

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN WALKER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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William Buie: This begins an interview with William Buie and Steven Walker in Newark, New Jersey, on June 23, 2016. To begin, tell me where and when you were born.

Steven Walker: I was born in Montclair, New Jersey [on] September 28, 1964 in a hospital that is no longer there at St. Vincent's Hospital. Now, there's a middle school there, I think. When they say born and bred, I was born and bred in Montclair. I still live there, and I've moved an entire half block in my life. [laughter] So, yes, born right in the middle of town in a little, tiny hospital and still doing it.

WB: Tell me a little bit about your parents, starting with their names.

SW: Sure. My father was Richard (Samuel?) Walker. He was born in Montclair. My grandparents had moved from Biloxi, Mississippi. I never got to meet either one of them, my grandmother and my grandfather (Louis?), who was from Jamaica and met my grandmother in Mississippi. That, I'll go into later, but they met in 1919. In 1920, they got married, had my aunt, and for some reason moved here and moved to the section of town in Montclair which was largely African American called the Frog Hollow, which was a swampy area where they let us live, essentially, in those times. When my mother's father and mother moved from North Carolina, from Oxford, North Carolina right off their sharecropper's tobacco plantation, moved up to Montclair, and as chance would have it, they were next door neighbors. [My parents were] next door neighbors, knew each other their whole life.

My dad actually had the unfortunate timing of graduating in June of 1941. We know what happened in [laughter] December of 1941, so he was drafted almost immediately right into the Army. When he finally got out and came home, he married my mom, who he already knew, and the rest is history. They stayed right in town. They moved from the center of town to two miles south to the South End of town, which at that time was developing. Most of Montclair was white, but that end of town was where poorer whites were, working-class whites. My parents were one of the first groups of black folks to move to the South End of Montclair and start that whole South End concept of what our town is now. They moved there in the '50s, and we have been there ever since.

WB: What is your mother's name?

SW: Grace, sorry.

WB: Grace.

SW: Grace, yes.

WB: Do you know any details about your father's military service?

SW: Oh, sure, yes. It was odd. He didn't talk much about it. All those guys from the Great Generation did not. My understanding is--if can you imagine, the movie *Saving Private Ryan* was able to un-pry these little nuggets that he never told me until shortly before he passed. My dad started out ironically at Camp Kilmer, I went to Livingston [College], so he drove me into

Camp Kilmer to go to college and never uttered for one second that that's where he was. [laughter] I had no idea. We had classes in barracks. It didn't even occur to me that's what was going on. He didn't even mention that. [Editor's Note: In 1942, Camp Kilmer in Piscataway opened as an embarkation base to process soldiers before being sent to Europe during World War. In 1964, Rutgers University bought 540 acres of Camp Kilmer. In 1968, demolition of the buildings and barracks of Camp Kilmer began, and the construction of Kilmer I, later named Livingston College in honor of the eighteenth century New Jersey governor William Livingston, commenced and continued through the early years of the college's existence.]

A lot of black troops, my understanding is, went to Camp Kilmer. That's where they started their military career. Evidently, he was there for a while, because in those days, they weren't sure what to do with us. They didn't know what to do with the black troops, because they kind of didn't want us to have guns, because they were scared [laughter] of what we might do. It might be Nat Turner all over again or something. They were there for a minute, so my dad evidently used to use that, only being in New Brunswick but living in Montclair, as a way to sneak away sometimes and end up seeing my mom or he used to play drums in a jazz band. He would sneak up to Newark and play in the jazz bands if he could and then sneak back. There was a lot of that going on. [Editor's Note: The U.S. military was segregated until President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order in 1948 ending discrimination in the armed services. During World War II, African American soldiers were disproportionately represented in support roles, such as the Quartermaster Corps and Engineer Corps in the Army. African American units stationed at Camp Kilmer lived in segregated housing and used segregated facilities. [Nat Turner was a slave who led a sustained slave rebellion in Virginia in August 1831.]

Ultimately, he ended up landing in Normandy on D-Day. In those days, basically what happened was there was a unit called the Red Ball Line. His end of it was when the black troops had landed at Normandy, their job was to keep the beach settled so that there's no other attacks, not that there could be--at that time, the Germans had fallen back--but keep the [beachhead] open, make sure that supplies are coming in, make sure that the supplies are coordinated and going where they're supposed to go. Then, you're fighting behind the white troops into the areas that the white troops have already taken over, so you're getting a lot of recon, picking up stuff, trying to make sure everything keeps moving forward. [Editor's Note: On June 6, 1944, Allied forces invaded the Normandy region of German-occupied France. On August 25, Paris was liberated. Between August 25 and September 6, 1944, truck convoys of the Red Ball Express shuttled 90,000 tons of fuel and food from St.-Lo to Chartres to supply forward Allied units as they pursued the Germans across the River Seine. Red ball is railroad slang for fast freight. Subsequent supply operations also went by the name Red Ball Express.]

As it turned out, his unit was responsible for hooking up with what was called the Red Ball Line, and that was a predominately black troop-led supply unit that supplied General [George S.] Patton. They would be the guys on the beach that would hook up with the Red Ball unit, and the Red Ball unit would supply General Patton. Patton was known to be always ahead, so if he told you, "We need that on Friday," he really meant on Wednesday, so that kept them on their toes. He would recount sometimes about how that made their life a little hectic. They were rushing up to keep the supply line going, so sometimes they would encounter extra troops that hadn't been captured or guys that had wandered off that were coming back and then they'd encounter them.

I remember there was a story of they encountered two German guys who had been separated [from their unit]. They were still fighting, but they had run out of bullets. They were actually whittling little pieces of wood to shoot through their Lugers at them. They had bullets, [laughter] so that didn't last very long. He thought he got winged by a piece of wood. It didn't get him, but it did pierce his jacket. They captured the guys, and they kept pressing on. [It was] interesting stuff.

All that stuff would not have come out if we didn't watch *Private Ryan*. I watched *Private Ryan*. I just kept asking him questions, and finally he opened up a little bit. [laughter] He gave me a little bit of what [had] happened. It was cool. We went to France back in 2011, me and my wife, and I felt very proud that I could say that that we were the first Walkers that had been back to France since my dad helped liberate it. I felt real good about that. That was neat.

WB: What did your parents do for a living after your dad's military service?

SW: At that time, my dad wanted to be a veterinarian, but as a black man, he couldn't get that off, unless you were of great wealth, but they were not. My dad, being part Jamaican, he hit every one of those stereotypes. [laughter] My dad had a trillion jobs it seemed. He had to have four or five jobs in my whole life. Every time I can think of it, [laughter] he didn't have vacations, he would just work another job. [laughter] He worked as a delivery person for a pet shop, and then he parlayed that into becoming a groomer at the pet shop, which he loved to do and he had a penchant for. There was a period of time before I was born where he was transitioning from that. He was working also in a factory, and then he somehow scraped enough money together, one, through the GI Bill to buy a house, but, two, to also open a pet shop. [Editor's Note: In 1944, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, which provided educational assistance, readjustment allowances, and low-interest loans for housing to veterans.]

There's a whole bunch of folks--I'm one of five, so my older brothers and sisters, I'm number four--[who] have recollections of my father's pet shop. There's still people, to this second, that are older than me that see me, and they're like, "Oh, yeah, Richard's Pet Shop, right?" I'm like, "Yeah, I guess. I didn't see it, but I know of it. I know it existed." I wasn't around yet. Legend has it that he was one of the first black business people to open up a shop in the South End of town at that time in the '50s. He had a pet grooming place. He sold puppies. He sold dog food. He groomed your dog. I don't know for how long that lasted. I'm going to say maybe three years in the '50s or so, like '53, '54, '55, somewhere in that neighborhood, which at that time was groundbreaking. Again, not like he talked about it, because he never did. I've come to find out the significance of that. I'm like, "Okay, wow, that's kind of cool. You're barely allowed to have a house. You've got a house. You're in this town. You've got your own business. That's big." He said not one word about any of that ever.

As I was born and got to know him, as largely factory work for Bendix, which is now Honeywell. They actually made parts, on an assembly line, they would make parts for NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] for satellites. They had also rockets that went up before folks landed on the moon. Then, when people did land on the moon, there was more

of that, so they had the contract to provide that. They would put them together assembly-line style, and he would come home from time to time with these little certificates that he put a part on whatever. As a kid, I had no idea what that meant. I was like, “I don’t know what that is. Okay, that’s cool, Dad, whatever.” [laughter] He did that.

He had a cleaning job he worked. He had the grooming on the weekends. Saturday and Sunday was always people would come over and bring their dogs to our basement, and my dad would cut their dog’s hair. He had this day job which may be that. He might work at Bendix at night. Then, somehow in the middle of that, I remember as I got to be a teenager, he ended up being a security guard at ITT [Technical Institute]. My mom was usually a homemaker, generally, but every once and a while, she would go out as a domestic around town or nearby. Usually, that pissed my dad off, [laughter] so that just meant he’d get another job. He’d just get another job. I have no idea how he could do it. I have no idea how he could even remotely have the time or the energy, but [he was] just constantly working and somehow making that work. So, usually homemaker for Mom and Dad usually factory worker, security guard, dog groomer and then handyman, cleaning man in the morning or days, so it was a constant thing. You’d see him in between jobs, [laughter] waking him up to go to the next job.

WB: You mentioned that sometimes your mom going out to work as a domestic upset your father.

SW: Yes.

WB: Do you know why?

SW: He felt like that meant he wasn’t providing for his family, that his wife should have to do that. That wasn’t outrageous in those times, because women weren’t allowed in the workforce at that time. We’re talking, I’m born in ’64, so we’re talking in the mid to late ‘60s, we’re talking the early ‘70s, when that was happening. If your wife was in the workforce at that time, it was like, “Oh, well, he’s not able to provide for his family.” That’s how he took it. My mom would just be like if she had to do that, it wasn’t something that was crazy because my mom was kind of OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder]. Our house was always spotless to the degree that, I mean, she didn’t do the white glove test, but if she wanted to, she could. She cleaned it every single day that I can recall, always, tirelessly, every second cleaning the house. It wasn’t a problem for her to go clean someone else’s house and get paid, because she actually enjoyed cleaning. She’s kind of OCD, [laughter] so it was feeding her problem, her compulsion. She liked the freedom of it. She wasn’t happy that she had to go out and work, but there was a part of her [that liked it].

When my mom got married to my dad, she was seventeen, and in those days, you weren’t grown until you were twenty-one. My mom was technically my dad’s responsibility until she turned twenty-one. She hated that, that basically my dad would have some type of scenario where technically he’s responsible for her, like she’s some child or something. That really used to make her annoyed. When she would get this opportunity to spread her wings a little bit, which was how she saw it, she was really happy to do it on some level. Generally, it’s cleaning a house.

I can't imagine she wasn't somewhat vexed by it, but I think it also let her see, because usually they were for white families that lived nearby or in the township, so I think it let her see a different lifestyle, a different scenario that these white folks were going through. At that time, [it was] not a[n] us-against-them kind of thing. My parents lived through the depression, so their understanding of their place among white folks was different than the way we grew up. We grew up to be revolutionary with it and to question it and to push it and prod it. They didn't grow up like that, so they just would be like, "Oh, gee, look at what they do and look at what they have," but not in a way of, "Hey, gee, why don't I have it?" but more so like, "Wow, that's pretty cool." Then, "Look at what I saw today," or, "Look at this. They're Jewish and they do this." "Look at this. They're Italian and they do that." She took it in that way, and I think her approach to that, because it was so light in the way that she looked at it, I think that probably shaped the way our racial context was as children. There was a[n] aspect of it, as we got older, that got to be, obviously, as times were changing, more militant, but then there was a part of it that wasn't.

[I have] just a real quick aside. My parents, because they're from that era, they were very happy to be called colored or be called Negro, but I didn't hear that. When I was born in '64, by that time, it was not so fashionable, and my older siblings weren't with that. [laughter] When that dynamic happened, for me, I never got to see what Negro meant or colored meant. It was always black. For them, that was an adjustment. That's powerful, because when you think about that, we take it for granted now between being called black or African American. For them, that was a big thing. They were almost offended that someone would call them black, because they had been called "Blackie," and black was such a negative word to them they didn't understand that it was being imposed on them. Imagine you're living in a world where everyone's telling you you're supposed to be excited about being called colored because it means, "You're not black. You're just like us. You could be white, but you're just colored," because that's what the connotation of the phrase is. Understand that someone's feeding you from your time, your ethos to before that, that's cool, that's a good thing, "At least I'm not calling you the n-word." That's where they came from. I think that fed into the way my mom dealt with that situation, where nowadays, we would obviously be more indignant and more offended and annoyed that we'd be in that position. She didn't quite see it that way. She seemed somewhere between it wasn't the worst thing that could happen and like she got to see a part of the world she wouldn't have seen before which was kind of weird. [laughter] It is what it is. Time doesn't happen in a vacuum, so you see what happens, when it happened and how it happened and you can mitigate yourself through, like, "Okay, that's why."

WB: To what degree were your parents politically active?

SW: Not very. I'm born post-Kennedy. They were big supporters of [President John F.] Kennedy. I knew that. Again, this is a big thing, and for them, they had already been through a depression, so they had been supporters of FDR [President Franklin D. Roosevelt]. The concepts of blacks, normal, regular blacks, not your talented-tenth blacks, being even conceptually involved politically in some mindset was new. [Editor's Note: In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an essay entitled "The Talented Tenth," in which he proposes that a small select group of African Americans should be classically educated, not vocationally trained as was trend of the era.]

Understand that they had grown up in areas where essentially there're poll taxes and people are beaten and not allowed to vote, generally, not allowed to read. Again, that kind of oppression wears on you in way that, again, isn't apparent to us because that hasn't been a part of our life, but for them, that was the way it was. Luckily, they had a mindset that was congruent with what was going to be a movement to move blacks forward, but they were just like a lot of folks in that time. They were taught to never divulge who they voted for. My mom and dad, I know how they voted, they wouldn't say it. I knew. Yes, I can remember when I was four, and I can remember Bobby Kennedy being killed. I can remember how devastated they were that Bobby Kennedy was killed, because they planned to vote for him and they had voted for his brother. Yet still, when they ended up voting for Lyndon Johnson, they didn't say they voted for Lyndon Johnson [laughter] even among themselves, because this is how a lot of people were reared. They would say, jokingly, I can remember there being an interaction between my mom and my dad in the kitchen or we were eating dinner, and my mom might say, "Oh, so who did you vote for?" My dad might say, "Oh, that's none of your business. I don't have to tell you who I voted for." [laughter] It was like they were reading it from a script. They said it exactly the same way every single time with a little wink and a little nod kind of thing.

Somehow through that, we were pushed in a direction. I couldn't say openly that they were militant in any way per se, because they were a little pre-militant, but they definitely were progressive in that I'm sure they voted for Kennedy. I would venture to say, I would guess they might have voted for Harry Truman, I guess, if they voted [in the presidential election of 1948]. You know, that's the thing. I'm sure that would make sense to me, but I don't know that. It was Kennedy. It was definitely Johnson. It was definitely not [Richard] Nixon. I know that. I know their direction was generally Democratic, and I think that shaped my way of seeing things as well. I'm still liberal in that concept. Folks make so much now of the parties, mainly this year, but it's not really the parties. It's the concept. At that time, in the '60s, the Democrats, before Kennedy, were Dixiecrats. They were the party absolutely trying to keep a boot on your neck. There had to be some kind of transition, but at the time, being so young, I had no clue that all that was going on, not that they would have told me anyway. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Dixiecrats were Southern Democrats opposed to the civil rights movement.]

