

Robert Johnson

Interviewer: This is Donna E. Rhein and I am meeting with Pastor Robert Johnson at the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church. Thank you. Would you like to tell us a little bit about your background?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, I was born in Pittsburgh, Pa. Reared in Holytown in the south, due west South Carolina. Reared in a very religious home where my mother believed in training us in the right way and doing the right things. She carried me to church and I became very active in church at an early age. Went to school there and high school. Left home after my high school education and I went to Voorhees College in Kingmal, South Carolina where I did my undergraduate work in the field of history. At that particular time I know exactly that my call was to be a Minister and I received my call at the age of seven.

Interviewer: Seven (7)?

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: What happen?

I was struck by an automobile at the age of six. It was a death situation. I called on the lord, I felt that I was dieing and I called on the lord. I asked him to save me, and he did. When I got back on my feet I had a conversation with god and I knew that he saved me for a purpose and I wanted to know. So I went behind the graveyard and had a private one to one conversation with him. At that point he revealed to me that the ministry was the call he inspired me to do.

Interviewer: This was your hometown, which was again?

Mr. Johnson: Due West South Carolina.

Interviewer: Due West?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, it's on the Piedmont of SC, right on the Georgia line, between Greenville, SC and Atlanta, GA.

Interviewer: What year were you born if you don't mine?

Mr. Johnson: I was born June 29, 1951.

Interviewer: 1951.

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: Was your family in the Presbyterian tradition, your mom?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, my mom and dad are both Presbyterians.

Interviewer: So that's always been the tradition?

Mr. Johnson: Always the family tradition and that is what made me remain in the faith because of the background. I receive nurture from my family uncles, aunts and neighbors. They made me what I am today. They looked at me and saw something within me. It was my pastor out of all people that told me that I want to be a preacher. I tried my best to deny that, saying no no you are talking to the wrong person. My mind is on something else, just explore the world.

Interview: So even thought at 7 you knew that God wanted you to go into a ministry of sort, you didn't know that you were going to go officially into the ministry until your pastor at home started pushing you in that direction.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. After I recovered from my auto accident then I became more active in the church. My pastor took notice of me and he sense that I had some gifts, doing speeches in the church and I was always wanting to do something because the lord saved my life. I wanted to pay him back. At that age I learned better as I studied the word. You cannot work for your salvation. It is a free gift. Anyway, I developed a love for the church at an early age, held most all the offices within the church. I just had a love for God's worship.

Interviewer: So after you finish your undergraduate work did you go into theology school?

Mr. Johnson: Oh Yes! I went on from my undergraduate works right into Chancy Smith Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia which is a Presbyterian

Seminary. At that time my denomination seminary which was in Charlotte, NC was so small until we couldn't survive on our own so we move to Atlanta under the umbrella or six (6) other denominations which is still now known as The Intenty Denomination. It is the largest century denomination in Atlanta, GA.

Interviewer: So that was an [] ?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, I am so pleased that the lord has blessed me to get a tasted of the [] fellowship of various denominations.

Interviewer: Because that was the way that Christianity has grown in this country.

Interviewer: Was this an integrated school or not?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, It was integrated, different ethnics. It was beautiful. It was God's seminary for many women that desired to go into the field. I consider the experience as and awesome experience.

Interviewer: The Presbyterian Church has had women ministers in it for quite a number of years. So you came right at the time that there were men and women, black and white.

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: So you did that right after college and went immediately into [].

Mr. Johnson: Yes, went immediately into seminary even when I was in elementary school my mind was focus on Presbyterian. We had to go to school for 7 years. And so, I started working early saving my money for an education because at that time my mom had 5 sons. She was a single mother and couldn't take care. She did her best.

Interviewer: Did you have sisters as well?

Mr. Johnson: No, just 5 sons.

Interviewer: What happen to your father?

Mr. Johnson: My father left us when we were real young so my mother took on the position of father and mother and did the best she could

Interviewer: What did she do for a living?

