

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD J. VAN BLAKE

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Donald J. Van Blake on January 15, 2008, in Plainfield, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Mr. Van Blake, thank you very much for sitting down with me again to talk about your life.

Donald J. Van Blake: You're quite welcome.

SI: Off the tape, we were talking about Bill Mauldin's work, his cartoons, the "Willie and Joe" cartoons. You read his book, *Up Front*, in the interim between the first interview and this interview and it brought up some memories. Would you like to share some of those? [Editor's Note: Bill Mauldin, World War II veteran and Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, illustrated the daily challenges faced by the typical American foot soldier through his characters Willie and Joe. In 1945, he published *Up Front*, both a memoir and a collection of his cartoons.]

DV: Yes. ...

SI: How you felt about the book.

DV: The book was real. Well, it had to be real--Bill was there. ... The book wasn't just a compilation of the drawings. The drawings are what we used to laugh at ... when they appeared in the *Stars and Stripes* [the US Armed Forces newspaper], because they were so real to all of us, but they were funny, made us laugh. ... We all laughed at each other, but the book, he really writes about it and he wrote it from the time he was there, I guess, until it was shortly after, after the war, that he wrote it, and so, ... his memories were very sharp, as were all of our memories. ... Then, for sixty-five years, when you don't think about it, or the memories kind of fade, they don't get so [vivid], they're not so sharp and the book makes them sharp again. ... I don't think that ... I'd ever read the book again.

SI: It was too emotional.

DV: Well, yes. It brought up, it almost brought up, smells--I mean, it was so vivid--it brought up feelings, it brought up opinions that I hadn't even thought about for sixty-five years and they were real. Bill was there, he saw them. He knew the feelings of the Italians and the Jerries, the Germans. He knew our feelings and the opinions what we had of the Germans and the Italians and the whole situation. So, it was kind of a rude awakening for me to go through this again, ... but it was a good book. Naturally, he had all the pictures in it, the drawings, but I don't think I'll read it again.

SI: When you talked about the opinions, they were the opinions of the enemy, but were there other opinions?

DV: Oh, yes, opinions of [others], our opinions, what we felt about the German, what we felt about the Italian, what we felt about the French and what we feel that they were feeling about us.

SI: Can you give me a more specific example, perhaps how you felt about the Germans or how you felt they felt about you?

DV: Well, Bill brings out the point that they were damn good soldiers, and they were--well, they're just like we were--and about the Italians, because ... the Italians, at the time we invaded the [Italian] Peninsula, they had just about drawn out. They were just about finished with the war and Bill brings out, in the book, that [fact], but they were so damn poor. The whole nation was so darn poor, that ... they seemed to be just looking for whatever handout they could get, which is true. They had nothing, but it was different than the [French], and he brings it [up], than the way the French felt. The French, of course--we went into Southern France, this is not the Normandy Invasion--and [the] French were glad to see us. There was a little more dignity about the way the French felt, about themselves, ... about us, and ... those were the feelings that he speaks of in the book and they were very, very real. I mean, his opinions were very real. They were the things we thought of, we talked of, when we were there.

SI: One thing that other veterans have told me about, in Italy and Germany, is seeing the civilians waiting at the end of a chow line, trying to get the leftovers.

DV: A handful of garbage to eat.

SI: Did you see that in France as well?

DV: Not too much of that in France. It was more so in Italy, but the French were [poor], and the countries were poor. They had been fighting for years and war drains--drains people, homes, clothes, values, changes in values, the whole thing. ... They were destitute in France, too, but there was a little more dignity about it than there was ... in Italy.

SI: Since you spoke the language in Italy and France, you had a chance to interact with these people more intimately.

DV: Pretty good, yes.

SI: More than the average soldier.

DV: Yes, yes, ... especially French. ... Well, we had been in North Africa, so many speak French there, ... and then, we went into Southern France and it was like another lesson review for me, [laughter] and so, I was able to communicate pretty good. I wasn't fluent, I wouldn't call me fluent, but, on special occasions, when the communication was needed, they called upon me to interpret and whatnot.

SI: Did you form any kind of friendship with any French individuals or families?

DV: Oh, yes. We were stationed outside of a little town called Marignane, and I've forgotten how long, but we were there when the war ended and we even ran a parade. Well, we did it with ... some of the French, Italian Partisans, too. We're all there celebrating the end of the war in Europe, yes, yes. I've got some pictures, somewhere, of that. I don't know--well, I did have, anyhow.

SI: One thing that you touched upon in the last interview, that I was hoping you could elaborate on, is, you mentioned talking with, I assume your fellow truck drivers and maybe, also, the men in the engineering unit, about injustices you felt, from the Army and society as a whole. Do you remember anything more specifically? Could you elaborate on that?

DV: Oh, yes, sure. Oh, yes, in the first place, we were very bitter about it being a segregated army. ... We were [an] all-black unit and, mainly, we had white officers, and we all felt that, "Hell, the same injustices that we were fighting at home, we should have been home fighting them, rather than over there killing Jerries," and that's the way we felt. We had hoped that, ... when we got back, that the situation in the States here would have gotten better, but there was no change. ... This was the beginning of the feelings that came about in the [1960s, the Civil Rights Movement], what happened in the '60s, when the black people, American Blacks, rose up and just said, "We've had enough of it. That's all. We want changes, for our children, for ourselves," and I also was very, very articulate and very much a part of that, back in the '60s. I organized and led marches, here in Plainfield, downtown, for six months, and we did it, I think, on a daily basis, or five times a week, but I was proud and very happy to have been a part of this black rising. I don't ... care what you call it or anybody else calls it, that we felt that we had had enough and that we were speaking out against this, and this is when the resistance in the South [was happening], when the marches all over the country [were happening], when the riots broke out. We had a riot here in Plainfield, too, and they even saw fit to bring in the state militia here and they brought the tanks and the troops in, right here in Plainfield. [Editor's Note: The Plainfield riots, also called the Plainfield Rebellion, occurred from July 14 to July 17, 1967, and resulted in over one hundred arrests, ten gun violence injuries and the death of white police officer John Gleason. Gleason was killed by a mob after shooting a young African-American man on the third day of the crisis. That same day, civilians seized arms from a local munitions factory. The National Guard was then deployed to the city and a truce was negotiated on July 18th.] This is at the same time that it was happening in Elizabeth, in Newark, in Detroit, in California, in Watts. It was happening all [over] and I was glad that it was happening all through the [country], all across the nation, because it meant that we were all feeling the same thing and we were all tired and wanted to express ourselves. Some of us died for it. [Editor's Note: On August 11, 1965, racial tension in Los Angeles' South Central neighborhood of Watts erupted in riots after a police officer arrested and beat two black brothers. The violence ensued for six days and resulted in the deaths of thirty-four people. The Newark riots lasted from July 12 to July 17, 1967. They began after the police arrested an African-American cab driver and rumors spread that he had been killed in custody. The riots resulted in over two dozen deaths, over seven hundred injuries, fifteen hundred arrests and property damage exceeding ten million dollars.]

SI: That was happening in the mid-1960s. The riot was 1967, I believe.

DV: Yes, the riots and, yes, were they the '70s? See, I've forgotten. ...

SI: 1967.

DV: Yes, yes.

SI: One of the main things I want to do in this interview is track this development, from coming home a World War II veteran through the mid-1960s, and discuss how you became involved in this movement. Did it start right away, in the mid-1940s, or later on?

DV: No, it didn't, it didn't start [then]. The war ended in '45, for us, anyhow. We had been--did I speak about [it] on this thing here?

SI: It is okay if we repeat a little bit.

DV: ... Well, one of the things that [I recall], we came home on a ship called the SS *Joseph Gale*, and I did say something about that, didn't I? [Editor's Note: The SS *Joseph Gale*, Hull Number 0594, a War Shipping Administration transport operated by the Army Transportation Service, carried a maximum of 550 troops. It was named for Joseph Gale (1800-1881), an American pioneer who helped settle Oregon.]

SI: You mentioned that, when you got back ...

DV: We were at sea longer than Christopher Columbus was, [laughter] coming across the [ocean]. I don't know why it was so slow, but, when we came in at Hampton Roads, the bay area there, which is the United States, was the home of the Atlantic Fleet. ... One of the first things they did, before they [did much else], when they took us off the ship, ... they took all of us black guys off, and then, we went into a hall and there was a white officer who actually asked us, "We know you've been over a long time. You know you're ready to go home and all that ... and you're probably dissatisfied," he said, "but, if you can keep it quiet, just [awhile longer], we're going to get you out of here and get you home," ... but they had taken our guns, and we booed him and ran him off the darn stage, right, but that was [what he said]. They wanted us to just be quiet and, "Let's get this thing over with quick as we can," and we knew then that, well, to put it [one way], "The shit was still the same." ...

SI: Before that meeting, had you been hopeful that things were going to change?

DV: Well, I'd kind of thought maybe, as did many of us. We talked about it, that some of us felt, "Yes, hey, maybe, after we'd been through all this, they've got to make it better for us," and others said, "No, it ain't going to be no better. It's going to be the same." They were right.

SI: Those were other men in your unit saying it would be the same.

DV: Yes, yes, and so, I came home, no job, and the government, at that time, started something called 52/20. Do you know about it? [Editor's Note: The GI Bill included a "52/20" clause, which provided twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to discharged servicemen while they looked for work.]

SI: Yes, it was where you got twenty dollars for fifty-two weeks.

DV: ... Yes, we got twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks, and there were those of us who this was all we had, ... and the government gave you some money when you came out, I don't know, [around] two, three hundred dollars.

SI: Like mustering out pay?

DV: Yes, yes. See, it's been so long, I've forgotten all these things.

SI: That is all right.

DV: And I was married and, shortly after I got back here, I had a family, I had a son. A son was born to us, and I didn't have a house. Where the heck did I work?

SI: Did you go back to Calco?

DV: No, I don't think I went back to Calco.

SI: Did you come back to the Plainfield area?

DV: Yes.

SI: Okay.

DV: Oh, yes, I came back to Plainfield, and my wife, whom I had married before I went overseas, just before ... we shipped out, she came up to Plainfield, naturally, to meet me. My mother was here, and my brother, sisters, one sister, and so, we started from here. Oh, that was, well, we got out in December, December of '45, so, this was going through ... '46 and maybe part of the '47 [period]. I can't remember where the heck I was working.

SI: You were on the "52/20 Club" for a while.

DV: Yes. Well, that was only a year, only fifty-two weeks, [laughter] but that ended, fifty-two dollars a week [twenty dollars a week]. [laughter] ... My wife was a social worker. She worked. She worked here in Plainfield, out of the Plainfield office, and we didn't have a home. We rented rooms from people. ... Well, that happened through '46 and '47. By that time, I had started getting my papers together for the GI Bill, to go to school, because I didn't know how I was going to go to school. ... Well, I didn't have any money, but the GI Bill was what made it for us. So, I got accepted at Hampton. Well, at that time, it was Hampton Institute, it's now Hampton University, and it's in Virginia. It's right at Hampton Roads, Virginia. It's right there on the waterfront. It's a beautiful campus, buildings. It's an old school. It's predominantly black, for which I was so very glad, because, at that time, it gave me some insight on what black history really was, not what they taught us in the schools up here, in the North. In the South, the kids were taught more of the truth. It still wasn't all the truth, but I learned a lot more about black history and I was quite proud of it.

