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Isiah Turner

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith
in 2005

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Interview with Isiah Turner
Interviewed by: Richard Cándida Smith
Transcriber: Nadine Wilmot
Interview #1: February 4, 2005
Begin Turner, Isiah1 02-04-05

1-00:00:05

Cándida Smith:

Okay, it's February 4th, 2005, at the home of Isiah Turner in Richmond, California. Isiah, we usually start with asking a simple question which is where and when were you born?

Turner:

I was born May 15th, 1945, in St. Joseph, Louisiana.

Cándida Smith:

Were your parents from Louisiana area?

Turner:

My father was from the same town that I was born in. My mother was from Mississippi.

Cándida Smith:

Do you know how long your father's family had been in that section?

Turner:

Probably about forty years because he told me about his father and his grandfather but I don't remember much about my great grandfather. And on my mother's side, her parents and her great-grandparents, they were, like I said, all from Mississippi. But her family moved to Louisiana when she was about ten years old.

Cándida Smith:

And St. Joseph is located where?

Turner:

It's in the Northeast part of Louisiana. As a matter of fact, it's right on the Mississippi river right across from Vicksburg, Mississippi. I fondly remember, after we moved here to California, to Richmond, we used to go back down there, every year. It was our annual trek. And we actually swam and fished in the Mississippi River.

Cándida Smith:

You did?

Turner:

Yeah, it was exciting and it was dangerous, but I remember us doing that until this day, and I'm fifty-nine years old now.

Cándida Smith:

What kind of work did your father do and your mother as well?

Turner:

My mother was a teacher at the elementary level and down there, in Louisiana, they had K-12 and everybody pretty much was in the same class in these small country towns. My dad worked on a plantation as more like a laborer, if you will. He matriculated from that to joining the service. During World War II, he joined the Navy. We wound up in Richmond because of that. Because my dad was discharged from the Navy in Oakland, California. He called my mom and said, “Leona, you and Junior come to California, I’m not coming back to Louisiana.” [laughs] He had a good job with Naval Supply and so we moved out here to Oakland, California for a few years before we moved to Richmond.

Cándida Smith:

So, he continued working for the government or was this a private company?

Turner:

No, he went to work for the government. It’s called Naval Supply Station. Then he went to work for Alameda Naval Air. Being a Navy man himself—and he was mechanic by trade—and so he was able to move around to the different Naval installations here in the Bay Area and find work.

Cándida Smith:

Well, it sounds like he had a reasonably good experience in the Navy? Is that true?

Turner:

Yeah, I think he did. He had some issues to deal with because the Navy, as I reflect on the history of the navy in terms of African American men in the Navy, they had some challenges being a minority, if you will. But two things my dad had going for him: he was a boxer and he was a military policeman in the Navy and he later on learned mechanics. So, he knew how to take care of himself, let’s put it that way.

Cándida Smith:

So, you come to Oakland when you’re about a year old?

Turner:

I was three years old when we moved out here, three years old.

Cándida Smith:

Do you remember anything?

Turner:

I remember my mom and I coming on the train. I can remember that train ride. Seemed like it took a week to get out of there back then. But I just remember us being on a train.

Cándida Smith:

Was your mom looking forward to leaving or did she want to stay in Louisiana?

Turner:

She was excited about the change as I recall, particularly as we got older. She was glad that we moved there. And she went to work herself. She worked in a seamstress factory that was producing wartime goods like parachutes or something like that. And we lived in a place called

Harbor Homes over in Oakland, right on the Oakland Estuary. I never will forget that because it was right on the water, here were these wartime projects located on the water.

It was a busy time at that time because a lot of our people were working and our kids, like myself, we were being taken care of by other parents or other people in the community that were working different shifts. Families really supported one another back then.

Cándida Smith:

Did you have any other family in the area?

Turner:

Not at that time. But we did eventually relocate and assist about eleven other families from the South to move out here to the Bay Area.

Cándida Smith:

So life was much better for people out here in terms of making a living?

Turner:

At that time, yes, because you could get a decent job paying good wages with benefits and the racial issues weren't as acute here in the East Bay as they were in the Southern part of our country at that time.

Cándida Smith:

When did your family move to Richmond?

Turner:

We moved to Richmond in 1951.

Cándida Smith:

Directly to Parchester Village?

Turner:

Yes, we did. It was very gratifying for my parents and for myself to move into an environment where you had your own home, you had your own backyard, you had your own front yard, you could have a garden, you could have flowers. Whereas the other environment we lived in was three-story projects and a very dense living environment. Moving out to Parchester in '51, we were literally out in the country. Because we were about two miles outside of Richmond downtown and there was nobody out by Parchester except the Richmond Golf and Country Club. There was no other people living out there.

Cándida Smith:

And you're close to the Estuary there as well?

Turner:

No, there we were close to the San Pablo Bay.

Cándida Smith:

San Pablo Bay.

Turner:

San Pablo Bay which was in itself a breath of fresh air because you had this huge body of water where you could go out and fish and wade and swim if you dared to do so. And that was a recreational opportunity a lot of other people didn't have, didn't have access to water like that, didn't have access to the views. And we could hike along the shoreline. That just made life of a different quality than the immediate urban area of Richmond.

Cándida Smith:

Do you remember, or did you talk to your parents about the whole issue of wanting to buy a home after the war? Your father had the GI Bill. In principle, a lot of African American found it hard to use the home loan part of it because of the restrictions that were in place at that time. Do you know when they started looking? Had they been looking before Parchester Village?

Turner:

Yes, they had. We had looked in Oakland, we had looked in Berkeley, and probably what was called Emeryville at that time and/or El Cerrito. Even Vallejo, we looked in Vallejo. But the opportunity to move to Parchester was afforded to my parents and about 399 other African American families. At a reasonable price that they could afford with the GI Bill. And because, as history tells it, Parchester was built for African Americans, so there wasn't any restrictions in terms of the lending issue. And there wasn't any restrictions in terms of, "We don't want you in our neighborhood," because everybody that lived in Parchester except for one family—there was one family that was mixed—everybody else was African Americans. So that wasn't an issue.

Cándida Smith:

So, you were about six years old when you moved to Parchester Village. Could you describe the house, what the house looked like when you first moved in?