Mr. Johnson: She worked for factories.

Interviewer: In South Carolina?

Mr. Johnson: South Carolina.

Interviewer: So you went to graduate school and then what happen?

Mr. Johnson: After graduate school my Dean of Seminary asked me a few weeks before graduation, he said, Bob, where do you want to go. I said I am still waiting on the lord to order my steps. He ordered my steps to come this far. At first he said he wanted to give me a 3 circuit church. I told him I said no, god has called me to be a pastor not a traveling preacher. Pastor of people to be with them on a 7-day basis to nurture and feed to be their Shepard. He said, "OK, I got a church in North Carolina on the east coast, have you been there. I said "no I haven't been." He said I want you to go out there and just look the particular church over and come back and talk to me. So I came out to New Bern to Ebenezer and the members had been without a pastor for 5 years. Rev. C.C. White, he was to long passed and they were just searching and waiting for the lord to send them a leader. When they saw me, one of the members ran after I finish preaching, he said. please come back and be our pastor? I said I would love to make a promise but I have to pray over it, I have to talk to the lord. I don't know what direction he is leading me but if he led me back here I will come back and be your pastor. He said, if you do, I will buy your first robe. I said that still is not going to entice me to misdirection of the lord desire. The Lord has been number one in my life and I rely on him for everything.

Interviewer: Who was this person that said that?

1142

Mr. Johnson: The gentleman that wrote the history about the basement, this basement, Mr. Allen S Dudley. His family grew up in this church and he was a dedicated leader in this community as well as the church.

Interviewer: So this was your first parish?

Mr. Johnson: My very first and I am still here.

Interviewer: And it's been 28 years?

Mr. Johnson: 28 years.

Interviewer: Are you married?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. I didn't marry until almost 50 years after pastoring. At that particular time I was still in prayer seeking for a mate, the right mate for the ministry. I knew that the lord would desire me to have the best for his ministry and it would be a blessing to me as well as to the ministry of the church that I serve so I met my wife, Martha Johnson. We got married in 92.

Interviewer

Is she from New Bern?

Mr. Johnson: She worked at the time in New Bern but she is from Jacksonville, NC.

Interviewer: Does she work now? I know you have children.

Mr. Johnson:

Yes, she is a schoolteacher in Special Ed teaching disable children in school. We have 2 fine sons, Robert Lee Manual and Jordan Isaiah they both carry the biblical names.

Interviewer: Jordan Isaiah, that's wonderful.

Mr. Johnson. I named my first and my wife named the second. My wife named my second after the book that I received my call. From Isaiah the 6th chapter. The Lord said, "Whom shall I send." That came to me that day when I went and talked to the Lord. Out of the clear blue sky whom shall I send.

Interviewer: Did you come here when you were a little kid?.

Mr. Johnson: When I was a kid.

Interviewer: When you were in the graveyard?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. As I Look back, I said lord at that age I was studying the bible. But it just happened. I can't explain it.

Interviewer: Well, Isaiah was a powerful book.

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: And [ad van] [] is a great time for Isaiah.

What was the parish like when you first came here? You said the ministry was without a pastor for 5 years. That must have been terribly difficult for them.

Mr. Johnson: Well the clerk of session she stepped in. She was very close to pastor CC White. He was pastor for 39 year and she worked closely with him. When he passed she somewhat took over leading the congregation until the lord saw fit to sent someone here to be the pastor. When I came on the seen I met Mrs. Dudley. She schooled me about the church and what she has done. She did a beautiful job. In holding the church together. Her picture is over there on the table.

Interviewer: She's the wife of the man that []

Mr. Johnson: No, she was a member. She was the clerk of session at the time.

Interviewer: Was the church financial solvent or did you come into a situation that had other kinds of problems? I mean was the church itself in good shape?