SI: When you say that the kids in the South were taught more of the truth, can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

DV: Sure. ... As kids, they were studying black history as part of their school program, as kids, up through high school. So, when they entered college, they had a pretty good insight on what black history was. Of course, the problem is, everybody says black history or African-American [history], and, really, it's world history, because Africa ... played such a [pivotal] part in the development of our world, in the development of our society, in the development of the world, and we never got this concept in the schools up here in the North. They taught us lies or they just didn't tell the truth. They just didn't say anything--such things as, I can never forget the time when I was in fifth grade or sixth grade and we were studying Egyptology [the study of ancient Egypt] and we were studying about the Egyptians, the Karnak [an important area of Egyptian temple ruins] and the Pyramids and what[not], and it was never said, either in the book or by the teachers, that Egypt is in Africa. ... I looked at the map and I asked the teacher, "Well, Egypt is [in Africa]." It was always thought of as being a part of Greece or the European history. It was never taught that this, Egypt, was African history, as part of Africa, and that these things ... that were built and these things that were done, the sciences that they had, the whole glory of the Egyptian society, was part of Africa, and so, those are the things that you never hear of in the Northern schools. I don't know, I understand now, maybe, some of it is coming up, when they teach it, but these are the things I found out in the black college when I went to Hampton. ... Well, first, I went from '48 through '52; I graduated in '52. Now, Hampton was first thought of as a trade school and they did have trades that they taught, and the trade that I took was painting and decorating. ... It became famous because of the trade school. Of course, now, like I said, it's Hampton University. They have all the academics and all the sciences, but I went down there in '48. I was married, had a family. My son was ... about three or four years old when I went down, and I should have had him here, but he's in California, because ... his mind is sharper than mine. ... My wife worked and I got the GI Bill, which I think was ninety dollars a month, or ninety-seven dollars a month. I've forgotten what it was.

SI: Did they have on campus housing for married students?

DV: The housing was not on campus. ... Hampton is at Hampton, Virginia, and five miles down the road is Newport News, Virginia, and out there, they did have a section of the temporary housing that had been built. It was called Newsome Park and a section of that had been set aside for the veterans, with their wives and family. It was temporary housing, but it was adequate, had a wood-burning stove for heat. Well, in Virginia, ... it doesn't get as cold in the southern part of Virginia. Of course, you're almost down to the North Carolina line and you're right on the waterfront, so, the weather's a little more mild than it is here in New Jersey. ... While I was in school, though, I worked. I was in the painting curriculum--paint shop, we'd call it. I was in the paint shop, ... but people always [were in] need of painters. I never thought they needed them so much. [laughter] ... So, I did jobs on the side, while I was in school, and there was another veteran, (Perkins, Dan Perkins?), he was a veteran and he was in the paint shop, like I was, and we would do jobs together. In fact, there was a building contractor that I came in contact with and he wanted me to stay there, because ... he was building houses and I was painting them, and Dan and I were painting them, but I was the, more or less, like the paint contractor. ... I took the direct orders and I'd follow through and I had the responsibility of

doing the painting. ... Oh, he wanted to get me a house, for rent, [laughter] wanted me to keep the family down there, but I wasn't too impressed with the South. I had an awful experience one time. I always kept a little, old beat-up car, but there was a; turn that off a second.

SI: Sure.

[TAPE PAUSED]

DV: ... Had an ugly experience. I had my car, [laughter] which was always needing repair. It was an old 1929 Chrysler, which I kept. I drove it from Plainfield, New Jersey, down to Hampton. I had to make sure I had five gallons of oil in it, because it needed oil more than it needed gasoline, [laughter] but something was wrong. ... I didn't have use of the car this day, and I had my son and we went to Newport News. We had to ride the bus. ... This was his first experience ... in being on a bus and, you know, the front seats are long, like this, the other seats go across the bus. You're familiar with buses.

SI: Yes.

DV: And he said, "Let's sit up here, Daddy, let's sit up here." Well, they had the segregated laws down there, at that time, and I said, "No, come on, David, let's go on back here in the back." [He said], "But, I want to sit up in these seats. These seats are different, Daddy." Naturally, he was about five years old then or something and he just ... wanted to sit in the seats, and, boy, that tore my guts out, because I had to take him [back]. He cried about it. I had to take him, go back to the back of the bus, where the "colored" people sat. That was the word, "colored." Of course, all that's changed now. ... The '60s and '70s changed all that.

SI: After that incident, did you have to tell him about segregation?

DV: Yes. Well, I had to--how much can you tell a five-year-old kid? but he knows something's wrong. He knew something was wrong with us. ... I tried to explain, but, I mean, what can you tell a four-year, five-year-old boy that he can understand, that there's something wrong with him, that he could not sit in the front seats where he wanted to sit. That's what it was. I knew then that it had put its mark on him. I got the car fixed as quick as I could, so [that] I didn't have to ride the buses anymore. ... Did I tell you ... how I got in the war, how I got in the Army?

SI: Yes. You told me that you had been at Virginia State.

DV: Virginia State, yes, part of the Enlisted Reserves, yes, [laughter] and then, they called the Reserves in. I only made one semester [before the war], but, so, I graduated in ... 1952. Immediately, I came back North and I started [working]. I worked for a painting contractor over in Madison. So, I would drive from Plainfield to Madison, which is about twelve miles, every morning and back every night. My wife still worked. At that time, then, we negotiated to build a small house, on the other [side]--well, it was in Plainfield, but it was a little distance. ... Plainfield isn't so big anyhow, but ...

SI: Is it this house?

DV: No, no, oh, no. No, this is my first wife, and her mother loaned me, I think, five hundred dollars and we bought the lot, and, with possession of the lot, we were able to negotiate to build a house. ... We built the house, a small house. It was on 273 Chelsea Boulevard and the lot was fifty by, it's quite deep, I think a hundred, a hundred-and-fifty [feet]. It was quite deep, for five hundred dollars. ... At that time, it was out in the fields. Nothing was out there. [laughter] Now, it's all built up out there, but we built the house and, as I said, I worked for a contractor, a painting contractor. I always worked extra jobs. I did jobs ... on the side, Saturdays, Sundays, until I must have worked for him one or--I don't know how long I worked for him--but I knew I was going to go into business for myself, because I just felt that I had had too much training, having been through Hampton, to not be able to [do so]. Oh, while I was at Hampton, part of their training is that all the tradesmen, or trade people, had to work in the field for a contractor, whatever [it is]. The carpenter worked for a carpenter contractor or builder, I worked for a painting contractor, and the guy I worked for was Bob (Walls?), up in Rochester, New York. ... For a couple summers, I spent the summers there with him. ... He ran a painting business, and this is so that you would have some practical experience in your trade, not just doing the work that was provided in the shops at the school, ... so that you really got in touch with it.

SI: I am not sure if you mentioned this last time--did you take education classes as well?

DV: Oh, yes, yes, at Hampton, yes. Yes, the trade program was set up with education classes, but ... the trade program was set up for three years, and, if you so desired, and I desired, because I had the GI Bill to pay for it all, ... I took the education courses, so that I stayed for four years and I got the degree in education. Vocational education was my degree. When I came out, I didn't go into education, I went into the trade. I went into painting. As I said, ... I worked for this contractor over in [Madison]. His name was (Lassiter, Lassiter?) and Sons.

SI: That was the one in Hampton.

DV: No, it was the one over in Madison.

SI: Okay.

DV: But, he had been a Hampton graduate himself, years before I'd been, yes, and he ran quite a profitable business over there. I had stayed over there, I don't know, a couple of years, driving back and forth, and, like I said, I always kept an extra job. I worked extra jobs all the time and I became one of his, you know, ... mainstay men. I led jobs. There would be three or four other guys with me, under me, and I also hung the paper. I did the paper hanging for [him], or some of it, because he had an old guy that'd been doing paper hanging for him for years, ... but he was very happy that, when I came, he tried me and I hung a job for him and he said, "Okay." ... So, a lot of the times, when the paper hanging part came to [be next], which ... is usually the end of the job, because you've done all the painting, and then, you hang the paper. ... Then, as I said, I always worked an extra job, or outside job, myself, and so, I just started for myself. ... I graduated in '52, '54, so, I must have started for myself somewhere in '54 or '55, somewhere like that. I can't remember dates, not right now, anyhow.

SI: That is fine.

DV: And I bought a truck and I started working, and work just came and I hired men. I got some hired men. I also came in contact with another painting contractor who told me about--oh, God, the publication that's made for contractors, especially builders, of jobs all over the Eastern [Seaboard]. It is, oh, gosh, what is the name of that? They have reporters that go out and keep in touch with public jobs, government jobs. Oh, what is the name of it? *Dodge Report*, the *Dodge Bulletin* or the *Dodge Report* [the *Dodge Daily Bulletin*], and you paid so much every month and you got it at the door every day and you kept [reading it], but, see, this was quite a step, because it kept me in touch with contracts, that I could keep business flowing in. Of course, now, you had to bid against the other guys, so, it [was not assured]. [laughter] I mean, nothing was given to you, and I got so that I did quite a number of government jobs. I did the Armory over in Orange, I used to do the Housing Authority jobs for Plainfield, Housing Authority jobs for Harrison, and these were no great [jobs]. At the time, I thought they were pretty good, but they were great jobs for the winter, because, then, you kept your men. You'd get the contract for so many units, so many apartments, and then, you could keep your men working all during the winter. So, you wouldn't do them in the summer, because you had too much more [other work], made more money from the outside work and what-you-call-it, but, this way, you could at least keep contact, keep your men and keep them going, and you could keep going in the winter. ... How many years did I do that? Well, I did it for over, well, it must have been, like I said, nine years, eight years or so. No, no, see, I'm mixed up now, because I didn't do it until after I came out of school, and I finished school in '52, four years, yes, '52. So, it was outside of that, and then, ... during that time, ... as I started to say, we built a [house]. Mother-in-law loaned me five hundred dollars and ... we built a house up on Chelsea Boulevard, little house, but it was ours. It was the beginning.

SI: Was there any type of housing discrimination in Plainfield then? Was that your only option? Could you have bought a house somewhere else?

DV: Yes, yes, there was discrimination. Basically, up in this area, right around here, blacks did not live up here, and back over in there, they didn't [either]. There were certain areas that were, I guess, considered black, but we knew that we couldn't get any houses there. So, the building of a house was the best option for us, because, like I said, out there then, it was just fields, [laughter] and that's why the property was so cheap, five hundred [dollars]. The darn things are fifteen, thirty-thousand-dollar lots now, that I got for five hundred dollars, ... [laughter] but the desegregation of real estate started breaking down about then. Of course, it didn't really get here, again, until the black revolution. It didn't really open up and things started, and that's when the white middle-class fled the urban towns, the urban cities, the what-you-call-its, and that's what happened here in Plainfield, during the riots or right after the riots. Real estate, blacks could buy and whites were trying to sell and get out of here. ... During that time, oh, yes, I had built a house, was living [there], I was doing pretty good with my painting contracting. ... One of the big, main reasons was the *Dodge Bulletin*, the *Dodge Report*, and I was making contracts. I did jobs up in West Point, did jobs up in--what's that Air Force base up there?