WB: You mentioned your siblings.

SW: Yes.

WB: How many siblings do you have?

SW: I have four siblings. My brother is the oldest; he's born in 1948.

WB: What is his name?

SW: Richard, junior, and Terry, born in 1950, my sister Lisa, may she rest in peace, born in 1956, and myself, '64, and my youngest sister Kim, born in 1969.

WB: What was it like growing up in Montclair?

SW: It was great. We lived in the South End. In the South End of town, I took it for granted until recently, but we lived in a completely black neighborhood. If you can imagine every house was teeming with kids and everybody was black. We grew up in this, I like to call it, an alternate reality. We didn't even realize that that was a thing until later. Rutgers taught me that that was a thing. I didn't really understand that was a thing. We grew up in this completely black neighborhood. It was understood, "Oh, they live in the South End. They're from the black section of town," essentially.

In the '70s in Montclair, again, just prior to us going into school, there had been evidently this big battle to make sure that Upper Montclair, which folks think of Upper Montclair of being this separate town. It's not. Montclair is five miles long. There's not even forty thousand people in Montclair. Upper Montclair is just another part of Montclair. It has a different zip code, but it's like one digit off. It's the very top of Montclair, right next to Montclair State [University], essentially. From almost the middle of town, the last fourth of the town is Upper Montclair. At that time, evidently, folks had been, because of post-segregationist concepts, if you lived in the South End, you went to Nishuane School, which is the elementary school in our neighborhood, and you went to Hillside School, which is kind of in the middle of town, and you went to Montclair High. If you lived in the South End but you lived closer to the Glen Ridge border near where the train station is--now, there's a big train station and they're gentrifying it up--but that area was also kind of poor. There were a lot of us, a lot of blacks, that lived there. If you lived in that area, you would probably end up going to a different elementary school. You'd end up going to Glenfield School, which was right on Bloomfield Avenue essentially almost, and then you'd also go to Montclair High.

Well, what they found in the '70s, late '60s was that the Board of Ed[ucation] had been stockpiling teachers, so all the better teachers would end up in Upper Montclair and all the newer teachers or not-so-good teachers of sorts would end up in our schools. There was evidently this big, civil-war busing concept that happened just as we grew up, and that's why I said it's really weird growing up, being born in '64, because we were on the precipice of a lot of weird things that happened. We had no clue they were happening. They just became a reality, but we didn't know that we were doing anything special, which seemed to be the theme of my life on some level. [laughter]

As it turned out, we were among the first groups of kids that were bused. When I went to elementary school, I went to my local elementary school, but when I went to middle school, I went to Upper Montclair. Conversely, kids from Upper Montclair were bused to our end of town, so you had a complete reversal that way. The teachers couldn't be stockpiled, and that way, hypothetically, it could become this liberal bastion that folks talk about now. With that being said, us growing up in South End, we went to school with some white people, but you didn't get to see the scope and breadth of the town until you got to middle school because now it's all mixed up. You're just like, "Wow, okay, wow." The impact that had on us was that the concept of liberalism that now is bred into the way Montclair is seen started that way, almost in a laboratory conceptually, like in some type of think-tank laboratory because it worked out perfectly, but you couldn't have known that was going to happen. In other words, given the pitched battle that had to have been fought to create that dynamic, the dynamic was that just like

what you would think conceptually would happen is [actually what happened]. We always reference how no one's born racist, so we saw that happening right in front of us and we didn't even know it. We're going to middle school with other white kids that don't live in our neighborhood, we're going to have playdates at their house and they live in the middle of town or in Upper Montclair. They come and have playdates in our [part of] town and we're in smaller homes, more closely quartered in a neighborhood that's black.

When I was growing up, it was either black or white. There was no Puerto Rican. There was no Asian. There was nothing else. Everybody was black. Everybody was black. Everybody I knew was black. Everybody in my neighborhood was black. Everybody I saw every day was black. Everybody I played with was black. School would change that. Luckily, because of the fact that we were all educated in the same way anyway, because the district evidently did somehow pull their act together, that ended up unifying everybody in a weird way. Even though we technically came from these very homogeneous type of places with just one type of people, it seems like when we came to school, it changed because now we're interacting with these people that we probably would have never seen, and to their credit or to our credit or whatever, whatever happened, somehow we ended up there was rarely any incident. Everybody was just like, "Oh, that's such-and-such," not thinking about socioeconomic concepts, not thinking about racial concepts. Everyone just got along. That was nice. We, again, had no idea about any of that, because you're innocent. You have no idea that that's even happening.

I don't know if I was cognizant of, I mean, I knew that we lived in an all-black neighborhood, but I don't think I understood, because everything was black around me, black businesses. When we went someplace, we went to East Orange. We went to Newark. We went to Irvington. For us, we didn't think of black as inferior. We just happened to be in this area. We all happened to be black, but I don't think we even thought about being black as being some different thing. We felt empowered that we were all black in an all-black neighborhood. That was neat. Again, it got to be this Kumbaya-fest that's going on about my town, [laughter] but not in a negative way. It's just interesting, because you wouldn't have known that it was going to work out that way, good things, good things, good times.

WB: You went to Montclair High.

SW: I did.

WB: What was high school like?

SW: Great. Again, we had a ball, really a lot of good times, no real problems ever. We just all seemed to get along. It was weird because we, when I went there, I went from '78 to '82, so in that time frame, it still wasn't cool to do any interracial thing dating-wise. It wasn't frowned upon, but it wasn't cool. It wasn't something that was just accepted, so that made some type of a little interesting dynamic of sorts when I look back but not in any great way. There was never any Howard Beach scenarios, somebody getting chased out of a neighborhood. Actually, it was exactly the opposite. We seemed to just keep that whole concept going. When the weekends would come, there'd be parties. It kind of didn't matter where it was. You might see some kid whose dad is some multi-millionaire living in Upper Montclair down in our area, in the lower

end of town, hanging out and having beers or doing things we weren't supposed to do like everybody else, and we would do the same thing with them. It was never any problems. It was never any issues, surprisingly, because there's no reason that there shouldn't have been, but there weren't. We just never really had a problem. We were lucky, too. [Editor's Note: On December 19, 1986, Michael Griffith, a twenty-three-year-old African American man, was hit by a car and killed as he and two others fled a group of white teenagers chasing them in Howard Beach, Queens.]

In my neighborhood alone, one of the weird things that we never knew--and, again, it was kind of like a constant theme, folks never talked about the bigger picture--in my neighborhood, again, my parents [were] a domestic and a security guard or a factory worker. I know they were always real concerned, because one of my closest friends lived two blocks over, and his father--they lived in this huge mansion that's actually still there--his father was the first black FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent, but not that he ever mentioned it ever. He never mentioned it. His father never mentioned it. The only reason I knew it was fact was because I had heard it enough where I was like, "Screw it, I'm going to go to the library and look this up. If he's this historical guy, he's got to be in the library. Let me look him up." Sure enough, [laughter] I looked up *Ebony* magazine from like 195-something, and there he is, Mr. Lewis, Aubrey Lewis, standing there and he's the first black FBI agent. I was like, "Holy cow," like, "Wow." He was already the greatest football player in our town's history, so he was this living legend. I was at his house every day, so it wasn't even something I thought about. My parents though were concerned about the socioeconomic concepts of that, so they would always be really scared to let my friend John Lewis come over to the house because they felt embarrassed that they didn't have enough. Luckily, the Lewises, wonderful people, my mom didn't let us entertain too often, but when they came over, there was never any thought ever of anything like that, but that's how it was just weird like that.

You have him here two blocks over. If you went two blocks up, Larry Doby lived two blocks up. Larry Doby, I went to school with his daughters and everything, we knew them, but we never knew he was Larry Doby. Nobody said, "Oh, that's Larry Doby. He's significant in black history." We had no clue. We saw Mr. Doby all the time. We had no idea he meant anything. As we got older, we're like, "Oh, so Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier when the baseball season started in April [1947]. Well, Mr. Doby broke it on the American League side the next month." Mr. Doby is the first black to win a World Series [in 1948 with the Cleveland Indians]. Mr. Doby is the first black to hit a home run in a World Series. That's pretty significant, not that anyone ever mentioned it, not that my parents ever made us aware. He's right there. We saw him all the time.

Then, one of the guys that used to come over to visit Mr. Lewis was a guy by the name of Wally Choice. Wally Choice, now, again, we're just knowing him as Mr. Choice, no clue who he is in any bigger context. The guy is the first black to play basketball [and be a captain of a Big Ten team] at the University of Indiana, a Harlem Globetrotter, [laughter] all these things. No one ever mentioned these things to us. We found this out later. We got to college, and we're like, "Let me look this guy up," and you'd be like, "Oh, holy cow. Oh, holy cow." [laughter] "Oh, holy cow. Oh, dag, okay, wow. Man, wow." Not to mention it's a small community, so having that base with Mr. Lewis there, for instance, Yogi Berra would walk down the street often and

play tennis with Mr. Lewis. You'd see Yogi Berra all the time. It didn't occur to you [that Berra was a legendary New York Yankee baseball player]. You know it's Yogi Berra, you know his son was great in our sports context in town, but it's Yogi Berra. It's kind of big, right, [laughter] but we had no concept of who we're seeing and interacting. Monte Irvin might come over, and you had no idea who Monte Irvin is, no idea. Milt Campbell might come over. [Editor's Note: In a Hall of Fame baseball career that spanned three decades, Monte Irvin played for the Negro National League Newark Eagles and Major League New York Giants and Chicago Cubs. In the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Milt Campbell, a native of Plainfield, New Jersey, won the gold medal in the decathlon, becoming the first African American to achieve that title.]

You had no idea who these people are, because from my parents' perspective, these are people who went to college, these are people that are better than them, so they would not feel comfortable interacting with them, not that those people were anything like that, but that's how they saw it. They just kind of would be like, "Okay, well, you can go over there. Make sure you're home by whatever," and you'd come back and it would be like nothing. I didn't get to kind of savor it or understand what was happening until later. If I told them about it in any way, not that I would have known, but if I would have known and been cognizant of what a special concept I was going through and told them, that would only make them feel worse. They'd feel less like they didn't accomplish enough, which wasn't true, but it's just everything's happening in real time. They're not getting the ability to sit back and go, "Oh, this is wonderful that we know these people." They're just like, "Oh, God, well, I didn't go to college. Oh, God, I'm a domestic. I wish Steve wouldn't hang out with those people." [laughter] [These are] interesting, interesting concepts.

All that played out in high school, because you're coming into contact with all these different people that are of different socioeconomic groups and of your same socioeconomic group and somehow it never erupted into some type of crazy situation. Somehow they pulled it off. I have no idea how that worked. [laughter] [Those were] good times, good times at Montclair High.

WB: Did you work at all during high school?

SW: I did. When I was in high school, for some reason, I started enjoying writing and I started enjoying things tied to that. When I was in high school, first, I wanted to play sports, but I was never really that good at it. As I found out later, I actually had an interesting genetic thing. My right leg is a full inch shorter than my left. The only reason that's interesting is because I found out probably I would say six months before my dad died. We were just having a general conversation, and I said something about how I'd hurt my back before and I was getting it fixed but that'll happen when your leg's a whole inch shorter than the other leg. He was like, "Oh, yeah, you too?" I was like, "Dad, you're killing me." [laughter] It's like, "All these things you could tell me. You could have told me and make my life a little easier," but he never shared any of these things with you. You never knew. I felt, "Gee, I've got this disability." I didn't have a disability; it's genetic. His is exactly the same.

I ended up excelling in other things. I was a pretty good student, not a great student, but a pretty good student. I loved writing, so I kind of went towards our student paper. A bunch of us got together at some point and created what we called the WMHS. Essentially, you'd get your PA

[public address] announcements in the morning, and, for some ungodly reason, they allowed us to take over the PA system and play music and read news in the morning. We would do that in the morning, and then in the afternoons, we had a program where we would play either that show or club music in the afternoon while kids were eating their lunch. I have no idea how they allowed us to do that, but they did [laughter] for some reason. Luckily, we didn't get in trouble.

Somewhere in the middle of that, one of my best friends decided to run for student council and asked me to be secretary, and he became president, I became secretary. Somewhere in the middle of that, I became announcer for the football team and announcer for the basketball team. Somewhere in the middle of that, first, I think I started off cleaning buildings. A friend of mine had a job cleaning buildings in the summer. He had to go away on vacation, so he let me do it. At that time, I had to have been, I'll say, fourteen, fifteen, and I could ride my bike there. So, I would ride my bike there and clean the buildings, so he could keep his contract. When he came back, he could just start his job. It was my first job. I did that.

Whenever I got my license, that was probably my junior year, I delivered flowers for a local flower place. I would drive around in a van, once I was able to drive, and help deliver flowers from Montclair all the way to Newark. I did that all the way until I graduated actually. Somehow I was working in the middle of that, but I was also having all these extracurriculars. I'm still not sure how I pulled that off. [laughter] Somehow, somehow I did that. Those little extracurriculars actually prepared me for my future. I didn't know that, but that's what it was doing. It was preparing me for my future.

WB: What did you do with your money?

SW: Usually banked it. I didn't make a whole lot of it but banked it, sometimes used it for fun stuff, but mostly banked it, so that when, as it turned out, I ended up going to college, I had something to navigate that situation. In my household, I was the first kid to go to a four-year university, so I had no idea what I was walking into when I went to Rutgers. It was one of those things where it was weird because there was no precedent. My brother had gone to art school. My sister had gone to business school, and my other sister didn't go to any further education. Here I am, trying to go to New Brunswick and go to college and all this stuff, and that was different. I didn't know what to expect, so I was just preparing to have a few hundred dollars aside just in case. I didn't know for what. Just in case I need money, I'll have some. I had my little savings account that you would have, like someone gives you a dollar to go put in the bank back when you're five years old or whatever. I had my little savings account and parlayed that into money for college, and that's generally how I lived my life. I don't even know that I've changed my bank account from that time to now. [laughter] The bank has changed, but my account hasn't.

WB: Did you travel as a family at all?

SW: No. My parents were real Spartanesque. Their eyes were on the prize for them. Their concept was to get this house. Neither one of them had been in a home that had been owned. Their parents, I'm pretty sure, had rented their houses at the time. Again, black folks weren't really allowed to own property up until around that time. My dad was able to capitalize on the

GI Bill. He bought this house. They were going to keep their nose to the grindstone and pay it off. My parents put the “S” in Spartan. They never went on vacation, really just work, work, work, work.

You’d get to go up the street to, in those days, the government would fund lunch programs for the summer. If you qualified, you could go and have lunch or breakfast at the park, and you’d go play at the park. There were little games, and people would make sure you could access the games and not kill each other. That’s what I did; that was my summers. Most people would have the opportunity to go away, but we weren’t wealthy. We just were real happy to not be going to school and be going to the park and playing basketball or going to the park and playing some of the board games or just interacting with other kids. We never went away.

