

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD BETHEL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

and

SAMANTHA FITZGERALD

and

RAY BESS

DOYLESTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Leonard Bethel, on February 19, 2021. My name is Shaun Illingworth. I am currently in Hightstown, New Jersey, and I am joined by Samantha and Ray. Do you want to say your names and where you are?

Samantha Fitzgerald: I am Samantha Fitzgerald, and right now I am currently in Middletown, New Jersey.

Ray Bess: I am Ray Bess, and right now I'm in Montclair, New Jersey.

SI: Dr. Bethel, for the record, can you tell us where you are?

Leonard Bethel: I live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in Bucks County, on Layle Lane, a street that I got named after an African American woman, the first street named after an African American woman in Bucks County by the Doylestown Historical Society. [Editor's Note: Layle Lane was an educator and civil rights activist who lived from 1893 to 1976. Lane served as the vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, the first Black woman to hold that position. She operated a summer camp for inner-city children at her farm near Doylestown.]

SI: Great. Wow. Well, we'll ask you about that later. Thank you so much for joining us. We were supposed to do this about a year ago at the beginning of the pandemic, but we're able to do it now. We appreciate you hanging in there. To begin, can you tell us where and when you were born?

LB: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 5, 1939. My birthday was last week, so I'm eighty-two years old. I was born in Black West Philadelphia. That is a neighborhood that changed when I was born. All my neighbors were African American, and it was an inner-city life. My brother, who was a year older, has passed on now; he passed in 2000. We were the only two of my mother and father, there on 5517 Race Street in West Philadelphia.

SI: What were your parents' names?

LB: My father was Henry Bethel. He was born and raised in Nassau, Bahamas. He came to America when he was nineteen or twenty. When he came to this country, the first job he could get was boxing, and then he got into the restaurant [business] and became a chef. When he married my mother, who was big on education--she had graduated [from] Temple University--she made him go back to school and he became a dental technician. He eventually got into real estate and bought up property and owned a few apartments. My mother, Anna Bethel Young, was born in Philadelphia. She was born in 1918. Both parents are now deceased. My father died in 1971. My mother died in 2014 at ninety-six years old. She went through the Philadelphia school system, Girls' High, which was one of the top schools in the country for girls, and she was the only African American in her class. Mother went on to Temple University and then did a graduate degree at Temple and earned her doctorate at Rutgers while I was there. She became an English professor at the old Trenton State College (i.e., now The College of New Jersey). She was big on education, and my brother and I were raised with that kind of focus in Philadelphia. Mother was an early feminist. We were born in the old Woman's Hospital, which closed down, in Philadelphia. It was the first hospital that would hire women doctors and the

first African American women--there were two of them, I think, in Philadelphia. She insisted that my brother and I be born there. So, that's the kind of mother we had. She was very strong willed, and she kept us on our toes.

SI: Yes, she is a very interesting figure. Before we talk more about her though, did your father ever talk about his life before the United States and how he came here?

LB: Yes. Well, Dad was born and raised under British rule. Colonialism was much of a factor up until the twentieth century in the Caribbean, and he didn't fare too well under the British school system. He was six-foot-six and had trouble in the schools with the British nuns. He didn't finish up his education there. He came to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, because he heard about the "City of Brotherly Love" and thought it was something, that it wasn't, when he got here. He always wanted to return to the Bahamas, if it changed. He was very much affected by British colonialism in the Caribbean, but he had a certain kind of pride.

Dad's father, who was six-foot-eight, was the son of a British Jew, Duncan Bethel, who owned a shipping business that was part of the triangular slave trade. He brought slaves over from the West Coast of Africa. My family started because he had children by a woman from The Gambia, West Africa, the Mandinka Tribe, and gave the children his name. He held one of the holiest names in Israel, Bethel, which means "House of God." I abhor the idea that he was a slave runner, but I kept the holy name. I felt, in some way, he was connected to Jesus. [laughter] My father always kind of bragged about that. He didn't talk about his father transporting slaves. I found out about that later. How can this man have a shipping business in the early nineteenth century and not be involved in the slave trade? Slavery was big business in the Caribbean. Duncan Bethel ended up marrying a British white woman, a blonde, and he wouldn't marry the woman from The Gambia, who bore him children. On my mother's side, it was a slave overseer in Ozark, Alabama, who was either British or Irish, who had a child from a slave woman from The Gambia in West Africa. I think she was also from the Mandinka Tribe. The overseer ended up marrying a Caucasian woman.

I went to Central High School in Philadelphia, PA, which was ninety-two percent Jewish--it was a magnet school. You had to have a special IQ to get in and we were .02 percent Black, but I scored whatever the IQ requirement was and got in. The top swimmer on the swim team stood six-two. I was about six-two and eventually reached six-four. Now, I'm six-two. I had back surgery from college football, so I'm shorter. I got down to six-two. The top swimmer on Central's team was Richard Bethel. His father Richard Bethel senior was a captain of a ship company in Nassau, Bahamas. Richard Bethel junior was blonde, blue-eyed, but when he turned sideways, there were some features that looked like mine. He would never talk to me. Of course, my father raised me with pride. I didn't say anything to him. I and my cousin Lowell Bethel, who also stood six feet--his father was from Nassau, Bahamas--were the only two Blacks on the swim team at Central High. There was a stereotype back then that Blacks couldn't swim. If you go to the West Coast of Africa and the Caribbean, you will see Black boys swim in the sea every day.

Richard Bethel and I ended up in the shower one day. He would not speak to me, and I did not speak to him. He was curious about me, and I was curious about him. He waited until all of his

teammates left. He was very popular with the girls at Girls' High, down the street. Back in those days, white boys were very sensitive about Blacks and figured we were going to look at the white girls. So, they did not want to have anything to do with us. Richard stayed in the shower and I stayed in the shower, and everybody left. How long does one have to stay in a shower after getting out of a pool? We waited there an hour until everybody left, and he turned to me and said, "You're a Bethel." I said, "Yes." I said, "You're a Bethel." He said, "Yes." He said, "I see in the phonebook a Henry Bethel." There were only two Bethels in Philadelphia at that time. My father was Henry Bethel, and his was Richard Bethel, Captain Richard Bethel. I said, "Yes, Henry Bethel is my father." I said, "I see there's a Richard Bethel." He said, "Well, that's my father." His name was Richard junior. I said, "Well, where is your father from?" He said, "Nassau, Bahamas." I said, "Mine too." He turned real quick and started washing very hard. I said, "Have you ever heard of a Duncan Bethel?" He said, "Yes, that's my great-great grandfather." I said, "Well, that's mine too, out of slavery." Richard quickly turned away and would not speak to me. When we walked out in the hallway--even though we were on the same swim team together--he would go down another hall to avoid me. That's the way it was back in the '50s. That's the kind of Philadelphia I grew up in, Black West Philadelphia.

We always had problems with the Italian community. Italian boys, and the Irish community, were not friendly. There were fights between us. As a teenager, my dad, being born on the beach in Nassau, was a fanatic about swimming, and he made my brother and I swim as babies. We would go to Wildwood, NJ. Dad would throw us out in the sea to swim on our own. I became a certified lifeguard years later and they sent me over to a pool in Little Italy in South Philadelphia, and I would have to run home because they would say, "N*****, what are you doing over here?" My swimming was not easy. I tended to stay in my own neighborhood. That's the City of Brotherly Love for you. It was ghettoized and separated. Unfortunately, when you look at the graduates of the schools in Philadelphia today, the school system is still segregated. It's unfortunate. The city hasn't made much progress in this area, but that's the city I grew up in, the City of Brotherly Love. There were no segregated laws, but there were those attitudes.

I got my sense of pride from my grandparents, [who] lived only two blocks away in West Philadelphia. They were born and raised in Ozark, Alabama. They came to Philadelphia with the Great Migration of Blacks moving from the South to the North, running away from segregation. My grandfather was a member of the 369th Regiment in the First World War, the "Men of Bronze," an all-Black outfit that was highly decorated. My grandmother was the first licensed Black woman practical nurse in Philadelphia. She attended nursing school in Philadelphia. That's the Philadelphia that I grew up in.