Turner:

Well, the front and back yard, they were there but they weren't developed. We had two bedrooms which at that time seemed to be huge but now [chuckles] they were like closets compared to today's homes. We had a nice kitchen. We had a garage where we could park our car. And we had a nice living room. The yards were fairly large, particularly the backyard. And so that not only gave you a place to play that was safe, because fences were built around them, but it also gave my parents an opportunity to utilize their agricultural skills, if you will. Because we grew a lot of our own food. And my mother liked flowers so we had a lot of flowers, too. So it was a very nice place to live.

1-00:10:00

Cándida Smith:

How many—did you have any siblings?

Turner:

I had sister who passed away when she was three. I was thirteen at the time that she passed away. And I had—I still have a brother who is seven years younger than I am. I was the oldest of the three.

Cándida Smith:

Could you talk a little bit about the neighbors on your street? Who they were, what kind of work they were doing? [phone rings]

Washburn:

Could we wait until the phone—the machine will pick it up, right?

Turner:

Yeah, or my wife will pick it up. [phone stops ringing] Yes, she picked it up. When you looked at our neighborhood of 400, there were neighborhoods within that larger neighborhood. And, we lived in like a cul-de-sac. So there were about eight or nine families that really, really bonded and got to know each other. [pause as phone rings again] The majority of those families, the males in those families, worked for either Kaiser Shipyards, Alameda Naval Air Station, Point Melote, a fuel depot, but mostly government related jobs. Because that's why they had moved to the Bay Area, for those opportunities, during World War II. Most of the women stayed at home, most but not all. Some were nurses or some did domestic work for affluent white families.

And all the neighbors watched out for all the other neighbors' kids. We were very strictly monitored, if you will, back in the day. There's a saying now, here in I guess about 1998, Senator Hillary Clinton came up with this phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, they were doing that in Parchester back in 1951. The whole village raised all of the kids. And that first wave of kids, we all came out pretty good. In terms of getting career-type jobs and going to school and getting an education, et cetera. And a lot of it had to do with that communal atmosphere that we grew up in where everybody watched out for everybody. You just didn't stray too far away from the path that your parents wanted you to go down.

Cándida Smith:

Yes. As you were growing up, did you hear stories about the war years? I'm wondering what the war and the war experience meant to your parents and to the parents of your friends, the people who were around you? Did it have any kind of special significance to them?

Turner:

Well, the significance that it had was the loss of friends. We would hear those kind of discussions around dinner activities or when there was special gatherings. The men would tell these, literally, war stories about when they were in the war and what they had to endure and how grateful they were to be able to return home. But a lot of their friends didn't have the same experience. They left a lot of friends overseas. The other thing that they talked about was the separation of the troops, or the servicemen, because of the racism that existed in our military at that time. And last but not least, they thought that was still a better experience than actually living in the South working on a plantation. [chuckles] It still was an up grade.

And getting the GI Bill and then being able to come to the Bay Area of California and get a decent job, being able to buy a home, and become part of America's middle class, we felt like—or they felt like they had arrived.

Cándida Smith:

Was there any talk that you recall about the double victory, what the civil rights organizations had been proclaiming in 1940, '41, if U.S. goes to war there has to be a double victory, a victory against racism as well as against the Nazis?

Turner:

I don't remember the part about Nazis but I do remember the part about NAACP activities in Richmond and in Oakland. And about our ministers—at that time, most of the time, it was our ministers who were independent enough to be vocal about the disparity that was occurring in the Bay Area as it relates to the treatment of African Americans, as it relates to housing, job issues, and education issues.

Cándida Smith:

How old were you when you become aware this is a reality in California life?

Turner:

Second grade. It was very obvious when we left Parchester, walking to Bayview School. That was maybe a mile and a half. As we matriculated through the white neighborhood, we were confronted with that reality that we were different. Because people were very open about calling us names or wanting to engage in physical confrontation.

Cándida Smith:

Other kids.

Turner:

Yeah, other kids, but a lot of times, it would be kids older than you. Maybe two or three grades older than you. And that made a big difference.

Cándida Smith:

And no adults?

Turner:

And that also forced us to—excuse me, I've got to get this point in—band together. We never walked around by ourselves in those neighborhoods. It was always three or four of us that would be together to sort of, you know, buffer any potential attack on us.

Cándida Smith:

So just walking to school and walking home every day—

Turner:

People would call you names, sometimes throw things at you. Because we didn't have buses at that time. We literally had to walk to school if our parents didn't take us to school.

Cándida Smith:

What about in school? Did the teachers keep control of things like that? Did they put a lid on it?

Turner:

Yeah, most of the times, in a classroom you didn't endure that intense hatred or dislike, but in P.E. and the physical activities, it always became apparent, you know, when we were playing. Whether it was tetherball or softball or what have you, there was always this underlying dissension between us and them, if you will. And it wasn't everybody. But it was just, these kids were being taught by their parents to treat us a certain way and not like us. I reflect on that as an adult; as a kid, I was just thinking that hated me and I didn't know why they didn't like me. But, when you run into somebody three to seven to eight years old, and they're saying very disparaging things about you, that has to come from teaching. You must be living in an environment where people are telling you to act like this. Even at that age, we took it into consideration, but we still had to protect ourselves.

Cándida Smith:

So, the kids in the school, when you left the classrooms, you gathered together in different racial groups?

Turner:

Yes and no. We lived in a polarized society at that time. No question about it. Because our neighborhoods were segregated. But what happened in the classroom, as kids, a lot of us bonded, *as kids*. Regardless of our racial backgrounds. We just liked one another. Or we joked with one another. But when you got into a larger environment it always changed.

Cándida Smith:

Were there Mexican or Japanese kids?

Turner:

There were Mexican kids, there were Mexican kids in Richmond. Very few Japanese, very few Asians at that time, but some. It was mostly black and white and some Mexican.

Cándida Smith:

The whites in the white community, of course, was also divided up because you had all the different ethnic groups. There was the Portuguese, the people who came from the South. Did white kids divide up according to their own ethnic background or did they form a single group?

Turner:

No, we could see that there was unity within the white group, once you understood that there was different kinds of white people. You know, as a young kid, everybody just looked white. But then, as you got older, then you did realize that people had German background, people were from maybe Italy—because we did have a lot of Italians in Richmond at that time and we still do have a lot of Italians. And then, some of them spoke in their native tongue so that made it different, too. You would recognize that. But your racial differences normally broke down white versus black. You weren't able to make these distinctions about these other groups within the European family.