Unlike most folks from our area, we never went back down South. Most people did have stories of going down South. I had none. We were like the most northern people I knew. There were no chitlins going on. [laughter] My mom had kind of taken a stance that she wanted to put that aside. Usually, I didn’t get to eat what is our stereotypical African American cuisine until I would go over my aunt’s house. If my mom would take me over my aunt’s house, she would cook like a normal person. She wasn’t on that, but my mom, believe me, it wasn’t going to be grits. It had better be mashed potatoes. It wasn’t going to be greens. It was going to be string beans or something. It was a subtle thing, but, again, until you get older, you’re like, “Why aren’t we having greens? Why do we have to go to Aunt (Joan’s?) house to have greens? What’s that about?” [laughter] You couldn’t question them, but you were just like, “That’s weird. Why are they doing that?” I think a lot of that was blowback. They’re leaving a Jim Crow society. They’re coming to the North. I think that was perhaps one take on it. They just kind of disavow the whole thing, like, “I don’t want to be involved with any of it. We’re up here now. I don’t want to be involved with any of that stuff.” Yes, we never went down South. We were always here.

We never even went to sleepaway camp. You know sometimes when people go to sleepaway camp, some of it was subsidized government-wise. I’m not exactly sure why, but we never did that. I’m sure it was economic. There were five of us. I have no idea how they made that work anyway. I have one child, and it is way too much work. [laughter] I cannot imagine four other people. It would be crazy. Yes, we were real fiscally conservative on that front.

WB: In your senior year of high school, was there any doubt that you were going to go to college?

SW: Oh, absolutely, it was not a given, because no one [in my family had gone to a four-year university]. Again, it’s kind of the [thesis] of what oppression is. In other words, when you’re oppressed, you don’t even know you’re oppressed, but you limit yourself and you don’t even know you do it. It’s like when you see folks many times in the inner city and they’re literally fighting over blocks, “This is my block. I’m going to protect it,” and be that violent or nonviolent or whatever. The problem with that view is that you forget that there’s more than your block. There’s way more than your block. Your block’s kind of irrelevant. That’s just where you live, like move on. Well, it was like that for me as the first kid thinking about going to a university. My mom did not graduate high school, so she left high school, which was

relatively customary, at fifteen, sixteen. My dad did graduate high school but went right into the Army. In those days, that was seen as something that you wouldn't even think to do. They didn't even know that you could go to college, even though my brother had gone to art school.

My brother was an artist. He went to school here in Newark for [art]. Technically, it was a junior college. Newark [School of] Fine and Industrial Arts is what it was called at the time. It's now [Newark] Arts High [School], but I think it was Newark Fine and Industrial Arts. After high school, there was a year where you could go there and prep for college, so he went there. Then, he went to art school in Baltimore. My sister went to business school, I believe, it was right in town. I know it was Drake [College of Business in Newark and Elizabeth]. I'm not sure where it was, but I know it was nearby.

The concept of actually going to a college to get a college education was something that was completely alien to my parents, so they were a little afraid of that. They felt there was no way we could afford it, so they didn't really want me to even try. They never really mentioned it. I think what they thought I was going to do for some reason was they thought I was going to go in the military, because I think that that's what they thought people did. They're like, "Okay, well, he'll graduate and he'll go in the military." I know there was talk of it. I remember two of my uncles, both of them had been Marines. I remember getting a pep talk from them at some point, but my brother graduated high school in '66. When the Vietnam War happened, he was going to be drafted. He went to college definitely to make sure that wasn't going to happen. That was more so his reason to go, quite frankly. I remember when I wanted to go to school that was my thought, again, not thinking or knowing what that meant or what that could do. I remember them kind of saying, my uncles were thinking, "Oh, he probably talked to his brother."

My parents, basically, as it turned out, as I found out when I graduated, I think they were afraid that I would turn into this upper, talented-tenth Negro that would look down on them. That's so crazy when I think about it, but I remember how they were almost afraid when I graduated. It wasn't like a big graduation and a celebration, like, "Oh, you graduated college!" It was kind of like, "Now what's going to happen? Now who's he going to become?" Some of my friends were already in this educated black concept. My parents were older. When my mom had me, she was thirty-six. My friends, most of their parents were younger than my parents, so there was that dynamic, too. In other words, we were kind of intergenerational. Imagine my parents are twenty years older than my friends' parents or ten years older than my friends' parents. The concept of even going to college just between a person born in 1928, when my mom was, to someone born in 1940 was stark. It was like a whole different world. The person born in 1940, it might be a concept that they would think about more so, but I think *en masse* folks born in that '20s era, you had to be extraordinary to be thinking about college. They were afraid.

For me, I think my buddy, who I referenced earlier, Judge Gary Wilcox in Hackensack, his mom Judith Wilcox had been a principal in town and had been on the Board of Ed, and I remember when she dragged me along to go to a college fair. That was when I first thought about it. I was like, "Wow, okay, well, she seems to think I can go, so why can't I go? I don't know." It was one of those things that was always kind of, you're thinking about it, getting the urging that you would see normally today, and then also too, in those days, our guidance counselors were kind of weird. I'm guessing guidance counselors must get some type of review that lets folks say, "Hey,

well, this person is doing a good job, because x amount of people got into school.” Well, the downside to that number, which I didn’t even think about, was that they also didn’t want you to fail. I remember my guidance counselor, she was also black, when she saw where I came from, when she saw who my parents were of sorts, and I wasn’t killing it grade-wise. I was doing okay, “B,” “C” student perhaps. She was like, “Well, you know, I don’t think you should even try for Rutgers, because you won’t get in there. Maybe you should try for Essex County College maybe, but if not, you can just get a job.” That was kind of the thought process from everybody, my parents [being] not so cool about the idea, the guidance counselor not exactly pushing me.

Almost all my friends went to college. One friend went to Penn State. One went to Florida A&M. Gary and Neil Wilcox ended up going to Duke, but they were really smart, so they were getting scholarships. I wasn’t. I was kind of like, “Am I being a jerk by trying to go to school? I’m going to try it anyway. Let’s just see what happens.” A few Pell grants later and some student loans on my end later, I ended up going. I think it was the best decision I made in my life.

WB: What made you decide to go to Livingston College?

SW: Quite frankly, I was actually going to go to Rutgers-Newark. I thought about it, and I thought it was too close. [laughter] I said, “This is just too close. My parents can get here and I didn’t like that. What’s New Brunswick? I don’t even know what’s in New Brunswick. I’ve never been to New Brunswick.” I studied about where the majors were. Rutgers, at that time, was still colleges. It hadn’t even done the whole university thing like we’re used to now. It happened when we got there. They hadn’t really been doing that yet. [Editor’s Note: In the federated college system, each of the undergraduate colleges of Rutgers-New Brunswick, Rutgers College, Cook College, Douglass College, University College and Livingston College, functioned autonomously with its own campus, budget, administration and faculty, admission standards, student body, curriculum, and academic requirements. The transformation of undergraduate education at Rutgers-New Brunswick took place in phases. In 1981, the faculties were merged into a single entity, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS). In 2006, the colleges were consolidated into the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), with Douglass becoming a residential college, Cook becoming the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (SEBS), and Livingston Campus being transformed into a center for business education.]

In the college setting, Rutgers College didn’t offer a journalism degree, but you could get an English degree. You could ask for permission to allow it to be a journalism degree, but you had to get permission. Douglass had a journalism degree, and Livingston had a journalism degree. I ended up going to Livingston really because of the journalism end of it, but when I got there, I was not prepared, I don’t think, to find out all the, I’m going to say, baggage. It isn’t baggage now, but I’m saying at the time, conceptually, if I was that type of person that it mattered to, it would have been baggage. Livingston had baggage. I didn’t even know. I was just like, “Oh, well, it’s a campus.” Livingston, at that time, in the ‘80s, it was like the newest campus. Everything was new. It was a nice campus, small enough amount of people, nice amount of people. Living-wise, I’m actually really excited I went to Livingston on the aesthetic end of it. [On the] College Ave[nue Campus], you had a major road. The housing seemed old and antiquated. Everybody was on top of one another. There was never enough housing. Most

people were looking to move off campus, even though it was right there. Livingston, you didn't really have that push. You still were overcrowded, but you actually could be in a dorm and there were other people in the dorm and it wasn't a big deal. You weren't near a road. Once you were on campus, you were just there, and it was its own little world. I thought that was the coolest thing ever. Then, I found out all the other cool stuff about Livingston [laughter] later. In other words, if I would have had the knowledge of Livingston's history, I would have definitely gone to Livingston. [laughter] It's just by chance because they had journalism I ended up at Livingston. [Editor's Note: In 1969, Livingston College opened as Rutgers-New Brunswick's first coeducational liberal arts college. Planning for the new college had begun in 1965 under the leadership of founding Dean Ernest Lynton, who envisioned an innovative, experimental college dedicated to the teaching of social sciences. The shaping of the institution's mission evolved to reflect crosscurrents in society. After demonstrations at Rutgers protesting racial inequalities, Livingston planners expanded the college's mission to emphasize diversity, recruiting and enrolling African American and Latino students and hiring women, African American, Latino and Asian faculty members.]

WB: What year did you enroll?

SW: '82.

WB: 1982. You lived on campus.

SW: I did, yes. I lived in Quad II or Quad III, yes, Quad III I think it was. I lived in the Quads my freshman year. That was a whole other ball that I just wasn't prepared for. Like I said earlier, Livingston and Rutgers actually made me understand how special a situation I had in my town, because at that time New Jersey was the third most segregated state in the country. I didn't realize that, but it was evident as you interacted with people that you had a lot of white kids that had never seen black kids. You had a lot of black kids that had never seen white kids. They would say things to me. I'm living in this completely integrated situation, and that was a positive and a negative all at the same time. You would see black kids from the inner city who would be hesitant to be friendly with you, because they figured you were going to be an Uncle Tom and you were going to be oppressing them and saying bad things. You're looking down at them. You also have white kids that, to them, you could be from the depths of Newark, as far as they [know]. You're black. They don't care. They're terrified. They're from Voorhees or some place. They're terrified. There was that. I always thought that was kind of funny, because even though we were kind of odd man out, it was kind of interesting because I learned very early on about what I call the power of being black. Eddie Murphy used to make a joke about how he could be on a bus and have a bad day, and if he wanted to scare a white person, all he had to do was act really confused and the white person would be terrified. He was like, "Well, I'm not tough or anything, but if I act really confused, they'll get scared and then I won't have to worry about them kicking my butt." [laughter] That was the first time I tasted that, like, "Wow, so damn, if I'm in a suit and I'm standing in an elevator, they're terrified. How is that possible? Wow, I can't imagine that." Coming up as a bookish, nerdy kid, I don't think I ever got the luxury of feeling what "being tough" was until I got to be around other folks not from town, where you're like, "Wow, okay, so, boy, the white kids are really scared of all the black kids. That's something. They outnumber us greatly, and they're terrified. I can't imagine how that

would be.” Being from an integrated situation, it allowed me to kind of nuance into both worlds at that time at Rutgers, and Livingston was great for that.

On Livingston, at that time, it was seen, for lack of a better term, if you’re at Rutgers, that was the ghetto, which is silly because it’s not. To the white kids on the campus and to the white kids on Busch [Campus] and the white kids on College Ave and the white kids at Douglass, you were in the ghetto. When you told them you were Livingston, they were like, “Oh, my God. He’s from Livingston.” [laughter] Most of us are from here. I’m from Montclair, but I’m in Newark all the time. I can say I’m from Newark, and it wouldn’t matter. They’d be terrified. [laughter] It was kind of funny to me. I don’t know. I thought it was funny the whole time.

Livingston, for me, was neat on a bunch of levels. Once I got to learn the history, it got even cooler. That was like a consolation prize. I didn’t know about all the cool history, so when I got to know the cool history, I was like, “Wow, so this is like a groundbreaking place. Wow, I can’t believe it. So, that’s where I ended up. How cool is that.”

As goofy as all of it was, I liked the Quads. I didn’t have any problems with the Quads. They used to call the Quads and underneath it, I guess, the tombs and the tunnels. Folks were always somewhat vexed about that. I always thought that was the coolest thing. I didn’t have to go outside. I could just go downstairs and go do my laundry, go get a little snack and come back up and just be in the building and seeing another person in another Quad through the tunnels, I thought that was the coolest thing in the world. [laughter] I think it actually gave me my concept of my urban identity, I think, ironically. Living in a single-family neighborhood that was all black, I think Livingston gave me my street credit, even though it was obviously not the ghetto. The fact that everybody thought it was the ghetto kind of gave you the concept of mental oppression. In other words, you understood what hip-hop later taught us, that, yes, hypothetically, what could make it a negative is that you live in the ghetto, but what hip-hop, I thought, was real efficient about doing was flipping that, saying, “Okay, well, all right, if that’s the worst you can say, well, yes, I live in the ghetto. Now what? What are you going to do about that?” That was what Livingston made present for me, one of those things where you’re like, “Wow, okay, all right, I live in the ghetto. Okay, now what? Where do we go from here? Are you going to be scared to come over here? Are you going to be scared when I come over there? Okay, cool. I like that. I like that. You’re scared. Good. Okay, all right. Now, let’s work with that. Let’s see what we can do.” Like I said, as I got to know more, I was just blown away by the history. The history is really cool. I’m glad I went there.

WB: Did black kids and white kids interact with each other socially?

SW: Not really, not really, not in the ‘80s. We did in the Quads. In other words, Quad people, some people absolutely didn’t and some people did. I think on my floor, I was the last on my floor to get a place to live because of my very, very non-committal way of approaching college. I was unfortunately one of the last people to get housing, so I was in a triple. My floor was almost completely white, and that was pretty much true throughout much of the housing concepts. Even though there were more black folks on Livingston than anyplace else, still the numbers were scant. There were not that many when you think about it. So, there was that. Then, also, at that time, Livingston was really the hub [of] black culture, so all the black frats

were there. All the black sororities were there. The Latino fraternities and sororities were there, which was so cool. Livingston had that legacy. There was a legacy to be proud of that. Even though there weren't race wars or anything, folks didn't outwardly socialize in that way. It was understood that generally if you were in a black frat or a black sorority that you were going to probably have an event on Livingston or at the RAC [Rutgers Athletic Center], but if you're in a white fraternity or white sorority, you're probably going to be on College Ave. The distance between the campuses worked as a way to separate folks socially. In other words, it was nothing for us to say, "Oh, you're going to have a party in Tillett [Hall]. I'll see you guys at Tillett. We'll have a party at Tillett. Your fraternity's going to have that. Okay, cool, we're going to go to a dance at Tillett." The dance at Tillett is a completely different animal than the dance over at DU [Delta Upsilon]. [laughter] That is what kind of stratified the social experience, which was kind of interesting, too. Everyone was very cliquish.