SI: I know Samantha and Ray have some questions about your early life.

RB: Dr. Bethel, I was wondering about your parents' religious beliefs. How did that influence you growing up and your view on the world?

LB: Well, it was an important part of it. It's interesting, growing up in the Caribbean, my father was a Roman Catholic. My mother was a Seventh-day Adventist. We went to the Adventist Church on Saturday and my father would go along, but he would never join. Religion was very

much a part of how we survived in the city and my growing up. My grandmother was a member of the Adventist Church, which was an African American church, and my grandfather was a Baptist. He would attend, but he never joined. Religion was very much a part of my experience, and that's why I ended up eventually joining the Presbyterian Church and becoming an ordained Presbyterian minister.

SF: Dr. Bethel, you mentioned before that your mother was a feminist and educator like yourself. She pushed your father into going back to school. Was there a heavy emphasis placed on education for you and your brother while you were growing up?

LB: Oh, yes. [laughter] It was a major part of our growing up. Education was the key to surviving and having a better life and doing better things. It was very important. Yes, it was very important in our household. Education and going to college was not an option; it was a requirement. That was something pushed on both of us (i.e., my brother and I). That's the path that we followed.

SI: Do you know how your parents met?

LB: In the same neighborhood in West Philadelphia. I don't know how--my father was rooming with someone, but he was there in West Philadelphia. They met just in the neighborhood and started dating. The Black neighborhood, in those days, was very close. There wasn't the moving in and out that you see now. The families were fairly stable. The scene in the Black community has changed since then. On the street that I lived on, I think there was only one family with a mother and two sons. The other families on the street had a mother and a father with the children. It's just the opposite now. The Black family has been and is in trouble because seventy percent of African American women with children do not have husbands. That creates a social problem that we have yet to deal with. It's a part of all the problems that we see in the inner city now. It is a challenge still.

SI: You have a brother. Were there any other siblings in the family?

LB: No, just he and I.

SI: Could you tell us a little bit more about the neighborhood you grew up in and the street where you lived? Can you describe that community a little more?

LB: Philadelphia is an old city. It was over two centuries ago, when immigrants came from Europe (i.e., from England, Germany and Italy). The Germans played a major role in building the row houses, which my family lived in. The British lived in row houses in England. When you go to London, you'll see row houses. They built the houses close together in America the way they did back in Europe because of the cold weather. Blacks coming out of slavery, during the Reconstruction period in the South, occupied the European row houses in Philadelphia (i.e., North, South and West Philadelphia). Blacks moving into Philadelphia from the American South, after slavery and Reconstruction, were primarily not educated and had to learn labor and skills. They occupied the row houses that Europeans once lived in. When they moved in, the white families there left. It still is one of the challenges in America today. The average white

family will not live in a neighborhood with Blacks. As a result, most Blacks lived an inner-city life or in Black communities. The West Philadelphia that I was born into in 1939--and my brother was born in 1937--was all Black. It was Irish and German. I don't know all the ethnic groups that were there before, but I knew that when I was born, it was Black. It was Black West Philadelphia, mostly migrants from the South. The white families that lived there all left and moved out.

West Philadelphia is still Black today. My old street is not integrated. The neighborhood is still Black West Philadelphia. It hasn't changed. There's a lot more difficulty economically because the family life is not as stable as it was, and people are surviving. The crime rate is high. You hear about it in the news every day, i.e., the shootings and killings. There's a lot to be done. This morning, when I was looking at the news, I saw how scientists have gotten to Mars in a machine. I said, "Well, that's good. With all this knowledge of technology, there seems to be little knowledge of how people can get along here on earth and live together." Racial progress is slow, and the future does not look promising.

SI: What are some of your earliest memories growing up in this neighborhood?

LB: I enjoyed growing up in Black West Philadelphia because the things that I saw on the movie screen were different than the life that I lived in the community. For example, we used to go and watch movies from the war, i.e., the Second World War. We did not see any Black troops. We did not see any Black heroes. Unfortunately, the movie house in West Philadelphia, the theater, was owned by a white businessman, and he could not stay in business because of the boys who used to take popcorn boxes and throw them at the screen. The screen was torn. When they saw things that were not inclusive of Black people, they reacted. They would also boo when they saw certain offensive things. My uncle fought in the Second World War and was a member of an all-Black outfit that landed on Normandy Beach. We never saw this at the theater. We did not hear or see anything about Black troops landing on Normandy Beach. In those days, Black troops were commanded by white officers. The Black armory in town had a First World War armory and a Second World War armory. Once a year, I do not remember whether it was July Fourth or one of the service holidays, we would sit on our steps and our mothers would make lemonade. Black troops marched down Race Street, where we lived, with bands in a parade. They did not march like the soldiers we see marching in the movies. They did a goose step to a beat, a certain kind of drumbeat, that seemed to be of African heritage. There were Black soldiers and Marines and Navy.

In my West Philadelphia community, people watched out for one another when they got sick. They were very supportive of one another. There had always been a problem with the police. It's unfortunate that white police would come through the neighborhood. One of the sad things is, some of the men who could not get jobs would run numbers. Police would come in and arrest them. The boys in the neighborhood would throw stones at the police cars and they would get out of their cars and chase us, and I was one of those boys. We would run up the alleys and reach our homes. The neighbors would not give us away. Neighbors would watch out for one another and protect the children. If somebody was in trouble, they would help them out. I know that my grandfather would take people to the hospital if they were sick. It was interesting growing up in West Philadelphia, PA. There was no unhappiness as long as we were in the

neighborhood area. The only time there were frustrations was when we went downtown to anything. Going downtown to the theater or shopping always created problems that were racial in nature. So, we tried to stay in our neighborhood.

One of the things that I remember as a child and I enjoyed very much was a soda named after the heavyweight boxer, Joe Louis. As a champion and African American, Louis was our hero. It was called Joe Louis Punch and cost five cents a bottle. There were no Black businesses in our community. There was a Jewish man who owned a store right at the corner where I lived, and he would sell Joe Louis Punch, which came in bottles. Joe Louis got into some trouble with his taxes, and they discontinued Joe Louis Punch soda. It never returned. It was the best-tasting soda and had a picture of Joe Louis standing in a boxing position with his boxing gloves on. It was the most popular drink among the children in our neighborhood. We did not have a playground in our area. We played stickball on the street. We would take a broom, cut off the broom, and use the stick as a bat. We would take a tennis ball and cut it in half for our game ball. We played stickball. In fact, some of the top baseball players came out of our area. The stickball was harder to hit than a regular baseball. When you learn how to hit that thing, a baseball was a piece of cake. We played wall ball with a tennis ball. We also made our own scooters out of wooden boxes. We made our own sleds out of wooden boxes. We did not know anything about buying a sled. We made our own sleds. It was interesting how things were done, and a lot of productive people came out of our neighborhood.

RB: Dr. Bethel, while you were growing up in Philadelphia, did you have any role models or mentors that you looked up to?

LB: Yes. There was Marian Anderson singing. There was Paul Robeson. He eventually moved to 50th and Walnut Street in West Philadelphia, PA, with his sister, and that is where he passed away. In fact, Paul Robeson's image is what brought me to Rutgers eventually. I think one of the strongest role models was right in my household, my mother, being the educator, one of the few Black teachers in the city of Philadelphia.

SI: Where did your mother teach at the time?

LB: Before she earned her doctorate, she was teaching in the Philadelphia public school system, junior high and high school, like Bartram High and Sayre Junior High. She was an English teacher and an administrator. When she earned her doctorate, she went on and taught at the college level, i.e., the old Trenton State in New Jersey and her alma mater, Temple University, in Philadelphia, PA.

SI: It is interesting that you brought up Paul Robeson. When you were growing up, would you go to see his movies or listen to his music, that sort of thing?