1-00:20:00

Cándida Smith:

Before we had set up you had said something along the lines of if you could grow up in Richmond successfully, you could get through any challenge. I think you must have been talking about more than just the school situation. Was the school situation at the core of it?

Turner:

Well, just the environment itself. That was a time of [pause]—I don't think John Wayne was my hero, but he might have been a lot of other peoples' heroes. And it was a time of machoism—that's what I'm trying to get to. Within the African American community, and within the larger society. You had to be a tough guy, you had to be a tough guy. In Richmond, it seemed like that was even more dominant, that attitude and that perception where you had to prove yourself through physicality.

So, having that challenge on a day to day basis, and not having—I'm relating my personal experience now—and not having and big brothers, and sometimes being too slow to run or too stubborn to run, I finally came to a point when I was about twelve years old, I realized I couldn't win all the time on the physical level. So then I started using my head in terms of trying to figure out ways to avoid confrontations or to manage confrontations when confrontations were presented to me. Because the probability of having it be confronted with a physical opportunity, in other words, to fight, it was almost daily. In school, on the way to school, even in your own neighborhood in Parchester. It was a little small community like that, we had sections. If you went around the block, two, three blocks, you were on somebody else's turf. So you had to deal with that reality, even in your own community. If you went to downtown Richmond, to the movie theater, if your parents dropped you off, that was central Richmond. Well, if the guys from central Richmond knew that the guys from Parchester North Richmond were in the theater, when you came out the theater, you were confronted with them trying to block you from going to your home in a peaceful way. They just wanted to jump on you because you were in their neighborhood.

Cándida Smith:

Was some of that a class issue because you guys from Parchester were a little bit more comfortable?

Turner:

Well, it could have been. I didn't recognize it as a class issue. But in reflecting back, some people used to call us the "country bumpkins from Parchester," the people from the urban part of Richmond. Because we did live in a nice neighborhood. That would probably be your one of your first suburban developments in the Bay Area, particularly one that was designed for African Americans. We *were* living a lot better than a lot of our counterparts in the urban environment, no question about it. And there probably was some jealousy because a lot of our folks had new cars and we had our own homes and we weren't on assistance, like welfare, that kind of thing. So, yeah, those issues were prevalent.

Cándida Smith:

Could you talk a little bit more about the schools and how they developed as a you moved through them?

Turner:

Well, I had some very good teachers in elementary school and junior high school and in high school. I can't say anything disparaging about the education system. One of the things that made me kind of focus on it was my parents were very adamant, particularly my mother about me getting a good education and doing my homework. And so she was active in the PTA and all that kind of stuff. She'd come down and talk to my teachers, and if my report didn't reflect what she thought it should reflect, then her and my teacher talked about it and she talked to my dad and I got punished. Plus the fact I was I was a pretty good student. I liked being viewed as smart. Let's put it that way. So, I studied to try to be good in class.

Back in junior high school, when we graduated from elementary school, all of us were in similar classes together. But there became a separation once you started junior high school. They had all these different tracks. And fortunate or unfortunate, I was put in the college prep track and was taking algebra and French, like that, in seventh and eighth grade, where a lot of my counterparts where a lot of my counterparts were taking other kinds of courses. Our only common meeting during the day was either lunch period or physical education, because the rest of our courses were different. And I say that to say this, that that put me in a different environment in terms of the kind of kid that I was going to school with, in my immediate classes. And in our classes, the whites, the Mexicans, the few Asians, we all were more like—we weren't nerds, but we were students. And so the physicality mentality wasn't as prevalent with college prep kids as it was with other kids. Does that make sense?

Cándida Smith:

Yeah, that makes sense.

Turner:

So, that allowed us to start viewing each other as people, as individuals. Because we focused on doing our homework together and practicing on each other if we had to make presentations and that kind of thing. And some of the classes we had, we even went on excursions to UC Berkeley or to San Francisco to the Exploratorium. So we got a larger view of the world and how you can interface with each other than some of my other counterparts were getting. Because I would see them after school or in physical ed or in lunch and they would still have that same mentality. Meanwhile I was growing up with these other kids over here who a totally different mentality. But when I hung around my buddies, who had this other mentality, I had to act like them to be accepted. Because if you acted the other way, then they would reject you. They would literally reject you. Because a lot of them talked about me and my counterparts just because we were in different classes. They resented it.

Cándida Smith:

But you learned to live and operate in both worlds.

Turner:

I've been like that all my life, ever since about the seventh grade.

Cándida Smith:

Can you talk a little bit about your interests as you were growing up? You said, John Wayne wasn't a hero of yours but maybe there were other things that captured your imagination.

Turner:

Well, it wasn't so much John Wayne. John Wayne himself wasn't my hero, but Red Rider was. Randolph Scott [chuckles], he was one of my heroes, he was a cowboy. And {Audie?} Murphy? Still today I look at some of those old movies and reflect back on when I was a kid. But my real heroes are my mom and my dad and then people like Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, people who are making a difference in the larger world against big odds. They gave us pride. They gave us pride and they gave me pride.

My interests, as it relates to being a kid at that time. I was in the cub scouts, the boy scouts, so we would fish, we would camp out. We never did hunt but we would go to a lot of different parks and camp out and experience Mother Nature if you will. And I enjoyed that.

Cándida Smith:

Are these Parchester troops?

Turner:

Yeah, we had a cub scout and a boy scout troop but right there in Parchester. And that kept us, again, from getting into other things that we could have got into at that age. And then I had to go to church, whether I liked it or not. I had to go to church every Sunday, pretty much all day, because that was just understood in my family. So that gave me a different exposure. And I started singing in a choir.

And one of my most fondest memories of being a child in Richmond was, I belonged to an organization called American singers association. And they were in California, Oregon, and the state of Washington. And they had all these local chapters. And in Richmond, the chapter was local 10. You could be from any religious denomination, but you had to have some religious affiliation to be in this choir. Now, what was neat about being in the choir was that we traveled. We were like fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years of age and here we were going to L.A., Pheonix, Arizona, Portland, Oregon, Seattle, singing against all these other choirs. There would be like a thousand kids at these singing contests, and it was just good old hardy fun. Just like any other young teenagers at that time. Even though we were singing religious songs during the contest, then afterwards we'd go party. [laughs] You know, we were kids just like any other teenagers.

