt, Courtney, was how to organize. Women organize differently from men. They don't have no cross words but they shut you out if you don't conform. It's an entirely different tactical toolkit. It was like, "Okay." This nursing [inaudible 01:02:06] put me back in contact with that childhood stuff. I was like, "I know about this. They getting ready to shut you out because you're not conforming." These were white girls, and we were all adults, and we were all in graduate school but the same tactics. That's what women's leadership ... That's where I learned about women's leadership.

Now why is that important? Because it added to my toolkit. I can use the tools of women's leadership or I can use the tools of men's leadership. Believe me the best leaders ... Now I know this to be a fact, the best leaders have an expansive, inclusive toolkit. It's a genderized toolkit. So that was a big part of my becoming a nurse because I was immediately comfortable with being a nurse. I was like, "Okay, this ain't the first time I've been the only man in the room."

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's invaluable. I just have to hold that for a moment. That's beautiful. So if you would be willing to speak about your time at IBW, what kind of brought you to Atlanta? Where did family come into the mix? You had three kids in Atlanta, were you married there as well?

Don Edwards:

I was married in college.

Courtney:

Oh okay.

Don Edwards:

Got married in college because we didn't believe we'd live to be 30, and we wanted to go ahead and make our children. So my first child was born when I was ... I got married at 19 and had my first child at 21.

Courtney:

Oh that's beautiful.

Don Edwards:

That was a [inaudible 01:04:05] choice that nobody [inaudible 01:04:07] nothing. We just thought that we were little revolutionaries and if we was going to make our mark you had to raise revolutionary children to carry on the struggle after you're dead. I went to Cuba while my pregnant wife stayed back in Durham. She moved to Atlanta and lived with her parents after graduation, so I came back to the US and we lived with them a little while until we were able to save up enough little money to rent us a little house, and raise our little boy.

I went to IBW, I don't actually remember what directed me to IBW. I think ... Now this is the logic but I don't actually remember, when I came back from Cuba I had already committed to doing organizing work about sending other Americans to Cuba. One of the people I met, or got directed to, ended up being a staff person at IBW.

Courtney:

Okay.

Don Edwards:

She says, "I think" ... At the time I was working as an installer/repairman for Southern Bell.

Courtney:

Okay. Southern Bell. Yeah.

Don Edwards:

Yeah. Right. When there was still such a thing as the big ones. She said, "I think you should come by and find out a little bit more about the institute. I don't know, they might have something for you to do." Of course, that appealed to me because I really ... I was out enjoying myself in Georgia, or riding around the only black person, if I got in trouble no one would come to help me. I wasn't that good at it anyway, climbing up telephone poles, and that really wasn't me. I got this job at IBW in early 1974. I had returned to Atlanta in 1973 from Cuba. I was at IBW from early '74 until mid '77. My job at IBW was to run the printing press because IBW was self-determining, so we printed our own books, booklets.

Courtney:

Wow.

Don Edwards:

Anything that came out that was part of IBW series or analyses, or whatever, we did in-house for the most part. They taught me how to run the printing press and I printed stuff. I also would go represent IBW at conferences, or conventions, or programs. I would have the book table. But in exchange for that basically I had my first graduate experience in black struggle. The people who were the founders of IBW became my mentors. I mean, I'm 20, 22 years old studying under Vincent Harding, studying under Walter Rodney, studying under Bobby Hill, studying under Joyce Ladner, studying under [Wikali Mot 01:07:32], all these people will be on this program tonight and who are pillars. Studying under CLR James, studying under St. Clair Drake, people from all over that diaspora.

I met my first Vietnamese person in the United States, Trần Văn Dĩnh, who had been sent by the National Liberation Front to help introduce Vietnamese liberation struggle, the Vietnamese Revolution, to the black community. He would come to IBW and just [inaudible 01:08:19] our struggle. I remember when Louis X, who later became Louis Farrakhan, he visited IBW. James and Grace Boggs came to IBW. It was just a ... If you could just take all the great minds and it was in a house ... Du Bois used to date the woman who lived in the house. He used to come to the house. Even though he was married he used to tip on in there and hang out for a little while. So I was just in this ... It was like being in a rich, rich intellectual, political environment of critical thinking ...

