RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
CAMDEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH

ARNOLD NORRIS BYRD

for the

BLACK CAMDEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in collaboration with the

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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CAMDEN, NJ

(recorded remotely)

MARCH 1, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kendra Boyd: This begins an oral history interview with Mr. Arnold Norris Byrd on March 1, 2022, conducted by Kendra Boyd and Jesse Bayker. This interview is being conducted virtually on Zoom. Thank you so much for joining us today Mr. Byrd. To begin with, can you tell us where and when you were born?

Arnold Byrd: Yeah. August 30, 1939, Camden, New Jersey.

KB: And what were your parents' names, their birthplace, and their date of birth?

AB: Okay. My father's name was Ralph Herman Byrd. My mom's name was Laura Byrd. My father's birthplace was King-Queen County, Virginia. I don't have his date of his birthday. My mother was born in Moorestown, New Jersey. My mother was born in 1923. And I think my father was born in 1919.

KB: So, starting with your mom's side, can you tell us just a little bit about what you know about her family how they came to be in the area? Any information you have.

AB: She was born in Moorestown, New Jersey, so I think most of our family was from this area between Philadelphia, South Jersey, and so forth. She did have some family in Washington, DC. Then she went to high school in Camden, she went to Camden High, she didn't graduate. She left high school in about the 11th grade. And she was a typical housewife. She worked in a sewing factory, and that's how she brought us up. I mean, she was a great mom.

KB: What about your father's side? Can you tell us a little bit what you know about his family background and how long they were in Virginia?

AB: He was born in King-Queen County in 1919-20 and I think he came to Camden in about 1930. He went to Woodrow Wilson High School, he graduated

from Woodrow Wilson High School in Camden in 1939. He was an athlete. He played basketball, football, and track, and obviously that's where I got my involvement from football as far as athletics is concerned. He worked at a Camden shipyard during the Second World War. I still say The War, but I understand there's been a lot of wars since that war. During the Second World War he worked there. His religious affiliation was Episcopalian. His political affiliation was Democrat. He had no military service, and his race was African American. He was a great father.

KB: Do you know why your dad, or his family decided to come from Virginia to Camden?

AB: Yeah, better employment opportunities. That's what they told me, that it was hard to get them any jobs in Virginia and so forth, so they moved up here to New Jersey and worked out of New Jersey, Philadelphia, North Jersey, New York area. Obviously, being African American, they were looking for better economic opportunities. And schools up here were more integrated than they were in the South at that time.

KB: Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like for you as a kid growing up in Camden?

AB: Yeah, it was wonderful as a kid growing up in Camden, I could do anything I wanted to do. I could run, play, snowball fights, play football, basketball. I didn't have to do a job until I was about 17, 18 years old, so I just had a great time. Learn how to ride a bike, learn how to play baseball, football, basketball, follow my parents around all the time, follow my father playing semi-pro football. It was just great. I mean, I lived in the projects, but I didn't realize that was there was a stigma to living in the projects. I thought that was great housing as a young kid, until I got to junior high and high school. Then I reached out on my own, became involved in sports and public speaking and a lot of other kinds of things and had a real successful high school career. I loved it. I got a new car when I was 17 as a senior

in high school, so you know, really living it up. I say a new car, it was new to me. It was a 1951 Chevy in 1957. So, it was new to me and my buddies.

KB: Can you tell us about your K-12 educational experience in Camden and just any memories that come up for you going through the school system?

AB: Yes, I was part of the first integration as far as the school system was concerned, I think it was in about 1946-47. You know, obviously I was in kindergarten or first grade or whatever, I don't remember exactly where. But we were integrated. We went from the all-African American school, to the mixed public school. I went from Sumner School, it was called Charles Sumner named after the abolitionist, to a school called Mickle School, where they had Caucasian students. So that was an experience. I stayed there until the sixth or seventh grade. And I left there to go to junior high, because they said if you took college prep you can go to junior high. I thought that was great to take college prep, so I took college prep. I went to junior high and in junior high you could move around in your classrooms, and everything was a little different than elementary school. So that's how I got to junior high in college prep. And eventually, I got to college. I guess that was part of the start. And I loved every minute of school. I enjoyed school, even though we had the normal situations and so forth there, but I enjoyed school.

KB: What about your neighborhood, and the neighborhoods in Camden over time? How was that? Or what was your experience with the social aspects of Camden?

AB: Okay, well, obviously, at that time the neighborhoods were not integrated, you know, like they are today. I was born downtown in an all-Black neighborhood. My mother never made it to the hospital, a midwife birthed me. So that's an experience that I tell people to joke. I've had sometimes opportunities to interact with the hospital in town, Cooper Hospital, and I used to tell them, “hey look, you guys didn't even let me come into hospital to be birthed,” and you know they’d get quiet and everything. It is just a joke to carry on. So, it was an area called Downtown, it was actually called Foggy Bottom. And if you got into any Porgy

and Bess kind of situations, you heard of Foggy Bottom. That's a place where poor Black folks lived. And they had their own, how would you say it? Their own interaction with each other. So that's where I was born. Downtown, Foggy Bottom.

I left there at about age six or seven. As a matter of fact, I went to about five elementary schools during the war, because during the war, they could act as babysitters. And you know, the war, the Second World War, I guess you guys are not old enough to know what I'm talking about during the war. But the Second World War was when we were fighting Germany. So, I went to about five different schools down there, because my father and mother worked in the defense industries. That's an experience that I remember.

A unique experience I remember, I learned to ride a bike. It was my cousin's bike. The way I could ride it at four or five years old was that it was a girl's bike. And I remember the girl's bike didn't have the bar across. So, I could stand up and ride a bike. It's amazing what you remember. I remember that. And then we moved to the projects, they were actually the public housing projects. I guess I might have been seven, eight years old, when we moved there. And I stayed there, until my parents bought a house when I was about 14 years old. So, I've had that experience. That experience that so many poor people and African Americans had, I lived in the projects and I loved it. It was great, I had no problems.