LB: It's interesting, there wasn't much exposure of his work in the Black community. I do not think there was a serious effort on the part of Hollywood to really send his work out. It was not until years later that I saw his films. There just were not any Black artists' work in those days (i.e., in the '40s) visible in the Black community. I knew about Robeson and heard about him. One of my heroes was Joe Louis. My dad used to love Joe Louis. He used to take us (i.e., my

brother and me) to see him when he came to the Philadelphia area to box. Then, of course, there was my grandfather, Walter Fields, who fought in the First World War as a soldier with the highly decorated Black 369th Regiment. Henry Ford taught my grandfather how to build a Model-T Ford, and he became an auto mechanic. "Pop," as we affectionately called him, owned a Model-T Ford. He could take it apart with his hands and put it back together. He would talk about the First World War, where he was wounded and walked with a limp because of his injury. I looked up to him and appreciated him very much.

SI: Tell us a little bit about your early education before the magnet high school. Where did you go to school? What did you think of your schools?

LB: Well, it wasn't a happy experience, I must say. There were no Black teachers, only white teachers, in my all-Black elementary school. The first school I went to was within a short walking distance from my house. Both my brother and I had problems there. Our parents insisted on dressing us up in a certain way, so we did not look ghetto. We got in a lot of fights. My mother, being a teacher in the Philadelphia school system, changed us to attend another elementary school that was a mile away from our house. We had to walk to school. Our new elementary school had an all-white administration and faculty. All the teachers were women. There were no male teachers, and the principal was a woman. Having a mother who was a teacher at home, outside of my father's discipline, I hungered for a male teacher.

My new elementary school was not a happy experience. I did not enjoy it at all. I did not get along with my homeroom teacher. I was tall for my age, and I ate a lot. I was growing fast, and I had to go to the bathroom a lot. We had recess every day, and the teacher made it clear that we all had to go to the bathroom during recess. She required that no one could go to the bathroom after recess. I would go to the bathroom at recess, but I drank so much water and had to go again right after recess. I said, "I have to go." She said, "No, you should have gone at recess." "I have to go now." She said, "You sit down." I seemed to be the only boy in class like that. I urinated on myself. After that, I decided I was not going to listen to her. I got up and went to the bathroom anyway when I had to go after recess. As a punishment, the teacher would put me in the closet. It was not a good experience. I do not know how much I learned, but I did not enjoy my elementary school experience.

At Central High School, where I attended, Blacks were only .02 percent of the student body. Most of us played sports. We were the athletes, and I excelled in that. I was a good student, and I was the first Black to win the Collins, Bitner, Burgoyne Trophy. You had to have a B average or better to get that award. I was an all-conference football player at the tackle position. I also broke the school record in shot put.

I worked in the summer and put my money earned in the bank. Our school football team made the city championship. I played against Herb Adderley, who ended up with the Green Bay Packers, and Angelo Coia, who played with the 49ers. They played for Northeast High School, Central High's biggest competitor. [Editor's Note: Angelo Coia played for seven seasons in the National Football League with the Bears, Redskins and Falcons.]

I got an offer to play at a few colleges, Temple and Albright. I just was not satisfied with my educational experience, even though Central High was the number one high school in the country at the time. You had to have a special IQ to get in. I ended up going to Lincoln University, PA. My brother, who was a graduate of Germantown High in Philadelphia, went there. I went to visit him once, and I had never seen a Black professor. A Black male teaching in a classroom was new to me. I said, "This is where I am going to college. This is what I need." I did not apply to any other school. I did not accept the football offers to other colleges. When I attended Lincoln University, I played three sports. My experience in an all-Black male college changed my life. It gave me a new focus, and I met so many outstanding people.

Before attending Lincoln University, I did have a few positive experiences. I met Marjorie Penney, who was introduced to me by my mother--a Quaker woman who directed the Fellowship House in South Philadelphia--when I was in high school. I met some humane people, Quakers and a few others. Ms. Penney let me develop the athletic program there because I was a top athlete in high school. I was on the swim team and had a varsity letter and had a track team varsity letter. I was also an all-conference tackle in football. It gave me a different perspective on getting along with people. They had a farm out near Pottstown, the Fellowship House Farm. I enjoyed my experience there.

One of the highlights of my life was in my senior year at Central High School. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the Fellowship House for his northern initiative. He had just gotten out of the Montgomery jail in Alabama. Marjorie Penney directed me, "When Dr. King gets here, take him upstairs, give him a cup of coffee and cookies until he speaks." I put on my Central High sweater with crimson and gold. It was bright colors. I had a big varsity football letter, a big varsity track letter, a big varsity swim letter. I got on the elevator with Dr. King, going up to the top floor to the reception room. He looked at me and said, "A very impressive sweater." Back then, I was so interested in young ladies and things like that; I did not sit down to think about getting a pad, pen or pencil--there were no tape recorders then--and interview him about the Civil Rights Movement. He did say, "Well, listen, I see that you are standing tall and are a young man, and you're up here talking to this older fellow. You go right on down." He said, "I saw some pretty girls downstairs." I went down, and Marjorie Penney got on me, "Why are you not with Dr. King?" Her scolding reminded me of the importance of historical figures who made social change.

The most interesting thing occurred four years later. When I graduated from Lincoln University in 1961, Martin Luther King got an honorary doctorate and was the speaker at my graduation. Marjorie Penney brought a busload of staff people from the Fellowship House from Philadelphia, both to see me graduate and to hear her friend Dr. King. She was a part of his northern initiative in Philadelphia, PA. After he spoke and got his honorary degree, I went up to him and said, "Dr. King, I don't know if you remember me." (I was admitted to theology school.) His perception was so clear. He said, "The sweater" (i.e., my high school athletic sweater that I wore when I escorted him at Fellowship House). He looked right at me, pointed, and said, "Sweater." I said, "I'm graduating from Lincoln. I've been admitted to a Presbyterian seminary." He grabbed and hugged me--Martin Luther King--and said, "Welcome to the struggle," because he was right in that protest movement around 1961. That gesture motivated me.

I was influenced by Dr. Samuel G. Stevens, a noted theologian, who taught Hebrew and Greek, that I took in college. Hebrew and Greek became a few of my favorite subjects. I took them in seminary and took them also for my second theology degree. I was greatly influenced by Samuel G. Stevens. He was the chaplain at Lincoln University. He would come to all the home football games, and after each game, he invited me to his house and gave me a lot of advice and guidance. Because he was an ordained Presbyterian, I joined the Presbyterian Church. The top theological seminary in the Presbyterian Church at that time was Princeton. I went and visited the school. I did not feel right there. It felt like Central High again, this superior attitude, the best in the country, and all of that. I did not see any other Black students, nor Black faculty. Lincoln University had the only Black seminary that educated Blacks in the North for the Presbyterian Church, but it closed down in my senior year because of financial and low enrollment reasons. Because Princeton Theological Seminary was the closest in proximity to Lincoln University, PA and there was an interest in admitting Black students, an argument for Lincoln's closing was made.

There was only one other seminary that educated Black Presbyterians, and that was Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. Because of my interest in the Black church, I decided to attend there. I went down and visited because I heard about Dr. A.H. George, the noted theologian and preacher, and Dr. A.O. [Algernon Odell] Steele. His book on theology was taught at Harvard Theology School. I was admitted to JCSU Seminary on full-tuition scholarship. As a theology student, I decided to join Martin Luther King's protest movement.

I met my wife, who was an undergraduate student at JCSU, on the protest line in Charlotte, North Carolina. We protested at the Presbyterian hospital because it was segregated. A football player from Johnson C. Smith burst his spleen in practice. The Presbyterian hospital would not admit him. There was one little Good Samaritan hospital that only admitted Blacks. There was only one Black doctor in that hospital and one registered Black nurse. They could not see the Black football player because they were waiting on other serious patients. The football player was sent to the segregated hospital on an emergency basis.