Mr. Johnson: Financially, they were struggling in all other aspects of the life of the church and so I had to take what they shared with me and find my way trying to build onto what they presented to me. At the time the church was receiving aid from the Presbyterian to take care of the pastor. I was able to sit down with him when I became pastor and share with him that my Ministry is not all about money, if you are willing to work where we can

compromise each other I'm willing to work with you until we reach that point where we can grow in membership and finances so forth and so we were able to do that.

Interviewer: Was it a struggle or did it take you several years to get solid there?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, once they looked at my vision, because I told them I had a different vision than CC White in I am ready to lead you further toward betterment of life and ministry here from my perspective.

Interviewer: What was his and what was yours?

Mr. Johnson

Basically, Reverend White's vision, was governing of the youth. He attracted a lot of young people to this church. He was a walking pastor. He didn't own a vehicle. He walked to visit his Parisian. He was a caring pastor he was a serious pastor, very educated, he taught school along with his pasturing Ebenezer.

Interviewer: So he had two jobs?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, he had 2 jobs.

Interviewer: And this is your total responsibility?

Mr. Johnson: When I first came here I came as a full time pastor because that's what I shared with the people that I couldn't see myself as serving a church and also at the time a vocational job. So we tried it for several years and they decided well pastor we are not financially stable enough to take on a full time pastor.

Interviewer: To afford a salary that would be []. It is not complex that I can ask, that this is a responsibility to keep up a historic building like this.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, and so at that time the lord open up a door for me to enter to work, well at that time Ebenezer became a member of The Religious Community Service. We were one of the firs black churches in the community that united with The Religious Community Service. And through that ministry, I became very involved with the Soup Kitchen. The

bless thing, the temporary soup kitchen got a start right here in this basement. This was the first church that opened the doors for the Soup Kitchen that we now have.

Interviewer: What date was that, do you recall?

Mr. Johnson: That was in 1982.

Interviewer: What year did you actually come to Ebenezer?

Mr. Johnson: May 1980. Rev. Rev. Richard Boyd, the pastor of First Presbyterian, he had the vision for RCS. So he called all churches from both communities together and shared the idea with all of us.

Interviewer: He and I go [birdie] together []

Me. Johnson: All right, he is my friend.

Interviewer: How did that come about that you all had the first dinners here?

Mr. Johnson: Well, the churches down town didn't open their doors and then Sister Angel Mary who was a Nun at the catholic church, she approached me and asked me would I talk to the members and at that time we just renovated this basement to what it is now. Put up panel and towered the floors. At first the members were a little skeptical. I said you know what, we cannot say no; this is a ministry which the lord has called us to reach out. We heard stories about people sleeping under the bridge, committing suicide because they had no one []

Interviewer: They were so desperate.

Mr. Johnson: Desperate. I said no. I said in spite of the renovation we have done. I still feel that god want us []. We opened the doors and they came in and stayed for about 2 or 3 years.

Interviewer: How many days a week did you serve dinner?

Mr. Johnson: We served 5 days, Monday through Friday.

Interviewer: Is that only one meal a day?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, Lunch.

Interviewer: Did you make it here in your own kitchen?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, everything was done right here in the kitchen, served right here. Volunteers from the various churches met here and prepared the meals.

Interviewer: Rotated like they do today.

Mr. Johnson: Yes,

Interviewer: Did you ever have any incidents from these 3 years of service?

Mr. Johnson: Yes we had someone to break in. to take some of the food items.

Interviewer: You think it might have come from that particular ministry.

[] (cannot understand, both are talking)

Mr. Johnson: We knew some insiders knew about this place and where we keep things.

Interviewer: That wasn't so bad, was much damage done.

Mr. Johnson: No.

Interviewer: So again, probably needed it. Was anything else, I mean its tremendous, things you've done really, very great things in many ways. That was one of your outreaches.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, that was our very first and through that we had a shelter, we had a shelter at the RCS and it needed a manager to supervise the shelter with guest that were going to stay overnight so that was like part time job for me to fall back on.

Interviewer: When did you take that on?

Mr. Johnson: I took that when the church shared with me that they could no longer support a full time pastor.