SI: McGuire?

DV: No, McGuire's in New Jersey. This is up in ...

SI: Up in New York?

DV: Up in New York, outside of ... West Point.

SI: Kelly? [Editor's Note: Mr. Van Blake is referring to Stewart Air Force Base.]

DV: No, no. I can't remember right now, but, anyway.

SI: We can add it later.

DV: But, then, this led us into the '60s and the revolt and the resistance started in the '60s, and I very definitely knew that if there was any time there was going to be anybody speaking out against the injustices against the blacks, I was going to be a part of it. I knew [I was going to be active] and, consequently, my wife, also, she was very much [active], very adamant about it. My son, he grew up in the [segregation era]. ... He'd never forgotten that experience down there in Newport News, when he was a little boy. He had never forgotten that, and so, he was then about high school age and I was a member--I became, first, I was ... a member of the NAACP and, with this, the NAACP, at this time, the NAACP became very involved, naturally, because this was the organization for black people. ... We had a--oh, God, what was it, was it civic committee? ... I've forgotten the name of the committee, but I was chairman of the committee. So, when ... it came time that we were going to protest here in Plainfield, I was asked to do the organizing, and I did, ... but I had help from so many people, because, at that time, the black community was ready and it was so beautiful. ... At that time, ... my wife had come in contact with the Quakers. She went to school at Cheyney, Pennsylvania, which is not far from the Quaker school; oh, I've forgotten what the name [is].

SI: Swarthmore?

DV: ... No, Swarthmore is a college. This is the high school--Westtown--and we sent our son there to school, too, to Westtown, and, see, now, I forgot what the heck I was [saying]. I was trying to think of the name. [laughter]

SI: Your wife had been in contact with the Quakers.

DV: Yes, and, consequently, now, there's a meeting house here in Plainfield, an old meeting house, right here in Plainfield. I later painted it, inside and out. I painted it a couple times, but I went with her to the [meetings]. I was raised in the Presbyterian Church. That was segregated, because it was a little, black Presbyterian church, but she was impressed with the work of the Quakers. ... I started attending with her and we all went, the three of us, she, me and my son, and I found the Quakers to be a little different than the average white person. [In the] first place, I got to know some of their history and I found out they, historically, ... had been part of the what-you-call-it movement?

SI: Abolitionist?

DV: Abolitionist movement. Yes, they had been very active, most of them, and, well, like I said, the church that I had been raised in was a little church called Bethel Chapel, which is Presbyterian, but, ... here, too, it was a black Presbyterian church. [laughter] The big, white Presbyterian church sat over there, and I believe they probably had bought the building for us first. I imagine that's how it started, but my grandmothers, both of my grandmothers, my grandfather, my mother, they were all starting members of this church. So, I was raised there, but, yes, I've forgotten the [question]. [Editor's Note: The Bethel Presbyterian Church of Plainfield developed from the Hope Mission chapel established by the Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1884.]

SI: You mentioned that the Quakers were different from any other white people you knew.

DV: Yes, yes, and so, I started going there, but I still never felt quite ready to join. They never pressured me to join. My wife joined and my son was raised there, so, he was [a member], or just about raised there, ... but they asked me to teach Sunday school. [laughter] ... I had fun teaching Sunday school there with the kids and it was really quite a nice experience. It was the first teaching experience that I had, and then, after about five years, the Quakers of this area, New York/New Jersey, have a yearly meeting up at Silver Bay, which is Upstate New York. ... We decided that, well, we didn't have much money for vacations or anything, so, we decided we'd go there, because it was cheaper for us. The lodging was there and the food was there, and it's really a very nice location, Silver Bay, and, while I was there, ... we had the meetings and I had a very spiritual experience while I was staying there. ... I realized I really shook like the Quakers when I had this [experience], and I realized ... why they were called "Quakers" and I realized the experience that they had had, like I had had. ... When I came back, I wrote a letter to join, and all I said in the letter was, "I would like to join the Quakers," that's all I said, and that was it. I became a member there. I was still working as a contractor, painting contractor, and, in fact, [when] they got ready to paint the place, they asked me to paint it and I gave them the price and I painted it. I painted it inside, I painted it outside. [laughter] I had lived, I had been raised, right down the street from the Quaker meeting house and I remember, when I was a boy, when they had a wing that the carriages, the horse and carriages, came up and they would put them there while they went out. They would tie the horses there and they went to [the] meeting. There was the meeting house over here. ... So, I knew the building, you know. I didn't know them, I knew the building. As a kid, I remember the building very well. It was right next to the post office, and so, I became a member.

SI: You mentioned that during this vision at Silver Bay, you started shaking. Did you see anything?

DV: ... I had a spiritual experience. ... You know, the Quakers do not preach. You go to a Quaker meeting, everybody sits quietly, until somebody feels that [there is] something he must say. I very seldom spoke, but there were three or four times that I spoke, in the years that I've been [there], but, ... as I said, I continued teaching there with them, Sunday school.

SI: Was this before the 1960s or later?

DV: This was during the '60s. This came before the '60s started, before the '60s, and lasted after the '60s, because once we started protesting here in Plainfield, and, as I said, I was the chairman of the--I've forgotten the name of the committee for the NAACP--and I organized the marches here in Plainfield, ... we would gather at the meeting house. The meeting house in Plainfield is right downtown. Like I said, it's next to the post office [laughter] and the meeting house even set aside money in the case that any of us were jailed, that they would have money to get us out and none of us were jailed. I was the only one that was handled a little bit roughly, once. [laughter] We protested in front of the city hall and I approached the doors and the cops grabbed me and threw me back, but, no, the Friends ... opened up themselves. They became [involved]. They marched with us, many of them, not all of them; oh, not all the blacks marched, either. Well, we carried our signs and we would meet daily at the meeting house and get ourselves together and we'd go out singing and marching. ...

SI: Do you remember approximately what year you started organizing these marches?

DV: Now, see, I can't remember. See, that's like the book; see, the book, like I said, the book opened up the memories and made things sharp.

SI: Was it a few years before the riots in Plainfield or was it after?

DV: No, that was it, the riots were--we were protesting at the time the riots happened, the same time that they happened in Elizabeth, in Newark, Detroit, Watts in California, it was all over the nation. ... Really, it was something so very good, because we realized that we were all protesting, we were all together on this, most of us. Now, there were some blacks, they never would have protested, [laughter] but, because we protested, jobs were opened up, housing was opened up, schools were opened up. The movement for women's liberation ... began. ... All the liberal movements started with the protest of the blacks. Today, ... the issues are still there, but we are not together anymore. There's been some progress made. I was raised in this town here and I never had a black teacher, but I became a teacher here, ... and I saw black principals. Now, [as] the heads of the boards of education, we've had blacks. We now have had black mayors, and, oh, this is an urban town, this is a black town, black and Hispanic, black and Hispanic.

SI: Today.

DV: Yes, today, oh, yes, which is one of the main reasons why so many white people are against it, and I'm hoping that Obama will bring some of us together. I definitely am for Obama, by the way. [laughter] [Editor's Note: President (then Senator) Barack Obama was campaigning for the Democratic Presidential nomination against then Senator Hillary Clinton at the time of the interview.]

SI: Okay.

DV: I think he's a healthy, intelligent, young man, very intelligent, and I would love to see the country led by a person like this, who ... had not been tainted by this [separation]. See, white people, all of them, are tainted by what they think the superiority of their skin is and Obama

doesn't suffer from this. He's got a brown skin, he knows he's black, he's not white and he's not black, but he is that combination that is who we are. We are the combination, and I am for Obama, as against--now, I love, what's her name?

SI: Hillary Clinton.

DV: Yes, Clinton, I love Hillary Clinton, and, ... before Obama made his stand, I was for, definitely for, Clinton, Hillary, but Hillary has one mark against her, and it's indicative to me, that she is a politician and she has deals that she has to make, ... as most politicians do, and that was she voted for the war, on the first vote. She voted for the war, and I don't think she believed in that vote so much, but, because she was the white, ruling politician, she had to, and, if she got in, she would still have these allegiances that she would have to [abide by] and these relationships that she would have to recognize. [Editor's Note: Senator Hillary Clinton voted in support of the resolution that authorized military action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in October 2002.] Obama doesn't have them. He doesn't have them, and I would love to see the world being led--and you can say what you want, the United States leads the world. ... Well, we're one of the major forces, ... we're such a dominant force, but I'd love to see this country led by a person who isn't tainted by all that that I spoke of, and Obama would do it. Even, here's an article here, where is it? "Tossing Out the Race Card From the Deck." Well, I'm not going to go into that, but ...

SI: That is from the *Star-Ledger*.

DV: Yes, I subscribe to the *Star-Ledger*, because it's a New Jersey paper, yes, how the young people are not riding on the race issue, that what is good for the body, what is good for all the people, or most of the people, is what they're for, and they are not emphasizing the race part of it at all. Of course, I'm too old to understand that, but I can believe that it's good. It's good for a young politician to be [indifferent to race], because in this world that he's going to be facing, he's got to be able to focus beyond that.

SI: In the first interview, we talked a lot about segregation in Plainfield. For example, well, this was in Bound Brook, but, when you worked at Calco, African-Americans had very defined jobs.

DV: Yes, we got all the dirty jobs, the dirty jobs and the dangerous jobs.

SI: Had much changed during the war, when you were away?

DV: But, during the war, no. That's why the '60s and the '70s came about there and so many of us had come back home and nothing had changed, not that we--and, when I say "we," being the veterans--not that we were the complete motivation behind the movements, but ... we voiced very much our opinions about [how] we had fought like everybody else had fought and we were still back in the same positions, though, in the same situations we were before the war and because the black students, God bless them, in the black colleges, most of the unions, ... oh, of course, not all the unions, but, anyway, we were able to come together and protest. Riots is what you remember--no, you're too young--but most people remember the riots, but the riots were because of the protests and we were protesting because of what had been done ... to us, to our

fathers, our grandfathers, all of us. We had to face the issue of being deprived because our skins were black and that's what it was. ... So, I'm very proud of the protests. The riots, people questioned them, "Why are they rioting? Why are they breaking up their homes and the buildings and the what-you-call-its in their towns?" Well, in so many other times, we had protested by writing, by talking, and nobody paid any attention and I always relate it to the fact, when you protest, if somebody's stepping on your foot, or stomping your foot, they can't tell you to holler in the key of C or something--you protest, you holler, you strike out--and that's what happened with the riots, and they struck out. They struck out at the nearest places, at their buildings, their businesses, their homes, their section of town, but they made a difference. They made a difference. The world now, as I said, your feminist movement started with the black protests, the gay movement started with the black protests, all of your protests started because the blacks started the protest concept.

SI: You have been talking mostly about the 1960s, but were you either involved in or following Dr. Martin Luther King's movement in the South in the 1950s?

DV: Yes, we were all, yes, we were all. This was all a part. We took--I, with the NAACP--we took down six busses and there was another organization took down four or five busses, from this little town of Plainfield, to the March on Washington, the first March on Washington. [Editor's Note: On August 28, 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was held on the National Mall, during which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., made his famous "I Have A Dream" address.]

SI: Okay, in 1963?