I was a first-year divinity student while marching on the protest line. I did not know my future wife, but a Klansman came up while she was holding a picket sign. Physically, he stood six-two. He beat her to the ground. She suffers today with chronic pain from that beating, and I went for him. Here I am, an all-conference tackle in football and a leading javelin and discus and shot putter from college and a two-time semi-finalist heavyweight collegiate wrestler, and I could not stand by and watch him beat her. (In 2012, I was inducted into the athletic hall of fame at Lincoln University, PA.) I put my sign down and went for the KKK bully, even though they said, "Turn the cheek." Reverend Andrew Young was there, and my seminary classmates had gone through better training than myself in turning the cheek. I did not. When I went for the Klanner, they grabbed me and threw me in the car. They said, "Turn the cheek." I did not know that he had a gun in his belt, this Klansman. After the protest, I started visiting my wife while she was healing from the beating and the swelling in her face. She's had major surgery on her spinal cord from it and is carrying discs in her neck, and she suffers with chronic pain today. We're up in age now, but it's a terrible thing to remember that protest experience. This man was never prosecuted or punished. I was involved in the civil rights movement and sit-ins as a seminary student. I almost got shot three times in Charlotte, NC by KKK sympathizers.

My wife Veronica and I got married in 1962, and we've been married since. We have two grown children and a nice family. We insisted on education. My wife earned her master's, ABD [all but dissertation], at Rutgers University, New Jersey. She graduated as an early childhood specialist and was the first director of the early childhood program at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey. Even though I played sports, I was a good student. I believed in studying hard, and it brought rewards. I struggled paying my tuition and so on in college, but my three degrees after that were scholarship.

SI: You mentioned that you put away most of the money to put yourself through school by working. What kind of jobs would you have when you were in high school and college?

LB: Well, in high school, I was a lifeguard and worked as a counselor at a camp. Where I live right now was one of the experiences of my life. In high school, my brother and I became counselors at La Citadelle Camp, one of the first camps for Black boys in the country. It started out in the early '30s. My mother was a counselor at that camp when it was coed and introduced us to Layle Lane. Layle Lane was a social activist, an outstanding woman. She was one of the early Blacks to run for Congress in the 1940s. She, with A. Philip Randolph, helped organize the first March on Washington in 1941, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president. She was a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Along with A. Philip Randolph, Layle was responsible for getting the Fair Employment Practices Act passed through Congress. Also, with the March on Washington movement, when Harry Truman got in the presidency, she met with Harry Truman and was a part of the A. Philip Randolph movement to get military troops desegregated.

When I moved to La Citadelle Manor (i.e., La Citadelle is the fortress in Haiti in honor of Toussaint Louverture) in retirement, my wife and I had a marker put, by the Doylestown Historical Society, right at the corner of our street, and I had the street name changed back in 1969 to Layle Lane after she passed away. It was the first street named after an African American woman in Bucks County and possibly the State of Pennsylvania. You will see my wife's and my name on that marker and the Doylestown Historical Society; it stands right at the corner. We live on Layle Lane today.

I was a counselor to the Black boys from Harlem, New York and North and South Philadelphia for a couple of summers. Layle Lane was able to pay me as a counselor. That was one of my jobs. Lifeguard was one of my jobs through high school also. In college, I was a lifeguard. I did odd jobs in my college years. I was rewarded with a Senatorial Scholarship (based on academics), along with working in college. I worked with a sharecropper in Charlotte, North Carolina when I studied for my Master's of Divinity degree. I did that just to buy food. I had a full scholarship to seminary, and I had a full scholarship for my M.A. [Master of Arts] in Theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, in New Brunswick, NJ. I also had a full scholarship for my doctorate at Rutgers University.

The years passed by. Of course, my wife and I--she has her master's and ABD doctorate--we had two children. They are both in their early fifties now. My son is a neurosurgeon. He went to Princeton and to Penn Med. We believed in education, and we sent them both to Rutgers Preparatory School, there in Somerset, New Jersey. I served on the Board of Trustees there for

fourteen years. I've had a long stint with boards of trustees, two terms at Lincoln University, two terms at Bloomfield College, NJ, two terms at Union County College, NJ. Both of my children went to Rutgers Preparatory School. They were outstanding students. My son is now chief neurosurgeon at the hospital in Scranton, Pennsylvania. My daughter is an attorney. She graduated top of her class at Rutgers Prep and was the only Black in her class. She went on to Georgetown University, where she finished with honors in English, and Doctor Juris from Northwestern Law School. She is vice president of a theater-museum. Both of our adult children are married. We have five grandchildren. All five grandchildren are in colleges around the country. The educational pattern continued in our family.

SI: Samantha has a question.

SF: Dr. Bethel, going back to La Citadelle, in your book [*La Citadelle: Layle Lane and Social Activism in Twentieth-Century America*], you mentioned that Layle Lane actually used the camp as a way to help Black men to stay away from bad habits that could make them servile to white men. Was this a problem that you witnessed growing up in your community?

LB: Let me catch your point again. A problem how?

SF: In the book, you talked about Layle Lane building the camp as a way for Black men to stay away from bad habits such as drinking.

LB: Yes. Oh, I see. I'll tell you what happened. In the '30s and '40s, the camp was coed. Layle Lane saw that the problem in the Black community is a problem of the Black male because of the stigma of white superiority. White men ran the country and were offended by Black men who achieved. So, she changed the camp to all-male, and she tried to set values in the boys, i.e., values about family life and community service. She was an English teacher and was very much opposed to foul language. She would not allow smoking or drinking alcohol. When the boys first came from Harlem and North and South Philadelphia, four-letter words were part of their language. She straightened that out in two weeks. How did she straighten that out? Instead of feeding them a good fresh meal, she gave them pot liquor. I know about pot liquor because I used the N-word on one of the boys, and she made me drink it for two days. [Editor's Note: Pot liquor refers to the liquid left behind after boiling greens or beans.]

She named the area "La Citadelle Camp," meaning high ideals, high principles. She wanted the boys to see that Napoleon Bonaparte beat all the armies in Europe, but when he went to Haiti against Toussaint Louverture and all the descendants of slaves, he lost his first battle against slaves. They built a fortress, La Citadelle, on a hill. The only way that you could get up to it was a single pathway, and the slaves picked off the charging French soldiers one by one and Napoleon had to retreat.

The fortress meant high ideals, high principles, victory, and so that's why she named the camp La Citadelle Camp. She tried to let the boys see that there's pride and victory in achievement. She had the boys read every day. We sang inspirational songs. W.E.B. DuBois was her friend and came to camp. I met him as a teenager. Ralph Bunche, who was in the federal government, came to the camp. One of the boys wrote me, and he is now a schoolteacher. Layle Lane

emphasized the idea of family and the idea of community and service, giving, and having personal pride in the minds of young men, so they could become responsible citizens. She emphasized those values and had a great impact on the boys from North Philly, South Philadelphia and Harlem, New York.

La Citadelle was a part of my experience also. That's how I raised my son and, of course, daughter also. She is very strongminded like my wife. We don't seem to have any institutions to raise Black boys anymore. Lincoln University now is about seventy percent women. Outstanding women have come out of Lincoln. One of the most outstanding women, who graduated from there, is the present LU president, Dr. Brenda Allen. She's an outstanding president. In fact, I'm so proud that she and the Trustee Board will, this coming May, 2021, confer on me the honorary degree Humane Letters from Lincoln University. Predominantly white universities, that segregated Blacks, are now reaching out to Black athletes rather than developing and reaching out to Black scholars. A better job must be done to develop Black boys and girls to serve as responsible and productive citizens.

My brother, who was a student at Lincoln University, when he passed away, left me some money, and I got a scholarship established in his name for Black students at Lincoln University to go to dental school. My dentist (African American) presently is retiring, and my dentist before him (also African American) passed away. I cannot find a young Black dentist to serve the Black community. I do not see young Blacks going into science, medicine and dentistry in adequate numbers. It was sad for me to watch this morning when a NASA team jumped up in the air, when the portion of the spaceship landed on Mars, and there were no Blacks among them. I know we have brains. [Editor's Note: On February 18, 2021, NASA's Perseverance rover landed on Mars.] That's why I love watching that movie *Hidden Figures* about those Black women who got us to the Moon with their mathematics training and skill. We have brains. Paul Robeson, the great Rutgers graduate, nobody knows what his IQ was. Hildrus Poindexter, who discovered antibodies against tropical disease, an African American, and Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court member, did not reveal IQ scores. When I think about my own educational experience, in order to get into Central High, Philadelphia, PA, you had to have 120 or above IQ, and I must have gotten that because I got in. There was no affirmative action. I got in because I passed the test. I know we as a people are not inferior.