Interviewer: So you did that before the soup kitchen came here?

Mr. Johnson: No. About a year down the road.

Interviewer: Started the soup and while it was still here you went on there.

Mr. Johnson: When I left here another door opened under the same ministry. They needed someone to monitor a hot line in the shelter so I did that. We had a family shelter but it needed a supervisor so at that time I got married. My wife and my first son we moved into the family home of the Religious Community Service. In the house and we stayed there about 3 years.

Interviewer: So that was in the early 90's about mid 90's.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. They shared with me later hat they had to close the home because they were in a financial shutdown at RCS. So I was out of a house, out of a shelter but the lord he is always good he open a door right next door from the church one of the members passed and the family offered the home to us and so my wife and I we brought the home.

Interviewer: Is that your home or part of the church?

Mr. Johnson: It's our home.

Interviewer: Where did you live when you first came here?

Mr. Johnson: The church provided a house for me the first 2 years.

Interviewer: Where did you live?

Mr. Johnson: I lived several places, first on George Street right beside Tabernacle Baptist Church, and then I moved on Johnson Street and lived in one of the relatives of the church family home. Then I moved on West

Street, a little dollhouse. I would like for you sometime to ride by and see it. A little home for one person I stayed there for one year and a half. That's where I met my wife.

Interviewer: What was the address of that? I am going to have to look it up.

Mr. Johnson: It's West Street across from Good Shepard. It's this hotel. It's a small tiny house beside the hotel. So you can't miss it, if you are coming down Queen and you turn down west Street it's the second house.

Interviewer: A little dollhouse?

Mr. Johnson: I had to put my head down just to go up stairs.

Interviewer: Yes you're a tall fellow. But still that would be hard to find.

Mr. Johnson: And still after that the lord open the door to work at the hospital.

Interviewer: What did you do there?

Mr. Johnson: I started out as a volunteer Chaplain for 5 years I served. Then the door opened for a staff Chaplain for the weekend. I am still working there now.

Interviewer: So you have a part time job at the hospital and a part time job here.

Mr. Johnson: Yes

Interviewer: As we all know there is no such thing as a part time you must be a busy fellow.

Mr. Johnson: No I tell my members, I only get paid for a part-time but I'm a full time pastor. I know my role as well and I don't consider the time whatever the lord has called me to do I am going to give it my all and use all the time that he give me to complete the work.

Interviewer: So you really have followed the carrier of the religious service center. Are you on the board?

Mr. Johnson: I have served as a president, the first black president of this Community Service. I served on the board; I just recently step down from that.

Interviewer: How is it doing?

Mr. Johnson: Well it's suffering financially because of the economic.

Interviewer: I know everybody Covent is bare.

Mr. Johnson: We are looking at ways how we can support that ministry. We have cut back hours services because of lack of funds coming in from the churches and other religious organization. We have not struggled but we're still surviving and we will continue to do the best we can because without RCS all of our churches people will be knocking on every church.

Interviewer: What's the clientele there?

Mr. Johnson: Well it's...

Interviewer: Is it young, old, black, white, how about Hispanic, have you seen it change? I know there are a lot of Asian people living here now.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. Spanish.

Interviewer : Have you seen it change? Has it changed over the years that you have been associated with it?

Mr. Johnson: In what way?

Interviewer: The complex of the clientele.

Mr. Johnson: Yes the numbers are increasing.

Interviewer: The mix of the races.

Mr. Johnson: The word is really spreading. I guest, when the congregate and tell their friends through religious community service involvement in the community. The word is really out there now. I remember at first sister Angela Berry had to go and knock on doors and invite people to come.

Interviewer: What kind of doors?

Mr. Johnson: They had a club down here where a lot of people were hanging out.

Interviewer: What kind of club

Mr. Johnson: It was like a social club

Interviewer: On Bern?

Mr. Johnson: On the corner of Bern and Queen.