DV: Yes, oh, yes, we were there. Yes, I remember and, ... in fact, that night, I hadn't slept all night, because there was an old man then, his name was Mr. Liberty. He had been an immigrant from Poland, I believe, and he was a printer and he had his shop down on Park Avenue and he was seventy-eight, I believe he was, at the time. ... When he got to the bus, the bus was loaded--all the busses were loaded--so, I got up and gave him my seat, because this old man couldn't ride all the way down to DC standing up on a bus, but he was remarkable. ... Well, I don't know whether I should say this or not, though; turn that thing off.

[TAPE PAUSED]

DV: Put this on the damn tape. Put this on--I don't care who the hell knows it. ...

SI: You could always seal this for a while.

DV: No, no, that's all right, let it go, if you want to talk about it, you want to arrest me or anything. They ain't going to arrest me--they don't arrest us anymore.

SI: No.

DV: No, they killed us. Yes, I was a Communist Party member, card carrying. I worked on organizing union movements in Bound Brook, Calco. I worked on them in Elizabeth and this

was the thing that the Right really wanted--they have destroyed the voice of the Left thinking. They used to be in Plainfield here. You could buy *The Daily Worker*. Do you know what *The Daily Worker* is? [Editor's Note: *The Daily Worker*, the organ of the Communist Party, USA, was published daily from 1924 to 1958, when it was forced to cease publication amid anti-Communist pressures. It later resumed weekly publication under several different titles.]

SI: Yes, the Communist Party's newspaper.

DV: Paper, yes. You could buy it every day, go right downtown and buy it, but you can't do it anymore. I don't even know whether they even publish it anymore.

SI: I think they publish it.

DV: It's very hush-hush, very underground. So, they have succeeded in destroying the Left thinking, ... the source of the Left thinking, the source of the Left movement. They have been successful in doing that. There was even thought that, you know, if Hitler hadn't attacked England, if he'd just confined his what-you-call-it against Russia, the United States and England would have been helping him, because, at that time, that was the source of the Left thinking. Russia was the greatest Socialist state in the world at that time, but the stupid Hitler, he thought he could conquer the world. So, he started with France and Poland and England. Naturally, the United States came in and, finally, did what should have been done to him, but had he confined it just to Russia, there is thought that England and the United States might have helped him. People don't like to think of that. [laughter]

SI: You joined the party after the March on Washington, or had you been involved before?

DV: I had been involved before. I had been involved before.

SI: You mentioned organizing these unions. When did that begin?

DV: Oh, there, I'm trying to remember if we went back to Calco to organize there. I believe we did. We passed out leaflets and talked to the people, because so many shops had shop unions and these are the unions that the owners, the managers, ran. So, they put up the guys they wanted there, they told them what to say, and so forth, and the Communists and the Socialists were against this. They wanted a union to be a real union of the workers themselves, and so, this was the main thing. It was not that the shops didn't have some kind of a union, but they didn't have unions that were of themselves--they were by the managers. Anyway, I kept that very quiet for a number of years, because of my wife. ...

SI: Were you doing that while you had your painting business?

DV: [Yes], and then, you know, that was--I've had two wives--that was the first wife and, [in] '68, I think, she left. I was so stupid I didn't know that she had left me. She went down to St. Thomas. We had friends--in fact, I had school buddies--from St. Thomas who had gone to Hampton, but I had tried to save the marriage by going to [St. Thomas]. I went, I bought a one-way ticket to St. Thomas and had a job offered me, too, in St. Thomas, a shop job. I was going

to be a shop teacher. In fact, I even shipped down, paid the money to ship down, my tools and things, which was quite expensive. Tools are heavy. ... It was at this time my wife had started to break apart. She went down to St. Thomas, I went down to St. Thomas, but the movement, the protest movement, had already started. This was before '68. They had already started and I was still a painting contractor and I had a job--I never will forget--I had a job at this location and I usually went here and went home and they needed a shop teacher at one of the middle schools, here in Plainfield. ... The principal was a black man at that time and he knew me. I had been his Scoutmaster when he was a boy [laughter] and he knew I was a graduate of Hampton and, for some reason, this day that I was getting ready to go--my wife had left me and she had gone down to St. Thomas--but, for some reason, instead of going home this way, I went home this way and (Ev Lattimore?), he was the principal at the middle school, Hubbard Middle School, "Donald," he stopped me on the way, "Donald, Donald, wait a minute, wait a minute." He said, "I've got a job to offer you down at [the school]." I told him, "(Ev?), I'm going down to St. Thomas. You know I'm going there. I used your name and I asked you ... to recommend me," you know.

SI: Write a reference.

DV: Yes, a reference, and then, I said, "You know I'm going down there." He said, "But, this is the application for the job," says, "I've got to get somebody in," he said, "and you're the most likely guy." He said, "Take the application and fill it up and turn it in anyhow." I said, "Well, I'll take it," and I took it and, when I got home that afternoon, I threw it up on the shelf, ... but I called my wife, down in St. Thomas, I said, "(Ev?) wants to offer me a job as a shop teacher at [the school]," because I had my degree. ... She said, "If you get the job, I'll come back home." [laughter] So, I filled out the thing and took it to the superintendent. We talked and he wanted to start me at some little salary and I told him, "No, I couldn't start at that." I gave him my figure that I wanted--I think my figure was ten or fifteen thousand dollars, that's all [laughter]--but, anyway, I told him I was going down to St. Thomas and that I had a chance that I was going to be employed there. ... So, after I got there, my wife said, well, she'd get ready to come on back home. I was still living in the house that we'd built and the superintendent of schools contacted me, told me he'd meet my offer ... to work here in Plainfield, and I don't know whether you know it, but insular living, in the islands, is very hard if you want to have a level of living that you ... enjoy here. You know, if you want to maintain a middle-class level of living, it's very expensive, because everything has to be brought in, everything is an extreme price on everything, and I knew that. So, I told him, "Look, I'm not going to take this job down here in St. Thomas, because, for one thing, the job up in Plainfield was twice that amount that they were going to offer me in St. Thomas, the price. So, I'm going back to Plainfield." She said, "Okay," she said, "I don't blame you," and that was one of the reconciliations that we [made]. We were married twenty-five years and that was one of the reconciliations we went through. We ended up divorcing, but this was on the way to the [end]. I didn't know whether--well, at that time, I did not want a divorce. She didn't know quite what she wanted, either, and we were still in love with each other, ... but that's how I got into the school system here and how I started to work here.

SI: You taught at Plainfield High School.

DV: No, I taught at the middle school.

SI: Hubbard?

DV: Hubbard, yes.

SI: Okay. Before we turn to that, you started telling me about the March on Washington in 1963. You talked about being on the bus.

DV: Now, see, you knew better the year than I can remember the year--'63, yes, that's it.

SI: Can you tell me about the bus ride down there and what it was like to be at the march?

DV: Well, I was telling you about Mr. Liberty. He had been an immigrant from Poland. His name was not Liberty at the time he left Poland or at the time he came, but he changed his name to Liberty, so that everybody, he signed his name Mr. Liberty. I've forgotten what his first name was and he was seventy-eight, I believe it was, and I gave up my seat for him to ride down on the bus and riding down on the bus, none of us really knew where the heck we're going. The bus driver, I don't think, knew too much, but we sang. We just had a wonderful reaction with this. Some of us had food, some of us didn't have food. I'm trying to remember if our bus had a bathroom on the back of it or not, [laughter] but, anyway, we got down and it was organized so that the busses all went one direction and they'd let the people off and they went and parked in this certain place. It was a wonderful, good feeling to see all the people there with the same feelings, the same thoughts. It was just a wonderful feeling. I'm so glad that I was a part of it, and then, when Martin Luther King spoke, we were all lined up along the Lincoln Memorial there, that big pool that's out in front of it, yes.

SI: The Reflecting Pool.

DV: Yes, yes, and we cheered, we cried, we danced, we laughed, but we all felt, "This is a wonderful day. We're united and we're just not going to stand for this shit anymore," that's all, and we came home. I gave Mr. Liberty, still had my seat, so, I was dog dead tired. [laughter] We went down the night before and stayed all day and came back the next night.

SI: Okay, you did not stay over.

DV: No, no. Where was I going to stay? Oh, I guess some people stayed at some of the hotels and things like that, but I'm wondering if the hotels were open to black people at that time, because DC was a segregated town, too. ... Sure, they had black schools, ... high schools, in DC, because, when I went to college, I met some of the kids who were from those schools. I'm very glad that I participated. I'm very glad that I was a part of the protest.

SI: Did you have a sense at the time of how historic that event was?

DV: Yes. ... You had to feel that. I think everybody felt that change was coming. "This thing is going to make the society different." There were those who were determined that it was not going to change, but, then, with so many of us protesting, we felt that something had to change.

It didn't change as fast as we wanted, it didn't change as fast as we thought, but, yes, we knew ... change was here, yes.

SI: Can you talk about the resistance in Plainfield, I guess mostly from the white community?

DV: All right, yes, it was mostly the white community. The main resistance from the white community--see, they lived up here. All this up here was [white]. Blacks did not live up here at all, but they started selling their houses and leaving town, as they did in many of the other towns around. Prices fell on property, because they wanted to get out and they would take, generally speaking, a lot less than they might have taken had they been moving under another [set of circumstances] and the real estate industry exploited it. They would send out letters, "So-and-So, is moving into your neighborhood," or around the corner or something like that, "we're going to sell," and the real estate industry exploited it. So, they made money and they left Plainfield with the problems of not having a solid, good middle-class community. Now, see, your middle class is what carries the nation, everything. We pay for everything, we work for everything, we fight for everything. [laughter] So, Plainfield was left with a very small middle class and you got people who came in who were from the South and from other places and ... there became a large black community in Plainfield and that's the way it is today. Even today, there is fear among many whites in local communities around--I mean, in other communities around--that they will not come into Plainfield, and the fear is that, well, they must think that we're going to kill them or shoot them up or something. Well, naturally, we have the problems that communities have when they don't have enough educated people and enough people who have attained, who have had jobs that were adequate for them. ... Listen, my thought has always been, the white man has spent four hundred years developing this ugly, black monster and now that the black monster is out and abroad, he doesn't want ... them to come near. He doesn't want anything about them. When you keep a people down, you suppress them in every way you can--you keep them from having jobs, from having housing, from getting education--you're going to develop an ugly, black monster, or an ugly monster--he could be black, blue, green or yellow--and that is what's happened. So, we have ... our gangs, our prisons, we have our thieves, our murderers, the whole nine yards, but this doesn't mean that we are all there. Most of us wouldn't harm a flea. [laughter] Most of us, I mean, the average guy, you know, if he can get the job and get the house and send his kids to school, and so on, he's not looking for any problem, but there are some who have not, who are the results of having been depressed so long that, yes, ... we have contributed to the large part of the prison population, we do have the gang leaders and the gang people. We do, yes, there's no two ways about it.

SI: When you were leading the protests in Plainfield, can you tell me more about that period, but, also, if there was a lot of resistance from people in the town to these protests? You mentioned the police would rough you up a little.