I was one of the organizers of the Department of Africana at Rutgers. I spent forty-two years on the faculty there. I am very proud of that. Dr. McCormick, when he was president, recognized my service, he and the Board of Governors awarded me Professor Emeritus when I retired in 2011. I am glad to see women emerge because women are not inferior to men. In fact, the most intelligent one in my family was not my father; it was my mother. He was arrogant and tough, but she was the smartest. I think this thing with giving women's rights helps Black people move forward. I do not believe in inferiority by race. I fight against that notion every day. I believe in the worth of a person, and what they do, and what they are able to give, and how they are able to make changes. This is why I am so disappointed at how we have not resolved human problems and social issues in the world in which we live, and yet we can go to the Moon and go to Mars and do things technical with a computer, but we cannot solve human problems.

We have a division in this country today. It is not a division of politics, but a division of race and class. We have people who are not all that intelligent, we just saw one finish the presidency, who divide it more. I do not know where you stand politically, do not want to get into political arguments, but President Trump did a great disservice to the country. We need to try to get over that and try to live together and do things together. We need people doing things, that they were not able to do before, in science and math and even in the church. We need more trained Black clergy, not the ones who just up and preach and become ministers. We need them getting theological education in theology schools, learning Hebrew and Greek in order to properly interpret the Bible. I'm a strong advocate of that. I will never step back on that issue.

SI: I was curious if any of the professors stand out in your memory from Lincoln in your undergraduate days.

LB: Oh, yes. I mentioned Dr. Samuel G. Stevens. There is a Dr. [H.] Alfred Farrell. I'm writing my eighth book. I have published seven books and a number of articles and journals. Outside of my mother, who was an English teacher, teaching me writing, Dr. Farrell had a great impact on my writing. Dr. [James] Frankowsky sent people onto mathematics. Dr. James Donaldson was my classmate and was a brilliant mathematician. He passed away last year. We were very close. We played football together. Jim went on to earn his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. He finished Lincoln at age eighteen, earned his Ph.D. with honors at age twenty-two from the University of Illinois.

Athletically, we had Manuel Rivero. You may have heard of him. He was the first Black to earn All-American from Columbia University in football and baseball. He was the first Black to play in the Rose Bowl for Columbia against Stanford in 1933. I was very close to him. He had some strong values. My coach was [Robert "Bob" Gardner], who was a Tuskegee Airman, the first Black who played for the University of Minnesota, an All-American. He and Rivero, when we would go anywhere to play football, we had to wear a shirt and tie and a jacket. If we got to the bus to go, and did not have that on, they said, "You have five minutes to go put on a shirt and tie and jacket and get back here, or we are leaving you." So, it was those kinds of values, from faculty and coaches, that I cherish.

Things have changed since my school days. Athletes wear their hair so long that it comes out of the helmet. Back in the 1950s and '60s, players could not wear beards and mustaches and have long hair. If we walked up with a mustache on, Manny said, "You think you're a hotshot? Shave that off; you play on my team. It doesn't make you less of a man." But just little values like that were important for positive development. Then, we had required chapel service. We had to wear a shirt, tie and jacket. Those practices were instilled in us, and we were all male at that time.

Other inspiring professors were Dr. Grim (i.e., former Princeton grad). He made sure that young Black men would get into medical school. Dr. Eric Foner, a Harvard grad, who wrote a volume on Frederick Douglass, was inspiring. Back in the 1940s, Albert Einstein (i.e., a well-known scientist) would only accept an honorary degree from Lincoln University, turned down honorary degrees from Harvard and Princeton, because he said that he wanted to see young Black men achieve and be a service to their communities. He was loyal to Israel as a Jew and he knew what

that meant. [Editor's Note: On May 3, 1946, Albert Einstein received an honorary Doctor of Laws from Lincoln University.]

I think one of the things that I enjoyed the most was that most of the top faculty lived on campus. I spent time visiting faculty homes. They would always invite you in. Dr. Samuel Stevens, for example, would always have hot chocolate and some cookies for me to eat when I visited his home. I went to Manny's house and was always welcomed. Dr. Lawrence Foster, who was a noted sociologist, lived right on campus. You could walk up and knock on his door and say, "Dr. Foster?" and he would say, "Come on in." It was like home at Lincoln. Many times, they did not have to have office hours, because you could go to their homes. It was the best experience I had in my life, living on campus at Lincoln University.

SI: You also got involved in Greek life.

LB: Well, I became a Phi Beta Sigma, but I joined in the graduate chapter. I did not join the undergraduate chapter because I played three sports. I played football and was a member of the wrestling team and field events on the track team. The teams always traveled to other schools to compete. I did not have time for other things because my studies came first. I often had to carry my books on the bus and study when we played football in other states. I could not join a fraternity until I graduated.

SI: I was curious and I meant to ask this earlier. Did you participate in the Penn Relays when you were in college?

LB: I got an offer, but the Penn Relays took place in the springtime, which was right during the final exam period. Back in those days, this is how fanatic I was about not missing my finals. I was offered to participate in shot put, javelin, and discus. I turned down the opportunity and studied for my final exams. That was my thinking at that time. Maybe I should have gone, but I did not. I was good at javelin, discus and shot put. I was the leading javelin, discus, and shot put on my team in my junior and senior years. In the final analysis, my studies always came first.

SI: What would you say was your most memorable experience in athletics, either at the high school level or collegiate?

LB: Playing sports, for me, was a fun experience. I met Jim Brown, the celebrated players for the Cleveland Browns. I met Coach Paul Brown (Cleveland Browns). I was drafted to the Cleveland Browns. I did not go because in seminary, I was on full scholarship. I was also dating my future wife, Veronica, at the time. I went to the dean's house (i.e., the dean of my theology school, Dean Thomkins) with a letter from Coach Paul Brown, and I said, "I got this letter, and I'm thinking about going and playing professional football for the Cleveland Browns." Back in 1961-'62, Cleveland was the top team in the NFL with Jim Brown, star player. I said, "I'm thinking seriously about going to play professional ball." He looked at me and said, "You know you are on full scholarship." I said, "Well, yes." He said, "Do you know how scholarships work?" I said, "I do not know." He said, "You do not own this scholarship. You leave; it goes to the next person. Since you are going to be making all those big bucks playing professional

football, you come back here and pay." He said, "I see you walking around campus holding the hand of a little girl. You are going to lose your girl and lose your scholarship. Now, you think about that." So, I thought about it seriously. I said, "No." I wrote Coach Paul Brown. I said, "I'm not coming."

I eventually became an ordained Presbyterian minister. My first job was pastor at the Washington United Presbyterian Church in Reading, Pennsylvania. This is before I went into college work. It was around 1964. I taught African American history in the OEO office in Reading, PA. We had a Lenny Moore Day. Lenny Moore was an All-Pro player for the old Baltimore Colts. He graduated from Reading High School. They had a Lenny Moore Day. Myself and three other people, politicians--I think one was the mayor--had a Lenny Moore Day to raise money for cancer research. Moore had a parent and a sibling die from cancer. He invited top football players to the celebration. Gino Marchetti, who led the Gino's [Hamburgers] restaurants, was there. Coach Paul Brown was there. I wore a clerical collar in those days. Coach Brown said, "Aren't you the Leonard Bethel that I invited to come to play for our team, the Cleveland Browns?" I said, "I am the one." He said, "You went into preaching? You will earn ten times more money playing professional football than trying to be a preacher in the little church there." I said, "Well, I believe in service, and I am dedicated. I enjoy what I am doing. I am not sorry because the little girl I was dating, I got married to." I said, "Money is not everything to me." He said, "Well, you gave up a good opportunity." I said, "No, I have an opportunity, and I am going to grow in it."