It was weird, because I didn't fit into either clique. [laughter] Initially, I think I ate mostly with my friends on the floor. When they would go to eat, I would go to eat with them if I was on Livingston when dinnertime came. Most of the time, it was just exploring. If I happened to be running late, I wasn't rushing back to Livingston to have dinner. I'd just go have dinner on College Ave, because I was just there and I would eat by myself anyway so what difference does it make. That dynamic though, that's what it was. The '80s were very much that. There was a lot of feeling out. There was integration, but it was like kind of integration for the first time, because Rutgers had been notoriously a very segregated place up until right around the late '60s. Even if we didn't know each other, it was understood that we were kind of special. There weren't that many of us. To this day, to this second, we run into each other in different places. Even if we didn't know each other, a lot of times, I'll look at somebody and they'll look at me and they'll be like, "Rutgers?" I'll be like, "Yes, Rutgers." They'll be like, "Thought so." You might have glanced at them on the bus going home and never talked to them, but you'll see them now, thirty years later, in Newark and be like, "I know your face from somewhere. Where can I know you from?" They'll be like, "Rutgers," because there were so few black folks that we just had a little tribal concept. Even if we didn't even get together, we all knew that. We accepted that. The white kids, given the way that things were structured, I think it just made it easier for them. In other words, you're taking a stratified group of folks and putting them with a limited number of a minority group that you're not even used to seeing. For them, it was easy to just really party with themselves, but ultimately it was actually easier for us to party with ourselves, too. It kept us kind of stratified. We stayed stratified for much of the '80s. I think there were a few little weird breakthroughs. I ended up being a part of one. I didn't mean for it to be that way, but it actually ended up that way.

I ended up as a founding member of the Omicron Alpha Chapter of Kappa Delta Rho. Now, interestingly, Kappa Delta Rho is a white fraternity. It's based in Vermont; Middlebury College it comes from. I have no idea why, but somewhere along the way they for some reason started focusing on diversity. I was a young reporter. I'm going to say it was my freshman year. I was doing a story for the *Targum*, and I heard about this new fraternity that was forming. Just by chance, a bunch of people on my floor were going to meetings. Now, in the general context of things, that would be rushing if it was a white fraternity. Technically, they were rushing, but there was no fraternity yet. It didn't really exist. The guys on my floor talked me into it. I was like, "I don't really want to," because I knew the stratified lines, and [I thought], "I'm not trying

to make any type of statement. I don't really want to be a part of making a statement per se. I actually don't know enough of you guys to actually want to be a brother of sorts."

Somehow they talked me into it. I think probably the concept of having a Greek [fraternity membership] card wasn't the worst concept at the time. I said, "What the hell? What is this? Let me just see can I do this? Would I want to do this?"

As it turned out, Kappa Delta Rho formed [in April 1984] probably at the end of my freshman year. They were largely engineers from Busch that wanted Greek cards, too. They wanted to go to frat parties on College Ave, but they couldn't get in because they weren't Greek so they started forming this fraternity. For some reason, Kappa Delta Rho as an organization valued diversity, so the president of the fraternity as it formed was Puerto Rican. There were probably three, four Indian cats in there, Asian cats of different ethnicities in there, Jewish cats, so it was relatively diverse, which was actually, as diverse as I can sound or lack of diverse as I can sound, that was an anomaly at Rutgers at that time. As they formed without a house, without the ability to have a party like they were used to having, we formed and I was the only brother in there. Believe me, I tried. Anybody that I'd see at parties, I was like, "Come on. You want to join Kappa Delta Rho, don't you?" In my mind, I'm like, "Please don't make me the only one." The guys in the fraternity, to their credit, they were from all different backgrounds, but generally they were pretty cool. There were a few problems, but the problems would be like, again, when you're brothers of sorts, if you have got any stones to you, you can put that problem out directly. If I had a problem with somebody saying something racially insensitive, I went right to the head and said, "Hey, you're not going to be able to say that, and I'm not listening to that. I've got a problem with that. I've got a problem with you."

WB: Did that happen?

SW: Yes, a few times, because you had a few white cats, but, ironically, those guys, I'll say maybe there were two or three guys that might have said something that was a little off color, no pun intended, that might be keyed at the Asian brothers or it might be keyed at the Indian brothers, but it wouldn't fly with me or the Jewish brothers even. They would say something, and it would rub me the wrong way or rub them the wrong way or something. You'd be in their face, and you'd talk to them. Usually, ironically, that person would change. I mean, that sounds completely utopic, but that would happen. Normally, by the end of that time, you might see that person a year from then, coming from a complete white background, a year from then dating a Latino girl or dating a black girl or dating an Asian girl, something that they never would have done. Perhaps that was because of being around this diversity in this organization. It was one of those things. I used it really to get a Greek card and also to make good relationships with some cats that were nice guys that were Greek guys that I probably wouldn't have become friends with them anyway. I thought that was neat, because what happened with that, in there also were white folks that were more progressive.

I remember distinctly, I think it was my senior year, it might have been my junior year, there was an inter-Greek basketball tournament. Now, the brothers [in] the Ques [Omega Psi Phi] and the Alphas [Alpha Phi Alpha] and the Kappas [Kappa Alpha Psi], I'm sure, as I recall, destroyed everybody in this inter-league fraternity thing. At that time, prior to that being decided, that wasn't spearheaded by myself, that was spearheaded definitely by one of my frat brothers, they

would have had a basketball tournament, but the black fraternities would not have been invited. Conversely, if the black fraternities and sororities had something, they would definitely not have invited the white fraternities. It didn't go over in any dramatically big way, but the fact that it happened I thought was kind of neat and the fact that I didn't spearhead I thought was kind of neat. The fact that it was an idea that came from one of the white cats, he's from Wayne, really good guy, but he was, in those days, he was always seen as an anomaly. You would definitely see Mike at Tillett at the parties trying to hit on the sisters. [laughter] You weren't surprised. I wasn't surprised because I knew him. He was there.

One of our brothers ironically was, you know the football player Tony Siragusa. His brother Pete was one of our frat brothers, and he was from Kenilworth but Italian. It seems they were more, for some reason, those two guys at least and a few of their friends and a few of our brothers were always going to Tillett anyway out of curiosity, like, "Oh, we're trying to hit on this girl." That brought things together for that little flash of time. I don't think it ever endured, but I just thought it was neat, given how stratified everything was that you could actually point to that as something that happened that was different. It never really happened. I'm sure now it probably happens all the time, but at that time, it was something like, "Wow, wait a minute. Black frats are going to come." "Yes, of course, they're going to come. They're fraternities. It's Greek. Of course they're coming." [It was] kind of neat.

WB: You were a reporter for the *Targum*.

SW: I was. I started off at the *Targum*, and along the way, I discovered the *Black Voice*. The *Black Voice* was right down the street. I was working for the *Targum* in, I think, my sophomore year. There was a brother that was a Phi Beta Sigma (black fraternity), and he was the managing editor of the *Black Voice*. He lived in the Quads. I lived in the Quads. For some reason, I think we were catching a bus together that ended up on College Ave, and he was like, "Where are you going?" I was like, "I'm going to the *Targum*." He's like, "Oh, are you working there?" I was like, "Yes." He's like, "You should come over and check us out." I was like, "Okay, I will." The *Targum* was a daily, so you'd write whatever inane story you were going to write for the daily, but as a person trying to learn their craft, I thought it was essential to keep diversity, keep trying to learn different versions of it. Being a weekly, it allowed you to write in a different way. You wrote more of a magazine style than a daily style. I was like, "Let me go hang out with those guys." I went to the [Paul] Robeson [Cultural] Center, and it was really cool. All the people were really cool. One of the best people I met actually [was] Alfred Edmond Jr. [RC '83], who's the editor in chief of *Black Enterprise*. [He] was the editor of the *Black Voice*. I was an underclassman. He was a senior or a junior. I got to meet him. He was very welcoming and took me in, showed me around. Tony Manners, who was the [Phi Beta] Sigma who was there, he was like, "Yeah, come on up." I found a home. The *Targum* was nice, but it was more like what I was going to encounter in newsrooms in the future in a small-scale way. It was prestigious, so you wanted that, and it was daily. The *Black Voice* felt more like home.

Probably my sophomore year and my junior year, I became managing editor and worked under a good brother, who I'm still in touch with to this second, Glen Arnold, who was the editor in chief. Many nights, going into Wednesday, way in the early morning hours, we were putting the *Black Voice* together. Then, when I had spare time, I would still write for the *Targum*. It was

just about getting experience and getting the ability and taking away the fear of writing, because that's a thing. You're writing for public consumption, but there're different styles and different ways to go about it. I thought it was the best way for me at least to learn hands on without just reading it in a book. I got to work for both, and that was neat.

It was actually, like I said, kind of a reoccurring theme. [laughter] I got the benefits of both, living on Livingston, but I'm able to go to parties on College Ave, working for the *Targum*, but I'm also working for the *Black Voice*. It was a good time. The *Black Voice* was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I think my only regret there was that I didn't learn Spanish. It was like we are also part of the *Black Voice/Carta Boricua* and we all worked together anyway, why not learn Spanish? That's the only thing I didn't do. I should have learned Spanish while I was right there, but we didn't know this all was going to all happen. We didn't know there'd be such a Latino presence in our everyday life at that time in the '80s. It hadn't happened yet.

WB: What kind of pieces were you writing for the *Black Voice*?

SW: We would do things on the faculty at the time. We were building, we didn't know it, but we were building towards divestiture. We didn't know that at the time. As I look back, that's kind of where we were going, but I don't even know if we knew that. We were writing cultural pieces, writing pieces on things that you just wouldn't see in the *Targum*. For instance, I remember on Livingston, there was a martial arts demonstration, but it was Bando. It was African martial arts. We covered that and took some nice pictures, wrote about who was teaching the class, what type of things they were teaching that was different, and the history of it, predating karate and all that stuff. [We wrote about] those types of things, Afrocentric pieces that were more towards a nationalist concept, more towards, at that time, divesting from South Africa. [Editor's Note: Bando is a form of martial arts that originated in Myanmar. In the divestment movement of the 1970s and 1980s, corporations, universities and institutions sought to cut economic ties and investments with South Africa in order to influence the end of the apartheid regime.]

As it turned out, just by chance, we were able to force Rutgers to divest from South Africa. It wasn't just us. What happened was by the time we got to be juniors, the movement to have Rutgers divest was starting to pick up steam. Rutgers was picking up steam, but it was happening completely at the same time as Columbia [University]. Just by chance, the president of Kappa Delta Rho at Columbia was black, and he was leading marches at Columbia to divest at the same as that was happening there. He would come over and help folks that were coordinating the movement at Rutgers, and they were interchanging because we were just so close, so folks were interchanging. We had the lucky, complete blessing of having Sister Souljah [laughter] as our person that was our spokesperson because she was [a student at Rutgers College]. Lisa [Williamson], you saw her all the time. She was always on College Ave, always talking, one of the smartest people you'll ever meet in your life, always at the Robeson Center, always talking nationalism, always talking divestiture, always talking black pride and stuff. Having access to a person like that, as big as life as she was when she was in the media, that's how she was as a student, but I dare say bigger. To be honest with you, I think she's a year younger than me, but you always felt completely intimidated to even be speaking to her, but she was such a nice person. She's so nice that when you got to know her you were like, "Wow, I

can't believe she just spoke with me. Wow, she's the smartest person." [laughter] You had a person like that leading the concept of divestiture. [Editor's Note: Born in the Bronx in 1964, Lisa Williamson, known as Sister Souljah, grew up in Englewood, New Jersey and went on to a career as a hip-hop artist, activist and author.]

To be honest, we never thought in a million years it would divest. Rutgers seemed like the whitest place in the world. They were not going to divest for us. Once the Student Center got taken over and a few protests on that scale, Lisa speaking about it, and catching a little bit of national or local flavor with what Columbia was doing, before you knew it, I think it was the end of my junior year, Jesse Jackson was running for president, Jesse Jackson came and addressed folks at Rutgers about divesting, before you knew it, not only had Rutgers divested but a few years later Nelson Mandela was free. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe we had anything to even do about that. It's like we got our little college protest in [laughter] in the '80s somehow. People forget about that. It's like the forgotten protest. It was significant. It wasn't as coordinated as you'd see in the '60s. Obviously, it worked, but it was just not something that you thought would work. It wasn't something that you thought they even gave any traction to whatsoever. I'm glad to have been some small part of that. That was probably the neatest thing about working for the *Black Voice*. [Editor's Note: Nelson Mandela was released from prison on Sunday, February 11, 1990, after spending twenty-seven years imprisoned for his role in the struggle to overcome apartheid. After his release, Mandela helped negotiate an end to apartheid and the establishment of a multiracial state in South Africa. Mandela served as the first democratically-elected president of South Africa.]

WB: You were surprised when that actually happened.

SW: I couldn't believe they actually [divested], but it's because I'm kind of a jaded person anyways. [laughter] I just didn't expect them to. Were the wheels coming off the wagon? Yes. Was there no absolute excuse for them to be invested in South Africa? Sure. This is your first time, you're a teenager still or in your young twenties coming against "establishment," a school older than the country. They're going to divest because you get a bunch of black folks together to take over the Student Center. Again, we're tiny numbers. Rutgers, at the time, was what, forty-five thousand people, and we're like eight percent of that. To even think that they would listen, but I think it became understood that we were galvanized with Columbia and Columbia was absolutely rabid. They were catching the news; they were catching the headlines. They were definitely in the news, not the biggest thing you'll ever see, but you definitely would see Columbia. They were fighting divestiture and they might mention us, but to know that for Rutgers' reality that they knew at the end of the day that that kid from Columbia and all those people from Columbia were definitely on the train on their way to New Brunswick [laughter] to come and join with folks here to push that effort, I think must have pushed their hand. We were committed to it, but we didn't think it would work. I think when Jesse Jackson came, that's when we were like, "Wow, Jesse Jackson came. Jesse Jackson's going to come and actually speak to us, holy cow."

At that time, again, Rutgers didn't have its respect like it has now. It has more respect now. It didn't have that respect then, for no apparent reason. I have no idea why, but Rutgers didn't seem to seize upon its rich history like it does now. Rutgers was seen as some B-league school,

but at the end of the day, it never was academically and it was always thought of before that in New Jersey as some secret, like some magic secret that you're not really supposed to tell somebody, like [whispering], "You get a really good education. Don't tell anybody." That was kind of how it was. When we were bringing all this attention to it, I think they were uneasy about that concept of them being outed, and once they got outed as being folks investing in open apartheid in another country and the oppression of those people and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela that they realized [they needed to divest]. Again, we were blessed; we had Sister Souljah making the case. How are you going to tell her she's wrong? She's right. I'm saying she's right anyway, but you couldn't have picked anyone more eloquent to be laying that dogma down, her and all the other folks on the steering committee [of the Rutgers Coalition for Total Divestment].