DV: Well, that wasn't that much. ... Well, yes, that was just one event. We found out that, you see, nobody had told us what to expect. We found out that the police were definitely against us, because we, basically, were black people. We even marched through the schools and we found out that the average high school student wanted us to go away and leave them alone and they were against us. Well, they were just like their parents, after all--they're not different--and I can remember even many of my white friends asking me, "What do you want? What do you want?"

and we told them, "We wanted the same thing you want. We want the education, the housing, the jobs. ... We wanted our part of the society that was good," and especially since so many of us were now veterans, and the veterans' organizations here were even segregated. I don't think they're now, I don't think they're now segregated, but, at that time, here in Plainfield, they were the VFW and the--I forgot the other one there.

SI: The American Legion?

DV: American Legion, yes, they were segregated, yes.

SI: Did the African-American veterans have a group of their own?

DV: Yes, they formed one. I believe they formed one of each.

SI: Okay.

DV: I believe they formed one of each, but, now, I think, ... it never appealed to me to be a part of the veterans' organization. I didn't like the white people who were running them. They were very bigoted, very small in thinking and it had no appeal for me. So, I never bothered to join any.

SI: Did you face any discrimination in your business? For example, would people not hire you?

DV: Oh, yes, yes, I had people, because I was a contractor, and, soon as they found out, one man even told me, he said, "I heard your voice on the radio this morning," and my work fell off. A lot of people with whom I had contracts cancelled their contracts and that's when I really started going after the government jobs. They couldn't do anything about that. I got in a pretty good line and that's when the *Dodge Report*--I told you about the *Dodge*, I found out about the *Dodge Bulletin*, the *Dodge Report*--and I started subscribing to that and that helped me a lot. It kept me in touch with work that was developing, that was on the way. If a city hall or any town or any school was getting ready to build a school or do some work, the *Dodge* reporters got it into the *Dodge Bulletin* right from the beginning. They would attend the meetings in which the plan was to build this, or whatever, and they would put it in their report and you read your report every day, if you're smart, and you would see, well, such-and-such, and then, you'd follow it. You'd find out which company got the general contract. ... As a painter, I was a subcontractor, and then, I would see if Joe Blow had the general contract. I would write him and tell him who I was, what-you-call-it, and then, nine times out of ten, he would either have me over or he'd send me blueprints of the work, and then, I would read those, and then, I would bid on [it], give him my bid. After a while, now, see, it got to be very funny. After a while, the contractors--well, not after a while--they were looking at who was doing the tiling, who was doing the painting, who was doing the carpentry work, who was doing the masonry work, they kept a record of all that, too, and then, when they got a job, they would follow. They had already followed ... who got the price on the masonry work, who got the price on the carpentry work, who got the price on the painting job, and they would send you bids to pick, I mean, requests for you to bid on the painting, or whatever your trade was. So, it kind of kept things going pretty good there, since I

did lose a lot of private jobs, contracts, yes, because of that, because of my activity in the [movement], yes.

SI: You mentioned that you were in charge of organizing the protests. Did you have to canvas in the neighborhood to get people to come out for the marches? How did that happen?

DV: As I said, I was chairman of the ... Political Action Committee, PAC. I was chairman of the Political Action Committee and the thing was almost spontaneous. It's hard to explain. Nobody told me, from ... the main office of NAACP, to, "Get your political [forces mobilized];" nobody said that. We knew, or we felt, because they were doing it in Watts, they were doing it in Newark, we felt that we should be doing something here in Plainfield, as all the localities did. ... As chairman of the Political Action Committee, "Donald, you get the thing going," and, really, I don't even remember posting a notice in the paper or anything. We just, as I said, we organized, we gathered at the Friends meeting house and the Friends meeting house is right downtown, the center of town, by the railroad station, or next to the railroad station, by the post office, and we started. ... People just came, people just came. Well, it's very hard to say.

SI: How many people, roughly?

DV: ... In Plainfield? Oh, we used to count them every day, naturally, but I think it started with around about twenty-five, thirty, and then, we would have marches up to two hundred people, in Plainfield, and we did it daily, which I think was a mistake, in a way.

SI: Why is that?

DV: Well, you know, when people get so, after a while, they hear you every day, they see you every day, "You again?" you know, like that. [laughter] Even some of the blacks thought, "You're doing too much, damn it. Lay off a little," ... but we would do a lot of planning also, in my home or in the homes of some of the others of us. There were white people in on the planning, too. ... Oh, yes, we had one man ran for president, Frost, David Frost. You look him up, David Frost. He became a very serious candidate for president, because he said the debt was so great, and, when it was all over, he was years paying off the debt that he did, you know, things he had to pay off.

SI: Were there people coming from outside of the Plainfield community?

DV: Yes, sometimes, yes. We would visit Elizabeth; Elizabeth, sometimes, would send people down here. We would visit Bound Brook; sometimes, Bound Brook came down here, New Brunswick, sometimes. Yes, we interchanged, yes. We were all in this.

SI: When you would go out and march, were there people out there to either cheer you on or jeer you?

DV: Well, both. Very few people--we know that most of the people living in town were opposed to us, but very few people would confront us and say anything, because we would march, we would sing. I can remember one white family telling me, "Do you have to sing, Mr.

Van Blake? You know, it's not so bad if you didn't sing," and I'd say, "Yes, we had to sing, because ... it was our expression and our emotions felt. Yes, we had to sing," [laughter] and, no, as far as opposition, no, there was very little open opposition. I am sure that the resistance feelings had met in houses and homes all around, "What are we going to do?" "I'm getting out of Plainfield," that was the main reaction, "I'm getting out of Plainfield. I'm selling. I ain't staying here anymore," and that was the main reaction.

SI: Did you get threatening phone calls?

DV: Oh, yes, oh, yes. The phone would ring and there'd be mysterious voices, just voices, "What the hell are you doing?" Some would call you nigger, and, oh, yes, and my wife would pick up the phone. ...

SI: Were you ever afraid?

DV: Well, yes, yes, and I can remember ... when Newark blew up. I was working somewhere and I couldn't get--my wife was working in Newark and my son was old enough to drive. He was seventeen then. I told him, "All right, you go to [get her]." I called her and told her, "We're coming over to get you," and I told him, "Don't go down 22." I told him how to go out through the back there to get to Newark. We went over and, sure, we were afraid there, some of us, yes, yes, but, when you had examples of the kids, the college kids in the South, the sit-ins that they did, they were afraid, too, but they did it. When you had protests, I mean, you had recognition of the children who were bombed in the churches, yes, they were afraid, but they did it, and the mammoth marches that they had in the South, the police dogs that they turned on people, the fire hoses that they turned on people, yes, you were afraid. ... They were afraid, too, but they did it and the kids, the little kids that went to school, went to those after the schools were integrated and went to school, then, ... they had to have the damn National Guard out there to see that they would and people were spitting on them and these were just kids. God, how could you not protest? How could you not protest? but the feeling was so beautiful, it was so strong. ... We all knew we were in this together and we were all doing it.

SI: Was everybody pretty committed to non-violent resistance?

DV: No, not everybody was committed to non--some of them wouldn't. [laughter]

SI: Within Plainfield, within the group you were involved in.

DV: No, the group I was in [in the] NAACP, ... we were the organizer, the official, quote, "official"--there was no real official organization yet--but, no, ... we basically followed Martin Luther King's feelings of non-violence. Now, there were other organizations, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], that organization, you know, the black--the guys with the berets--the Black Panthers, they had a group here. Now, they were not--you know they were not--especially non-violent. They were ready for any violence and they came to the schools, they came to our meetings, sometimes, and, no, everybody was not of the non-violent thinking or feeling, no, not everybody. ...

SI: For example, if a Black Panther came to the meeting and started a discussion, how would the discussion go?

DV: Well, we would ask him if he wanted to speak and he would say yes, and then, there were things that were happening, individual things that were happening, around at the times and he would say, "We've got to do this or we've got to do [that]," and we'd say, "Well, we're not of the violent type. We're not going to do it, commit violence to do it. We'll protest it, but we're not going to [be violent]," and that was basically the way.

SI: Did you ever work in conjunction with these more militant groups?

DV: Not really, no. They basically moved on their own, we moved on our own. Nothing was planned. I think there's so many in the public [who] thought it was all planned and that the NAACP was organizing the revolt and the Black Panthers were part of it and CORE was part of it. Yes, they were all part of it, but it was like different fingers, but the arm was still there.

SI: It was more grassroots.

DV: Yes, oh, yes, it was definitely grassroots. That was the beautiful part of it, yes. ... If you were going to go down to join the march on Selma, some of us went down there. [Editor's Note: During a Civil Rights protest in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, state troopers and volunteer police officers violently broke up the protest, leading to the injuries of at least fifty black and white protestors.]

SI: Did you go down there?

DV: No, I didn't go to Selma, and I couldn't. Well, my wife really didn't want me to go and I didn't go. We had pros and cons about it--I wanted to go--but we had people who left Plainfield and marched on Selma. ... Really, I should've had somebody else here with me, because there's so much that I've forgotten.

SI: No, you are doing good.

DV: No, but, I mean, there's so much I've forgotten. Just the mention of the word Selma, I'd forgotten about Selma, the march, where we were. We were protesting up here and [said], "We've got to go down and support them." "But, they didn't ask us to come down." ... We had some brothers who came up--oh, God, I had three or four of them stay at my house when they came up--because they wanted to come up to see how we were doing it up here and one of them was the brother, his brother was killed. They shot him in the driveway of his house.

SI: Medgar Evers? [Editor's Note: Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated on June 12, 1963.]

DV: Yes.

SI: His brother stayed here.

DV: Came up here and stayed here. Well, I wasn't living here then.

SI: Your other house.

DV: I was in the other house. ... This house came about with the second wife, ... which was at least ten years later, after the first marriage ended. This was ten years later, nine, ten years later. By that time, I was already teaching, because that was why the wife came back from St. Thomas, because she knew I had taken the teaching job, and so, she came back and we tried it again, but marriages are very hard to reconcile once they're broken, once they're broken. Are you married?

SI: Yes.

DV: Okay. Well, once a marriage is broken, it's very hard to make a good reconciliation, very difficult, and, like I said, we tried for--I don't know whether we tried for nine years or [what]--but, anyway, we were off and on. We'd go together for a while. In fact, for a while, we lived over in East Orange. She went over in East Orange and I was working in Plainfield and I'd drive to Plainfield, and then, we lived in Plainfield together. We got together again and lived in Plainfield. ... Finally, I realized that it wasn't going to work. We said, "Well, we'll just break it and let it go," and then, I married this lady here, that lady there, and we were married thirty-two years after that.

SI: Her name is Lorraine.

DV: Lorraine, yes, Evelyn Lorraine Smith, then became Evelyn Lorraine Van Blake, yes. So, now, I'm an old man. Oh, yes, I'm an old man, eighty-six years old. That's old. ...

SI: You talked mostly about marches. Were there any other tactics that you used, like boycotts or anything else?

DV: No, you know, see, in the North, it was a little different than in the South. See, in the South, the suppression was so open, you couldn't ... ride on the busses, you couldn't live in certain areas, you couldn't get jobs--well, we couldn't get jobs, either. So, really, the protests was what was enough to open up the conscience of the ruling people. ...

SI: What would you say were the main issues you were fighting for? You mentioned employment.

DV: Housing. Do you know, in Plainfield, there were four movie theaters?

SI: No, I did not.

DV: And, well, Plainfield was a very vigorous, very wealthy community and it was larger than the average one around here. So, they had the big what-you-call-it stores? ...