But it was so rich. And it was so much fun. It was clean fun. And again you got this exposure because we were always going somewhere.

1-00:30:00

Cándida Smith:

What church did you go to?

Turner:

Parchester First Baptist, which started in a garage of a minister named Reverend Thomas. And then eventually my parents and the other neighbors generated enough money to buy some land right there in Parchester and then build a church. It's still standing there today.

Cándida Smith:

So you did Sunday school there?

Turner:

Oh yeah! All day. Started with Sunday School, ended with evening worship. You'd go to Sunday school, then you would go to eleven o'clock service, you come home and eat, then you'd go back. Normally, the mission or one of the other groups has some afternoon activity at three o'clock. And then that lasted 'til five or six, and then you ate again, and then you went back to eat and worship would start at seven. You were in church all day.

Cándida Smith:

Did most of the people that you knew spend all day in church, too?

Turner:

No. No. No. Maybe half.

Cándida Smith:

It sounds like your parents were very active and very committed to the church.

Turner:

My mom was. My dad wasn't. She had a role; she was very active. She was on two or three different committees.

Cándida Smith:

Now, after you moved to Parchester, did she continue working?

Turner:

She did domestic work. She did domestic work for a while. And then—this is another thing that happened that was kind of unique for me growing up in Richmond, or just growing up, period. My dad having been a mechanic, had this notion, this idea that he wanted to be an entrepreneur. So, one day, I came home, and we had bought a gas station, right there in Parchester. Parchester used to have what we call a “dad,” a little shopping mall. It had a gas station, it had a supermarket, beauty parlor, barbershop, ice cream, soda fountain kind of place, a night club. I think those were the only facilities that we had. And my dad became the owner of that Texaco service station. And that was a proud moment for our family. I had to work up there every day after school. I had to work up there every Saturday, every Sunday, even though I played sports and things like that, I still had to put my hours in.

But that was a very unique experience in a lot of ways because I learned a lot about human behavior. As we struggle to pay our bills and a lot of people would use my parents in terms of credit and then wouldn't pay us back. I would hear all these stories at the dinner table. And these would be some of our neighbors, people I would know, you know. [laughs] Then the service orientation that I learned from my parents, because back in the day, we used to literally put air in the tires, we would clean the windshields. My job was to make sure our bathrooms were clean. You know, those kinds of things. And then we went out and greeted the people as a customer like they were important. Because my dad had this training from Texaco as a leasee or an owner, and he in turn trained me and my uncle and my cousins who would work at the gas station.

So that was a unique opportunity. It out me around cars, I learned more about cars and the mechanics of them. Even though I didn't really like it. [laughs]. I fondly remember one night about eleven o'clock at night, I was holding a light for my dad because he was working on

somebody's motor, and there was oil dripping in his face and mine. And I told him, I said, "Dad, I'm not gonna do this when I grow up. I want to wear a suit a tie." [laughs] I said, "I love you, but this is not for me." It was cold and we were literally on the ground. There was just a blanket between us and the ground. That wasn't my cup of tea. I learned a lot and I admired him for what he was doing and I learned a lot from the experiences that he put me through in working at the gas station.

Cándida Smith:

Did he keep working at the restaurant?

Turner:

Yeah, he kept working at his other job and between my mother and I and my uncle and a couple of friends of his, we kept the gas station open.

Cándida Smith:

And how old were you about?

Turner:

I worked at the gas station from about ten until about seventeen.

Cándida Smith:

So, when you went off to college.

Turner:

Yeah, we had about seven years.

Cándida Smith:

That's a good experience.

Turner:

It was a very good experience, very good experience.

Cándida Smith:

I had wanted to ask you about where people went shopping. You had mentioned there was a little shopping center in the community.

Turner:

Right.

Cándida Smith:

But did you also go shopping outside—I mean, did people have to go to some big Safeway somewhere to get all of their goods?

Turner:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, there were other areas in Richmond where we shopped at like a Safeway, or went to Sears, went to Montgomery Wards for those kinds of purchases, yes.

Cándida Smith:

And that was all downtown?

Turner:

It was all downtown on MacDonald. There was no Hilltop Mall at that time.

Cándida Smith:

What about health care? Where did you guys go to get your health care taken care of? Doctors, dentists, eye doctors?

Turner:

We were in Kaiser, I guess through my dad's work. That's who we got all of our medical services through. Our dentist was a private dentist. I don't know if we were on a plan or not, but we went to a particular dentist because I do remember my aunt did domestic work for this dentist. And that's why we went to this dentist over—

Cándida Smith:

Was he downtown or—?

Turner:

No, he was in Alameda. Our dentist was in Alameda.

Cándida Smith:

And then the recreation that was available in your community, you've talked about San Pablo Bay. Were there parks there? There was a recreation center, did you go to it?

Turner:

Well, the recreation center sits on the land that our gas station was on. See, that whole shopping center went through a transformation of demise for some reason after I left. And other historians can tell you better than I. But when the city of—oh, that's what happened, Parchester became annexed to the city of Richmond. We used to be in the county and then Parchester became annexed to the city of Richmond. One of the things that the leaders at that time advocated for was recreation services. So they built that recreation center on that land where the gas station and the market and those other things used to be.

Cándida Smith:

Did your father sell his gas station at some point?

Turner:

Yeah, he did. He sold it to somebody else and then I don't know what happened after that in terms of that whole shopping center, why it fell apart. But it did.

Cándida Smith:

How long did your family stay in Parchester Village?

Turner:

My father stayed there until he died in '71. He was 58 years old. My mother stayed there until she died three years ago. And we still own the home out there.

Cándida Smith:

Had they remodeled it over the years?

Turner:

Yes, we did. We expanded it, built on another room, put some exterior siding that made it more attractive and better insulated. It's still a nice house. And my parents might have paid \$8,000 for that house and now it's worth about \$350,000. It's amazing to us, those of us who grew up in Parchester, that those homes would be in 2005 valued at \$350,000.

Cándida Smith:

Yeah, that's a good chunk of money.

Turner:

Yeah.

Cándida Smith:

Still a bargain in Bay Area terms.