My dad was an athlete. He couldn't go pro because he had kids and at that time, you know, you had to take care of your family. So, he passed on to me everything he knew about sports and that was my life as a teenager. Then when I got to high school I realized that I could use sports to further my activity and further my life. So, I saw my father working in a foundry, in a metal foundry, and I promised myself I would never do that kind of work. So, I really got involved in sports because somebody told me that if you do sports, you got a chance to get a scholarship to go to college, and my parents didn't have enough money to send me to college. So, I was involved in sports. Plus, that's what my dad did. So, I got a new car at 17 and I graduated at 17. And I went off to Rutgers University.

In high school, I had some successes. As a matter of fact, I was like an all-area football player. I played basketball, I wasn't good at basketball, okay, but I played it. They probably put me on the team because I was a good athlete. But anyway, I played it, and enjoyed. From there, I decided I wanted to further my education, but to be honest with you, the only reason I was going to further my education was because I wanted to keep on playing sports. They told me, "If you leave high

school, to keep on playing sports you needed to go to college." I said okay, that's for me. So, I was lucky to go to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, and like they say, the rest is history.

I mean, it was a major story me going to Rutgers University from the projects in Camden, New Jersey. First of all, when you talk about sports and Rutgers University, I think maybe you guys have heard of Paul Robeson. Well, there's a relationship between me and Paul Robeson. Because I was the third African American football player, Paul Robeson was the first. I was the second African American baseball player, Paul Robeson was the first. I was the second African American basketball player at Rutgers, Paul Robeson was first. So there was a connection. He's from Princeton, and I had a chance to go to Princeton, on Clay Street and relate to some relatives of Paul Robeson and so forth. Talking too much, you got some more questions for me? [laughter]

Jesse Bayker: We love this! That's what we want you to do. So, I want to just back up just a little bit and see if we can hear a little bit more about how you decided to come to Rutgers specifically? Did you have other schools you were thinking about? What made that decision for you?

AB: That's a good question. Like I said, my mother and father were typical workers, and they didn't have a lot of money. So obviously, one of the ways that I would be able to go to school would be an athletic scholarship, because at that time, they didn't have financial aid and all that kind of stuff. So what I did, my father and myself, we contacted about five different universities, like University of Pennsylvania, Penn State, Rutgers, a few others, and a couple of the African American schools in the South like Morgan and Fisk. So, when it came down to a choice, I was able to pass the College Boards barely, I wasn't a brain, but I was able to pass the College Boards. In athletics in high school, I became an all-state this, and all state that, so I had these things going for me. I was able to pass the College Boards, I was African American, and they started talking about integrating African Americans, and so forth. So, I had a choice of about five schools. I chose Rutgers because Rutgers was a little further away and they offered me some money, a scholarship. University of Pennsylvania really gave me the best package, but it was only across the bridge. It was only in Philadelphia, and I'm living in Camden. And I said, I would like to go away. I wasn't sure I had the discipline to

do what I needed to do right across the bridge. Because I could come home and see my buddies and hang out and stuff like that, I didn't think that was such a good idea. But I fell in love with the idea of going away to college. Now, the college that I really loved and they wanted me was Colby College, up in Maine. But their athletic program was a little small and it was a little far away from home.

So, I weighed everything and I wound up at Rutgers because it's closer, I could get home, but I was still away. I wasn't staying home, I was on campus every day, and their package was fine. They paid for everything, except food. The way I got around that is because I was playing athletics all the time, I would eat on training meal. So, I would get food taken care of, and that was great. Now, when I wasn't playing, I had to go downtown and buy whatever I had to buy, but during the seasons and everything, you had a training meal. So, I got room and board and food. I didn't have to pay for anything else. Books I may have. That was fine. My parents used to send me an allowance every week. They sent me like $12 to $14 a week. Back then that was a lot of money. You know, and obviously I would spend it in two days. I would do some other things on campus, I'd do all kinds of jobs to make it last. So, it was a great experience.

And also, one thing that Rutgers has going for it is it's close to New York. It's close to the Big Apple, you got to realize I was a little kid coming from Centerville, in South Jersey, and all of a sudden, I'm in the Big Apple. I mean, you catch a little bus from New Brunswick, 15-20 minutes, you're in New York; you're in Harlem, you're in The Village, you're learning about jazz, you're doing all those kinds of things. Everything. So, it was a wonderful experience, me and Rutgers. And I had to get out of there in four years.

Also, I joined the ROTC. At that time, there was an excellent chance that you would be drafted; any adult male would be drafted. They don't draft too many folks nowadays, but they did then every day. I was in ROTC, because the first two years was mandatory. Instead of me saying I want to be drafted, I said as I might as well stay on in. So, if I'm drafted, which I expected to be because all my friends were, I would go in as an officer. So, I got to learn how to fly an airplane, that was a great experience. I was all over Korea and Japan, and in every place in the United States, based on ROTC and being in the military. I started as a second lieutenant and finished as a captain in the reserves. That's an experience that I don't get to share with my peers because not all of them had that kind of experience. And when I get to talking about it, I just get kind of quiet because I don't want them to think I'm

bragging about it. Which I probably am right? [laughter] So, you guys get that part. I'll brag about it.

Now, I got my wings. I didn't complete advance helicopter or helicopter aircraft training because the training was in Fort Rucker, Alabama. At that time the racism that was going on and they had lynched Emmett Till and stuff. I couldn't bring myself to go to Fort Rucker. I told them I wasn't going to Fort Rucker, so they punished me by shipping me to South Korea on the DMZ, one mile from North Korea. The Korean War was only over about 10 years, so they was still having issues there. But Korea, I survived it for 13 months. And basically, what I did was play sports. I played and coached baseball, football and basketball. That was the first time I saw myself on TV, because by that time they started funding a telecast of the games, and it was amazing. I'm a poor boy from Centerville. I didn't know nothing about me being on TV. [laughter] But it was fun. And I met people from all over the world and played against everybody all over the world.

I'll tell you when I was there, you'll know of this, John F. Kennedy was killed. He was assassinated, that's like November, probably November 22, or something like that, back in 1964 or 1963, I don't remember the exact date. [Editor's note: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963.]