Mr. Johnson: And I remember just as good because that first day we open we sister and I we stayed here because we had gone out that the temporary soup kitchen was open for all people and that first day no one walked in. Sister said we are going to have to do something we have made all this preparation. At that time people were very proud, they never had a soup kitchen so they didn't know what this was going to be like. We took the initiative to go to them and welcome them and invite them to come.

Interviewer: So you went to the social club because you knew people that hung out around it.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, and from that day on to now people have been coming.

Interviewer: From all walks of New Bern.

Mr. Johnson: Yes and beyond New Bern.

Interviewer: What happen to sister?

Mr. Johnson: She received her call to move onto Pennsylvania, and she is working in a Nun Retirement Center.

Interviewer: Do you keep in touch?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. Sister and I we can write a book. When she needed a shoulder to lean on she will call me and when I need a shoulder to lean on I'll call her and we were just like this.

Interviewer: And that's when the Catholic Church, St. Paul's was down town I imagine.

Mr. Johnson: Yes it was down town. She was in the school system. She just retired from the school system

Interviewer: From St. Paul's School?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, she was just a joy.

Interviewer: Was she tough?

Mr. Johnson: Yes she was tough. She was sweet but she was tough. She was a beautiful fantastic sister. God sent, God sent! You know everybody loved sister. She would give you a run for your money if you step out of line but she did it always in love. That what made the RCS at that time, a religious organization but they really cared and showed a lot of compassion for the needs of the people. She even took people in the office and did counseling.

Interviewer: What did Rich [Boyd] have, I know you said he helped start it. I know he had left but I don't know how long he was involved?..

Mr. Johnson: Rich, I think he as about 10 years, he stayed until we got into the first place. We are in the 2nd building now. We built right next to the farmers market. After that he moved on. He stayed with us until we were able to stay around and move forward. We are sort of in debt to him for presenting this vision to the community and I always give him credit for this ministry.

Interviewer: Getting back to Ebenezer that was your other life, your part time so then how did your ministry her develop. What would you say the benchmarks of this ministry were?

Mr. Johnson: Could we speak of the benchmark of the high points?

Interviewer: Sure.

Mr. Johnson: My vision of Ebenezer, god placed my heart for us not to remain on this corner all by yourself. We're one black Presbyterian and we don't have a sister church in this community to connect with. In order for us to grow we must mingle and fellowship with other churches so they can come in and fellowship with us. I saw that was a great need because the majority of the member were content being to themselves and it was more to ministry than Sunday morning or Wednesday pray meeting. I invited other churches from different denominations to worship with us and they came with their former worship in a Presbyterian Church. I had some members that didn't like that who said we are Presbyterians we never done that here, but I said we have to break the ice there were this wall to tear down because people are really giving us a bad name.

Interviewer: Presbyterians are not particularly emotional in their services, so I imagine some of the other denominations were a little livelier.

Mr. Johnson: Oh yes, oh yes!

Interviewer: I know the Episcopalian have the same problem; they are always a little surprise.

Mr. Johnson: Because of my inner denomination, my [] background, I can't get with that. That's a way to go to bring this congregation to become involved in fellowships with other denomination so after I introduced that to them my members started welcoming other people having people come more across the community. They say well, you got a young pastor there that believe in extending an invitation to all people. I really made it known to them that God has no respect he love us all he want us to be family. We all decide on our own to be part of this group and part of that group but in god sight we all are his children.

Interviewer. Are there [] services that developed out of this?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. We had Good Friday service I introduced to the community. We invite seven different pastors from seven different churches

to come to one place and preach on the seven saying of Christ and that was an awesome experience.

Interviewer: Has any of that tradition continued on during the years?

Mr. Johnson. Yes, it still continued on and now in both communities. When I came here we didn't have such. We did some of that on the seminary.

Interviewer: Do you have a group of ministers that meet?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. We have a minstrel line.

Interviewer: The black community?

Mr. Johnson: The black community. When I first came here they had a strong ministerial line fellowship and also to address spiritual issues. I became involved and very involved with that today.