SI: Malls?

DV: No, no. See, now, you've got malls. Then, you had ...

SI: A department store? [Editor's Note: The interviewer did not say this clearly.]

DV: Well, you know the stores, sold clothing and shoes and all that.

SI: Like a department store?

DV: Yes, department stores. We had two--we had Tepper's, we had Rosenbaum's. Sears was here, in Plainfield. Macy's was here, in Plainfield, and, see, people came from all around to come to Plainfield to shop, because we had the best stores in this area. It was called "The Queen City," ... but, for example, there were four movie houses that were segregated. We had to sit ... either up in the balcony or on one side or the other. The YMCA and the YWCA were segregated. Only the white kids could go to the YMCA and the YWCA. I can remember, going home, walking right by the YMCA and I could hear the boys that I was in school with, I could hear their voices. They were in swimming, but I couldn't go in to go swimming.

SI: That persisted into the 1960s.

DV: Yes, yes. It ended, I guess, somewhere thereabouts. See, we had a segregated Y over in the west side of town that was called the Moorland Branch of the YMCA. I never could understand why it was called the Moorland, but, see, history has--American history has--named the darker people there, especially the people of Africa, "Moors," rather than to say Africans, because they have not wanted the world to know what the Africans have accomplished. ... The Moors, you know, overran and dominated southern Europe, especially Spain, and Spain had one of its highest moments in history when they were ruled by the Moors. Who were the Moors? They were Africans. ... Hannibal was from Africa. Hannibal may not have been a black man himself, but his troops definitely were black and he brought them over and they walked up and down the Italian Peninsula for eleven years and, now, your Spanish and your black people have nice tan skins and many of them have curly black hair--not as curly as mine, not as tightly curled as mine--but they have [it], especially down in, what's the island down at the boot? See, and I went in there.

SI: Sicily.

SI: Sicily, I went into Sicily. The Sicilians are very dark and ... many of the Greeks are very dark, because they were in contact with the Moors. Moors, as I said, they walked the whole southern Europe for eleven years, crossed the Pyrenees with their elephants and I'm sure those men, when they had to have sex, they didn't go back to Africa to have sex. They had sex with the women that were following them and the women that were available to them. They were the Etruscans and the Italians and the Spaniards, ... but the world calls them the Moors. So, we had a Moorland Y. [Editor's Note: The Moorland Branch of the YMCA was created in 1923 to service the African-American community of Plainfield and found a home in the former Hope Chapel in 1926. After its building burned down in 1955, the African-American community, supported by the local chapter of the NAACP, moved to integrate the former Moorland staff and

membership into the main YMCA in Plainfield rather than reestablish a segregated facility.] At that time, I didn't know what the hell Moorland was, but, anyway, I used to go down there because that's where we black kids went, and we had no swimming pool. We had bowling, we had pool tables, basketball, that's about all. That was about all. They had dances on Friday nights, yes. So, see, ... your Y was just a part of the segregated neighborhood. There were jobs in the stores. I'm trying to remember if you ever saw a black--you never saw a black salesman. You couldn't try on the clothing. There were some stores that didn't want you sitting at the counters, but that was very small and, most of the time, we sat where the hell we wanted, but, like I told you about the theaters, there were different sections. Black people had jobs for [them]--domestic ... workers were mainly the things that the women did, men did pick-and-shovel. They didn't even have black men cleaning the streets in Plainfield. Most of them were Italians. So, you see, and ... Plainfield was just like so many of the other towns around. There wasn't anything special about Plainfield. So, you asked me what we wanted. We wanted the jobs that we thought we were capable of doing, we wanted the housing that we thought we could afford--if we got the jobs, we could get the housing--we wanted our schools to have black teachers in them, so that our kids could have identification with black people being very positive and, yes, those are the things. Well, these are the things that everybody wants. Everybody wants these things, nothing new, but I can remember, white people here'd always ask me, "What do you want? What do you want?" "Same thing you want, that's all." ...

SI: During the time when you were leading the marches, did these things start to change or were they not really changing?

DV: Oh, well, like I said, the first thing that happened was, the white people got out, massive what-you-call-it from the [city].

SI: "White flight."

DV: White flight. That was the first thing that happened. Eventually, the school system, they had to employ black teachers, because black teachers were available. They had black principals because black principals were available, and we also wanted them, because, you know, it made a positive image for the kids, like I said. I grew up here in Plainfield and never had a ... black teacher, hardly ever saw a black custodian, only one or two that I can remember. So, it just evolved. It didn't, "We want/you get." It wasn't like that. No, it took time and it just evolved.

SI: Did the white people leaving Plainfield begin before the riots?

DV: No, it happened after the riots, after the riots.

SI: Can you tell me about the riots? Was it one defined period or was it a series of events?

DV: Oh, yes, very. We had been marching and protesting six months--I know it was at least six months--downtown. People would leave the stores, leave the shops. They would leave and the shopkeepers would ask us, "Please, don't come downtown anymore. You're driving the business away." [laughter]

SI: These would be mostly white storeowners.

DV: Yes, they were storeowners. There were no black storeowners. This was a white town, as far as the board of education, as far as the city government, the mayor. This was a white town, a Republican town. Democrats could meet in a telephone booth somewhere. Nobody cared anything about the Democrats. Now, it's different. This is a Democratic town and ... the administration is all-black, got a black female mayor. [laughter] ...

SI: When these storekeepers would say, "Please do not come down here, you are driving our business away," would you say, "If you change this and this, we would not have to protest?"

DV: Yes, but ...

SI: Would you get into arguments with these people?

DV: Sometimes, sometimes, not often, because most of them weren't too willing to come out and confront you. ... All those black people lined up there, they weren't going to come out and confront anybody, but it was never [organized]. When they left, it wasn't organized. They just left, that's all. They sold out, they got what money they could get. ... They would sell to whom they could. So, they would sell and, sometimes, a black man would buy it. ... Of course, now, it's black and Hispanic. You've got a lot of Hispanics now. They run the downtown now, the stores and what-you-call-its. I would say around about eighty percent Hispanic, the stores and what-you-call-its now.

SI: The stores.

DV: Yes, I would say so. ...

SI: You were telling me what was leading up to the riots, that you had been protesting for six months before the riots.

DV: I don't say before, because I'm trying to remember when the riots [happened]. They happened at--it all came along at--the same time, Watts, Newark, Detroit, New York, and then, the South, all in the South, the protest marches in the South. ... It all came along at the same time, and then, the riots--you say the riots--yes, what happened in Plainfield, well, you know what happened in Newark, you know what happened in Watts, you know what happened in Detroit. Well, the same thing happened here. We were protesting and many of the people got together beyond the protestors, not necessarily the people who were walking downtown, and they were breaking windows and they were rioting, the homes. They had a store area; ... what do I want to say, you know? a business area.

SI: Business district.

DV: Yes, business district, they were breaking windows and looting. ... In Plainfield, they had the horrible experience [where] one policeman, one white policeman, thought he could go down there and present himself and quell all those niggers, as he called them, and they stoned him to

death, underneath the bridge on Plainfield Avenue. ... That's when the state militia came in and they brought in the troops. They cordoned off from Plainfield to Seventh Street, from Watchung, I think just to Grant Avenue, which is about a square mile, all of it, and I don't know how long they stayed. They must have stayed about a week, I guess. I know my son and the boys, he was a teenager, they said they would take pride in slipping through the soldiers and getting past them, going to see their friends, or their friends would come out to see them. [laughter] You had curfew. You couldn't be out at a certain time of night. ... It was a very unusual period of time.

SI: Was it frightening for you to have the National Guard in town?

DV: Yes, because we knew what [could happen]. ... Who were, quote, the "National Guard?" They were young, white men who were in the national militia and they were very happy to shoot a black man, and we knew it, and so, outside of the fact, ... then, we tried to keep our boys and our kids from running through the what-you-call-it, but we knew, ... if they caught them, they would shoot them. There was a danger--I won't say they would shoot them--there was the danger of their being shot and their being taken and beaten, and I didn't live in that area of town. I lived across town, in the east side, but we all had friends there, we went to church there, and so forth, and so on. ... Oh, I've got to tell you about the tennis. [laughter]

SI: Yes, when did that start?

DV: ... That started when I started teaching. ... Well, I got to play. I was fifty-five years old when I picked the racket up, and this was in-between marriages and I was courting this young lady who played tennis. So, I bought a racket, but ... I just became so ...

SI: Obsessed.

DV: Yes, obsessed with it, yes. ... Oh, heck, I guess in about a week or so, I was beating her, [laughter] and we broke up, but, oh, it just became a part of me. I would get up every day to go to work, when I was teaching; ... no, before I went to work. Five o'clock, I'd get up and I'd go down to the courts and play. There were some other nuts down there who'd be out there [at] five o'clock to play, [laughter] and then, I'd come back home, shower, take my clothes and my racket with me to school, work, change right there, come back by the courts, play until it got dark, and then, come on home. [laughter] ... Then, in the wintertime, I would keep my clothes and racket at the school and I'd wait until the basketball team got through practicing, then, I would go to the gym and practice hitting the wall. ... I remember, later on, I got so I could, you know, play tennis and I went back and tried to practice in the gym again. The varnished floor was too fast for me and the balls came at me too fast. [laughter] I could do it before, when I was starting, but I couldn't do it [anymore], and then, oh, I played with anybody, everybody, every day, on weekends. ... I had a friend who was the coach of the high school team, who worked at Hubbard with me. He was a what-you-call-it teacher--I've forgotten what he taught--but, anyway, ... I was a shop teacher, metal shop, and we'd have lunch together. ... He was complaining, "Oh, they don't want to do anything for the tennis team. I'm quitting the job as a coach," ... and, today, it's still hard. Getting black kids to compete, at the high school level, especially back in those times, was very hard, because very few black kids played any tennis and, if you're going to compete on the varsity level, high school varsity level, you'd better have learned some tennis