Well, when he was killed, obviously being in the service, I had to stand at attention with the troops and everything. But I was scheduled to go home, to leave there and come back home. Well, the general came down the line and the only reason I was standing there was because we all had to stand at attention. And he asked me to stay to play the final game. And I stayed. That's how I stayed a week or two longer in Korea, because John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I had to stand at attention, and based on that the general had the chance to ask "are you going to stay and play this football game on Thanksgiving?" Now, what could I say? Tell the general, no? [laughter] So, I said yes. But what he did, that day when we had that game on Thanksgiving, I don't know if we won or lost, but he paraded me through the cafeteria, called a mess hall, and I got a standing ovation and got in his private plane and flew me to Japan. And I came home. So, I'll never forget that. And other things that were in Korea too, but that one, I remember.

JB: Can you tell us a little bit more about your military experience and what the racial climate was like for you?

AB: The military experience for me, well, first of all, let me go back to Rutgers University. The first two years, it was mandatory for the students to take ROTC, you know, otherwise I wouldn't have taken it. I don't think it's mandatory for anybody nowadays. But at that time, if you were a freshman or sophomore, it was mandatory that you took ROTC, Reserve Officers Training Corps. Now, after the two years there, they also gave you some perks, if you could do certain things. And one of the things that I could do, I could learn to fly an airplane. I mean actually as a pilot, by myself. I still remember the first time I went solo. So I was able to do that. So I said, well, I might as well stay in because at that time, all my friends were being drafted. And I figured, well, I'm playing football, I'm healthy, I'm gonna get drafted. So, I might as well go as an officer. So, I stayed in and when I graduated there, I went into the service as an officer. That was like, amazing to be an officer in no time and still be in the United States Army.

And the military was just fantastic, you know, out of sight for a Black boy from Centerville and Camden. And all the perks that go with being an officer, I did them, I enjoyed them. I don't think I was obnoxious with anybody, but I had the respect and so forth. And I was able to continue playing sports because I played every sport in the service and some of the sports I was even in charge of. And that was the first time I ran into folks that were—in my mind—actually better than me. Because you had folks from all over the country. I remember a young individual from Detroit. I was a centerfielder, and he was a left fielder, and he became the most valuable player. And deservedly so. Those were the good times.

I'm not going to talk about the bad times. Because you know, we were only 10 years past the Korean War. So, we still had issues and I did see people get shot, killed, and airplane crashes and stuff like that. I was stationed along the DMZ, you might have heard of the DMZ, the imaginary line between North and South Korea. So anyway, that was a great experience. The funny thing, the thing I remember most about it, is that for 18 months there, you couldn't wear civilian clothes. So, I was in a GI uniform for 18 months straight. Every day, every night. [laugher] And because I was a lieutenant, I did all kinds of things. I was in charge at the mess hall, which is the cafeteria, I was in charge of the movie house. It was great. It was a great learning experience for a young lieutenant. I was only 22, 23, 24 years old.

JB: Were you serving with a lot of other African American soldiers or were there mostly white soldiers serving with you?

AB: Oh boy, I got to be careful how I say this here, because I don't want to give away our secrets, and everything. Actually, there was very few, maybe down to one or two other African American officers. They just didn't exist. So, all the African American enlisted men were obviously non-officer they were enlisted men. But I still had that friendship with my people. I still had a great friendship with the enlisted men because they were African American and I was African American. I'm from the city, they're from big cities. So, I spent more time with them than was allowable in the service. Because there's supposed to be a schism between officers and enlisted men. However, that didn't stop me from spending time with them. First of all, I was an athlete, so I was playing with them because they were mainly the people that was playing football, baseball, and basketball. And the other thing is that they would spend time in the so-called village and they would bring me. They would let me go with them. Okay, I'm not going to say what really went down. But the one thing that I remembered is I would never hide the lieutenant bars on my shoulder, because I was always saying if you hide the lieutenant bar, as an officer, you would be impersonating the enlisted men. And that was a court martial situation. So, when I would go to the village with the enlisted men, I would be the only one with the lieutenant bars on. So, they came up with a nickname for me, sukoshi lieutenant, which means small or young lieutenant in Korea. I spent more time in the villages with the enlisted guys than I probably should have. I don't think they will come and court martial me, you know, 50, 60 years later. [laughter] And then I spent a lot of time with them on the athletic field, too. That's where most of the African Americans were, they were enlisted men, they weren't officers. As a matter of fact, the whole time that I was in the service, I only really communicated with one or two other African American officers. All the rest were enlisted men. And of course, I dealt with hundreds, or thousands of soldiers and they were all enlisted men. I might be talking too much; they might come lock me up. Now I'm looking over my shoulder already. [laughter]

JB: So, let's back up a little bit back to your time at Rutgers. Can you tell us a little bit more about your experience at Rutgers aside from sports and the ROTC?

What was your academic experience like in the classroom, and relationships with other students?

AB: Well, the classroom Rutgers at that time, I think they were kind of upset that they weren't considered an Ivy League school and everything. So, they really tried to make the academics key. They gave me an extremely hard time with the academics. They were competing with the Yales, the Harvards, and the Princetons. So, coming from South Jersey, from Camden, the academics was tough. I mean, the first year I think I took something crazy called [engineer] chemistry. They had just done Sputnik, it just went up in space. So, everybody wanted to deal with that kind of activity. So instead of me taking a normal course there I am in some kind of engineer chemistry course. It was above my head, didn't know what was going on. And I suffered. So that first year there, I didn't do badly with the other courses, psychology, sociology, whatever it was, but I failed that [engineer chemistry] course, or got a D in that course. So, I had to make that up. The first year was a little rough, and I think I was on probation, or warning. The reason I remember was because one of the things I wanted to do was play sports at Rutgers. That's really why I went. So the first semester I did play freshman football because the grades hadn't come out yet. But when I got the grades from the first semester, I had this big D, F, whatever you want to call it, there. But then I wanted to play baseball and everything. So, they allowed me to play baseball with the one D, and that was it. After that day, I never failed a course, never got less than a C in a course. I did get the worst, in my mind, the worst grade ever there in music. I got a C. The reason for that was because the music they wanted me to deal with put me to sleep. Bach, Beethoven, stuff like that. I'm trying to tell them about Ray Charles, James Brown. [laughter] But I got a C out of that. That's the worst grade I got. The rest of it I did pretty well because I wanted to graduate. And I did. I did sports every year.