Turner:

And that's why the prices have escalated because we are in the immediate Bay Area and Parchester still is a relatively safe community. It's not a long commute. You do have front yards and back yards and you've got a lot more land than you do than in a lot of these new houses that they're building. The houses might have the square footage but they don't have the yard.

Cándida Smith:

Right. I have a couple of questions which you may or may not have anything to say about. These have to do with things I've read about that were important for the history of Parchester. Did you or your folks know any of the principals who were involved in getting Parchester organized, like Guthrie John Williams or Fred Par or Amos Hinckley or Reverend Bradford?

Turner:

Yeah, we knew the ministers. Reverend Thomas, Reverend—all the streets in Parchester are named after black ministers. Because it was those black ministers who linked up with Mr. Par and Mr. Chester to get Parchester built, as I understand it, the history of it. Because somebody was running for Mayor, they wanted the black vote, and a deal was cut, as I understand it, that if the ministers told this guy that was running for Mayor, "If you build us these homes out here so we can own our own homes, then we'll support you for mayor."

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And then that happened. The homes were built. And all the streets were named after the ministers. Bradford Drive, Williams Drive, Talmich Drive, MacLachlan, all of those streets were named after a preacher from the black community.

Cándida Smith:

Do they live in the community?

Turner:

Some did and some didn't. Like Reverend Thomas, on Thomas Drive, he was our minister at Parchester First Baptist. Yeah, he lived there. He lived there in a house right on the corner, Thomas Drive, on his street. I think Reverend Griffin lived out there and Reverend MacLachlan, but I think the rest of them lived in other parts of Richmond or other parts of the Bay Area.

Cándida Smith:

So was it the churches that held the community together in a sense?

Turner:

Oh, no question. We had two churches out in Parchester. El Bethel started maybe about five years after Parchester. Those were the focal points of the community, no question about that.

Cándida Smith:

Another thing I wanted to ask you about was, in '59 there was an effort apparently to redistrict the schools and so to send all the Parchester kids to one school instead of them going to both Lake Elementary and Bayview Elementary. Do you remember anything about this?

Turner:

No, I don't. But I was going to Bayview. I don't remember anything.

Cándida Smith:

And the community apparently successfully stopped that effort.

Turner:

We had—I think it was Mr. Hornsby that was the leader of that, that advocated for that. Because it was that group which as I recall was the seed group or the initial group that started the Parchester Neighborhood Association. In other words, a voice for the neighborhood to City Hall, to the school district.

Cándida Smith:

I guess you were a kid at this time. So your interests were elsewhere.

Turner:

Right. Yes.

Cándida Smith:

'63, you're going on eighteen years old, so maybe you have more recollection of when Parchester was annexed to the city of Richmond.

Turner:

I had just graduated from high school. I was living in Berkeley in '63 but I graduated in '62. I do remember us advocating becoming part of Richmond because living in Parchester at that time—I mentioned this earlier—we were in the County, so any services, like fire, police, the people came all the way from Martinez. And so sometimes you were waiting a long time for an emergency service to be delivered. So that was one of the reason I know why we were advocating to become part of Richmond. Plus we wanted bus service. We wanted all the other regular services. So that was a prolonged effort for that to happen. And finally, between the wisdom of the leaders in

Parchester and some of the people who were elected officials in Richmond, we were embraced and annexed to the city of Richmond.

Cándida Smith:

Were you concerned about it? Were you actively supportive of it?

Turner:

Yeah, I wasn't actively supportive but my heart was with the movement, if you will. Because the bottom line was we thought our quality of life would go up.

Cándida Smith:

So in '62 you go to college at Berkeley? Do you go to Berkeley?

Turner:

I moved to Berkeley in '62 but I actually was going to college at Contra Costa College. I moved to Berkeley because, having been in those college prep courses that I shared with you about earlier and having exposure to the larger Bay Area, and the sixties being what they were at that time, Berkeley was a real hip place to live. Because there was a lot of peace and love. There wasn't all this physicality; it wasn't all this racism. And so that was one of the main reason I moved there. And I got a job at the State Department of Health while I was going to school. So that was a different quality of life for me as a young man, living in Berkeley at that time.

Cándida Smith:

I wanted to get a sense of your trajectory after you grow up. You maintain your ties to Richmond in different ways, both professionally and as a homeowner. But also, how your political thinking was developing and how you come to get involved in Richmond politics.

Turner:

Well, it was a circuitous route and it wasn't by design, to be quite frank with you. 1965, I'm going to school now at Cal for a couple of semesters. I'm still working at the State Department of Health. And, a chemist at the State Department of Health took me aside one day and told me she thought I had a lot of potential and that she had somebody that she wanted me to meet. And so being raised the way I had been raised, I respect my elders, so I went over this lady's house for dinner to meet this colleague of hers that she went to college with. Well, he was running at that time a non-profit employment and training program in Oakland called Opportunities Industrialization Centers. He told me how these became operational throughout the United States under the leadership of a Dr. Reverend Leon Sullivan out of Philadelphia. And he was running Oakland's operation for Dr. Sullivan. Well, that inspired me that a black man had created the impetus—this was during the Nixon years—to get enough money out of the Nixon administration to start all these workforce preparation centers around the United States, mostly in urban communities where African Americans live. And so he offered me a job that night, on the spot. And the job paid twice as much as I was making for the State Department of Health.

So I went in the next day and I resigned and I joined this organization. And, they sent me to different training programs to learn how to be a counselor, to learn how to be a manager. And to make a long story short, I stayed with that organization for about twelve years. I matriculated up to Seattle following some older colleagues of mine who were going up there to work for a person

that was held in high esteem. So, I went up there. I moved up there reluctantly. I really didn't want to go to Seattle. Because I was living down on Lake Merrit at the time and I was living large and I was having a good time down here in the Bay Area. But, I guess it was my destiny because I moved up there.

Well, the guy that my colleagues followed up there, he took an interest in me and told me I was like a diamond in the rough and he was going to polish me up. And what he meant by that was he was going to give me some developmental opportunities to grow an organization. Well, about a year and a half after I had moved up there, he promoted me over all the guys I followed up there. All these guys were older than me and I became their boss.