I say this all the time, when I hear folks that talk about kids in the inner city not getting education and kids in the inner city are this or that, I say my experience was completely different. I said when I met kids from Newark or from Camden or from Neptune or from Philly or someplace like that, these were usually some of the smartest kids I've ever met in my life, and they were usually not like kids. They were like adults. Not only were they really smart and could quote things and quote real stuff, but they had real life experience, where they had worked x-amount of jobs to get to school. Their mother was this, and they did this. They went to school, and they were really excited about going to college. They really invigorated you. It made you go, "Okay, well, wait a minute, I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to graduate. I'm going to stick to my guns. I can do it. I've got to be as smart as that cat. I've got to get smart like him. He's smart." That's why when I see folks belittle urban schools, a part of it is it's a con game. Yes, absolutely, there need to be more resources in urban schools no doubt, but at the end of the day, I don't think folks give enough credit to the kids that come out of the urban schools because they're too busy focusing on the ones that don't. The ones that do come out, many times are like the smartest kids you'll ever meet. That's how it was with me. My friend Glen Arnold, I think he was from Elizabeth, just one of the smartest people I ever met, just brilliant. You're just like, "Wow, man, I hope I can be as smart as that guy, boy." You'd go to write, and you're like, "Man, I'm hoping I can write something that can even be in the *Black Voice*. How can I even come and write something about that? I'm from little old Montclair, and this guy's from Newark or some big city, he's smart." That was always the way I approached it.

It was no different with the divestiture rallies. All the folks that were leading it were largely from the bigger cities, and they were the smartest people you knew, the smartest people I ever met. It was great that they were leading it, and we were shocked, shocked that they divested. We couldn't believe it. Then, when Mandela got free, that was just one of those things like you just were like, "No way, they're actually going to let him out, really?" You're reading this. You're reading papers of this guy and being in prison. You're reading his story, and it looks like they're never going to let this guy out. All those things were wonderful little watermarks we had during our time.

WB: *The Medium* was still around at Livingston, right?

SW: Yes.

WB: Did you write for them at all?

SW: I did not. It wasn't for any good reason. At that time, for some reason, *The Medium* had been a paper that was very well respected on the campus, but what happened was in that particular point in time, for some reason, it got to be very cliquish. You know how when folks talk about the downside to integration. They'll talk about baseball and they'll say, "Yes, but integration killed the Negro Leagues." You go, "Okay, I guess I can see where that is problematic conceptually." That's what happened to Livingston. Imagine you have this bohemian, urban college that's a groundbreaking, trendsetting college, and here's a paper reflecting that. Well, once the gates got opened and we got the ability to go to College Ave essentially, it kind of muddied the waters enough where there just weren't enough people left on Livingston to work for *The Medium* and the ones that were there were kind of cliquish. It was still respected, but I remember it was always a lot thinner than everything that was coming on. For me, I had thought about it, but because of the *Black Voice* and just the Robeson Center, it was a calling. It was one of those things. I couldn't have anticipated that was going to happen.

Ironically, one of my colleagues at the time, I think she had just left there, the Livingston *Medium*, Kinga Borondy. It was funny because her name I always knew, and with a name like Kinga Borondy, you're like, "I don't know what type of person this is, but I wonder who that is. Do I ever see her?" You'd see her stuff. You'd see she wrote it. She's the head writer of the Livingston *Medium* at the time, and you'd be like, "Did I ever encounter her? I don't even know if I did." Sure enough, later in life, when I was working at *The Star-Ledger*, I got to work with Kinga Borondy, and she was wonderful, a great writer, a great person, but nothing of what you would have expected. When I'm thinking Kinga Borondy, especially [when I am] working at the *Black Voice*, I'm thinking African sister from Ghana, "She's down. You think you're down. You're not even close to as down as Kinga Borondy." Kinga Borondy was this white Hungarian woman, [laughter] great writer, very, very, very liberal, cool person, but it was just funny as I actually met her, I was like, "Oh, you're Kinga Borondy, okay. Nice to meet you. You worked for the Livingston *Medium*. I remember reading your byline." Unfortunately, I think it got, I don't know how it is now and if it's still around, but there was a period of time in the early '80s where it seems like it got watered down. The folks that normally would have been there writing, me included, would have ended up going to the *Targum*, ended up going to the *Black Voice* or not doing anything, you know, doing something completely different. I think that killed it, because Livingston had its own little identity.

When we were still there, there was still *The Medium*. There was a radio station, I think, still early on. I don't know if it was there my whole four years, but I'll say easily my freshman year. At the time, I don't think they ever got funded again, but I remember at the time, each campus had its own football team. There was the Livingston Panthers. I don't ever think they played when I was there, but I remember seeing the jerseys and seeing pictures and seeing that there had been a football team there. They never fielded the team again, I don't think, when we got there. That's the distinction of our time period. From '82 to '86, I dare say, from '80 to '82, there probably was a Livingston Panthers, but for some reason, right at that time when we got there, that's when everything was changing. Now, there was no more Livingston Panthers. I know Rutgers College had our normal Rutgers team, but I think there was like an intramural team that would interact with the Panthers. They played somebody, because I know that I saw that they

had some type of championship or whatever. The colors were different. That was the other thing. They wore black and silver. They looked like the [Oakland] Raiders. It was different. It was a different time, but we missed that. We got to the end of it, we heard of it, but by the time we got there, it was all about Rutgers, the Scarlet Knights, trying to build up the football team. Even then, the football team was not good, not anything like now, where it's a big-time program of sorts. It was not even close to that when we got there, so just different times. The *Livingston Medium* was kind of part of that. Does it still exist?

WB: It exists. It is an online publication. It is the entertainment weekly of Rutgers-New Brunswick.

SW: Okay. I wondered that. I wondered if it did. Respected, it was always respected. It was always thought of if you wanted to know about Rutgers politics or what was going on in the area, you could rely on *The Medium* to read that. Because we were pushing in a more Afrocentric way, we were pushing in a more nationalistic way, just in the way we were presenting [at the *Black Voice*], we didn't need to particularly rely on them. Usually, the *Targum* was trying to be like the *Home News* at the time. You're learning the mainstream style with the *Targum*, and then you get to go with your magazine style with the *Black Voice*. Then, if you wanted to know about politics, you could look at the *Livingston Medium*, but it wasn't as reviled as it had been in the past.

WB: What were some of the books, television shows, radio stations, magazines, speakers that influenced your way of thinking politically?

SW: For me, I didn't read as much as I would like when I think about it, but [I was] certainly reading James Baldwin, reading any of those early, turn-of-the-century-type writers, W.E.B. DuBois and the Harlem-elite type of writers was always neat. That kind of got your head wrapped around concepts of race and concepts of what you thought.

My sister, my older sister, was this revolutionary character in my life. She was the first kid in my family to wear an Afro. She was the first kid in my family to be Black Power and wear a dashiki. As you're watching this happen around you, it was kind of organic. If you saw a news clip with Eldridge Cleaver speaking, or you saw a news clip with Huey Newton speaking or H. Rap Brown, that kind of became your tome, along with reading Martin Luther King, reading things that maybe Malcolm X wrote. Malcolm X, at that time, was more frowned upon because people were terrified. They didn't understand the Nation of Islam or being Muslim like folks understand now, although you've got idiots trying to terrify everybody now in a different way. We didn't understand our ties to it as black folks. We were just learning that. It was like a big stew between that [and] my household. Because I had older brothers and sisters, I would get bombarded by all these different dynamic things. For my sister Lisa, who was eight years older than me, I would get the most direct bombardment, because we were interacting more than the other two, who were a little older. With her, it was all militant.

All the militant stuff that she'd be listening to, I'd be listening to, and right along with it would be heavy, heavy, heavy doses of James Brown, heavy, heavy doses of soul music from my sisters and brothers that were listening to the Motown stuff still. My brother, I'd always get from him

all types of different musical influences, like the Beatles and Chambers Brothers. You put those three older siblings together with what I was being exposed to at arguably one of the most revolutionary times in our history in our country, and it was kind of like I was just bombarded with multimedia concepts. You're reading things, but more so you're experiencing and you're watching.

My brother, I remember him coming home the first time from college, and he came home with a Mohawk. He had a Mohawk. He had these short shorts on that were like real short shorts but they were suspenders, crazy-looking stuff. This is what the '60s would bring. You didn't know what you'd see, and seeing hippies, real hippies that you were meeting that you knew that were kids that grew up and they became hippies. Now, their hair's really long and they're talking Che Guevara and they're talking about revolution and why we should get out of Vietnam. You would experience it almost in your walking around. The '60s into the '70s were way more of an aware time as far as what average people were doing. If you were walking down the street, it wouldn't be shocking that someone would try to press a book from Chairman Mao [Zedong] [laughter] in your hand or something. That was just the flavor of the day. You ran into these types of concepts over time. I think when you put all that together, I think that kind of shaped my political views, [laughter] which can be radical in concept but also liberal in concept, and I think that is what put me in whatever direction I ended up going in.

For me, music's always a big influence. I think the power of those speeches that you heard from different speakers for Black Nationalism or for Black Power, with the backdrop of James Brown, for me made it real simple for hip-hop to just completely blow me away. By the time I got to be of college age and hip-hop's happening, it was like someone decided to mix all those elements together into one thing and throw it back in a different way, and you're like, "Wow, wait a minute. Holy cow, wait a minute. Holy cow, did he just say that? Okay, wait a minute, that's a James Brown beat, and he did that. How did he do that?" I think the combination of that led me towards a hip-hop reality. I think that that's what shaped me, all those elements together, coming in but then being galvanized ultimately when I was old enough to understand it into hip-hop. It was kind of like I was waiting for hip-hop to happen and I didn't even know it, and then it happened. You're like, "Wow, I'm down with that. Whatever that is, I like that." [laughter] I think all those elements make my whole of sorts.

WB: You mentioned James Brown specifically as an influence.

SW: Yes.

WB: Then how you get to hear James Brown again in the sampling for hip-hop.

SW: Absolutely.

WB: What were some of the hip-hop artists that you listened to that influenced you?

SW: Oh, geez.

WB: Can you just name a few?

SW: LL Cool J, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, definitely Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, Kurtis Blow. In those days, when we were kids, and, again, we never thought hip-hop would be big, it was just our thing. Hip-hop would always be this thing, where I remember I had a friend, who he was from the Bronx but his family had moved to Montclair when he was a kid, so he would always go back home to the Bronx at some point. Kevin would always come back, and you'd be on the bus--and the bus is moving and the bus [was] noisy, people talking--but he would have his box and he'd play hip-hop tapes that he had got from the Bronx and you'd hear it. We're talking 1976, 1977, 1978, and you're hearing this. Whenever the bus would stop, he'd stop the machine, so nobody could hear it [laughter] because you knew they were saying crazy things that you're not supposed to be listening to. That was like his job. Whenever the bus stopped, "Turn off the tape." We would hear it, we'd be grooving to it for a second. Then, when the bus stopped, you'd just have to turn it off, so the bus driver doesn't hear that you're listening to that. How would we explain it anyway? It sounded insane. There'd be no way to explain that. Yes, once it got to be a real art form, those early artists, Schoolly D, that whole set of artists, those early ones, were just like these guys that you couldn't even believe that they made a record. You're like, "That's on a record. I can actually put that on and listen to that another time. I don't have to rely on Kevin to get the special tape." All the early stuff was big.

I always, as a person who loves words, I always loved the word play and the metaphors and the use of the metaphors especially over the beat, over the breakbeat, the way it was used at the time. That was what made it so impactful. That's why I have so much trouble with some of the newer stuff now, because it allowed commercialization to get them away from that base. I know the art form has to grow, so I get it, but at the end of the day, it's hard for some of us folks that started out with the culture as it was growing up to understand how I can interface with this new culture. It was unabashedly like what I was saying about living at Livingston; hip-hop was unabashedly for the common man, absolutely for the poorest person you knew. To even get to a place now where I'm supposed to be excited about this cat [Drake] from Degrassi Junior High rocking it from Toronto, it loses a little bit of its oomph to me. It's a little hard to be excited about that. In those days, it was easy, because it was our little thing. Kids a year or two older than us didn't like it. They were listening to club music and disco. We would listen to that, too. They were like, "What is this garbage that you're listening to?" [laughter] Then, white kids didn't really pick up on it yet at that time either, so it was just our little thing. It's something we had no clue would be commercially viable ever. It's all happening at the same time. If you can imagine all these things happening at the same time, it was kind of exciting.

WB: Are there any classes or professors from Livingston that stand out?

SW: Yes. I wasn't on Livingston as long as I would like. I remember there was a professor, I can't remember his first name, but his last name was (Monte?), I know that, that I had for a social science kind of thing. It was one of my first classes. I was blown away, because he was a brother. It was the first time I had really seen a real professional professor in that setting, but he's a brother. He had a little Afro. [He was] very clean, very dressed, very serious, and it was the first time I had really seen that before, where a brother is speaking to a class of people, a whole class of people, and, again, being from a black neighborhood, not just black people, everybody, and speaking in a way that we're all used to now, but at that time, I think I was

blown away by him and how professional he was and also from his lessons. I graduated high school at seventeen. When I got to start college, I didn't turn eighteen until late September, so I was still just a goofball, completely a kid, trying to figure out what in the world am I doing in college. I remember coming away from his class feeling--I probably didn't even do that well in it--just feeling a[n] understanding of a mission, like this is something I have to achieve. He made it real that it was something important that I was accomplishing. I don't even know if he said that, but seeing him and understanding that that's him and he's able to do this let me know that I could do this, that I could get through, I can graduate, I can go to college here. [I thought], "What do you mean, guidance counselor, I shouldn't even apply to Rutgers? What do you mean? I'm here. I can do this." Seeing that type of person and that person as an influence, even though I don't think I ever really spoke to him or had some type of close relationship with him, I think that that was his impact on me.

I cannot remember this professor's name, but I can definitely see him speaking, older professor, a white guy, something like Professor Seth Scheiner. He was a history professor, and he had such a unique way of putting forth the history that it made me completely interested. I was always kind of interested in history, but his stories and the way he approached it, the way he laid it out for me made me so interested in history. I was just like, "Wow." It was like it became living to me. He was very, very adept at delivering the nuances.

My favorite musical is *1776*, and the reason that is is because it was the first time you could kind of see the founding fathers as people with flaws, just regular people making a decision at a certain time but not these people up on a [pedestal]. I thought that that end of history was fascinating, because when you're hearing it through regular people, you get a little bit better understanding of what you're seeing. Whatever you're seeing, when you see a documentary, is someone's POV [point of view] of it. You get to see that. You get to hear a person that's telling you a story that [is] from a historical perspective.

For instance, when I was a young reporter, one of the first people I got to meet down here in Newark was Amiri Baraka, and I had never met anybody like that before. He just blew my mind. He was just such a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant man and giving you so much information in such a short period of time. You learned a little bit of the history, even if he wasn't talking about that, just in his delivery and the way he brought it forth. This particular professor, I cannot think of his name, was really good at that for me in history.

[Editor's Note: The following addendum was added after the original interview.] During my interview, I was asked which professor or educator had the largest influence on my collegiate career, and, initially, I blanked. However, upon further reflection, I did come away with two professors, one tenured and one adjunct, who impacted my college experience, one early on and another towards the end. Early on, history professor Seth Scheiner was my first history instructor at Rutgers. Professor Scheiner loomed large in my collegiate experience because of his lessons on American history, something in which I majored, but most importantly for his bombastic and over the top way of lecturing. As the first person in my family to attend a university, I had only seen college lectures on television, as I think back, probably during some odd hour during the week when I was watching an episode of "The Paper Chase," in the solitude of my childhood room in my parents' house. My first lecture with Professor Scheiner was

electric in that his colorful descriptions and often booming voice filled the hall and almost reminded me of a performance. Pacing and bringing the history to life, I learned about aspects of historical events I thought I'd covered in high school with a new depth and a new significance. To this second, I can still hear his recounting of a quote from FDR's vice president John Nance Garner III, in describing his office. "The vice presidency ain't worth a bucket of warm piss," Scheiner announced during an early lesson where he quoted the man known as "Cactus Jack." There was something about the explicit nature of the quote and the insight into the administration of the 33rd vice president and legendary presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that let me know that my learning experience in college would no longer be confined to a textbook like it had been in high school. No, college was going to be more than reading and repeating; it was going to be a full-on, three-dimensional and life-changing learning experience. It might have been at this point that I realized my love of history could mean something.