And then I got involved in some social movements there. I don't know if they called it Black Power then, but I was in charge of the NAACP and other things. You realize it was right there close to New York. Close to Harlem. I spent time in the Schomburg Library; 125th Street; the Polo Grounds, which is gone now, the Polo Grounds was there at the time; Madison Square Garden. I met Tubman's grandson. Tubman was the Prime Minister of Liberia. Well, his grandson was going to all the schools in this country. He just had money. He'd to go to Harvard, Yale. So, he wound up at Rutgers for one year. He liked to go to the Madison

Square Garden to watch the Knicks play, I guess it was the Knicks playing, and he would want to take me. I told him I don't have any money, but he would take me with his money. He had plenty of money. He just didn't stay in school. But I spent a lot of time in Madison Square Garden watching the games. I saw Ray Felix outplay Wilt Chamberlain. You know, it only happened that one game. [laughter] I don't know if you guys ever heard of Ray Felix, but look him up. He played for the New York Knicks. He was 7 foot. Great experiences.

JB: You were participating in some of these social movements when you were going up to New York City. What about social movements on campus at Rutgers?

AB: Yeah. I don't know what they called it. It was like the Black Students Movement, Black Student Union. I participated in all of them. As a matter of fact, that youth council of the NAACP, I think I was the president. So, whatever social movements they had on campus concerning African Americans, I was definitely involved. I don't know if you guys are familiar with that campus, you know where the Ledge is? Well, we used to have our meetings in the Ledge. And I can tell you one of the social movements—I don't know if you'd call it a social movement, but it was for real—was Patrice Lumumba. Patrice Lumumba, he was the first prime minister when the Congo got their freedom. Well at that time, we was trying to advocate for African American studies on campus, because they had none. I was leading the way. What the university did, they did put it on campus, but where did they put it? Douglass College. So now, I'm stuck. Either go to Douglass College and study this or you let ‘em be. So, I had to go to Douglass College for the first African American studies course ever at Rutgers University. And the thing I remember at Douglass College, number one, there was no other men there, it was all women. And number two, all the girls were knitting. I remember that. But we were able to get African American studies, you know that one course, not the studies program, but that one course. And I understand that since then now it’s blown up to be an actual studies program and you can get a degree in it. But I can say that we advocated for it back in, I guess it was about 1960, 1961. And I was part of the first class. [Editor’s note: The Ledge is now known as the Student Activities Center located at 613 George Street New Brunswick, NJ 08901]

JB: Do you remember who taught the first classes in African American Studies?

AB: I can't remember anybody that taught any classes at Rutgers. Not by name. I do remember one gentleman teaching political science there, but he didn't last because he got sick and everything, and he had made a racial statement and they got rid of him. He's about the only one I remember. But the teachers were all fair. I have to say the teachers that I had at Rutgers, the professors at Rutgers, I have no issues with any of them. I have an issue with a basketball coach, but that is it.

JB: Do you want to tell us a little bit about the basketball coach?

AB: Not really, not really. Cause I don't think he's around anymore. That's alright. Maybe later on in the conversation I may.

JB: Alright, if you change your mind. Well, we know that at the time when you were at Rutgers there was really only a handful of Black students on campus. And of course, here you are organizing and trying to get Black Studies on campus. Can you tell us a little bit more about your relationship with other African American students?

AB: Okay, you're correct. I'm thinking that at Rutgers University at New Brunswick there was a total of about 40 Black students, not all of them was on campus, there was about 20 young men and 20 women at Douglass and we tried to organize and so forth. Half the Black male students, they commuted to New Brunswick from Trenton, Newark and so forth. So actually, Black students living on campus, maybe it might have been six, seven. That's it. And a lot of my time was spent in athletics. And I keep referring to Paul Robeson because Paul Robeson was the first Black athlete, that I found out about, he started playing in 1915, and I could be considered the second African American. Yeah, I was the second African American to play baseball. And that was in 1957. So 50 years, there were no Black athletes [on the baseball team]. As a matter of fact, in football, he was also the first, Paul Robeson. And me and a friend of mine, we went to school and graduated

together, we played football, and there was one other Black athlete at the end of the Second World War. So there was only about three or four. Well, there was actually two that predated me playing football. One in baseball, and two in basketball. That was it. So I consider myself somewhat of a trailblazer; not that I was that successful, but I was still early on. And you could feel certain kinds of things. I'm not gonna tell all the stories, but there's certain things that went down and I look back on now, that made me realize that racism was still strong. [Editor's note: Paul Robeson attended Rutgers College from 1915-1919.]

JB: You were talking about Paul Robeson, and one of his experiences that was really important was not only what he experienced at Rutgers, but also going away to games. When they would sometimes play with other teams that had a problem with the fact that Rutgers had an African American on the team, and they wouldn't let Paul Robeson play. I wonder if you have any memories of going away to other places outside of Rutgers and if there ever was an issue for you in the same way?

AB: No, it wasn't the same type of issue as Paul Robeson, but it could have been considered an issue. I remember going to Colgate to play, which is up in Hamilton, New York, in that area. Because it was an away game, you stayed overnight. So the coach, or whoever was running the team, they would put us together as roommates in one room, they put two people to a room. Well, this one time they put three of us to a room, because there's only three African Americans on the team. Instead of breaking up one to stay in a room with a Caucasian, they put all three of the room. And I kind of said "no this is not it" and kind of had a mini revolution and said, "No, I'm not doing this." By that time I was a senior and one of the key players. So, I got my own room. And they made a mistake and they filled up the refrigerator with all kinds of goodies. So, for that night there, I was just eating everything, having a ball in my room, like I was a king. I don't think I had a good game the next day, but that happened. And we ran into some other issues. I remember playing, I think it was Lehigh University, and had a racial situation.

I also remember going to spring training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, when I was a senior and coming back, that was the first time I actually faced where there was prejudice when you couldn't eat in a certain place if you're Black, "Blacks in the back," and all that kind of stuff. And I had a mini revolution. I said, "No, I'm

not doing that" and I got back on the bus. Okay, as we riding back to come to New Jersey. You know, the white players on our team, they claimed that they didn't take the food, they didn't eat. But I saw some signs that somebody had taken the food. But that was basically the only thing that really just jumped out at me.