Through Reverend Sullivan—again the guy from Philadelphia who started these organizations, he was on the board of General Motors at that time. He was the only black person in America at that time who was on a corporate board. He convinced General Motors and IBM and General Electric to provide management and leadership development to ten of what he called his “young turks” around the country, and I was the one out of the northwest that he picked. What this meant was—and you probably are already aware of this but some of the people listening to this tape might not be aware of it—most of our Fortune 500 companies, they have their own universities, their own management development centers. And they're tucked back in the hills of Connecticut and New York and they're these posh places with tennis courts and basketball courts and dorms and all this. Well, I got to go to that.

They recruit these teachers from Yale, Harvard, Northwestern, different schools, who have certain expertise to teach you how to be a leader for the upcoming years, the upcoming century. So I was exposed to that at twenty-one years old. I was getting this kind of training. And I really readily just embraced it. It just came real natural for me.

Well, I'm in Seattle, and we're building—well, it was a nonprofit—and we built in to be a mega-nonprofit because we had the support of the mayor and city council I think and we were doing a pretty good job. I had developed a good reputation with Boeing and with Lockheed because we were training people for them. So, the mayor assisted us in buying a whole square block of land for a dollar at that time under what's called the model cities program. And I was put in charge of the building, the capitol improvement program, so I was working with an architect and a construction company. I had never done nothing like that but it was my job to lay out pretty much the classrooms and the education part of the workforce training program.

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Well, about three years, four years into that opportunity, Boeing and Seattle—well, Seattle in particular but largely because of Boeing—it was a recession, this was '81 now. And I never will forget this expression: “The last one out of Seattle, turn the lights out.” [chuckles] I don't know if you remember that or not. But my point is that Boeing and Lockheed and a lot of these companies were laying off a lot of people. And the state went to Boeing and offered them some government assistance and Boeing refused. And then the state came to me and asked me would I work for them. Because they had been told by Boeing that if they involved me, Boeing would deal with these government programs. So this was an opportunity for me to leave the nonprofit and get into state government at a pretty high level. So, they hired me and allowed me to form

four employment centers in the Seattle-Puget Sound area. I did it under one condition, that I wasn't going to hire all state workers. I wanted to hire some people from the community. I wanted to hire some people from the two unions at Boeing. So I could have a mixed and diverse workforce.

Well, that became so successful. After about two years, we put about 85 percent of those people back to work throughout the country at about 88 percent of their former wage. And that became a real big story.

Well, from there, I got promoted to another level in state government. It was a Republican administration but I came up to like, the number three job in this organization called Employment Security. Well, about a year after that, the Republicans lost to the Democrats and most state jobs, like when Schwarzenegger took over his job—he's our governor now—they get rid of the first two or three levels of government. Because you're all amongst all these exempt jobs.

So, having been a job developer myself, I had already made some connections where I could matriculate back to Seattle. I was working on Olympia, the capitol of Washington at that time. Or I could get a job in the Department of Vocational Education right there in Olympia with the new administration. But I was encouraged by an old time senior manager—he was the number two guy—to apply for the top job with the Democratic administration. And then I was encouraged by a senator in the state legislature, an African American, to apply for the top job. Because they thought I had promise. And to make a long story short, this governor—his name was Booth Gardner, he came from Warehouser family of the state of Washington, and he was an educator and he was a businessman—and he used a businesslike approach to hire members of his cabinet. So he had the Nordstroms, the Boeings, the Warehouser people interview candidates for his different executive positions.

Well, the job I was encouraged to interview for, about fifty four people applied or it. And then they went through a series of eliminations. They got down to the final three and I was still in the running. I walked into the governor's office for the interview and there was a couple other guys in there and he said, "Isaiah, you and I have a lot of friends in common." I said, "Mr. Governor, who could I know that you would know that would be a friend of mine?" He said, "You'd be surprised." He said, "I've been told by labor leaders, education leaders, community leaders that you're the perfect guy for this job." He said, "If I put you in the job what are you going to do with it?"

So, anyway I shared with him my vision for change, cultural change. Because there was a lot of old boy type attitudes in our organization and nobody would have ever thought that I would be in contention for the top job so I had seen a lot of this old boy inertia, if you will, in the organization. But there were a lot of people in the organization who had promised, like I had promised—and it was a large organization, it was 2700 employees. And I told him what I thought. We should become more business oriented, more customer friendly, and we should be able to work better with local labor leaders. See, we had 110 offices around the state. It's called the Department of Employment Security. In this state, they call it the Employment Development Department, the state of California.

Anyway, he put me in the job. And we had great change there because he supported me. And I stayed there for about seven years. I actually became the president of all my colleagues in the United States. First time that had ever happened for an African American. And I worked out of Washington, D.C. for two years during the Reagan administration and during George Bush, Senior's administration. And I had the opportunity to interface with them because I represented this national organization.

My mom became deathly ill—this finally gets us back to this circuitous route—and I had an opportunity at the end of that governor's second term to go to D.C., to go to Atlanta, or to go to New Orleans. When my mom became sick, I came down here because I had been taking care of her for about fifteen years after my dad had died. And it just so happened that the guy that was the city manager of Richmond at that time, I had went to high school with. He had seen me at a national conference in New Orleans about a year prior to that, getting a national award, which I have out in my den now. He wanted me to do some consulting work for him so I started doing that. And then eventually, he hired me as the department head.

Meanwhile, my mother miraculously gets well after I was down here about five months. [laughs] She gets—and my aunt says, “She just needed you down here, Jr.” Well, now I'm a department head in Richmond and I'm getting kind of entrenched and I'm bringing all the skills that I learned up in Washington to my city. I have been trained by the private sector so my first thing to do in Richmond when I came back here was reach out to the business community. And when you reach out to the business community in Richmond, you start with Chevron. So, I went to Chevron and I found the guru there who embraced me. You know, you always gotta have a sponsor in this American society. And I told him what my vision was for putting Richmond people to work and for Richmond businesses to hire Richmond people. But I didn't want it to be a program that was looked upon as some kind of poverty program. I said, “I know a way to produce quality people who will come to work on time and who will fit into your workforce, but I need you to help me. I need Chevron to step up to the plate.”