What sort of work does that do in the community? Do they take positions on things?

When there are problems in the school system with some of the youth in the community. When youth are in trouble down town, to go down and stay with the family and speak a word of support and most of the social issues and spiritual issues that face our community now. We have just a small group now to keep the legacy open because we feel for this community we need an umbrella like the ministry [] where churches can turn to when they need spiritual guidance.

Interviewer: What's happening within the congregations. You said you now have about 50 families, Perhaps 100 to 150 people. Somebody told me there are about 28 churches in this area, in the black area.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, there is more than that. About 50 more.

Interviewer: 50 within New Bern?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yes, we have more churches in New Bern than any other place.

Interviewer: Are these congregation shrinking, getting older?

Mr. Johnson: Yes they are getting older. The younger generation of migrating or flopping to these new modern or contemporary religious organizations that attracts them so you don't have many people that are strong in their faith.

Interviewer: In the traditional denominations that seem to be the trend for all the traditional denominations. Did you find that true in this community as well?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, people they feel that they cannot somewhat rule, you should do things in the life of the church. They branch out in status bound and that's what we have in this area. A lot of people didn't like the way things were done in traditional churches and they move out.

Interviewer: Create their own?

Mr. Johnson: Create or move wherever the winds blows it takes them wherever they land.

Interviewer: You find that difficult from you position in that?

Mr. Johnson: It is.

Interviewer: Practically no defense for it is there?

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you say that would be one of the disappointments of your ministry?

Mr. Johnson: I would say that would be because people need to be reached and I would love to see people anchored and have a strong faith base foundation and stay at home and its not all about the feeling, excitement and emotion. If you know the word of god and what he says that's what we need to stand on and not get caught up in the bet.

Interviewer: In your position have you been able to be personally active in some of the social activities, social problems, drugs or any of the political

problems about Five Points or any of the other things black people have been concerned about for the last 25 years?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, I've been out in the political arena.

Interviewer: What have you done?

Mr. Johnson: When Julius Parham ran for Alderman, I was his campaign manager and when Rev. Wainwright, to get into the house I was one of his campaign managers. Julius won, Wainwright won, members of the voters league was concern about educating and getting our people out to vote.

Interviewer: Get out to vote. What was that? What effort was that? I go back to the 60's so I imagine it was later than that.

Mr. Johnson: It was when during election when individuals step forward to hold positions in the political arena especially concerning blacks.

Interviewer: You campaign for particular candidates?

Mr. Johnson: Well, during that time we couldn't tell people how to vote but we helped them to understand that it's important to exercise their right to vote and take advantage of the opportunity and talk with them.

Interviewer: I know that a difficult thing in the ministry, to be active politically. You certainly can't do it from the pulpit.

Mr. Johnson: No. At that time when I went and got involved I probably participated about 10 years.

Interviewer: From when to when?

Mr. Johnson: The late 80's to late 90's. I think that's when Julius.

Interviewer: You felt strongly enough about that.

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, I felt we needed some representation down town. Our church, I had members in the church very much involved even with the pastor to lend some time and so I did. But after being in that arena I realized this is not my calling so I pulled out very quickly. But I do take people,

Senior Citizens that need a ride to the pole and they ask me questions about voting I help them that way.

Interviewer: There is no formal organization within the community for this?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, we have the Voter League.

Interviewer: What is that, The Voter's League?

Mr. Johnson: It's an organization that meets to educate people when the election comes to provide literature to educate people about the candidates.

Interviewer: The regular meetings before the election a couple of months?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. They have monthly meetings where they talk about strategy.

Interviewer: They meet every month, even now they meet?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, they have their calendar meetings every month they are doing something in that regard.

Interviewer: Would they be a group that would be interested in the sidewalks that was discussed last night? That's not an elective.

Mr. Johnson: They have concern citizens group that speaks out on issues like that.

Interviewer: Are you involved in that? Just as a private citizen.