I had a chance along the way to meet people. I joined Frontiers International, a Black servicemen's organization, serving the community. I was president of its chapter in Plainfield, New Jersey. In fact, I am speaking to them tomorrow for Black History Month. I believe in service. I believe in giving, and life has been profitable to me. I am not wealthy. I believe that when you give, you receive. Who knows where life would have taken me playing professional football and making a whole lot of money. However, I am happy with what I am doing now. I have educated my kids, and my grandchildren are educated. All five grandchildren are in college right now, and my adult children, their parents, believe in education. My decision not to play professional football was a blessing. I believe in service, and I believe in giving back.

SI: When you were at Lincoln, obviously, those four years were also a very important time in the Civil Rights Movement. Was that something that was discussed a lot on campus? Were people being encouraged to become involved, going down South to do registration drives, that sort of thing?

LB: Well, we had our challenges. The campus was located about three to six miles away from the Maryland border in southern Chester County, Pennsylvania. Oxford, Pennsylvania was a segregated little town. Oxford depended on businessmen from the South coming and staying in their hotels. They would not allow Blacks to stay in their hotel in Oxford, Pennsylvania prior to 1960. We didn't have to go South. We did our protests right there, and we had our challenges right in the area where we lived. We tried to communicate and build up a relationship with that town. We had our challenges. We did not have to cross over the border.

The funniest thing happened. Years later, when I was on the faculty at Rutgers and I was working on my doctoral dissertation, I went back to Lincoln because I was doing something related to my dissertation. Dr. Stevens was still alive and I would stay in his house overnight, but I did not get to Lincoln until about ten-thirty at night. I went into town to stay in a hotel. I did not want to wake Dr. Stevens and his wife up. I went into the Oxford Hotel, and I said, "Do you admit ..." I used the word Negro because the lady at the desk was up in age. I said, "Do you let a Negro stay?" She said, "What are you talking about? Who are you?" I told her who I was. She said, "My husband had those ideas. He put up southern segregationists in here overnight." She continued, "That thing ended with him when he died. He would turn over in his grave to know that I sent both of his sons to Lincoln University down the road. One is a lawyer and the other is a dentist, and I am proud of their education." She said, "You stay here. I am going to put you up in the best room." She took me up to a suite, "I am going to just charge you a regular overnight rate. You are always welcome here." She said, "My sons are Lincoln graduates." It's funny how things turn out.

SI: Do you remember any activities that you and other students at Lincoln did while you were there to desegregate Oxford?

LB: Some students went on--I didn't get involved--to integrate the bowling alley. They eventually did. They went in, they protested, and the owner finally let them use the bowling alley. So much was going on campus. As far as I was concerned, playing three sports and being so involved in that way, I did not have time to get involved in Oxford, PA at that time. I did not really get involved in the sit-in movement until seminary.

Lincoln had turned out some of the country's top leaders. A few were outstanding on the world scene. Lincoln still holds the record of the only college in America to educate two presidents of foreign countries: Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana in West Africa and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria. It educated the first Black Supreme Court member, Thurgood Marshall, who graduated in the Lincoln Class of 1930. Langston Hughes graduated Class of '28 or '29 [1929]. Hildrus Poindexter, who discovered antibodies against tropical diseases, was a graduate. [Editor's Note: Hildrus A. Poindexter earned his B.A. in 1924 and Doctor of Science in 1946 at Lincoln University.]

Do you remember that movie [*The Great Debaters*], Wiley College debated Harvard and beat them? The mentor of that team [Melvin B. Tolson] was the Lincoln U. Class of 1923. When I went to Lincoln, the faculty was predominantly white. There were Black males on the faculty. Lincoln started before the Emancipation Proclamation, 1854, to educate freedmen. At Princeton, there was almost a war on Princeton's campus between the radical Republicans and the southern sympathizers. A lot of southern sympathizers, who were on the faculty, brought up sons of slave owners to Princeton as students. Some of the faculty went to campus to teach with guns. They would not allow Blacks in as students. John Miller Dickey, who founded Lincoln University (first named Ashmun Institute), was a Princeton graduate, in 1854. Most of the faculty were Princeton faculty, who shuttled over horse and buggy to teach freedmen the same thing that they were teaching the white male students at Princeton. They were taught Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The anti-apartheid movement was started by two Lincoln men who finished both the undergraduate and the graduate seminary at Lincoln, taught by a Princeton faculty at Lincoln.

[Editor's Note: In 1854, Reverend John Miller Dickey, a Presbyterian minister born in Oxford, Pennsylvania, and his wife, Sarah Emlen Cresson, a Quaker, founded Ashmun Institute, which was renamed Lincoln University in 1866. Dickey had attended Dickinson College and then Princeton Theological Seminary. After unsuccessful attempts to get James Ralston Amos, an African American man, admitted to Princeton Theological Seminary, Dickey founded and served as the first president of Lincoln, the nation's first degree-granting HBCU, from which James Amos was one of the first graduates.]

Paul Robeson was to go to Lincoln. His father and older brother were Lincoln graduates. Reverend William Robeson was a Lincoln graduate, and his son William Robeson, Jr. was a Lincoln graduate. Paul was to attend Lincoln, but since he was so outstanding as a student at Somerville High School, Reverend William Robeson said, "Let's tread new ground. You will go to Rutgers." Now, even though they lived in Princeton, Reverend William Robeson, the pastor at the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, which is only a block and a half from the Princeton Campus (it was a little Black Presbyterian Church), he would not let Paul or any of his children attend Princeton because of its experience of bringing so many southerners up from the South. Reverend Robeson finished Lincoln Seminary. He would not attend Princeton Seminary because of John Calvin's theology of election and predestination. But he would let Paul go to Rutgers, even though Rutgers came out of the Reformed Church. There was something happening at Rutgers that Reverend Robeson thought would be a challenge to Paul. Paul Robeson enrolled at Rutgers College in 1915.

SI: Yes, Robeson graduated in 1919.

LB: When Paul Robeson graduated in the Class of 1919 at Rutgers College as a member of the Cap and Skull and top of his class, he joined Fritz Pollard, who was an All-American graduate of Brown University. Fritz Pollard became the head football coach at Lincoln University, PA. Paul Robeson, before he attended Columbia Law School, went to Lincoln as assistant football coach to Fritz Pollard. In 1920 and '21, Lincoln was undefeated in their league with those two coaches. [Editor's Note: Fritz Pollard coached Lincoln University's football team from 1918 to 1920. Lincoln's record during that period was 10-2-1. In 1918, Lincoln finished first in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) and went on in 1919 to tie for first place. The CIAA is a NCAA Division II collegiate athletic conference mostly comprised of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU).]

There are as many artifacts on Paul Robeson in the Langston Hughes Memorial Library on Lincoln's Campus as there are in the Alexander Library at Rutgers. Robeson's family put things in Lincoln's special collections because Paul's father and older brother graduated from Lincoln. After a few years coaching, Paul went on to Columbia Law School. Fritz Pollard wanted Paul to go into professional football with him, but he could not. Pollard later became the first Black coach of a professional football team.

The Robeson experience encouraged me to eventually end up at Rutgers. I helped to develop and start the Department of Africana Studies. As a Rutgers graduate student, I was taught by Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor in the School of Education and Dr. James Wheeler. I studied existentialism and pragmatism for my doctorate. That's a whole story in itself. I served fifteen

years chairing the discipline. I helped to start the first graduate program link (i.e., M.Ed.) at the School of Education. I served forty-two years on the faculty at Rutgers.

SI: Let me ask Samantha and Ray if they have more questions about your earlier life up to seminary.

RB: Yes. Dr. Bethel, I have a question. Prior to going to Johnson C. Smith, what were your thoughts and feelings on the South while you were still at Lincoln?