And then there was other things on your team. The All-American I won't name, he wanted his frat buddies to be the star instead of this little Black kid from Camden, so they would do certain things. That's one reason I never joined a fraternity because it was all-white fraternities and had issues. But it wasn't difficult. I was close to New York, North Jersey, I mean, it's always great things there. You know, Miles Davis, 125th Street, Schomburg Library, you can just get involved in so much in New York. New York was just New York, what do you call it, the Big Apple? New York, say it twice? [laughter] You're talking about a little kid from South Jersey, wound up spending four to five years in New York. I was out in New York City. And I'd gotten my courses at Rutgers so that I only went to class two or three days a week because I had taken so many courses. So that meant two or three days a week I was in New York. So I loved it. And then sports just kept me busy. So my experience at Rutgers was great. I have no reason to say anything bad about the university.

JB: So one of the things that you mentioned is that there were about 20 Black students at Rutgers and then 20 Black women also at Douglass…

AB: Split that in half; 10 and 10.

JB: So, in terms of the student activism, can you tell us a little bit about if there was organizing together with the women at Douglass, were you connected with them, or was it kind of separate things?

AB: It was kind of separate, we organized with the community, whether the community was the New Brunswick community, the North Jersey community or the New York community, that's where most of our organization came from. It was only a few of us. That's basically it. We did Central Jersey, North Jersey, New York, that's where we organized. I guess we started above Trenton. Above Trenton

we'd organize and go to different places, along the shore, Asbury Park area, Newark area real strong, East Orange, and so forth. And of course, you know, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Bed-Stuy. We were very, very strong up that way. I mean, Rutgers was about North Jersey. And now they try to pretend that Rutgers-Camden was part of Rutgers and everything. When I was in school in the 60s, they didn't acknowledge Rutgers-Camden. And they didn't even really acknowledge Rutgers-Newark. I mean, they thought that Rutgers-New Brunswick was Ivy League, that was something special. They tried to relate to Princeton, which didn't bother me. I wasn't there to go through those changes. Didn't change me. I knew I was from Centerville in Camden.

KB: Okay, let's shift now to your time after Rutgers. So, we've heard that you did go to the military. But can you tell us a little bit more about what you did after you left Rutgers, in terms of your career and your work experience?

AB: Oh, yeah, I can do that. Basically, one of the things that Rutgers teach you to do is to pass a test. And, you know, if you want to be an Ivy League school and they pretended to be Ivy League, you learn how to pass a test. So, I did well with civil service tests. I took a number of civil service tests to get a job because my parents said, "okay, when you come out of college we want you to have a job, you support yourself." Okay? So, I applied through civil service, and I went to Tilden High School in Brooklyn, New York, and took a couple civil service tests and did okay. So, I had a choice of where I could work in the Civil Service Commission, whether I worked in North Jersey, South Jersey, Pennsylvania, Brooklyn, whatever. And I think I wanted to come back home, you know, I was a Camden guy. So, my first job was with the Welfare Board in Camden, based on taking the test. I was the first or second African American ever to work in the Welfare Board here. So that was an experience. I did that six or seven years.

They had a civil service test, it was called the United States Civil Service Commission. So I took that test and I passed it, and I was assigned to Third and Arch in Philadelphia, which is the United States Civil Service Office. At that time, they was pushing integration throughout the country. The area I covered was a five-state area. I moved from New York to New Jersey, Virginia, trying to get folks to apply for employment with the federal government, which at that time, didn't have many African American workers. They claimed that one of the reasons

was that people had to pass this test and have a background to be approved. But, I was part of that initial group, and went up and down five or six states trying to advocate for the Civil Service Commission to hire more African Americans. It worked pretty good, they hired a lot of folks. For some reason, I decided to come back to Camden, and that's when I came back to work for the Welfare Board. The Welfare Board, that was an experience because there was just so much going on.

After that, I wanted to go into community action, anti-poverty agency and I started with OIC of America, you guys probably heard of Reverend Sullivan. [Editor's note: Reverend Leon H. Sullivan founded Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC) of America in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1964.]

OIC of America, they started the program on this side of the river, the New Jersey program, which was in Camden County, Burlington County, and so forth. And I was very interested in a lot of the things he was doing, like, OIC of Africa and around the world. And that enabled me to travel throughout this country. I mean, I've been to Minneapolis, I've been to Oregon, I've been to California, I've been to Atlanta. I mean, if it wasn't for those programs I don't know if I'd have been able to go to those places. And you know, even though me and Reverend Sullivan, we didn't always see eye to eye on social issues and everything. But we kind of got along. We got along. He allowed me to learn a lot of things and go a lot of places. Between OIC, playing sports at Rutgers, and in the military as a lieutenant and a captain, I got around. I never believed that would happen when I was growing up in South Camden. I got around. There is no part of this country that I haven't been to. I've been to Oregon, been to Seattle. Obviously, I've been to Chicago, to Detroit, Minneapolis. All through the South. Been to Maine. What Black folks from South Camden go up to Maine? [laughter] Fort Devens in Massachusetts. I mean, it's been great!

KB: I know you continued your education getting a master's degree in 1976 from Antioch College. Can you tell us a bit about that?

AB: Okay. They had like a special program, I guess it was Community Education, where they had folks that go out into the community and advocate. I guess it was supposed to be a kind of social service leadership situation, they wanted to spread the knowledge throughout the country and everything. And I was one of the first to

be involved in that program, even though most of it was also associated with Morgan State College in the South, and it was geared towards inner city learning. And I enjoyed that. Antioch was wonderful and I'm proud of having a master's degree from Antioch. There was a lot of other things that went down because I got a chance to go down to Baltimore a number of times because it was related with Morgan State College. We actually took classes at Morgan State. Even though Antioch had a program with a number of folks there. I don't know, I guess they still have a reputation of being a very liberal minded college. Well, that was part of it. I loved it.