So they stepped up to the plate and for the first time, we got the Council of Industries, which is a group of industries in West Contra Costa County, to support this workforce program. And I got the Richmond Chamber of Commerce to support it. And we started putting hundreds and hundreds of Richmond people to work, youth and adults. This was in 1990. Then I get promoted to Deputy City Manager and they put me over Economic Development. And that went good for about three or four years, of deputy city managing. Then, the Council fired my boss, the city manager, and tried to get me to take the job. And I just didn't want it because I didn't want to deal with the politics. I like running programs and making things happen but I didn't want to deal with the politics.

So then they hired another guy and they got rid of him. And then finally, the forces—I call it the constellation of forces [chuckles]—came at me again, and said, “Look, Isaiah, you got to take this job. You a homeboy, you from here, you ready for it, and the politics aren't that bad.” So, I waited until the last day to apply, about three o'clock, then I applied. It was a national search thing. Again there was over fifty applicants and it came down to me and three other guys and the city council hired me in '98. In '98, I became city manager.

I inherited a very, very difficult job. Richmond was one of the toughest cities in the United States to be a city administrator of because of politics and the unions are just really, really powerful here. Very powerful. But having the training that I had had, having grown up here in this community, I had a platform or a foundation that none of my predecessors had. So I could flex a little bit. Because I was a homeboy and I was using my intelligence as well to keep people from doing to me what I had seen done to my predecessors.

So we had some successes in getting some new developments out here, some new housing developments, some new business developments, getting some government grants. But we had our issues. And so, about a year ago—this is February—in 2003, I told my wife one day, I came home, I said, “You know, most city managers only last about three years. I’ve been doing this for almost six years now. And I’m at a point now where I just think that I need to move on. I need to do something different with my life. This is just taking too much of a toll on me.”

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Because it was the kind of job where 24/7 you were on. Even when you weren’t there, you had to be available to the public, to the police chief, to the fire chief. If anything goes wrong or if there is some explosion at Chevron, I’m the first one that gets involved, as city manager. So I told the mayor and the city council one night—it was in October of 2003, and my contract ran to 2005—I told them that I had just come to a point where I thought it was in my best interest, particularly for my health, that I retire at this point in time. I’m almost 59. My dad died at 58 and I’m pleased that I’m past 58 but I want to see 59. [chuckles] I said, “So I’m out of here.” I gave them ninety days notice and I retired as Richmond city manager in January, 2004. So it’s been about a year and two weeks that I retired.

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged.]

02:00:00:20

Cándida Smith:

That’s an interesting story, because you are a homeboy but you also come back with all this distance and objectivity. I wonder if we were to, like in a science fiction movie, project you back in time to—you become city manager in 1951—knowing all the things that you know, what would you have done to help the city of Richmond go through the post-war situation? Have you given that any thought?

Turner:

Well, when you look at the history of Richmond, and particularly when Kaiser closed those shipyards and how that changed the whole economic fiber of Richmond, there wasn’t too much one person could’ve done. It would have had to be a mobilization of all the political business forces at that time to sit down and figure out a new future for Richmond. Because when Kaiser closed down, there was thousands of jobs that was lost. And there was an overnight swelling of poverty if you will, and unemployment if you will, which created chaos in a lot of sectors. And so what they needed at that time more than anything was unified leadership, and they didn’t have that. It was sort of like everybody’s going for themselves. “If you don’t have a job, more power to you. Us few over here, we do have jobs.” Very few of us, in terms of our families, wanted to go back down South, there was nothing down there. So we became part of the system that started depending more on the dole. I really do believe that’s where the welfare explosion, some of that came from. Because we didn’t have opportunities to matriculate into the other parts of our

economy, as far as job opportunities. So, once your unemployment ran out, if you were even eligible for unemployment, then you went on some other kinds of assistance, so.

What I would have done, if I had been in a leadership position, I would have went to our leaders in government and our leaders in business and asked them to help me put together a strategy to take us from this recession into a more stable and livable situation, which would have meant the infusion of some money from the government, infusion of some money from the private sector and maybe some public/private partnerships that could have created and/ or attracted new businesses to Richmond.

Cándida Smith:

Do you have any ideas why that didn't happen?

Turner:

Most of the time, most things don't happen because you don't have the leadership there. There's a leadership vacuum or there's a lack of will or there was benign neglect or a combination of all that.

Cándida Smith:

Have you met any of the leaders, the people who were running the city government in the 1950's?

Turner:

No, I haven't. No, I haven't. I met some that was running it in the sixties and the seventies but not the fifties.

Cándida Smith:

So you don't know what was going through their minds.

Turner:

No, I don't.

Cándida Smith:

The other thing I wanted to ask about was the legacy of Jim Crow in Richmond and in the Bay Area. We've talked a little bit about some of the problems at school, but what about the police or the police community relations?

Turner:

It was terrible. [laughs] As a matter of fact, I know some people who are going to laugh when they look at this document, this video. When I retired last year, I told people that it was really a strange twist of fate that growing up in Parchester in Richmond, I used to run from the police. And here, for the last years, the police been working for me. [laughs] I said, "I have hired police chiefs and I have fired police chiefs. Who would ever have thought? A little ol' kid from Parchester would be in a situation like that?" So that's a personal story, but the legacy of the police department in Richmond against minorities, particularly African Americans or Latinos has been terrible. To the point where they made national news on Sixty Minutes. They made Sixty Minutes, way back in the seventies. Because there was an organized group called the cowboys in the Richmond police department that were literally attacking people and arresting people and

beating up people and getting away with it. Literally, just getting away with it. There was all kinds of corruption. And so for years, Richmond has been trying to live down that reputation of having that kind of police force. Now, today, as we sit here in 2005, that doesn't exist, nowhere near to the degree that it existed because most of those guys have retired. But most of them have just retired in the last four or five years. There were still vestiges of that when I became city management. And there was still a core group of guys in the department that didn't even want to listen to me just because of my color and who I am.

But that's just what you had to inherit when you get a job like being city manager or a city like Richmond where police and fire have had political strongholds because they are very formidable organizations. And they have their own culture within their organizations, that breeds dominance, if you will, and crude dominance at that. And I'm being polite.

Cándida Smith:

I sense that. One of things that people studying post-war cities are looking at is the degree to which the Southern white migration changes the racial climate of the North and the West and to what degree is it that the already existing ethnic populations have their racism triggered by the larger southern migration. Have you any thoughts on that?