Where Professor Scheiner began my journey, it was an adjunct professor who had arguably the largest impact on my time at Rutgers--Donald Bogle. Bogle taught a course on "Blacks in Film" on the Rutgers College Campus that was so thought provoking and informational that it probably impacted the way I watched all films and the way I saw myself in the universe for the rest of my life. Bogle, who is the son of a prominent African-American newspaper executive, was forever modest and never let us know about his place in the universe. As it turned out, he is and was the leading authority on African Americans in film in the world. Teaching us about the relatively short presence of Blacks in American film, Professor Bogle's ability to outline the many stereotypes, while highlighting all of the fine actors, absolutely defined the way I saw people who looked like me in film. Often relegated to lesser roles or diminished, Professor Bogle not only taught us historical context, but made us better people and helped develop our critical eye. His class was outstanding and I believe could have been a graduate level course. [Editor's Note: This is the end of the addendum.]

Later, what impacted me the most, ironically, [was] my time in the Towers. I got to be in the Towers my sophomore year. LeRoy Haynes was the director, I'm going to say, director of housing for Livingston, I think is how it worked for him. [Editor's Note: A native of Atlantic City, LeRoy Haynes enrolled at Livingston College in 1969 along with the first class of students. After earning a social science degree in 1971, Haynes spent his career at Rutgers in a variety of positions, including assistant director of residence life at Livingston College.] I didn't realize until later what a historical person he was at Livingston College, but by interacting with him, and, again, I'm not the type of person to be sitting down at the feet of these people and let them talk to me or mentor me or whatever, a lot of times just them being them would impact me in a way where I could get a concept [or] get some context. Him just being him in this circumstance, so here we are in this Rutgers college building on Livingston Campus, where no Livingston students can live. [Editor's Note: The Towers on Livingston Campus housed Rutgers College students due to housing shortages on the College Avenue Campus.] He's a black man telling me about, "Okay, well, we're trying to do this. We're trying to have a Livingston floor in here," and you're just going, "Wow, my mind's blown." Here's a brother telling me how it's going to be, but he's obviously in a decision-making capacity. He's not asking someone how it's going to be. He's dictating how it's going to be, but not in some crazy way, in a very straightforward, professional way. You're just like, "Wow, okay." It doesn't always have to be that

revolutionary speaker. It doesn't always have to be H. Rap Brown. A person can succeed and be impactful in many different ways.

That was another thing that I thought became very, very, very clear to me during my travels at Rutgers, different people doing things in a different way but impacting you in profound ways, even though they're not even trying to do that. LeRoy was that type of person, and I had very little dealing with him, because when I was living in the Towers and even when I was interviewing for the position at the Towers, if you saw LeRoy, you'd screwed up. [laughter] If you saw that guy, you really blew it. You did something real bad, because that meant that the person you're dealing with, which at that time was (Kathy Goldman?), had to go to LeRoy. LeRoy lived in the building. He had his own apartment in the building. If you had to bother that guy, and he was a pretty tall cat, as I remember. He's probably, I'm six feet tall, I'm going to say he's probably six-three, six-four. He was a big dude, so you didn't want to have to deal with that. As a black man to black man--I didn't even know his history at that time--you didn't want to be schooled by that guy, like you're screwing up, because that meant you really screwed up. You didn't want to embarrass him. I would say [I remember] those folks generally, but for me it was a lot of organic stuff just because you were living in the circumstances.

A lot of times, with my interactions with the *Black Voice* and with the Robeson Center, you were coming in contact with people [who went on to do great things]. Again, I can see Alfred Edmond, Jr. now, but I'm just saying you couldn't have known he was going to become the editor in chief of *Black Enterprise* magazine, that he was going to be this impactful person, but this is the type of person you're talking about writing a story about karate to. This is the editor you're talking to, just having a conversation, "Hey, should I approach it this way?" Just by chance, the guy you're having this casual conversation with is a person that's going to be impactful in black journalism in the next thirty, forty years. [These are] not things that you could know but things that you end up figuring out, and then when you look back at them, you go, "Wow, okay, I guess that was good advice. It was coming from a pretty good source." There was a lot of that at Rutgers, a lot of self-learning type of things, circumstances, that came about.

Actually, my roommate's friend was Bill Bellamy [comedian and actor], so I got to know Bill when Bill was a freshman and I was a sophomore. Again, I didn't know he's funny. [laughter] I had no clue. Why would I know he's funny? He seemed like a nice enough guy, but he's a funny dude evidently. You're meeting people like this. Regina Belle [Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter] went to school there while we went there. Regina dated [John] Battle, who was the basketball star on the team. You saw Regina all the time. It was just like somebody you saw. Yes, she sings really nice, but you didn't know it was going to be Regina Belle. [laughter] Why would you know that? Kevin Powell is another person. Powell was a little younger than me, but I remember meeting Kevin Powell. I didn't know he'd be the first black person on *The Real World*, which kind of set off reality TV. I didn't know he's that smart of a dude. I mean, [he is a] relatively smart dude, met him, seemed like a good cat, but didn't know he'd be that guy. That was a constant thing at Rutgers. You met these people that were going to be impactful, but you had no idea they were going to be impactful. I thought Lisa Williamson would be impactful, I guess, but did I think she'd ever end up rapping with Public Enemy? No, it didn't occur to me. [laughter] It didn't occur to me that would happen. That was kind of the

Rutgers experiences. A lot of times you got to meet people that were going to be impactful in the future, and you just had no clue that you were meeting that person on all sides.

Matt Pinfeld, who's a big DJ and VJ, I saw him all the time. When you used to go into the *Targum*, WRSU [Rutgers radio station] was right there. He was usually out in the hallway. My roommate was good friends with him, so I'd see him all the time. I didn't know he'd become anybody. Why would you think he would? That was often the Rutgers experience. There was a band that was popular for a while called the Smithereens. The guy that was the lead guitarist for this owned Captain Video. That was the only video store you could get videos at off of College Ave, so you would go there to get your videos on College Ave, because there was really nothing at Livingston. You'd go to College Ave and go to Captain Video and get a video to rent and come back on the bus, and then you'd have some videos for the weekend. The guy who owns the store became a great guitar player for the Smithereens that was popular in the '90s for a little bit. Again, there's no way you could have known that. A lot of impactful folks that impacted you from Rutgers may not have been educators. Some of them were educators, but lot of times they were just people, kids, other students that you met that you were just like, "Wow, okay." Then, later on, you go, "Wow, hey, that guy became somebody. How about that." [laughter] That was fascinating.

WB: Talk to me about the Towers a little bit. Were you the first Livingston student to live in the Towers?

SW: I was, I was. We were the first floor. Rutgers always has a housing problem, so my guess is they must have let some Livingston students live there off the books I bet, but we were the first floor in the Towers of only Livingston students being allowed at that time to live among Rutgers College students. We always thought it was hypocritical, because we were like, "Well, okay, here's the ghetto, right. You're living in the ghetto. It's good enough for you to have the best housing stock in the ghetto, obviously, so it's not that ghetto. It's so ghetto that you can live on it because you've got a housing problem, but you need a place to stay." We always thought about that, "Okay, well, this is kind of interesting." Even that we were allowed to do that--and I was hired as the RA [resident advisor]--it was not something that we thought would last. I was like, "Okay, well, I don't know what this is going to be like." At the time, it was my sophomore year. All the kids that were on my floor were older than me. They could all drink; I couldn't. [laughter] They were a great bunch, but it was just funny because I'm thinking in the back of my mind, "These kids are older than me. They're not going to listen to a word I'm saying." [laughter] They were a good bunch, and they were actually pretty mindful. Livingston students at that time, they were probably, I would say, that last group of kids that were still tied to the old way, so they were really, really mindful of how important that was. They were like, "Okay, whatever you want to do, Steve, let's do that," because they want to make sure that they're not going to screw it up for future Livingston students. They were really mindful of that. They wanted to make sure that they were impactful and showed Rutgers College students that they were as smart as them and that they were as good as them and not that we would think any different because we all took classes together.

Livingston and all of Rutgers had a legacy of each college being its own little world. Before we got there, I got there in '82, before that, it was self-contained. If you were on Livingston, all

your classes were on Livingston. You only read the Livingston *Medium* because you didn't go off of Livingston. That's where you lived. You weren't allowed to go to Rutgers College. That was very much mindful for all of us, even though that wasn't our reality. I think all of us had a mindset of, "Well, if someone's going to screw it up, it's not going to be us. We're not going to screw it up. We're going to make sure that they understand that we're not scared of them and we're not scary people. We're good students just like them. We're in the same classes. We're going to be taken seriously. You know what? We deserve to be living in this building. It's on our freaking campus. You guys call us the ghetto. You don't want to be here." Most of the white students that were in the Towers were resentful that they were there, and even the white kids that lived in the Quads largely were resentful that they were there. They were mad that their parents didn't make enough money, or they were mad that they didn't get into this school, so their parents made them go to Rutgers. They ended up at Livingston, and they're living in the Quads. The Quads are the ghetto, and they were just resentful.

For us, mainly a person like myself, the first kid in my house to go to college, I was tickled pink to be there. I couldn't believe how fortuitous, like, "Oh, my God, I'm in college. I'm living in a dorm." I had my own room, how about that. I think that there was that weird dynamic, too. You're dealing with a lot of kids. They need places to live, so they're there. The Towers was always the nicest building on the campus, so they're in the best building that they can be in. You're rarely going to see them in Tillett. They're not going to go to Tillett. They're going to go to Rutgers College, because they want to do anything to disavow themselves from being at Livingston. It was important to show them that, "If you don't want to be here, that's cool, you can go. We'll gladly take this building if you would let us." [laughter] There was always that. I was very shocked when I went back a few years ago and saw that it was all Livingston College on Livingston Campus. [Editor's Note: In 2006, Livingston College ceased to be a degree-granting institution, admitting its last four-year class that went on to graduate in 2010.] I was like, "Wow, so we did it. We all actually are living in here. Wow, that's amazing," because, at the time, it was just seen as crazy. When you would tell people you were living in the Towers, they were like, "What? You can't be living in the Towers. Where do you go to school?" "Livingston." "But you can't live in the Towers." "No, I'm living in the Towers." [laughter] "You can't. What do mean? You can't. You can't live there. What did you do?" It was always a very odd situation to live in the Towers. In that, though, when we got our second floor my junior year, that was just even more pride. You're just like, "Wow, okay, good, now we've got two floors, so obviously we did something right that they are allowing us to have another floor. That's cool. We're making progress. That's good." That was always a good thing.

I wrote a piece, I think, for one of the outlying magazines. My roommate had turned me onto that. [Editor's Note: Steven Walker wrote "Towering Memories: Livingston College Students Move In to Dorms on North Side of Campus" for the 1986 yearbook *The Experience*. The article is available on the Livingston Alumni Association website at <http://livingstonalumni.org>.] He also got interviewed, Glen Weisman [LC '86]. I hadn't even thought about it, to tell you the God's honest truth, until he told me that. He was like, "You know you're the first RA." I was like I knew that, but I was just like, "Damn, yeah, I guess I was the first RA. How about that?" I was so focused. My main concern was that everybody understood that we were just as good as everybody else. That was my main concern; we were as good as everybody else. There's no difference. We're just as good. We're just as smart. We belong at Rutgers. That was my main

concern, so it actually didn't really occur to me, in the grand scale of what we were doing, but it was neat. I was just glad I was given the opportunity to do it. We always saw the Towers as someplace to take over. [laughter] It was kind of neat.

WB: What year did you graduate?

SW: '86.

WB: 1986.

SW: Yes.

WB: Did you start working right away?

SW: I did.

WB: You did not take time off.

SW: No. I got really lucky. I had to fight to stay senior week. A funny story, my dad was retired, but, again, he would not stop working. [laughter] He had purchased a buffing machine, one of those buffing machines that you buff the floors with, and decided that he was just going to summarily go find jobs cleaning and buffing floors. One of the places he cleaned and buffed the floors at was this newspaper called the *Herald & News*. The building's something else now, but it was in Passaic. He said he was going to buff the floors there, and he was doing it for probably, I'll say, maybe a year or so. Just by chance, I said to him, "Hey, Dad, could you just drop one of my resumes off at the place and just see if I can maybe get an interview there?" to which he was like, "Of course, they'll definitely hire you" and this, that and the other. He was always such the optimist, just a tremendously optimistic, nice, happy guy. I was like, "Yes, whatever. The janitor leaves your resume. They're not going to hire me." By chance, they called me, and I got an opportunity to interview. I got hired right, literally out of college. I graduated in May and started working that summer right there at the *Herald & News*. That my first newspaper job. That was a lot of fun.

WB: What were you doing there?

SW: At that time, the *Herald & News* was battling with the *Paterson News*, which also doesn't exist anymore. The *Herald News* exists. At that time, the *Paterson News* was a predominant paper, and it was in physical Paterson. They were seen as the big newspaper in that area. The *Herald & News* was in Passaic. They were kind of seen like, "Ah, they're suburban." *Paterson News* people were seeing themselves as city folk. They're not going to buy a suburban paper, so that was the battle. I got to cover, initially, sometimes you get to cover in the city, but I was brand new. You might get to cover something in Paterson, but usually not, every once in a while. Largely, they would put you in some remote place that they're trying to cultivate, so I covered places like Butler and West Milford and Ringwood, where there was no news. In Butler, places like that, you're way up Route 23 in Morris County, Passaic County, trying to cultivate coverage. You've got to learn municipal news and how to cover a municipal meeting

and how to turn that into a news story and write it and just learn a new craft. It was crazy. [laughter] We were making no money. I think when I came out of school, I think I might have been making ten thousand dollars a year or maybe even eight. It was something ridiculously low. To be honest with you, you knew you had to start somewhere, and we were just happy to have an opportunity to write. It was neat.

WB: Did you have your own place?

SW: No, not initially. Initially, I stayed with my parents. For the first six to eight months, I moved back home, and then that next year, that January actually, the Giants Super Bowl, I remember I was moving that weekend. When the Giants beat the Broncos in the Super Bowl in '87, I had just moved into my place. At that point, I lived in Bloomfield, which was nearby, and I had my own place. That was a weird thing. Most people, I guess, I don't know if it's like this now, but at the time, most people didn't graduate in four years. They graduated usually [in] five years, sometimes a little later. Because I had graduated in four years, it was only like me and one or two of my other friends that had also graduated. My one buddy was from Bloomfield, and he had graduated from Swarthmore [College] at the same time. He was out. I was out. We got an apartment together and lived in Bloomfield ultimately. I was at the *Herald & News* probably another six months. I left there to go work actually for my first government job, which was working at Essex County. I did that for a few years before I got lucky enough to work for *The Star-Ledger*.