LB: I thought I would never go South, because my grandparents left the South during the Great Migration movement in the teens, 1913, or sometime around that period. My great grandmother was a product of a white overseer and a slave woman, but she took on the characteristics of her father. She had no Negroid features. Her hair was straighter than the average Caucasian. She used to wear it in a knit cap because sometimes she was ashamed, saying, "I'm a Negro," and her hair was so straight. There was nothing Negroid about her in her features. She told my brother and I about slavery and Reconstruction. She was born three years after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. I heard so many stories about segregation, the Black Codes and discrimination. I said, "I don't want to go to that place" (i.e., the South). But I decided to go to Johnson C. Smith University School of Theology because it trained Black clergy for the Black Presbyterian Church. I was interested in becoming a preacher in the Black church, but I wanted to be properly trained to be a preacher and teach and preach Blacks the right stuff. Smith was the only Presbyterian seminary that did that. That's why I did not decide to attend Princeton Theological Seminary, NJ.

Dr. Samuel Stevens, Lincoln University Chaplain, finished his theology degree at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He said, "Bethel, it's up to you. Princeton was the number one Presbyterian school in the country, and you'll get a superior education." I said, "Superior? Listen, I finished a superior high school, and I know the key to being the best is studying, writing, doing, reading and exploring, not necessarily the name of a school." I learned that early, because I saw too many outstanding Blacks coming out of Black colleges. Thank God for Vice President Kamala Harris, Howard University.

It does not make any difference where you go to school; your achievement comes through hard work and dedication. I won the Warren I. Susman Award for Excellence in Teaching at Rutgers College, the highest teaching award. I got it over some of my colleagues who had finished Harvard and Princeton. Why? Because I'm good. I worked at it. I studied hard. I read. I published. I write. You become the best by doing those things. I figured that if I go South and I learn some things about how to be an educated preacher in a Black Presbyterian Church, I would get it from JCSU Seminary. I heard about Dr. A.O. Steele and his book on Christian theology being used as required reading at Harvard's Theology School. I heard about Dr. A.H. George being one of the outstanding preachers in the country at Smith Seminary. Smith Seminary was my final choice.

SF: Dr. Bethel, what made you actually become interested in studying theology in the first place?

LB: I was a political science major and was planning on attending law school. My brother and I took different directions. My brother wanted to be a dentist, but he ended up a science teacher. Right up through my sophomore year, I was thinking about law school, and I got real close to Rev. Dr. Samuel Stevens. This man would come out on Saturdays at football home games; the Chaplain at Lincoln University, Dr. Samuel G. Stevens, would watch my football games and invite me to his house after the games. He had played college football at Lincoln as an undergrad and took time to tell me about my mistakes on the field. Then, he started talking religion, what God would do, and this kind of thing. He had a great impact on me. I said, "Well, my mother's very religious." [laughter] I'd see my father sitting at the table, making the sign of a cross; he was a Roman Catholic. Religion was very much a part of my life. Then, I said, "I'm going to make a final decision." In my junior year, I took a trip into Philadelphia to City Hall and sat in on a few court cases. I said, "I can't do that. That's ugly, the way they pound people on the stand." I said, "That's not my nature." I cannot say that to my daughter because she's a lawyer and she's good. [laughter]

I started having all kinds of thoughts about, "What am I going to really do?" I went to Dr. Stevens, and he said, "Did you ever think about theology?" I said, "No, I do not know if I could do that. I do not know if I can preach." He said, "Well, give it some thought. I would like to see you come this direction." He said, "We do not have too many Black men in the Presbyterian Church as pastors. It is a predominantly white church, and the Black Presbyterian churches that are here are few in number." In Philadelphia, we had the first African Presbyterian Church, the first Black [Presbyterian] Church [in the United States]. Churches like that need leadership. So, I said, "What do I have to do?" He said, "You should take philosophy and religion courses." He said, "You should also take Hebrew and Greek." Dr. Stevens was a Greek and Hebrew scholar. I added religion and philosophy as minors and continued to take political science and history.

I also took German as a language requirement. I remember Dr. Paul Kuehner; he was German and my German professor. I think he was a Ph.D. from the University of Penn. I will never forget his required reading for the course. It was titled *Erzahl Mir Was*. I know a little German because I took enough with him. He would not let us speak English in class. We had to speak German. [laughter] So, I went through all that, and I said, "I do not know if I want to take language anymore." However, I got into Hebrew and Greek and loved it. I said, "Maybe this is the Jew in me." I do not know. [laughter] But I loved Hebrew, and I loved Greek.

In my senior year, I told Dr. Stevens that I was enrolling in seminary. Lincoln's seminary has just closed in 1960. Princeton said they were opening up to Blacks now. Low enrollment at Lincoln's seminary and decreased budget caused the Presbyterian Church to close Lincoln's seminary. I wanted to attend a Black seminary and preach in a Black church. Dr. Stevens said, "The only other school like that is Johnson C. Smith in Charlotte, North Carolina. It's the South, and you have never been south. You might have some experiences that you might not want to have." I said, "I will try it."

Traveling to North Carolina from Philadelphia, PA was a challenge. I had to change in Washington and get on the segregated part of the train. That blew my mind. I said, "I am going to follow Martin King. I will fight this." Sitting in a "colored section" of the train was not acceptable. When I reached Charlotte, I was able to meet my new seminar classmates and

roomed with one. I got involved in the protest movement right away. A number of seminarians were out protesting, following Martin Luther King. I joined them. I met my future wife on the protest line. She, Veronica Bynum, was an undergraduate at Johnson C. Smith University.

SI: Was she from that area?

LB: She's from a little small town in North Carolina, a little segregated town, Wilkesboro, North Carolina, where they practiced segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. They would not let any Black women work in the stores in the 1950s. The only job they could do was domestic work. In fact, when we watched a movie on television called *The Help*, my wife turned it off. She said, "I remember those days, and it's a bad reminder. It makes me feel uncomfortable watching it." She had an interesting experience. When her father passed, her family (i.e., mother, two brothers and sister) left North Carolina and moved up to Connecticut. She and her mother became a babysitter and domestic for a wealthy family who were close friends of the Kennedys. They were invited to go on the Kennedy yacht, and my wife Veronica met John Kennedy. She had an interesting experience in Connecticut and always loved the Kennedys.

In fact, my brother, who died in 2000 at age sixty-two, went on and became a member of the Old Guard in Virginia in the Army, and he carried General [Douglas] MacArthur's casket. He was chosen by Jackie Kennedy to march and carry President Kennedy's casket in the funeral. He always had a picture of the Kennedy family sitting on a mantle in his home beside the picture of his family. I said, "What are you doing with that family sitting up there with us?" He received a full-gun salute from the Old Guard at Arlington Cemetery when he passed. He's only buried seventy-five yards from the eternal flame of President John Kennedy. During his work years, my brother, Wayne Bethel, was a special education teacher. He taught science in the Philadelphia public school system.

My life took an interesting turn when I decided to join the staff of Rutgers University, NJ. I left my church as pastor, in Reading, Pennsylvania, and got hired as assistant chaplain to Dr. Stevens at Lincoln University, PA. When he asked me to be his assistant chaplain, I would not turn that down. I also was hired as the first full-time director of the student center at Lincoln. My wife was hired and taught in the Head Start program in Oxford, Pennsylvania, three miles from Lincoln's campus. While I was on staff at Lincoln, the vice president at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary contacted me and made me aware of a new Master's of Arts program at the seminary that was connected with the graduate program at Rutgers. Dr. Stevens, my chaplain at Lincoln, made it clear that I would be a prime candidate for the M.A. program. The first seminary M.A. class was a rabbi, a Jew, a woman, and myself. We were the first admitted to the M.A. in Theology program at NBTS. The program was open with a connection to Rutgers. There was a connection with the Graduate School of Psychology, so I could have gone on towards a Ph.D. in psychology, or the Doctor of Social Work in the School of Social Work, or the Doctor of Education at the School of Education. I looked at everything. I saw Dr. James Wheeler, existentialist pragmatist, and Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, the first Martin Luther King Chair. I decided to accept admission to the Rutgers Graduate School of Education for the joint M.A.-D.Ed. program to study theology and philosophy of education.