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Don Edwards:

...and my critical thinking, self determination of confronting how you go about creating the new world, the new world view. It defined my life. Would I do today the business I own and created, co-founded? It's a direct... It's like you take off my childhood, high school, growing up in the family I did, apply IBW all over. Rub IBW grease all over it.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

What comes out the other end is the man I am today.

Courtney:

Wow. That's well-stated.

Don Edwards:

I like to say my value system was matured, my principles were finalized or consolidated, and my world view was developed in the seventies, decade of the seventies at IBW. It was a period where there was a lot of oppression, a lot of attacks on IBW because of me and the work I was doing in Cuba.

Courtney:

I didn't know that.

Don Edwards:

It stuck by me, created a lot of tension, but that also had its benefits because I learned about, well, freedom ain't free. It didn't mean no struggle. It even surprised me.

Courtney:

Yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative). What were the relational dynamics like? Would you say familial in the sense of... Yeah, okay.

Don Edwards:

Yeah, they were very familial.

Courtney:

Okay.

Don Edwards:

IBW never really... Really, it was able to sustain itself as a financially stable and permanent. It had broken from the [kid's center 01:11:26]. So a lot of money that was going to come to IBW to the kid's center dried up. With this it went away from the kids center. Martin had been murdered. So basically you had to build a gap.

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

Howard Dodson was executive director. He would go out and buy 50 pound bags of rice and we'd divide up the rice and everybody had some rice.

Courtney:

Mm.

Don Edwards:

Or we'd spend a day working in the backyard because he had planted a garden. Well we ate. So very much like a family, no question about that.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

Because it was we were committed to what we would doing, but we were doing it with what we had.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

Yeah. So everybody's children went to the same boat. All our children went to a school called the Learning House.

Courtney:

Learning House. Okay. I listened back to... I can't recall which interview... Maybe it was [Molica 01:12:41], was talking about the Learning House being nearby and how it was a great model for communal education. She was wishing that there was something like that for black youth today.

Don Edwards:

Yeah. So all our kids went to the Learning House and that was more like family-

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

...and we supported each other through a lot of things.

Courtney:

Okay. Now did you feel aware at the time in a difference between the dynamics between women and men or did it seem pretty okay?

Don Edwards:

Well, I mean in that stage of the work, the struggle at that time it was the men who were the leaders and women's living not come to the black struggle, even though there were black women leaders in IBW. Joyce Ladner, Jan [inaudible 01:13:39], Pat Daly. They were leaders, but they weren't acknowledged. The big guys were Vincent, Bill and [inaudible 01:13:51], and Howard Dodson and others. But yeah, there was a gender gap. But I learned some things there from the women there as well. I mean, I learned how to read. I learned how to speed read from pat Daly. Pat Daly taught a class every semester on reading. How to read, how to interpret what you read, how to apply critical thinking to what you read. Why I can read as much as I read today.

Courtney:

That's invaluable.

Don Edwards:

I read.

Courtney:

That's invaluable.

Don Edwards:

Yeah. Yeah. So there was a gender gap there. No question.

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Would you say that it was mostly financial lack of sort of sustainability that led to the ending of IBW?

Don Edwards:

Well, yeah.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

I mean, if you cannot finance your work, it will stop.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

That's true anywhere and everywhere.

Courtney:

Yeah. That makes sense.

Don Edwards:

IBW was proposing a new way of thinking, a new definition of success. They were trying to do some things and there was opposition. So yes, money, the lack of financing was as much a cause as a result of that opposition.

Courtney:

Mm. Okay. Yeah. I got that. How has it been the Legacy Group gathering together and I'm going to tune in tonight, but how has this sort of planning period in this phase of being reconnected been?

Don Edwards:

Well actually, I'm not allowed value because I've not been active in the Legacy Group. I've supported intellectually what they're doing.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

Most of them are based in Atlanta-

Courtney:

I see. Yes.