Now, I did start to go to Rutgers-Camden. We started a master's program, but I didn't finish it. Some of my colleagues and some folks that we were involved with together, they went on and finished and got their master's degree. But I was very instrumental in getting it started. I think it was called a master's in Urban Studies. I don't know if they still have it, I assume they still have it. We were very instrumental in getting it started, having meetings and everything, but I didn't finish there. A gentleman by the name of Dr. James Brown, if you see his name somewhere, he went on and finished it, you know, the Urban Studies program that we got started at Rutgers-Camden. Rutgers Camden was always like, home campus to me, because I'm from Camden and it's been there for years. Some of my family, my daughter and my son went there. Before they went there, a couple of folks that went to Rutgers-Camden were personal friends of mine. The college was right there.

KB: I know that you've been involved with a lot of efforts around community economic development. Can you talk about your career?

AB: Okay, the economic development part of it is getting the organization which is Camden County Council On Economic Opportunity [OEO] to get involved in certain kinds of things. The first thing that we did there, we purchased about four or five businesses, and they were mainly service stations. And we were able to generate some funds from that, to provide certain kind of programs in the community and everything. What put us out of business there, it was during the gasoline shortage [of the 1970s]. The gas shortage you gentleman and lady, you guys are too young to really remember that. But during the gas shortage, you know, you would buy gas from whoever had it. They would bring tankers up from

the South, the West. And if you had say $5,000, you could buy a tanker full of gas. And you could put it into the service station, even though you had a brand name, you could still sell it. Well, they do that now, but back then they said that was illegal. So, Exxon, took me up someplace in Maine somewhere, and accused me of doing wrong. So, I had to drop out the business. But it got me started into the field of economic development and everything.

From there, we started having the agency construct housing. We've constructed at least 100 affordable housing for folks in conjunction with the city, which we were very proud of. Because we have an idea that works. The houses that we're building now, the market rate for those houses is approximately $300,000 and we're able to sell it to poor people for $90,000. That means that these persons bought out for $90,000, in their wildest imagination would never dream that they could own the house of that value for $90,000. The state puts in the rest of money, and we do some things with them. And we make them very nice. We make off-street parking, full basements, we're still putting in full basements and everybody's saying, "they don't do basements anymore." We put full basements in, off-street parking, everything. And its still working. There was one time and we were selling the same units there for like $40,000 to $50,000, but that was like 20 years ago. Now the latest ones that we're building the sale price to the client is $90,000. The cost is $300,000 plus, and I say plus cause I don't want people to know how much money I'm actually spending. [laughter] You know, we get funded, and we do other things as well. So I'm real proud of that. I'm real proud of that because it has really affected at least 100 families.

And I don't think any of the families have directly foreclosed. Of the 100 houses that we have built, not one of them is vacant. Now, I don't know the inner workings. I don't know if some moved, if some people died, I don't know all that there. But they're not vacant. So, I can say I don't know that any of them have been foreclosed. And every once in a while, we'll get an inquiry from a mortgage company or something about it and I'll say, "Look, we don't own it anymore, the Camden City records are not really up to date, just check it out." But you know, I still live in the community, I still see them. That's what we're doing now. I'm trying to finish up the last six [houses]. And I say the last six because between me and you it's the last six that I am going to do. [laughter] And I'm real, I'm real proud of that.

Also, we have been able to purchase facilities, you know, for the agency for services support. I think we own probably about 20-25 facilities. Most of them are Head Start or childcare facilities. Then we have five or six office facilities. Some are mortgage-free and there's one or two that still have a mortgage on it. I'm trying to get rid of the mortgage, but you know, people don't want to get rid of the mortgage. I can tell them when I leave "you guys will be stuck with a mortgage." But we are doing well. And as a matter of fact, the house that I live in now, me and my buddies built it between baseball games. We always played baseball, softball and everything. But in between the game we just did it ourselves. And really, I think this is the last house that I know of in Camden city that was really built that way.

KB: I'd like to hear a little bit more about your vision for economic development. You mentioned that you purchased the service stations. Was that a cooperative effort? When you were getting started what was the sort of philosophy?

AB: Well, I think what it was here is that there was a lot of businesses and facilities in the city of Camden that were vacant. It was the suburban flight. So you had these previous businesses here that I saw as an opportunity for a new population, you know, folks that are growing up, African American, Hispanics to get in business there and be self-sufficient. There was a big thing about being self-sufficient at that time, the Muslims was dealing with it, and so forth. It was an idea that you could provide services for your community and benefit from it. And it worked. It worked. I even had a sporting goods store. I would go to Philadelphia to the wholesale district and buy car loads of sneaks and other stuff and come back and sell it to the community. But I just had too much on my plate and I just didn't stick with it. I still wanted to play baseball, and run here and do this, and visit New York, and see what's going on in Philadelphia, and everything. But I mean, it was opportunity there. And I'd hope to set an example for the generations coming behind me. I've did it somewhat, but you know, you're never satisfied.

KB: Do you have ideas about where you got your entrepreneurial spirit from? Did you have business owners in your family?

AB: I think I got this from Rutgers and my time in the service. I think I got all those ideas when I left here and went to Rutgers University in New Brunswick as a 17-year-old. And you know, I didn't come back to Camden for almost a decade. I was born there. My experience at Rutgers, then going into the service as an officer—which was big then, I don't know if it's big now, but it's really big then—and spending time around the world, and around the country. I think that kind of developed the idea to me of, hey, you can do a lot of things that you don't see on a regular basis in my hometown. And I think the response of the hometown and the people in the hometown has been always great. I mean, they responded well, and they're still responding well. It's just, the thing is it's just time for me to retire. That's the key there. If it wasn't for retirement, we could do some things in the next 10 to 15 years that could turn this place around. But that's for the next generation, I hope that I have inspired somebody on the next generation to take the lead and keep on moving. You know, I'm proud of what I've been able to do, and I'm proud of the people that work with me. You know the community, businesses, organizations. I mean, we didn't always agree, and you have politics and everything, but basically, I'm real proud. And I still live here. As a matter of fact, I kind of grew up six blocks from here. When I was born, I didn't make it to the hospital, well my mom didn't make it to the hospital. I was born downtown a couple blocks away. So I love it.

JB: We wanted to ask you about some other historical developments that you lived through. So, the first one is 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. You were a young man at the time. Wondering if you could talk about what you remember.