Mr. Johnson: Well, the community, we have an organization that is concern about up grading our Broad Street. I'm serving on that committee. We are getting ready for the 300 celebration, we want the landowners to bring their property up to par because of the celebration not only the celebration but this is our community.

Interviewer: It's an historic street. What do you think about the 300 celebration, the history of New Bern? The black part of it?

Mr. Johnson: From what I have read the blacks have made contributions to the history, the beginning of New Bern just like our white brothers and sisters. In the past you don't hear of those contributions unless you are a historian or lived during that time and passed down stories and I am very happy that we are going celebrate 300 years of many many accomplishments for this community and it's great to know that this community has survived all those many years. It is time to pause for the celebration.

Interviewer: So what did you think about Mr. Obama being elected President?

Mr. Johnson: I think its god sent. God has a time for all people. 200 years that we struggled and we worked hard, people gave their lives so that something [] which we [] to enjoy. We have our first black, to be President of the United States. I said only God can do something like this. I just feel so excited so happy because just like others, I almost thought I would never see this day. I didn't really give up on it because I said if we continue one day the opportunity would come for a black to be President to lead this United States, Commander and Chief. This is great history, awesome history.

Interviewer: Incredible is it?

Mr. Johnson: To know that he shared the [] of all people. He is a president for all, I like it when he said "It's not the red state, not the blue state but I'm being [] for the whole United States." That's including all classes of people. I believe that's why from that statement that he made or the standing he took by saying that he was able to reach out and bring in young people from all walks of life because they feel it's time for a change, for us to come together to be people again.

Interviewer: It's a great opportunity.

Mr. Johnson: It is a great opportunity!

Interviewer: Which it plays with your own background and all that makes it even more exciting.

Mr. Johnson: I just wonder about this history, celebrating New Bern, I was blessed in 89 to go with the City Aldermen to Chicago to compete for the

All American. The first time they went themselves and they saw what other cities did to help them to win. So they came back and called the religious community service and took us. So we were an added plus. I will say the Religious Community Service ministry within the community really made New Bern to become the All American City.

Interviewer: Did it become the All American City?

Mr. Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: I don't know anything about that. Go ahead and explain that. This was a competition or something?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, it was a competition all cities would meet in a certain local to compete for the All American City. When I went, it was cities from all over.

Interviewer: Arranged by population?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, and we met in Chicago with the Mayors and Aldermen. Sister Angela Mary and I went and we talked about Religious Community Service and they applauded. When they appalled, they listen and were very timid to what we said and we knew we were almost there.

Interviewer: How many cities did you compete against?

Mr. Johnson: It was about 25 more cities up there for the same.

Interviewer: Who voted on this? What was the makeup of the voting?

Mr. Johnson: They had a committee.

Interviewer: Do you recall who made it up?

Mr. Johnson: No, I don't know. Each city stood before that committee and presented their presentation what made their city so great and why they should be the All American City. They shared the beautiful story and history.

Interviewer: Who was the mayor at that time?

Mr. Johnson: Ella Bingum.

Interviewer: You won?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, we won.

Interviewer: What did you get? Did you get like two million dollars or something?

Mr. Johnson: No we didn't get money we just got the recognition to put signs up in the community that you are the All American City. We were able to be recognized by signs that we were the All American City.

Interview: That's fantastic!

Mr. Johnson: In 89 we went to Chicago.

Interviewer: Was there any particular story from the pastor of the church in this idea of ancestor or something that you want to recall or some particular person that has been really instrumental? You have mention several people but not particular from the church's point of view. I mean obviously the sister is important.

With in this congregation?

Well, yes or any influential person.

Mr. Johnson: It was so wonderful ministers that when I first came in 80 they took me under their wings and they were my mentor and one Rev. H.O. Hawkins he was the committee on ministry at that time. He said "Rob before you go to New Bern to Ebenezer I want you to stop by Wilson.