Don Edwards:

...and I'm not.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

They get together socially, which I don't do with them. I don't have any differences with them. I have no opposition, but for me it was like, "Okay, everything that you do is like you got to be there and I've not been there." I would also say that I believe that the Legacy Group in the work they've done to create this program is outstanding. I fully support it, but then I could not prioritize it over my old Legacy Group.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

You know, my company is a legacy that I developed.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

While I want to celebrate the 50th anniversary or whatever, the founding of IBW, I also have to make sure that I prioritize the continued success of this legacy that I have created.

Courtney:

Yes. Justice & Sustainability Associates, correct? Yes. What led you to DC and did you know that that was on the horizon?

Don Edwards:

I came to DC directly from graduate school because I wanted to make policy that would help fight HIV AIDS.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

So I was hired by the National Black Lesbian and Gay Organization and we created one of the first, if not the first, black and Hispanic HIV AIDS prevention programs in the country.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

I went to the DC department of health. I worked for the daughter of one of my professors. She worked with the public health HIV AIDS part of the health department, and I worked for her.

Courtney:

Wow. Okay.

Don Edwards:

So I basically came to DC because that's where policy was made and we needed policies during the Reagan years to help save lives.

Courtney:

Yeah. Mm. So I think you've spoken to some of this, but one of the questions is what do you feel passionate about at this juncture? I'll sort of let you in your own words, I think you've spoken to that quite a bit throughout.

Don Edwards:

Well, the thing I'm most passionate... I mean, I'm a passionate person. If I care, I'm passionately, I care passionately. So right now, I'm an urbanist. I care about cities and helping them work for all their residents. Cities that work for all. I'm very passionate about that. I've been passionate about it ever since the early nineties, because the HIV epidemic led me into recognizing that you can't fix it from the end of the pipe, you have to fix it from the front of the pipe, which is a design question.

So I got interested. Healthcare had taken me to the end of the pipe. I really wanted to get interested in the design question, then in getting to answer the design question 'how should systems be designed,' I came up against this idea of becoming a midwife again. But not a midwife for babies, but a midwife for agreements. There needed to be someone whose job it was to just get everybody to agree so something could be done.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

The thing about advocates is that advocates only know your point of view. So ultimately if you're going to get anybody to agree, somebody's got to be in the seat of the other person's point of view and vice versa. So that's what I've been doing since. I helped create this organization in 1990, called the Citizens Network For Sustainable Development. I attended the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 as a member of the US delegation, and that basically introduced me to the fact that if we were going to do anything about climate change or poverty or population growth, or human habitats, we had to have agreements between corporations, government, and civil society.

That's what I began to do. I began to be a facilitator and a median. This was at that time where that hasn't been a censor on land use.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

The reason it's been I focused on land use is because I already told you that I know what happens when you grow up on your own land and live without limits.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

I know what's possible in terms of human evolution and development. Then basically, if you want to create the neighborhood you want, you've got to reach some agreements with some people who don't live in the neighborhood.

Courtney:

Indeed. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

So I created a for-profit company. I co-founded it with someone who had also been an AIDS activist with me. We said we want to develop the capacity to one, test whether you can create a career out of justice so that when you are in your thirties, because when you're in your twenties, you don't mind sleeping on the floor and eating popcorn three times a day. But once you get to be thirty, you want to marry

somebody, you want to buy a house and want to make some babies, you got to know that you got to stream a revenue stream.

So we said, "Let's see if we can create a revenue stream, a business, for-profit business where people will be paid to increase justice and increase sustainability." So, that was a hypothesis, and so that's what we did. 21 years later, we figured out how to do it and we're here doing it. We got 20 something people who work and they can do this career for the rest of their lives if they want.

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

Because there's one thing, here's the thing [Courtney 01:22:58], there's one thing we know that people are going to fight over and that's land.