before you get to the high school, and so, he said he was quitting. I said, "Well, Ed, if you're going to quit, I want to try coaching," because I used to play with Ed a lot, and he said, "Yes, Donald, go ahead, I don't care. I'm quitting." So, I put my application in and came back [in] a couple weeks and the athletic director said, "Well, Donald, you're the only one that put your application in," because nobody wanted to coach the tennis team. [laughter] They never won. They didn't have enough, most of the time, ... guys to make a team. Only seven, that's all it takes for a high school varsity [team]. So, he said, "Donald, you've got it. Nobody else put an application in." [I] said, "Okay, so, I'll start." In about two weeks, he called me, said, "Wait a minute," says, "I put the wrong price on the job. The price should be higher," and said, "I'm going to have to post the job again," and I thought to myself, "Well, here it goes. Now, there's going to be more money, and so, somebody else is going to take it." So, I came back two weeks after that--nobody else applied but me anyhow. [laughter] I said, "Well, I got a raise without even starting to work," [laughter] and then, that's when I started. Oh, I knew from playing, we were always losers and I knew that we had to do something about getting kids into tennis before they got to high school. So, I went about organizing a middle school program, but, in order to have a middle school program, you've got to have other middle schools or other places that they compete against. So, I went about to do that and the athletic director told me, "Don't do it," what-you-call-it, but the athletic director had been there for years and he was trying to retire, that's all. He didn't want anybody to rock the boat and I told him, "Well, we need to have it." "Well, it's not going to work," and so forth, and so on. ... I wrote a letter to the superintendent, who happened to be a lady superintendent, a black lady superintendent, and she wrote him a letter. I think I've got a copy of it still upstairs. "Whatever Mr. Van Blake wants to do, you help him do it," and so, I got his backing then. [laughter] He told me, "Why'd you have to write her?" I told him, "I asked you. You didn't want to help me." So, I contacted all the schools around and found out who had ... a middle school team. It wasn't always schools--some of them were private clubs that had young people playing--and I organized [our team]. We have two middle schools here in Plainfield, one's Hubbard and one's Maxie [Maxson Middle School], and I brought them together to make one team. ... It was very hard then, because I was coaching the varsity, high school varsity, too, and so, that meant that I had to coach both of them and that's pretty hard, but, later on, he put the money up and got a middle school coach. Now, I would coach the girls. I would coach the middle school in the fall. Somebody else would coach the girls. In New Jersey, the girls play the fall season, the boys play spring season. The middle school has nothing that designates who shall play when. So, I put them all together. I played boys and girls in the fall, played boys and girls in the spring. This meant the kids got two exposures per year, rather than waiting a whole year before they came back around, and then, I organized PTC, Plainfield Tennis Council, and these were people who were interested in developing tennis programs for kids here in Plainfield. ... We developed summer programs for the kids, so that the kids could play either fall or spring, and then, in the summer, too. ... We got so we developed [good players], we got some good teams. We started putting out some good teams. Since then, the Plainfield Tennis Council, which is about now, let's see, it must be twenty-some years old, I'm no longer the president, and [we have] got some of them in now who ... they've got dollar signs in their eyes, because, when we organized, we wanted just to bring tennis to the kids, but they developed, the high school developed, the site there. ... It's right around the corner. It's sixteen lighted courts that we have for the high school players.

SI: I think I saw it. I could see it from the road.

DV: ... Yes, but the courts had ... been there for years, but they were, at first, ... clay courts and they couldn't maintain them, ... because clay courts are hard in this area, because you have to maintain them every day. You've got to roll, brush them, rake them, every day, and they couldn't keep people. So, they started macadamizing them, making hard [surface courts], and then, they weren't keeping them up and the macadam developed these awful cracks and the grass was growing in them. ... It was really very ugly, and not only ugly, it was dangerous, because the courts are open to the public, too. ... Even if it weren't the public, if one of those kids got their foot caught in a crack, the board of education knew it would have a court case on it. So, they organized, the board of education organized, a committee, an ad hoc committee, to make the improvements on the courts, sixteen courts. Yes, that's a lot of courts, and we didn't know where to get the, the ad hoc committee didn't know where to get, the [money]. So, we came up with the conclusion that, if we wanted to get money, we'd have to go through professional money raisers, fundraisers, and we contacted three of them and they all wanted the board of education to put up something like three hundred thousand dollars, in front. ... The board said, "No, we ain't paying nobody no three hundred thousand dollars for nothing," and they found, I think it was about a million-and-a-half dollars to do the courts over. There's a beautiful site there now. ... Right now, they don't have the windscreens in, because they take the windscreens down ... when winter comes. ... They haven't gotten [around] yet to take the nets down, but, as I said, we had an organization in Plainfield Tennis Council and, after they had that place developed there, they turned the operation of the courts over to us, the Plainfield Tennis Council and they named the courts after me. [laughter] ... So, now, these are known as the Donald Van Blake Tennis Courts. ...

SI: They are pretty well-known. When I was doing my research, I came across them.

DV: Oh, yes. ... The same guy, the contractor, who did them is the contractor who did, does, the US Open courts.

SI: In Queens.

DV: In Queens, yes. He's the same guy and they did a heck of a job. The first thing they did was to tear up the old courts, but they were smart. If you tear the courts up, or if you tear the road up, it's macadam, which is an oil-type thing, you know. Then, you've got a hazardous material. Now, with the hazardous material, you have to dispose of it in certain ways. He was smart--he crushed the macadam up and left it there--and then, he brought in, he rolled it down, then, he brought in big, heavy stone. Oh, he had ... [it] all figured out, how to drain it and all that, all that went into it, and those courts drain so fast now, it'd make your head spin, but, now, it's been six years since it's been done and there's going to have to be something done soon. I don't know where we're going to get the money now to do it, but something's got to be done, because they're developing little cracks. Now, if you'll notice that there are big cracks between every court, that was designed. He designed them so that they would develop these big cracks in-between the courts, so that it will relieve the pressure ... from the courts themselves, so that the courts have very few cracks, but there are beginning some hair cracks now on the courts. ... I started to say, about Plainfield Tennis Council, we had a beautiful tennis facility, and so, the United States Tennis Association, the Eastern Section, ... we ran some tournaments for them. ...

Because we had so many courts, we could do them so fast and we had good personnel. ... They started having a lot of tournaments here, eastern tournaments, and we started making money from the people who wanted to play in the tournaments. ... Everybody's got to pay their entrance fee. ... Heck, I remember, ... we wouldn't have three hundred dollars in the treasury, then, all of a sudden, there, we had thirty-five thousand, wow. That's when certain people in the organization started getting dollar signs and instead of keeping it to the fact that we want to have tennis for kids--and, of course, we just sent one kid to college. We gave him a scholarship, to Lincoln. ... They protested, but there was enough of us in the organization saying, "No, this is [our mission]. The money is not there for us, the money is there for the kids. He is a kid. He came through our school, through our programs, and, now, he's eligible. He's a good student and ... he wanted to go to Lincoln University and he wants to go and we should help him go." So, we gave him a scholarship.

SI: That is great.

DV: Yes. Well, no, we've got to do more of it, see, but they don't want to do it. They don't want to. "We can't be paying for everybody doing this." ... "The hell you can't. What the hell you think we come for? We came here [because] this is helping tennis." ... Well, that's my tennis story. [laughter]

SI: You should be very proud. I think either you or Ms. Warner ...

DV: Oh, Jan.

SI: Yes, she mentioned that you were in the Tennis Hall of Fame now.

DV: Yes, they just sent me something, I think.

SI: The Eastern Tennis Hall of Fame, congratulations.

DV: Yes, thank you. [laughter]

SI: This is this year, wow.

DV: Yes, it's going to be this year, if I live that long. Hey, eighty-six, you ain't promised a day, you know.

SI: You mentioned that, when you first started with tennis, it was difficult to cultivate a tennis team in the African-American community because it was not as popular a sport.

DV: No.

SI: How have you seen that change over time?

DV: Oh, yes. ... Oh, yes, now, ... you've got the Williams sisters, you had the guy who won the championship, Arthur Ashe. You had Arthur Ashe, you've got the Williams sisters, you've got

James Blake. ... They see black kids playing and winning, playing, doing good, tennis, so that, now, it's easier. Also, part of this organization, we have gone down into teaching the physical ed. teachers. See, physical ed. teachers don't usually want to teach tennis. Most of them are a little ... hesitant--they're a little afraid of it. Most of them are not tennis players. One or two of them are tennis players and they will try it, but we have gone down to start to teach ... the phys ed. teachers how to teach the kids tennis and, once we get this well accomplished, we've started one year on it and we're going to have to go through it, I think, with a number of years before it's really going to start [paying off], but we want the kids, ... if they started in second, third, fourth, fifth grade, now, we've got middle school programs, they can compete for the middle school teams. They can compete then for the high school teams. We should ... really have a terrific [team], but the best thing of it is, they are learning a lifetime sport. That's the best thing.

SI: It is very open to people of all ages

DV: ... I'm eighty-some years old. I can go out there and, of course, I don't hit like a twenty-year-old boy hits, [laughter] but I can get out there and, you know, with doubles--I don't even try to play singles. ... There are octogenarian tournaments, national octogenarian tennis [tournaments], people who are eighty years [old] who compete.

SI: I interviewed one this summer, out in California.

DV: Yes, yes. Well, naturally, they live where it's nice and warm and sunshine, sure. Yes, California, Florida, they produce most of the tennis players, because they play all-year round, go out there and you can play anybody, and get beat, yes. [laughter]

SI: When you would take your teams out to predominantly white towns, was there any problem with that?

DV: Yes, sometimes, yes, even today.

SI: Even today?

DV: Yes. ... It would never be official or anything like that, but you can see that, and it's all according to how you present yourself and how you go to the coach and ... the two of you get together. That's the deciding factor, because I've even seen the times when the boys themselves would be saying, "We don't want to be playing them. They can't play." ... Well, for one thing, now, they know, when we come, we can play tennis. They'd better be ready to play some tennis. If they don't, we're going to beat their butts right off the bat. [laughter] ... I've been so open with it ... with their coaches, and then, when they come to us, ... I welcome them with open arms, you know what I mean. "This is our facility," ... and shake hands, "I want you to shake hands with ... your opponents," which is normal in tennis, "and then, when you get through, shake again, what-you-call-it, no fussing, no fighting, don't want to hear it." ... Oh, I've seen the time we beat teams and the boys refused to shake our boys' hands and storm off, leave the courts. I've seen that happen, too. It doesn't happen too much now. It has gotten better, yes.

SI: Was it in the late 1960s when you started working at Hubbard?

DV: Yes, it was late '60s or early '70s. I've forgotten which, yes.

SI: When did you retire?

DV: '86, was it? 1986, yes, something like that, but I just kept on coaching. I just kept right on coaching, because I was qualified and I could still do it, and so, I did it, but, now, ... I don't think they're going to give me the job this year, and I don't know that I want to do the job, because I can't move the way I used to move. Of course, you don't have to move, but, well, there's certain things that you've got to do. I can still get out on the courts and yell at them and feed balls, sometimes, but, you know, when you have coaches that really participate and can demonstrate, ... they get more across than somebody who's just talking it. You know, a young person who gets out and can demonstrate what he's talking about, he's great, yes.

SI: When you first joined the faculty at Hubbard, was it primarily African-American men or was it mixed? You mentioned you never had an African-American teacher.

DV: Yes. At that time, the staff was mixed. Well, see, here, again, the protests had started and they needed black teachers. They wanted black teachers, because the kids themselves had separated already. The white kids sat on this side of the luncheon, cafeteria, and the black kids sat on this side and the feelings were there, and so, they needed black men to lead the whole school. ... So, when I came along, that's why I said, when Ed saw me, he went, "Donald, Donald, I've got a job for you," because he needed black teachers, black, male teachers--black, male teachers because he had women teachers, quite a lot--and some of the white faculty quit. Some of the white faculty quit, others stayed, but it was the same thing, ... whatever their background was, they brought to the job situation, and which has been a large part of why black kids have such a small feeling about themselves, because, when you've had people who are your teachers and who've had the negative feelings all through their lives about black people, they don't portray good feelings toward black kids, and so, the black, male teachers were at a premium.

SI: Was that something that was consciously done to present a positive image, African-American role models, or to better integrate the black and white kids in the classroom?

DV: Truly, it never really integrated, and I've had to be in the middle with blacks oppressing whites and whites oppressing blacks. I've had to be in the middle for both. What was I saying? [laughter]

SI: We were talking about the integration of the school and you were saying that really never happened.

DV: No. Eventually, ... as I said, they moved out.