Interviewer: Wilson?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, Wilson, North Carolina where he lived. I want to give you from a pastor's point of view some tips on the church you are going to."

It was awesome! I never pastured but somehow the lord put me in his path to nurture and he really prepared me to come to New Bern.

Interviewer: Was there anyone here in town that took on that role when you got here?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yes. Rev. H.O. Simmons, he was one of the oldest senior strong leaders in this community. We connected when I first came here.

Interviewer: What denomination was he?

Mr. Johnson: He was Christian, Christian church. He was my dad in the ministry. We called each other by nickname we never call each other by name. He would call me peach. I would call him apples.

Interviewer: How do you spell that?

Mr. Johnson: APPLE.

Interviewer: You called each other peaches and apples?

Mr. Johnson: Yes and we call another term ice cream. People used to say why they call each other peach and apples. We developed that closeness. He saw me as his son. That was his nature he called everybody that.

Interviewer: Being a non New Bernian and coming into a ministry like this, that was wonderful that somebody would help you come into the community because as an outsider myself I know that is not always easy. Did you run into any kind of walls when you first came on, resistant I guest is the word?

Mr. Johnson: No. I learned through scripture to have friends but show yourself friendly. I needed a mom, dad and brothers. I had a lot of moms a lot of daddies.

Interviewer: A handsome single man I know you did.

Mr. Johnson: The ladies they took very good care of me. They took me out, invited me home, take me out to all the restaurants. They just spoiled me. They just loved to have a son. This is a very friendly community. [All my

days that I have been here are very rewarding. Rev. Basket he was the other ministry that took me under his wings.

Interviewer: He was not from New Bern.

Mr. Johnson: No, He was from Wilmington, North Carolina. He was in the same Christian as Rev. Hawkins.

Interviewer: Are these black people?

Mr. Johnson: Yes. They are black

Interviewer: What about the white ministers here? You mentioned Rich Boyd of course.

Mr. Johnson: Gary Howard was a white Presbyterian minister. In the white community, Presbyterians, we had this one fellowship every month. We would meet at one house and bring a cover dish and have a table discussion about ministry and get to know one another.

Interviewer: You still do that?

Mr. Johnson: No.

Interviewer: Cause there are several Presbyterian churches I mean the big church down town, I think there is another one too.

Mr. Johnson: Rich Boyd was very instrumental in that when I came here.

Interviewer: Did you fellowship with all the Presbyterians? But that's kind of gone by the waste side.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, gone by the waste side and out of that I was able to fellowship with Christ Episcopal at that time and when he learned how to pastor he came and welcomed me to the community. I have so many great memories of people on both sides of our community that was out of this world.

Interviewer: Do you have any other comments you want to make? Thank you very kindly for all you've done.

Mr. Johnson: Before I was in [] where I grew up, I was ridden in a community where black and whites didn't see color, we played with each other and this particular day right after Dr. King, someone open the door for us. In my community a black Presbyterian church and a white Presbyterian church almost faced each other, I said well Dr. King have really open the door I am going to visit my white brothers and sisters and it's a huge church. I walked in there; they normally have Sunday prayer devotion.

Interviewer: This is in the 60's you are talking about?

Mr. Johnson: Yes in the 60's I went to this church, it's a Reform Presbyterian Church. I didn't go to the back I went right down this long isle near the middle I felt everybody eyes is on me. I said, did I do the right thing. After the service was over everybody came up to me and said congratulations, thank you for coming.

Interviewer: How old were you when you did that?

Mr. Johnson: I was 12 years old.

Interviewer: You were pushing.

Mr. Johnson: The pastor still lives today. We still communicate today.

Interviewer: You 're quite a networker.

Mr. Johnson: Rev. James Code. He is still living today. He became a mentor for me, taking me to his home, youth camps in his den motion with his children. Sat around in his home had meals together. Went to all the services together. A lot of the people there they knew of me but didn't know me personally. I started going to bible study at Erskin College.

Interviewer: Thank you very much, it's been a delight.