Courtney:

Land. Oh, I got chills because I can hear my daddy. He bought a home, he paid cash for it. It's not the home that he lives in, but it isn't a part of Atlanta that 15 years ago he said, "This part of Atlanta is going to..." He's right. Mercedes-Benz Stadium is there now. Because it's in me and my sister's names, I get phone calls because my name I think is just higher on the alphabet they call me first. "Are you willing to sell this property? Are you?" I just hear my dad in my head and I say, "No, do you know how hard my father worked?" I just say exactly that. So thank you for naming that.

Don Edwards:

Yeah. I actually know what you're talking about. Because I know where Mercedes-Benz is. That area of Atlanta, it used to be called Techwood.

Courtney:

Okay. Yeah. I grew up in Southern California, but when he moved back to Georgia when I went to college-

Don Edwards:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Courtney:

...he said, "This neighborhood is going to change."

Don Edwards:

He was right.

Courtney:

Yeah. He was right. He was right. Yeah. So you are so right about land. I wish that we could be more mindful about land use.

Don Edwards:

Yeah, I got nothing to add to that.

Courtney:

Yeah. So thank you for sharing and thank you for the generosity of your time. I want to be respectful of your time.I think you've spoken to this too, but [Dr. Nuwan Quill 01:24:40] loves to ask what's bringing people hope or excitement currently? That can be anything from... It can be things that you've already named. It could be music, and it doesn't have to be current. I think that you, my parents, had a formation in what I think is one of the greatest times for music, greatest decades. So yeah, it can be anything.

Don Edwards:

Well, what gives me hope is that we are ready even though it doesn't always look like that. You know, at the end of the day, there are going to be sacrifices. There are going to be martyrs. George Floyd is a martyr. We've got now hundreds of martyrs. All of these people are shot by these police. But it's beginning... There's no remission of sin without the shedding of blood, and the sins that are being called into [inaudible 01:25:40], these are way beyond integration and way beyond desegregation. The white people, they are correct. This hullabaloo they created about critical race theory, they are correct because they know now that what people are getting clear about is this is not about some person, some individual. This is about a system, a structural system that operates and it's got nothing to do with individuals.

It operates according to some values and some objectives, and they are clear that once more white people begin to understand how they either contribute to that or they contribute it to dismantling it. Then they've got a problem. If they are correct, they do have a problem. That's what I say. We are winning because now the police is the thread. You got to pull out a police thread, then it'll tell you what history tells us. Vincent told us this. The police are the latter day owners, slave patrollers. They used to control the movements of slaves back in the day. Well that's who the police became. That's where the police evolve from.

But the police, those patrollers, were the working class white men who worked for the planters, they worked for the planters as [inaudible 01:27:24] two years of police and small businesses, but they couldn't be a planter. The class division between those planters and those plantation owners and those landowners and those white working class men. The only thing that kept them unified was black people. The oppression of black people.

Courtney:

Yes sir.

Don Edwards:

Only way they could keep black people oppressed was to also get the buy in from subsequent generations of white people. In this particular case, white women.

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

Now white women are raised on the notion that the biggest enemy of a white woman is a black man. Once they begin to deconstruct that, then the biggest enemy of a white woman, it's not the black man. It's your white husband who was exploiting you for your labor, exploiting you for your body, exploiting, exploiting, exploiting. Then they had elected a president of the United States who was the personification of the white hand who exploits white women.

Courtney:

Yes.

Don Edwards:

So the reason I say we're winning and why I feel good about it, even though we have a lot of drama and we have a lot of losses along the way, these subsequent generations of white youth and white women are discovering that these white men don't mean them no good whatsoever.

Courtney:

Yes sir.

Don Edwards:

When you start to break that whiteness up, gender, generational, class, then it's a problem.

Courtney:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

This is how white men see it. They see it, they see that it ain't black people and brown people, it's their women and their children who they can't control no more.

Courtney:

Yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Don Edwards:

So that's why I'm like, "I'm fine."

Courtney:

We're winning. Yeah.

Don Edwards:

There's going to be some sacrifices, going to be some losses and some setbacks-

Courtney:

Yeah.

Don Edwards:

...but it wasn't Martin King who said this, there was a man who Martin King paraphrases. He said, "The arc of justice, the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice."

Courtney:

Yes. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, thank you. Yeah.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:29:59]