It's interesting, the Rabbi admitted went to the School of Social Work with a M.A. and Doctor of Social Work. The only woman went to the School of Psychology for the Ph.D. and M.A. Theology at NBTS. I met the Rev. Dr. Samuel Proctor, who became one of my advisors. I majored in the "Philosophy of Education" under Dr. James Wheeler, my other advisor. He was a Ph.D. from Yale and a specialist in existentialism and pragmatism. That was my introduction to Rutgers and the New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

In 1969, on my way to NBTS and Rutgers, I was first hired as "Director of Counseling" in the Rutgers Urban University Program and was sent to Tufts University and Atlanta University to be trained to counsel minority students coming into the university. I was in that first group of counselors responsible for Black students entering the college scene. Rutgers needed someone like me because after Martin King was assassinated, Rutgers needed a trained Black counselor to help Black inclusion. I was hired as the Director of Counseling in the Institute for Services to Education at Lincoln University and assistant chaplain and director of the student center, prior to Rutgers and was trained to do the job. I came to Rutgers as the Director of Counseling for the Urban University Program. Our offices were located in the School of Education basement level.

Dr. Samuel D. Proctor taught the first courses in Afro-American Studies in the Rutgers School of Education. It was 1968. When I was hired at Rutgers, I also taught the first courses in Afro-American Studies at Somerset County College (i.e., now Raritan Valley Community College) in 1969-'70. The program of African and Afro-American Studies started at Rutgers College and at Livingston College in 1970. They both started around the same time. In 1970, my contract at Rutgers was changed from counselor in the Urban University Department to Assistant Instructor in the Afro-American Program at Rutgers College. I was academically trained to teach African American Studies. I taught the first introductory course in Afro-American Studies at Rutgers College. In 1971, we became the Department of Africana Studies. In 1974, I became the department chair. I did fifteen years in the chair. I served forty-two years at Rutgers on the faculty. I became a Rutgers College fellow and was awarded the Paul Robeson Faculty Award. Other awards included the Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Princeton. I received a number of other awards.

At the seminary, we had an interesting time. I was the first Black to earn an M.A. at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1971. Joining me in '72 was Elias Tema, who headed up the Black Reformed Church in South Africa. It was at his church that the African children were involved in the Soweto Riots and killed. He went back to bury them. He was over Desmond Tutu (i.e., the outstanding South African leader in the Black Reformed Church). When Elias earned his Master's of Arts in Theology from NBTS, he was the second Black to do so. He and I became friends while studying for the M.A. degree. Dr. Tema has passed on now, but his church was a major part of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. [Editor's Note: On June 16, 1976, as students peacefully protested in Soweto, South Africa against apartheid and educational restrictions, police opened fire, killing two students and injuring hundreds. The shootings led to a massive uprising in Soweto and galvanized international support for the anti-apartheid movement.]

SI: Maybe in a future session, we can talk more in depth about your time at Rutgers and at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. I was very curious because you were there for the birth

of not only the department at Rutgers but Africana Studies as a whole blossoming in the United States. What were your roots in studying African American history? You mentioned that you took the course at Lincoln. Had you been exposed to African American history or African American literature?

LB: Yes. I took a course in Negro history at Lincoln as an undergraduate. Most of the Africana scholars became scholars in the field through research and not so much through studies because there were no courses in Afro-American Studies when they came along. I was one of the few who had taken courses in it. When I was director of the student center at Lincoln University, I taught African American history to the Black high school students from Oxford High School, Oxford, PA (i.e., only three miles from Lincoln University). The students would come to the center for instruction. As I mentioned before, I taught the first course in Afro-American history at Somerset County College, North Branch, NJ. Through research and writing, I developed more skills in the African and African American Studies.

SI: Before going to Lincoln, would you say, in your experience, African American or African history has been ignored or not really taught properly?

LB: Well, it just was not taught in academia, except for a few colleges (i.e., in historically Black colleges). The only reason why "Negro History" was taught at Lincoln was because Dr. Samuel G. Stevens taught it. He was the only one. Where it was taught at a few historically Black colleges, usually one scholar, self-taught through research, taught it. Of course, you did not get it in any secondary (public or private) schools anywhere, except informally in some segregated Black secondary schools in the South. A few top Africana scholars emerged since the 1960s and had a profound impact on the spread of Africana Studies at the college level. Dr. Martin Kilson, a Lincoln University graduate, who was the first Black to be tenured at Harvard in the history department, was an early pioneer in Afro Studies. He was the one who hired Dr. Henry Gates, who has done the genealogy program and was/is the leading African American scholar in the country. Prior to Dr. Kilson and Dr. Gates, the early 1960s produced Asante at Temple University, PA. Both Asante and Gates developed the first Ph.D. program in Afro-American Studies at their respective institutions.

SI: Well, let me see, Ray, Samantha, do you have other questions for this session?

SF: I have a question about Johnson C. Smith University. Since this was your first time attending school with women, do you think this impacted you in any way or helped you develop your views further?

LB: Yes, it got me a wife. [laughter] She was in the undergraduate school. I began to see how smart women were and, many times, smarter than men. It is an important thing to see how productive women are in areas like science, which previously excluded women. In fact, my wife's classmate at JCSU is Dr. Dorothy Cowser Yancy. We call her Bonnie and we are good friends. She came from a little, rural, segregated town in Alabama. Nevertheless, Dr. Yancy rose up to become president of Johnson C. Smith and later president of Shaw University (another historically Black college). She made contact with William Gates (multi-millionaire), who gave her computers for all of her freshmen when she was president, and she pushed science. Some

years later, my wife Veronica and I were instrumental in getting a building on campus at John C. Smith University named after her (i.e., Dorothy Cowser Yancy Building). We went to the uncovering and dedication of her science building. This building is one of the largest buildings on campus, and it was built with funds from the State of North Carolina and federal government. The Dr. Dorothy Cowser Yancy Science Building.

A question on gender? That is not even a question for me. The brain that's in your head has nothing to do with gender. It has nothing to do with race. It has nothing to do with class. My own classmate, for example, was a good example. I was always so proud of him. He passed away about two years ago (i.e., 2020). I attended his funeral on the campus of Howard University, D.C., where he was the academic dean. He was born in Florida, where they spoke Gullah. When James Donaldson came to Lincoln, he did have to take a pre-course in English to get his spoken word and writing better. But when he graduated at age eighteen, he was at the top of the class. Donaldson was number one in mathematics. He had one of the best doctoral dissertations at the University of Illinois, over some students who finished Harvard, at age twenty-two. He became one of the top hundred mathematicians in the country and became academic dean at Howard University. He saved Lincoln University when we met a crisis. He was chosen as Interim President and got the school out of financial difficulty. Looking back at Dr. James Donaldson's years at Lincoln University, I remember a faculty member had to give him a pair of shoes to wear because he did not have shoes (i.e., only sneakers). It is not where you come from. It is not how poor you are. It does not make a difference what your gender is. The final truth in life is that it is your brain and your spirit and your will to do good, and that's what I see in life. You cannot tell me that because someone has a privilege because of race and class that they are smarter than anyone else. Life is what you make it if you have the right motivation and spirit. What will you do in your educational experience?

SF: I am going to law school.

LB: You're going to law school? Have you been accepted already?

SF: Yes. Right now, I am deciding between either Rutgers Law or University of Maryland Carey [School of Law].

LB: Oh, good. Good luck to you, and I wish you well.

SF: Thank you.

SI: We are at two hours.

LB: I know. It's time for us to take a rest, isn't it?

SI: Yes. We will conclude this session, and I can have Don reach out to you again and set up an appointment.

LB: Okay. Well, it is so good talking to you and talking to these two students.

SI: Yes.

LB: Do you want to see the students that I am talking to? I am showing my wife how you got these bright students that you put on asking all these questions. Here is my wife, Veronica.

SI: Hi, how are you?

LB: We're talking about Johnson C. Smith and so on.

Veronica Bethel: Oh, okay.

SI: Yes.

LB: She's a retired professor from Raritan Valley Community College.

SI: Oh, great.

LB: She directed the early childhood program there.

SI: Good to meet you.

VB: I organized it.

LB: She organized, as an early childhood specialist. These two bright students here, they really got to know me.

VB: Oh, great.

SI: Yes, let me just stop the recording.

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

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