WB: What were you doing for Essex County?

SW: I was the deputy press secretary for the county executive. My friend was spokesman for the county executive. He also had been a reporter at the *Herald & News*. When he made that move to become a spokesman, he had asked me if I would come along. I don't think I understood the ramifications of it. I wanted to go because it was more money, to be honest. I was fascinated by what was the PR [public relations] side of things. I was kind of interested in that, because you'd learned that at school. You learned about writing in newspapers, but you always, in the middle of your curriculum, you also learned public relations is a part of that. You can progress from reporter to public relations person. That's something that's seen as a normal progression. I didn't know if I wanted to be a spokesman, but I was just fascinated by the concept of it. I went over, but what I found out, I actually didn't even know this until later, was the guy that was our county exec at the time was a Democrat that had to run as a Republican to beat the city county executive, but what I didn't know was my friend was a Republican. He saw it as going to be a spokesman for a Republican guy. He's a Republican guy, and he was going to go as a spokesman. I guess he saw me in a good way, "Hey, here's a black guy. He's my friend. I want to bring him over and show the Republicans, 'Hey, yeah, we've got black people supporting us, too.'" I had no clue about any of that. All I knew was that it was in Newark, "So that's cool and more money. I get to be a deputy press secretary, and it's kind of interesting. I wonder what that entails." I followed him over here.

I'll say six to eight months down the road, he found out that the guy that was posing as a Republican was really a Democrat. I guess he realized that he was kind of the odd man out, so he got fired pretty quickly. I actually got fired too, but by chance it happened to be on my

birthday. I got fired on my birthday, and when the guy came to fire me, I started laughing. It's '87, so I'm [twenty-three]. He's like, "I'm firing you. What's so funny?" I said, "Because you happen to be firing me on my birthday. I don't know that I expected this to be my present for the day, and I just thought that was kind of funny." He was like, "It's not your birthday. That's ridiculous. How would we fire you on your birthday?" I broke out my driver's license and showed him that it was my birthday. He felt really bad, so they didn't fire me. They kept me on, and I became the deputy press secretary for the next press secretary. I stayed there probably three years or so and was able to learn a little bit about government, learn a little bit about Essex County politics, which is cutthroat and hard core, and it actually set me up for my next move, which was *The Star-Ledger*.

WB: Talk to me about your time at *The Star-Ledger*.

SW: Best times of my life. I got there, I was twenty-six. At the time, I had actually gone there to, I thought, write about hip-hop. That's what I wanted to do. At that time, one, hip-hop, believe it or not, was still a completely new concept to people, to the greater world. To all of us who had been following it since the '70s, it wasn't, but to everybody else, it was something alien. It was like, "What is this? Is this music? What is that?" My editor at the time was one of the original folks from *The Star-Ledger*, Mort Pye, and he didn't believe that men should cover music. He thought music was a woman's job. If you're a man, you should have a beat. You should cover a city, covering a mayor, cultivating the news. He forced me to cover Newark City Hall, and I got to cover Newark City Hall, covering Sharpe James and the [City] Council there. Many of them were later put into some type of [legal] situation, [laughter] but I got to cover them on a daily basis probably from '90 to '94. [Editor's Note: Sharpe James served as the mayor of Newark from 1986 to 2006. During the 1990s, various members of Newark's city government faced either accusations or charges of corruption, including City Council members, the police director, the mayor's chief of staff and eventually the mayor himself.]

I got to be a reporter covering the largest city in the state every day, which was a hoot. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. I was like, "Wow, I can't believe I actually fell into this." It was weird, because it was a job nobody wanted. If you look at *The Ledger*, there's a guy right now, a columnist, a real good columnist, Barry Carter. Barry Carter had been covering City Hall because the guy that had been covering City Hall forever, Fred Byrd, died, so Barry was shoved into the job. Barry's from Queensbridge. Barry had no interest in doing that at all. He always wanted to be a columnist, but he did it, a good soldier, went along with it. My luck was really good in those days. I had him as a mentor. He's a year older than me, so we're the same age essentially. He's teaching me. I'm twenty-six. He's twenty-seven. He's teaching me about covering Newark City Hall. I'm covering Sharpe James and that crew, so it wasn't like there was any shortage of news certainly. I really cut my teeth learning how to write the news, how to write municipal news, how to write investigatory stories and everything, really working with Barry covering Newark, Newark City Hall. It was wonderful.

It was great to learn in the old days when newspapers were newspapers. It's not like it is now. It meant something. A funny story is [that] I'm from here, so growing up, I read *The Star-Ledger*. It was one of those things I would read. My Saturdays would always be, we had this really, really old brother that would come around on a bicycle. It was like a converted ice cream

[carrier]. Back in the day, even before my time, there would be guys that would sell ice cream, but they'd be riding a bike. They would have a big icebox on the front, and they'd sell ice cream. Well, this guy had converted that into a newspaper thing, so he would come around every Saturday. He'd bring you your *Afro American*, your *JET*, and if you had money, you could buy *Ebony*, too. We never had that much money, [laughter] so we couldn't afford *Ebony*. He would bring those two papers, so that was Saturday. My weekends were usually reading that, and then on Sunday, my dad would go down to the store and get *The Star-Ledger*. I'd get to read *The Star-Ledger* and read the comic strips and everything else. *The Star-Ledger* was always what I wanted to do. I was just excited about having an opportunity to write for them. That's always what I wanted to do.

Ironically, as time has gone on and things have changed, I have a niece who's thirteen now. I remember a few years back, we're driving home, and she goes, "Uncle Steve, I'm so sorry." I said, "You're so sorry for what?" She said, "You never got to be on television." I said, "Television?" I said, "I had no interest in ever being on television." She's like, "Well, I'm sorry things didn't work out for you. You never got to realize your dream." I said, "Stasia," I said, "I realized my dream at twenty-six." It was actually one of things that knocked you back a few inches. If your goal was to work for *The Star-Ledger* your whole life and you get to do that at twenty-six, it's kind of overwhelming. You're like, "Holy cow, how did I get to do that?" Then, when you're there for a few years, you're realizing, "Hey, I'm doing it. I'm actually doing it." I'm actually working as a reporter with all these names of people that I grew up reading, Stanley Terrell and Lawrence Hall, and these people you're reading and you're working with them. They respect you and you can write stuff, ask them questions, Jerry Izenberg, you're seeing these people every day. It was just funny, but it's because the concept of a newspaper has fallen to such depths at this point that she didn't even understand that was prestigious in any way. She didn't understand that writing for a newspaper was a big deal, but in the '90s, that was a big deal. I was tremendously blessed to have that opportunity.

WB: What was it like covering Sharpe James?

SW: It was crazy. The paper wanted to catch him doing something, so there was that. Being the second black mayor in the City of Newark had a certain concept to it where basically the mayor and the council see you as the hand of white man coming to mess up whatever they're doing. Now, that may be legal or illegal that they're doing, but they're seeing you as a tool of the white man coming to mess up Newark. Then, you have the newspaper who sees those guys as criminals. You've got to catch them. You're being thrust into this situation. Here I am, really a guy who just wants to cover hip-hop, I just want to write about music, [laughter] really that's all, covering, having to deal with this, but I love politics, so I can make it work. I had to make it work.

Sharpe, he and I had a tremendously bad relationship, because I'm trying to get in good with my employer. I am trying to catch him doing stuff and I'm sure he is doing stuff, but I couldn't catch him. He was good. He was an accomplished politician on that level, and not to say in any way that he was a felon, because he was not. In Essex County, it's understood that politics is Machiavellian. Essentially, you're dealing with folks who, you know, Hugh Addonizio had been mayor of the City of Newark in the '60s, Hugh Addonizio. The garbage in Newark was

collected physically by the mob, not kind of by the mob. No, no, they called the mob, and that was who picked up the garbage. You're on that level, when you're ballsy enough that the mob is the people doing your garbage [collection]. [Editor's Note: Hugh J. Addonizio, a decorated World War II veteran and two-term Democratic mayor of Newark, served over five years of a jail sentence after he was found guilty of conspiracy and extortion. The trial revealed his administration's ties to the organized crime family of Ruggerio Boiardo.] Obviously, graft and scandal, there's levels of it that exist in Essex, Hudson, Bergen, these are places that have a history of having this interesting relationship with crime and the way they deal with things that are kind of groundbreaking and sometimes criminal. Sharpe was no different, [laughter] and he was good at it. He was good at it. [I had] many tense exchanges with him, many scenarios. One of my favorite memories of Sharpe James is they had a real trapdoor and secret stairwell, [laughter] believe it or not.

WB: In City Hall?

SW: In City Hall in his office. I had been told about it. I didn't know it existed. I had been told about it. It was legend, but I didn't know it existed. I was trying to reach him, and I think, at the time, I was pushing him. They were hiring a police director at the time. It was a big deal that he was hiring a police director who was a brother from Boston. As it turned out, the guy was completely corrupt, the police director, but at the time, it was a big deal. They were bringing a big city police director to Newark to run Newark, and they kept it under wraps. Ironically, Kinga Borondy, who I mentioned earlier, covered cops, so that was her story. She and I, of course, because we kind of knew each other, worked together with no problem. We knew who the guy was, and she needed just to get a quote from the mayor on it. The mayor wasn't speaking to her. I was in City Hall physically, so I would just walk across the hall and try to get a comment from him. He kept putting me off, putting me off, putting me off. Now, you've got a deadline, so your deadline's four o'clock. You can't put it off past four o'clock. I've got a deadline. I'm not going to miss that. I just was like, "Okay, well, I'm going to camp out. I'm not leaving. I'm going to sit here until they close this place. If he's in there. I'm going to talk to him. I don't care." I just sat there. Whenever he came out or someone on his staff came out, I was like, "Yo, could you tell the mayor I'm here? I just have got to talk to him for five minutes." He just kept avoiding me.

I got to a point where the doors kept opening. I kept saying, "Well, shoot, maybe I can just kind of force my way in, say something and maybe he'll have to respond. Even if it's no comment, I'll take it." His bodyguard was there, and the door did open. I tried to bum-rush him, and he caught me. He grabbed me. I reacted as anybody would react on the street. I reacted like, "Yo, don't you touch me like that." This is a former Newark cop, so he tried to get rough. We had words, but nothing else happened. In the interim, I noticed the mayor that was just right there, I know I saw him, wasn't there anymore. I was like, "Where the hell did he go?" I said, "Could there really be a secret [door]? Seriously. I know I just saw him, and I know he's not there now. I'm in the mayor's office. Where the hell did he go?" I said, "Screw that. Where could he go?" I was walking out, and I saw one of the old guys that worked there. I referenced it real quick, and he said, "Oh, well, that will come out to the side of the building." I was like, "Yeah? Okay." I took the elevator down and beat him out [of] the building. When he came to jump in his car, I was standing at the door. [laughter] I got my no comment, but he was so pissed that I

knew that he had slipped out. [laughter] The look on his face was just utter anguish. For a reporter, that was payment for the day. [laughter] It was like you couldn't give me any money that would have been worth that look. That was one of my favorite times covering Sharpe James, good times.

WB: How was he viewed by citizens in Newark?

SW: At that time?

WB: At that time.

SW: Sharpe, let me tell you, even as bad as things got for him later, I would say this guy, he's really from here, so people loved him. Even if they knew he was full of it or a cheerleader or [he would] be very, very dramatic and crazy about his presentation, folks loved him because they knew he was really one of them. He embodied that you could be from Newark and become mayor. You could be mayor and really do it. They loved him, they loved him. Everybody loved him. Wherever he went, they loved him. Even if they didn't love him, he was the type of guy, even if you didn't love him, he would bust your chops about you busting his chops enough that you would have to smile at least. You'd be like, "Okay, all right, you're full of shit." [laughter] He'd be like, "Ahhh" [making a laughing noise]. You'd be like, "All right, Sharpe, all right, go ahead. Go ahead. Do what you're going to do." That was his thing. They loved him.

WB: Did that break along racial lines or ethnic lines?

SW: No, he was loved by all, at that time. The way Newark is right now, I don't care what anybody says, Cory closed the deal. Cory Booker was the closer [as mayor of Newark from 2006 to 2013], but the guy that pitched eight innings on it was Sharpe James. Everything that's happening now in Newark, right this second, is everything that was in Sharpe James' vision of what he wanted Newark to be. He wanted folks to want to come back here. He wanted people to not be terrified of coming downtown. He wanted the North Ward not to just be the North Ward, a place where folks would amass wealth and live, [but to] just be another part of the city where anybody would live or not live. Even if there are racial dynamics, and there are still, they would be a little bit more relaxed. I think that what we're seeing now is completely his vision. Everything we're seeing is pretty much what Sharpe James thought it would be. Everybody was tolerant of him because they knew his power. He had a lot of folks that respected him. He had a lot of people [that] would follow him. Even when folks didn't like him, like a Steve Adubato [Democratic leader of the North Ward], I think they learned to respect one another, and I think he learned to realize that he could work with him and that Newark would be the richer for it. At the end of the day, that was a hundred percent correct.

None of this existed then, none of this. When you got here in the city, you got to Mulberry Street, that was that little street that you had to get [across], you were like, "Can I get to the train station without getting mugged? Is it possible?" [laughter] That was always the thought, mainly for the law students that went to Seton Hall. They knew when they went to that building, by the time they got to that building, it was go time. You better get there [laughter] for real. There was nothing here. This was nothing. There was no Gateway [Center]. There was nothing. It was

just wasteland between Mulberry Street and Neck. If you get Down Neck, cool, but if you can't get there, you've got about three, four big blocks to get [through]. When they physically built the Gateway, that was huge. No one even knew that that would happen or that would work like it did, but that was Sharpe James. The Pru Center [Prudential Center], Sharpe James. The [former] Bears' [Riverfront] Stadium way up the street, Sharpe James. The soccer stadium, Sharpe James. The trolley coming down, the [Newark Light Rail] inter-city line that comes through, Sharpe James. The connection to the airport, Sharpe James. He definitely had his shortcomings and definitely was looking out for himself, but at the end of the day, he was really looking out for Newark and I think everybody understood that.

Now, on the news side of it, they were open to him pitching it, but at the end of the day, they really wanted you to try to arrest the guy if you could. [laughter] If you could get him arrested, that was an extra feather in your cap. That's kind of where we had a little bit of a philosophical difference as things came towards a grinding halt for me with them but not in any great way. I was definitely trying to catch him, believe me, but he was difficult to catch. The system's built for a guy like that, and he knew that. He wasn't stupid. He knew how the system was built. He'd seen other guys get caught, so he kind of knew what not to do.