Turner:

Well, that certainly had to have an impact on the Bay Area because when you look at the Southern—you said a Southern white migration? No question about it because that's where a lot of those attitudes came from, they just transferred them out here. And even though in the Bay Area, back in the day, as I understand it, and as my parents witnessed it, the racism in the immediate Bay Area was there, but it was enhanced or heightened by this white migration of Southerners, white Southerners coming to the Bay Area. It was reinforced. And then there were communities like San Pablo, for instance, the little city that Richmond surrounds, a certain type of person that people called a redneck moved there. Or in Martinez, our county seat, a certain type, or in Pinole, our neighboring city, a certain type of white person moved there {characterized?} or Rodeo, as rednecks. So you knew not to go in none of those neighborhoods. And it was proud to be rednecks. [laughs]

So, those were the demographics at that time.

Cándida Smith:

So that was part of what you learned in the community was you don't go to certain areas.

Turner:

Exactly, exactly. But you know, as I grew up—not to jump all the way across the country—but I had an opportunity when I was working for the governor to go to Harvard. He sent me there three years for some leadership training. And I learned in Boston that the segregation issues and the racial issues there were much more difficult than they were out here. And even now. I was going to Harvard and they were telling me, “Don't go in that neighborhood, Isiah.” I'm a grown man! This was just a few years ago! So, this country's just been confronted with that reality.

Cándida Smith:

You were saying, as you grew up, your family would drive back to Louisiana every year or on a regular basis. Were they following or were they supportive of the civil rights movement as it emerges in '55?

Turner:

Yeah, very much so, very much so.

Cándida Smith:

And the churches were pretty supportive in participating?

Turner:

And that's why I was so impressed with my offer to go work for that workforce organization. Because I was part of the civil rights movement, that was just a peaceful way. If I can elaborate on this point, while I would be trying to cut a deal to get some people some jobs in Oakland or Richmond, the Black Panthers would be acting up on the other end of the spectrum and so people became more willing—the power structure—to negotiate with people like me. Because they couldn't negotiate with the Black Panthers.

02-00:10:00

Because they were single issue oriented. So it helped having that kind of leverage. A lot of people saw it as negative. I saw it as positive.

Cándida Smith:

How did you get along personally with Black Panther leadership?

Turner:

I got along fine with them, I knew quite a few of them. Because some of the people I had grown up with, that's the arena that they went into. They subscribed to that philosophy. I got along fine with them.

Cándida Smith:

[to David Washburn, videographer] Do you have any questions you want to ask?

Washburn:

I've read that many of the founding Black Panthers grew up in Richmond.

Turner:

I would say—yes some did.

Washburn:

That Contra Costa College was a hotbed of activity.

Turner:

That's right.

Washburn:

I guess one of the stories which I always ask people and I would like to hear your side of things, is the Redevelopment that went on in Richmond. I actually interviewed the daughter of the owner of the {Trevolini's?} department store. And the department store was burned down and there was an incident in Richmond where the police were brought in from out of town and things like this. And she, I tried to get her to explain, well what happened in Richmond, how did the racial climate change, how did that tie into the decline of the economy in Richmond, of the businesses and the downtown. She couldn't do that very well, but she had her own ideas, which I didn't necessarily agree with. But what did you—did you have anything to add the development of the mall here and the efforts that went on in Richmond to try and keep things together in town in terms of keeping businesses there? And how the racial climate, people attribute it to that—white people I speak to, they'll say, you know—I say, “Was it the racial climate that changed and made people, especially white people who used to live in Richmond, want to move out and start shopping for places or was it actually the economy that changed that time?” And it's a very confusing issue for people to really sort out.

Turner:

That's a very large question, Dave. My response, from what I've learned since I moved back here—because I wasn't here at that time, I had moved out—was a certain group of politicians were convinced by a developer that it was in the best interests to neglect downtown Richmond and start this shopping mall up here. And so, when they did that, the stores that were still down there, it's not like there weren't thriving, they were doing okay, but there was no way they could compete against this new mall up here. Then you had the racial tension issues that you're talking about, because the gangs were developing more in Richmond at that time. And it wasn't just white and black; there was this perception of it being dangerous to go on Macdonald and shop. Whereas, the perception of going to Hilltop was just the opposite. So that led to the demise of the few stores that were in downtown Richmond, because even the blacks that lived down there, they started shopping up here at Hilltop Mall. And it wasn't just because of the safety; it was the myriad of services that were being offered up here that weren't being offered downtown. So it was a combination of factors.

But that was one of the biggest mistakes that our forefathers made. Because right now, we're trying to—there's a movement that got started in my administration and it will take about another three or four years but we're calling the Revitalization of Downtown Richmond. It's no way that Richmond should go wanting for services when the majority of people in Richmond live over that way. That's where they live at. But now, they have to come to Hilltop Mall, they have to go to El Cerrito, they have to go to Berkeley or Pinole to buy some decent groceries, if you will. Let alone have opportunity for a cup of Starbucks coffee or Peet's or something. So, around the BART station, we started that transit village, and from there we want to spread up to old City Hall, rebuild that, put some new apartments in that.

Would you believe that the condos that we built around the BART station the last three years, right now, they're selling for \$375-400,000. Right around the BART station. So, that's telling us that we can get a certain client or a certain resident to move to old Richmond. We just have to continue to make it safe and continue to offer the services. And that's what we're in the midst of doing.

Cándida Smith:

How did you view the possible role of the Rosie the Riveter World War II historical park in terms of the vision that you had?

Turner:

Oh, I think it fits right in. I still tell people that who would have ever thought that out of those ruins of the shipyards and the image that those women projected in terms of being our workforce during the day, that we had a national park, an urban national park dedicated where we would be an attraction. Because what we envisioned, that's part of changing that image. We have that shoreline now, we've cleaned a lot of it up. We're building the new homes down there, we're going to put a few more businesses down there, a few more restaurants down there. And then by having a park there, it's just going to add to the quality of life in Richmond but it's also going to add to the perception of Richmond. Number one, the history, the fact that we built all those ships during World War II, number two, that was mostly women that did it. So, that bodes well for our pride, that we'll have people visiting our city and being able to become educated on how important Richmond and the shipyards were back in the day.

Cándida Smith:

I think that's it.

Turner:

Okay.

Cándida Smith:

Thank you.

Turner:

My pleasure.

[End of interview]