AB: At the time, there was several things happening and of course, you know, Martin Luther King with SCLC or whatever, but Malcolm was also busy. So, I was more a follower of Malcolm than Martin Luther King. Obviously, you know, the assassination of both of them was just horrible. Horrible. Both King and Malcolm. But as far as being on the ground, doing certain kinds of things, I was more a follower of Malcolm than I was of Martin Luther King. I mean, this area with the Black People's Unity Movement and so forth, I think we just kind of took to Malcolm. He was a demigod. The words he would say, and how they was said. And then you know, the Muslims, the so-called Black Muslims, they became very

popular. And as a matter of fact, as an organization [OEO], we took over one of their buildings that they used as a mosque, and we converted it into an office building and rebuilt it and everything. So you know, of course I love Martin Luther King and I love Malcolm. But I think we patterned ourselves more after Malcolm than we did Martin Luther King. That nonviolence approach, you know, wasn't one that I really advocated for. And I think one of the reasons that it was like that is because I grew up being an athlete. And as an athlete, you ran into some tough times, and it became physical combat. It was called athletics, but sometimes it was just pure physical combat. So, this nonviolent approach and turning the cheek the other way, that wasn't something that excited the folks that I was with. But I mean, obviously, I respect Martin, and recognize the good he did, and how it took more nerve for him to practice nonviolence than it did for somebody else to practice whatever we was practicing. H. Rap Brown, have you ever heard of H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael and stuff like that? Well, they were in my house when they came to Camden to talk. You know, so I had a relationship with them. One organization that I was very close with it's called, BPUM, Black People's Unity Movement. And a person that kind of ran that movement was named Poppy Sharp. I don't know if you've ever heard of Poppy Sharp. Well, we were friends. You know, as a matter of fact, I think we're related because my mother's maiden name is Sharp. Poppy was a local guy. He was a Camden guy, down-to-earth guy, you know. And his brother who's older would come watch us play softball and stuff like that. But until we talked to him, my leaning there, I was usually more violent than nonviolent. [laughter] Does that make sense?

JB: So other events in Camden, in 1969 and then again in 1971, you have what some people call the Camden Riots or the Camden Uprisings...

AB: Insurrections. I like to call them insurrections. Yes, I was very active at that time. I did not throw Molotov cocktails at anybody, all that kind of stuff, but I was very supportive. If somebody needed some legal advice, they could come to the organization, and we would work with them. We had meetings in our organization, and so forth. We would intercede for them if we had to get them some legal situations. Yes, we were totally involved in all that. I won't say we were the brains behind a lot of things, but you could depend on us for support. Camden County Council on Economic Opportunity, most people knew that, oh yeah, you could

count on us for support, very much. And you know, that was my youth. I know it quite well. When you talk about Poppy Sharp and H. Rap Brown and so forth, I personally knew him. And like I'm saying, I think Poppy Sharp was related to me on my mother's side. And then I knew his older brother, Barty Sharp, real well.

JB: Can you tell us a little more about your memories about Poppy Sharp and how did he become such a leader in Camden?

AB: I think the big thing that made Poppy a leader is he had a lot of courage. Some people say nerve. I mean, he was not a well-educated person in that he didn't go to college, and I really don't think he even graduated high school. I don't want anyone to think I'm talking [negative] about Poppy. But he had a lot of charisma. And he had a lot of heart. And he would step out there. You know, he was a front for a lot of folks in the back, was trying to tell him what to do and everything, but he was good people. Good people. Came from good family. And they wound up naming some buildings after him, some programs after him and so forth. You know, he was Poppy. Poppy Sharp. Camden has a kind of unique talent that most people know each other. So, you know, we all knew each other. Like I say, I'm pretty sure he's related to my mom, meaning he's related to me then.

KB: You mentioned before working with the Black Muslims, and how you were inspired by Malcolm X. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about if there was a large presence of the Nation of Islam in Camden or was it in Philadelphia? Just what you remember about that.

AB: Obviously, as far as numbers Philadelphia was much larger than Camden. But there was a very strong and active group of Nation of Islam members in the city of Camden. We had the Fruit Alone Store and we had the bean pie, which I loved. And I still love bean pies. I think I had a bean pie about a month ago, because one of the workers for me, he's Muslim and he's from Philly and every once in a while, he'll bring me a bean pie. And one of the buildings that I mentioned, used to be the mosque. It was Mosque #20. It used to be the mosque and I took that building over and I converted it to an Urban Women's Center, to service women in our

community. So, I've always been very, very respectful for the Nation of Islam. I never joined the Nation of Islam. Even though there's a lot of folks that just assumed that I was part of the Nation of Islam, because we all work together in the community. We'd work together and try to do things, we'd try to feed the community and so forth, we tried to give them direction. We weren't about negative stuff, you have to recognize that. And at one time I wore a lot of dashikis, if you guys remember the word dashiki, I wore a lot of dashikis and everything. So, they just assumed that I had to be part of some Black Power movement. And they would see me talking to the Nation of Islam folks. As a matter of fact, I still got a couple of employees now that belong to the Nation of Islam, because they moved out of Philadelphia and they kept the affiliation with the Nation, but they live on here. And we talk once in a while.

KB: Can you tell us where the location of their mosque was? Do you remember the cross streets?

AB: Yeah, let me see, we have a building there. Broadway and Spruce in South Camden. Now it's called the Camden County OEO Urban Women's Center. But that building, if not the building that location, was previously where the Nation of Islam was. The agency, we bought the building, knocked it down, and we rebuilt it as a modern Urban Women's Center. It's very, very nice. And as a matter of fact, I was there this morning, because we had a staff meeting there. That's a better place to have the meeting because of social distancing. So I came there, then here to attend this meeting. And my staff is probably glad because they may not see me today. [laughter]

KB: You mentioned that you were not a part of the Nation of Islam, you did not join the organization. I wondered, was there any Black Power-era organizations that you did formally join?