He was able to pull it off for a while, and when he finally did get caught, I still to this second hold that it was a political thing. In other words, there was enough there to catch him straight up, but for some reason, they didn't go that route. My guess is it's because they made too many deals with the people that would have been hurt if they would have actually arrested him on something that would have been normal, like a normal thing. They had a blueprint for arresting him on what they caught him on. It was something we couldn't have found. At the end of the day, if you're going to arrest somebody and you have the choice of trying to make a case about a guy selling land through a mistress, which I don't even believe to this second, or a guy that his bodyguards are city police officers spending money in Rio de Janeiro on vacation on a city credit card that the people are paying for, I'm going with the city credit card. They didn't go to that one, because it would have pissed off the police. The governor, Chris Christie, who is our current governor, wanted to win, and he's U.S. attorney. All he had to do is push this other concept. It wasn't a strong case. If you make it sound like a strong case, he'll get indicted. He got indicted. That's all he needed. He became governor, the rest is history. [Editor's Note: On April 16, 2008, Sharpe James was convicted of five counts of fraud and sentenced to twenty-seven months in prison. The conviction came as the result of an investigation launched by former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie when he was United States Attorney for New Jersey into real estate transactions involving James' friend Tamika Riley and James' use of city funds to pay for trips for himself and his associates. Prior to that, in 1995, the U.S. Attorney's Office investigated James' charitable fund, the Sharpe James Civic Association. ("With Usual Flourish, Sharpe James Pulls Curtain on a Career and an Era in Newark," by Ronald Smothers, *The New York Times*, April 11, 2007)]

WB: When did you leave *The Star-Ledger*?

SW: '98.

WB: Where did you go from there?

SW: Actually, I completely did the one thing my parents told me never to do, never leave a job without another job. I fell completely through the crapper, all the way down. I went from doing that, which was wonderful, and actually, at that time, between '95 and '98, I was also writing for *The Source* over in New York City. I would usually write a story or two for them each month but write every day for *The Ledger*. I was covering news for *The Source*. I wasn't doing hip-hop. I was writing news for *The Source*. At the time, what was supposed to happen was *The Source* had come out with a sports magazine. It was *The Source Sports* at that time, and it was when they were just starting to crumble, but we couldn't have known it at that time. This was '98. At that time, they were pushing *The Source Sports* magazine. That was supposed to be the next step. My editor at *The Source* had left *The Source*, and in his leaving, he was like, "Yes, let Steve go over and be managing editor or whatever for *Source Sports*, but work with him and you guys can work something out." I was writing articles for them but was supposed to transition into an editor-type position there, and the magazine went kerplunk six months later. I ended up completely exposed, completely vulnerable.

I ended up going from being a reporter to being a delivery guy for (Comet?) Delivery Service to just make ends meet, to just have money coming in. At that time, it was when Christie Todd Whitman was governor, your unemployment was only six months. I had left *The Ledger* under kind of bad terms, not from their end of it or my end of it per se, but basically Mr. Pye died. They brought in Jim Willse from the *Daily News*, and Mr. Willse kind of had a venture capitalist approach to journalism. What he would do is he would come into a newspaper and essentially pare the staff, cut them down and then remake the paper. That was his game plan. Unfortunately, when he came here, his concept was that if you were already here, you can't be much of a journalist. You haven't been anywhere else, so, "I'm going to fire you." That is what he set out to do. He got here in '95-'96, somewhere in that neighborhood, and in the next two years, he just literally tried to get rid of all the reporters that hadn't been anywhere else and brought in reporters from, at that time, *Newsday*, which used to have a city unit and they had closed and just moved all their operations to Long Island. He got as many of those guys that were still around, as many *Daily News* people that he knew that had worked under him, and brought them over here.

When that happened, I was kind of caught in the crosshairs. I was still in the middle of trying to write about hip-hop. At that time, hip-hop in New Jersey, specifically in Newark, was exploding. People forget how pivotal a time that was. Imagine you could be walking down the street and you could run into Queen Latifah and Redman and Naughty by Nature within a few blocks. Naughty by Nature had a store up the street. They weren't hard people to get in touch with. At the time, hip-hop was becoming this force that it is now, but nobody knew it was going to happen. Hip-hop's getting big, and just by chance, in the mid-'90s to late '90s, this was the epicenter. I was trying to cover it, but *The Ledger* didn't consider hip-hop as music. One, they didn't want me to cover it because it's music, and, two, they didn't me to cover it because they don't consider it music. They wanted me to do a police blotter essentially about them getting arrested, and I wasn't willing to do that.

It all came to a head with the Biggie-Tupac Shakur thing. When Pac got killed, Biggie got killed shortly thereafter. There was a school of thought, *Vibe* had started it kind of, about this East

Coast-West Coast War. There was no East Coast-West Coast War, but *Vibe* had created the concept of it. *The Ledger* wanted us to write this East Coast-West Coast War, and I couldn't do it. It wasn't fact. I wasn't going to write about it if it was not fact. I called up folks who were involved, Vin Rock from Naughty By Nature, Queen Latifah, a few people, and they were all, obviously, devastated that Biggie had been killed. We wrote that and wrote a funeral piece. They were kind of pissed about that. They wanted an East Coast-West Coast war story. When I wouldn't write that, it kind of put me at odds with them. [Editor's Note: Tupac Shakur died on September 13, 1996, six days after being shot in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. On March 9, 1997, Christopher Wallace, known as the Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls, was shot and killed in Los Angeles. Both murders remain unsolved.]

There was a year or two of hanging on. Imagine they had this machine built to pare reporters, so I would get right next to the paring device and I'd go on vacation. I'd get right next to the paring device again, I'd go on vacation. There was that for two years. It was interesting, but at the end of the day, I structured a buyout and I left in probably July of '98. I thought I was going on to *The Source*, but things didn't happen that way. I ended up with a severance package and money to live on, but how long can you do that? There was unemployment at the end of that. Then there was, "What are you going to do now? There's only six months of unemployment. What are you going to do?" I had a house. I didn't want to lose it, so I started looking for jobs. Being the son of a guy that worked five of them, I was certain I could find something, and as it turned out, I was a delivery guy for a year-and-half or so. I did that and started working myself back into some concept of regular work, but it didn't really catch traction until [the early 2000s]. That's right, that was '98, '99.

Then, the [September 11, 2001] attacks happened. At the time the attacks happened, I had worked myself back in. I was working as a managing editor at local newspapers owned by Worrall Publications, *Orange Transcript*, *West Orange Chronicle*, *East Orange Record*. I was managing editor of those papers. When the attacks happened, they cut back. I was the only guy that didn't have a family, so I got cut. That next year, I got cut. The next thing I know I'm working nights, I had been working nights anyway, but I was working nights so I could look for work during the day. Tough times, 2000, 2001, 2002. I was working doing surveys at night and during the day working anything I can work, mowing lawns, painting houses, anything.

The only upside that came out of that is I actually met my wife on that night job. I met my wife in 2000. She had to take care of her mom, because she was sick for a while. She went out to Arizona. She moved back. We got married in 2006. While on my honeymoon, I got a phone call from a friend that said they were looking for a spokesperson for the [Department of the] Public Advocate, and that's how I started with the state. I've been here almost ten years now. That's kind of how that all happened, but it was a crazy time. When I look back, I'm like, "I cannot even believe I was doing all that." [laughter] I was literally working two full-time jobs many times. It was crazy.

WB: You were a press secretary.

SW: For the Public Advocate, yes.

WB: Field investigator.

SW: Yes. The Public Advocate had a Citizen Relations Division, and we would basically kind of do what we do here. We would investigate any government inadequacy, be it state, local or even federal sometimes, and try to figure out where government fell short and see if we could fix it. I was a field investigator in the system, but, again, it was a created department and kind of as seems to be my way, sure enough, [it was eliminated in 2010]. The press secretary thing was interesting because basically what happened was they didn't have a whole lot of money. They were looking for someone they could pay a little bit of money to be their press secretary, but they actually had someone they really wanted to hire. When they got their money back, when we got through the fiscal year and they got their money back, they wanted to hire that person, so they shifted me down to citizen relations. That's how I became a field investigator for them. That was a good time. I've never been much for the government-work concept, but at the end of the day, as long as you're able to help people, I felt you're at least doing some good stuff. That was rewarding in that regard, but just when we were kind of getting our feet under us, Governor Christie won in 2009. It may have been his second act, like the second thing he did. I think the first thing he did was he fired the director of Health and Human Services, and the second thing he did was eliminate the Public Advocate. We got eliminated.

Luckily, there was a little facet of it that Governor [Jon] Corzine had created for foreclosure mediation, because what we learned right before the federal government admitted that we were in a recession was that what we kept seeing over and over again were landlords leaving their buildings but leaving their tenants in the buildings and walking away. It wasn't like it was happening one time. It was happening over and over and over again. We kept seeing it in every city. We're going, "What is going on? Why is this happening?" Governor Corzine, to his credit, was like, "I don't know what's happening, but you know what, let's create a unit to deal with what that is. I don't know what that is, but something's wrong." We focused on keeping the tenants in. The Public Advocate changed the law to strengthen it for tenant's rights, and we were working with the tenants to keep them in. A lot of times, our day might be someone would call and say, "Hey, I live at this address. I've been paying my rent on time. I've been giving my rent to my landlord, but I came home today and my lights are off. I came home today, and my door's padlocked. I can't get into my property. I can't get in to get my stuff. I've got a thing on the door that says the house is in foreclosure. I've been paying my rent. What's going on?" We would work with the Board of Public Utilities. We would work with PSE&G. We would work with water companies, local government, to, one, keep those people in their homes, two, find the landlord and see what are they doing and make them understand that it's against the law for you to kick that person out. That's what the Public Advocate changed the law to, because before, that's what they would do. They would just walk away and leave the tenant with the building. Of course, the bank comes to foreclose on the property, they're going to throw out the tenant, because they're a squatter. They're not the person that's paying them, so they don't care. That's how we learned.

What happened was that unit got put under the Public Defender's Office. When he got rid of the Public Advocate, that particular unit went to the Public Defender's Office. Just by chance, at that time, I was commuting to Trenton every day. My boss in Trenton, he had a Newark office, but he didn't have any interest in coming here. He was like, "Look, is there any way you could

possibly go work in Newark?” I was like, “Yes, I can work in Newark. I can’t wait to get to Newark.” [laughter] Trenton made me love Newark. [laughter] If I didn’t love Newark before, Trenton made me love it. Back in 2010, I came back here and started working with foreclosure mediation, and we basically rode the storm through the recession with keeping folks in their homes, letting homeowners get mediation, hopefully, talk to the bank and not get tossed out of their property. That’s what I did. Somewhere along the way, I got lucky enough for the last year and met the director of this, we’re at the Division on Civil Rights. I met him. I was able to parlay my investigatory skills to down here, so currently that’s what I’m doing.

WB: What are your duties here?

SW: Here, we basically cover all folks that are affected by the laws against discrimination. Maybe you have a public accommodation issue. You go in someplace, they won’t let you come in, because you’re black, or they won’t let you come in; that violates the laws against discrimination. We would take a complaint and do an investigation, present it to the director; that may turn out to be a finding. If it’s a finding, it goes to administrative law. The attorney general technically is over our division, so it gets to be a legal matter essentially. You could get fined or closed down or whatever.

Largely, my end of it is employment, so it’s a lot of folks that have been at a job and they feel they’ve been fired because maybe they were a woman or because of their religious beliefs or maybe because they’re black or Latino or whatever. We try to see if any of that’s true, and whenever there’s a finding, we present it to him to see what the legal process will hold for them, if they’ve actually wronged their employee. Usually the attorney general’s office and deputy attorney generals will come down, and they’ll represent that person in an administrative law court and the fur flies there. We’re trying to make sure people don’t violate folks’ civil rights. Ironically, although the federal Civil Rights [Act] was written in 1964, New Jersey actually wrote the first civil rights law in 1945 [New Jersey Law Against Discrimination]. The federal civil rights law is loosely based on New Jersey’s civil rights law that was written, obviously, much earlier. Kind of a neat thing. Again, just following my tome of at least trying to help people, I feel like at least I’m helping people. I’m in government, but at least I’m helping people. [laughter]

WB: You mentioned how you met your wife. What is your wife’s name?

SW: Julie, Julie Walker. She was Julie Philpott when I met her. We’ve been married ten years. We have our little guy Bryce, who’s four. We met [when] we were both doing surveys at night. She is from Parsippany, grew up in Parsippany, but she’ll tell you she’s from everywhere. She probably is. She’s born in California but [lived in] Colorado and lived [in] a bunch of places and spent most of her life in New Jersey in Parsippany. We met on a lark. I completely did not see that coming [laughter] and fell in love and got married. She didn’t mind marrying an old guy twelve years older than her, so I was happy about that. [laughter] It’s one of the only good things that came out of that really tough time in my life. I always think about that. I go, “Gosh, maybe I should have stayed at *The Ledger* until they closed a few years ago. Things would have been better,” but I’m like, “Yes, but you would have never met your wife. No way you would have met her. You met her on a night job doing surveys.” She was their best survey-taker, and

so she and I would battle over how many surveys we could get each night. I think somewhere along the way that competitive edge gave way to friendship. We got to be friends and got to just interact that way, and the next thing you know, it turned into a love affair. It was kind of neat, kind of amazing.

WB: Is there anything that I have not asked you about that you would like to say for the record?

SW: I think you got most of it, I would say. I think I got most of the Rutgers things that I was concerned about. I'm hoping that folks at Livingston, particularly, remember how important what they're doing is, because the thing that we even started to forget in the '80s is Livingston is such a unique college and such a unique space that the bottom line is that folks need to pop up that old history to let them know what they actually were inheriting, because I don't think it was actually made clear to us. Livingston was a pass-fail college initially and seen as kind of a hippy college initially, and I think that that mindset is what set that contrast between Rutgers College and Livingston College at that time. [Editor's Note: Livingston College had a non-traditional grading system based on three notations, honors, credit, no credit.]

I think that what happened in the '80s, luckily, was we were able to turn that on its ear. We were able to say, "Okay, well, this is what the legacy was or whatever, but that doesn't mean they were less then." At that time, when we came in, it was definitely portrayed that way, not on Livingston College, but if you went to Rutgers College, for instance, it was really understood that folks looked down at you and the reason that's important is because obviously we conquered that. Obviously, that doesn't happen now, but the fact is that that's the legacy and that's not a legacy we should look away from. It's a legacy we should embrace because one way or the other, through education and through us being determined and persistent and as bright as we thought we were, I think we all have showed folks, if there was any doubt left, that there's no reason to doubt it. We're all Rutgers University. We're all worthy, and we're all smart. We're all here because we are smart. There are no differences. If you made it in, you're being gaged by Rutgers. Obviously, being gaged by Rutgers, there's no real nuance to it on that level. Whatever nuance existed in the past was just a perceived nuance.

I think the history of it's important for folks to remember and that hopefully folks will keep that all in mind when they go there, that that's there. Again, I haven't been back in a while, so I don't know what the campus looks like, but I think it's important that somewhere along the way that they make sure they realize that everything's Rutgers University, that a lot of that was done with sweat and hard work that may not be as obvious as the March on Washington but at the end of the day is significant and that them being there is significant as well. I think that that's one of the main things that's important is that folks need to understand Livingston's importance in the University ecosystem, but more importantly use Livingston as a bottle of concepts of persistence and the fruits of persistence that, despite being looked at in a certain way or being perceived in a certain way, even under those circumstances, you can still triumph and you can still get your degree and you can still win. For me, that's always what Livingston represents is that determination and that persistence. I think that folks never need to lose sight of that. If I had to say one thing, that's what I would say.

WB: Thank you for having me, Steve.

SW: Yes, well, wonderful meeting you, and thanks for taking the time to chop it up, as they would say. [laughter]

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed and reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 8/7/18