AB: Yes, I can remember that there was a couple of Black Power organizations that we were kind of loosely affiliated with in Camden. Well, my best friend here is named Dhamiri Abayomi. And he was a professor at Temple University, so he

kind of, in terms of the intelligent aspect, he kind of kept us involved in those kinds of things. So I was always associated with everything, I was just never a full-fledged member. Because I was so busy playing baseball and doing other things. And they basically told me that they didn't have time to run around the state playing baseball, they was about other kinds of things as well. But I love sports so much, I wasn't giving it up. But we understood each other. I mean, I'm still associated with some folks that have some kind of affiliation with the Nation of Islam and some kind of affiliation with the Muslim religion. And I know there's different branches and everything. But, that's the way it is. It's good. It's not a bad thing. And a lot of folks assume that I'm a member, maybe because of the way I act, and maybe because of some of the things I've promoted, maybe because of what they see, which is no problem with me.

KB: Do you feel like religion has had an influence in life, in terms of how your parents raised you? Did you attend church growing up?

AB: I didn't hear you, say that again.

KB: Religion in your background, did you attend church growing up?

AB: Yes. Yes, my parents had me attend church, primarily Episcopalian Church. And the thing that I recall mainly about the Episcopalian Church is that a lot of the practices was very close to Catholic religion. You know, some folks would always get it mixed up. I was even an altar boy. Imagine me being an altar boy? And the thing I remember about it is when it comes to communion, with the wine and everything, they would use grape juice, not wine. I remember that part of it. And then when you're supposed to be on your knees, I'm up on my knees, you know I wasn't really good at it. But I was involved with the church for a long time. As a matter of fact, the church, which is St. Augustine's Episcopalian Church, has just changed hands. And the reason I say that the facility has changed hands because my sister and my nieces they were very active in the church until recently, my sister just died about three, four months ago—she's much younger than me—and no longer are they in that church. But the church happens to be located across the

street from where I work. So, I'm seeing the activity going on as they're getting ready for whatever is going forward. So yes, my mother and father made me go to church. I shouldn't say it like that. But I went to church with my mother and father, and they were Episcopalians. And they claim my name is still on the rolls. That's what they said when they asked me to send money. [laughter] They say, “Mr. Byrd you can send the money, your name is still on the rolls.” And my brother-in-law, he was somewhat of a preacher there. And my sister, she was strong. And she just died. She’s 17 years younger than me and she just died about three months ago.

I loved the church. I think what really happened is that the conflict became between the church and sports, and sports won out. [laughter] And that's because my dad didn't make me go to church once I was playing sports. I think he was living his dream through me. I was the oldest son, you know. And he was always into sports. So, anything I would say about sports, was a go. And sports is a good thing in the Black community, it's not a bad thing. I would always have the best equipment and stuff like that. One way I got through high school, every time I scored a touchdown, I’d get a new pair of pants. So I had like 15 pair of pants every school year, because I got to scoring touchdowns. You know, everybody loved it: I loved scoring a touchdown, my dad loved me scoring the touchdowns, and then I’d go to class with nice new pants. And then I joined one of the high school fraternities. I wasn't the high school fraternity type, but I joined because I could play football. They had a nice little sweater with the insignia on it and everything. So now, I was always dressed in high school. I had my sweater with the insignia on it, and a new pair of pants from scoring touchdowns. [laughter] So that was just something I remember. It’s strange what you remember.

I also remember in November of my senior year, within a span of like a week or two, I got a sister was just born and a car. And then people would ask me for years, “which one did you like the most? Having a sister or a car?” And I would never answer. I'll still won't answer! I don't want to get in trouble. [laughter] I think my sister was born about November 15, or something like that, and I got my car before Thanksgiving. And they would ask for years. “What did you like most? What was more important to you?”—cause we was all boys—“getting a sister or getting a car?” and I said, “I’m not answering that. I don't think whatever I say is gonna come out right.” I teased my sister there forever. And her kids would tease me.

JB: Mr. Byrd you've had such a long career in activism and community economic development. What do you think of as your biggest impact or the thing you're most proud of in terms of the work that you have done?

AB: I think the thing that I'm most proud of is that folks that are in the field now can see that an African American male can be successful. You know, can be successful in doing these kinds of things. I think that's the thing I'm most proud of. And I hope it told them that you can do better, that you can continue, that you can continue that work. Because my day is over. I'm not going to be here much longer, you know, as far as the job and everything. But I hope I'm showing that, hey, you can put your mind to it, you can get this thing done. You can use your ingenuity, you can use your skills, you can make it happen. And I still find out that when I explained to people that I actually was a pilot, I actually flew airplanes, young African American young people, they look at you like "you actually flew, an airplane?" "Yes, I wasn't the passenger. I was a pilot." The reason I didn't go further in my mind, was because I was scared to go South because they had just lynched Emmett Till. And I figured that me going South, even though I was an officer, I don't think my behavior in Alabama, you know, would really suit me. I just knew that something was gonna happen, and it wasn't gonna be good. Okay, you guys know about Emmett Till, you've heard about Emmett Till? That's something in my lifetime that I know I'll never get over. I forgot what you asked me, I just keep talking.

KB: Well, Mr. Byrd, we're going to wrap up the interview, but I just wanted to give you one last opportunity if you had any other memories or reflections that you want to share about your time at Rutgers, or just the Black experience in Camden and New Jersey.

AB: Well, I'd like to say to any and all that would listen or hear me that I appreciate the Rutgers experience. I don't know what they call it now, they may have a name for it, but the fact that I was able to come from South Camden and go to New Brunswick at the time I went there, and be involved in all the activities at Rutgers University, be amazed that it was a land grant college, be amazed that it was across the Raritan River, be amazed at playing in the stadium, and doing all

the other kinds of things that you do in a university, I had the opportunity to do it. And also, I think the close proximity to New York City was just amazing. To me, it was just a fantastic kind of experience. And also my experience with ROTC was great. Folks say not so hot, but I learned to fly an airplane; I learned to solo an airplane because of being involved in ROTC. I don't know anybody else, African American or otherwise, that can say they actually soloed an airplane and lived to tell about it. And just being part of the Big Apple arena, you know, New York arena. I think that just turned my life around. And I was able to carry that experience when I was overseas in Korea, in Japan. I was in California, Texas, Chicago and everything. I think all that came from the experience I got from coming to New Brunswick, to Rutgers University, and being involved in that scene. When they made me stand up for African Americans and be part of this program, and part of that program, I mean, I carried that with me the rest of my life. That make sense?

KB: Yes.