SI: Okay, it was predominantly African-American.

DV: ... Now, it's predominantly black. Yes, they had to go with their parents. Their parents moved out, but, at that time, it was early on. ... Now, there are, beginning to come, some white students back in school. So, some of the white parents must be moving back. Of course, I'm not so closely in touch with them anymore as I was when I was teaching, because I was there every day then. Now, I'm only there once or twice a week.

SI: Did you remain active in the NAACP after the 1960s, in the 1970s and 1980s?

DV: No. I have a lifetime membership, but I don't do any [activities], no, and I haven't attended any meetings lately. In the last fifteen years, I don't think I've attended meetings. ...

SI: Do you think the spirit of the 1960s kind of faded away?

DV: ... Oh, yes, oh, yes. [laughter] We had the issues, we had the feelings, we had the times, oh, yes. ... It's not the same now, it's not the same, and this is what the article alludes to, that the feelings are not the same. The leadership is not confronted with the same issues that the leadership was confronted with back in the '60s and the '70s. You don't have your Bull Connor-s now, you don't have your police dogs now, not that you don't have the feelings. You've got the feelings, but you don't have people who are standing up and saying, "No." ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Do you mind if I put it back on?

DV: Go on. Oh, jeepers, wait a second; if they're going to give me this [the Eastern Tennis Hall of Fame], they may not want to know that ... I was a Communist Party member.

SI: It probably will not matter.

DV: You don't know.

SI: We can just strike it, whatever you want.

DV: All right, go ahead with it.

SI: How long did that last, your involvement [in the Communist Party]?

DV: Well, it was right after the war, so, that was back in '46, '47. I went to school, kind of let them go, but, then, it was back there then. ... The Taft-Hartley Law was in, came in about there. There was argument and talk. [Editor's Note: The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which became law after Congress overrode President Harry S Truman's veto, curtailed the activities of labor unions.] ... I remember, [laughter] I was in a building union, a laborers' building union, and because they didn't want black guys in the carpenters and the bricklayers and the what-you-call-its, and the roofers. ... They didn't want blacks. The unions were messed up, too. Well, the unions were made of people, ... [laughter] but I was at this meeting, this union meeting, and the Taft-Hartley Law was being argued and talked about in the news and I'd read it. ... Well, at that

time, I was a party member and we had talked about it at the party meetings, and so, at the meeting, I spoke up about it, said, "We've got to be careful about it." I've forgotten even now what the Taft-Hartley Law was and what it did. I've forgotten, but, anyway, I told them, "We've got to be careful then, because we..." [laughter] and the representative, the head representative of the union, said, "Hey, Donald, we're going to make you shop steward," and I was just starting as a laborer, as a worker. They [said], "You know more about the Taft-Hartley Law than anybody here, [laughter] so, you're going to be the shop steward." "What does a shop steward do?" "Yes, well, okay, I'll tell you, don't worry," and they made me shop steward then, just because I [spoke up]. ... As I said, we did some organizing with ... a couple of unions--outside of that, nothing much, ... nothing much.

SI: You mentioned that you would go out to places like Calco and hand out literature.

DV: Yes, yes.

SI: Was there any kind of opposition?

DV: Opposition? They would talk, yes, say, "What [are] you doing here?" ... but most of the guys were willing to accept it, because they knew that the shop unions weren't any good. ... Calco became organized, too. They became part of the--I forget the union. It's a CIA union, I think--CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] union [laughter]--and I forgot. ... I don't know what they did, but that wasn't very eventful. The main thing is, ... I had been doing a lot of reading and, like I said, it was at the end of the war and I had a lot of questions in my mind, "What the hell was that all about?" and all that. ... I'll tell you one thing they taught me, though--how to read a newspaper. ... Most people don't know how to read a newspaper and one of the first things I want to know is the date, I want to know who wrote the article and what connection he has from the organizers, ... the management. Then, I can almost express what the [article was about]. ... I used to--now, I'm not up on ... the news--I could almost tell you what the hell the thing was going to say, but it did teach me to read, how to read, newspapers, also, which newspaper it was, too.

SI: How did you feel when, particularly Joe McCarthy, but all of the anti-Communist witch-hunts were happening?

DV: Oh, there was no two ways, as was found later, that he was a horrible man. He put "pink stamps" on so many people. ... Well, you know the story, you had people who lost their careers, lost their jobs and all that, behind this fear of being stamped as a pinky or a pinko, and it was all part of the effort to destroy the Left. That's all it was. ... Now, we don't have any good Left. We have some people who [are good] and it's not anything the way it [was]. I'll tell you something else; during the war, in our outfit, we had a guy who fought in the Spanish Civil War. He was a colonel, I think, in the Spanish Civil War and he was just a private in the American Army, but I used to talk with him a lot and he opened my eyes to some [of] what was going on in the world. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade, yes, I'd forgotten all about them. I was too young. ... [Editor's Note: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a group of American volunteers that fought against Francisco Franco's Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939.]

SI: What is your view now of the Communist Party? Are you ideologically ...

DV: Number one, I have no contact with them, so, let's make that definite. I have no contact with them, nor am I seeking contact with them. One time, about twenty years, twenty-five years ago, two or three men came here to talk to me about [it] and I told them that I was no longer interested in doing anything with the Communist Party. Now, what was your question again?

SI: What are your opinions now of Communism?

DV: Of Communism? All right, my opinion of Communism is that the Russians screwed up, too. They took it too far. See, I believe, I do believe, in their preaching the what-you-call-it that Socialism is going to be the next order of production. Most people don't realize it, don't think of it as that. They think of it as just the dictatorship, the dictatorship was so horrible, but Marx had taught that we would have to have a period of dictatorship in order to carry the Socialist thinking, the Socialist way of production, over, so that it would be able to exist by itself. I don't believe in the order of the dictatorship. I think that, yes, Socialism is going to be the next order, as opposed to private enterprise, but it's not going to be "this or that." It's going to slowly evolve into a Socialist state of a certain type, in which certain areas are going to be socialistic and that the other areas are going to remain as private enterprise. Now, what the type of government that's going to be this [will be], it can be a government that is elected, and that is--what do you call it when the government is elected in?

SI: Representative?

DV: Yes, representative type government, it can be that. ... It also can be that with the Socialist thing, too, the Socialist state, too, but I do think that the concept of producing for usage, rather than producing for profit, makes more sense, because there are too many people in the world who are starving, too many people in the world who are not a part of the government and they're not going to be as long as they cannot eat, they can't live properly. That's not going to happen. So, that's [my view], and so, as far as Communism today, like I said, United States, England, France, the Western World, has done their job--they have squelched the Left thinking. They've got it down. I hope I'm not stepping on your toes. [laughter]

SI: No, do not worry about me. Is there anything else you would like to add, anything you would like to say?

DV: I don't think so. I've talked; what time is it?

SI: It has been about three hours.

DV: Good lord.

SI: Did you ever become involved politically, say, in seeking help from the Democrats and the Republicans in New Jersey? Maybe through the NAACP or seeking the support of local politicians, were you involved in that, or were you outside of that system?

DV: Well, you see, at the time that I was involved, the issues were here. Black people were speaking out and protesting. These were the issues. The things that had happened in the South, with the marches and the protests in the South, the schools, the whole thing, these were our concerns and they were big issues. I mean, they were [major]. We argued amongst ourselves about it, but most of the people felt, "Hey, it's time to do something about it."

SI: You never worked with, say, this or that governor in trying to get a slate of legislation passed, or organizing, maybe, for Bobby Kennedy.

DV: No, no. I tried to get next to the--who's the Governor now, in New Jersey?

SI: Jon Corzine? [Editor's Note: Jon Stevens Corzine (born in 1947), a Democrat, served as US Senator from New Jersey from 2001 to 2006 and Governor of New Jersey from 2006 to 2010.]

DV: Corzine, yes, when he was running, because I have a dream of producing a facility here in the City of Plainfield that would ... have most of the lifetime sports, like golf, bowling, tennis, dancing, swimming, for kids, but it would have to be so that it would be connected with the school, so that they would have to keep up their grades in order to participate in any of these sports. I would love to see a facility of ... something like that built here, and I almost had the darn thing started. Oh, it may not be dead yet. I may not see it, but they had a situation in Plainfield in which the Democratic powers, ... the guy, Jerry Green, he's a representative in the house of representatives in New Jersey [the New Jersey General Assembly], and he lives right down the street here. He had never done anything in Plainfield, even though he lived here, as long as he was maintaining his support and what-you-call-it, but eight years ago or so, a man named Al McWilliams started a New Democratic Party and, through his delegate, the person whom he wanted to become the mayor and the what-you-call-it, threw him out and Al ran two terms, I think it was. [Editor's Note: Al McWilliams served as Mayor of Plainfield from 1997 to 2005, when he was defeated by Sharon Robinson-Briggs. He died on April 6, 2007.] He made a lot of improvements here in Plainfield. He brought the consciousness up a lot in Plainfield, but Al, I love him dearly, but Al wasn't a real politician. He was an idealist, but, if you're a politician, you've got to know how to appeal to people and Al didn't quite know that. Al thought that he had his support up here, around this neck of the woods, but, see, the people that he had to get to, and he didn't get to, were over on another ward. That's where the big Democratic vote is. Then, Green found a way to get some money out of the state coffers and he poured money into the last campaign and unseated Al McWilliams. He put in this woman, a black woman, as the mayor. Well, he's got his fingers in everything now. He's pretty well [set]. The only thing that I could hope that he might do, and I have spoken--I'm a committeeman from this district, ... this district of the ward and I've made it known, publicly--that this facility that I spoke of, I would like to see made, but that I am wanting to see such a facility. Now, I didn't ask him to back me and what-you-call-it, but I ... wanted him to know that I am standing for this. Now, I don't know whether I'm going to go [see it happen]. I don't know that I'm going to go in, but his wife, Al's wife--oh, Al died. McWilliams died and he died just at the time that I had approached him about this facility that I wanted and he was very eager about it, too. He said, "All right, Donald, we'll get the people together," and he was a lawyer and he had contact and he knew how to [make things happen]. In fact, McGreevy, former president [Governor] of New Jersey; do you live in

New Jersey? [Editor's Note: James Edward "Jim" McGreevey (born in 1957), a Democrat, served as Governor of New Jersey from 2002 to 2004.]

SI: Yes.

DV: All right, McGreevy bought his house from Al's wife, right across from Al's house. McGreevy's house is on one side and Al's house was [on the other]. So, he knew McGreevy well. McGreevy, I wanted in on the planning, because McGreevy had built such a facility in Woodbridge, when he was the Mayor of Woodbridge. He had built one there. I went there and saw it, but it isn't what I wanted to build, but, anyway, Al was anxious about it and he got quite a group together. They were lawyers, they were people in businesses and they had contacts, but, then, Al died, and then, my wife died, and so, it's kind of, "Blah," but his wife said that he said that he wanted it continued. So, we shall see what we shall see, and I'm old now--I can't do it the way I used to do it.

SI: You are still very active. I did not know you were a councilman.

DV: No, I'm not a councilman. I'm a committeeman.

SI: Committeeman, okay.

DV: ... I have a nephew who was president of the Plainfield City Council. Now, he is a freeholder, a Union County freeholder. He just got elected Union County freeholder.

SI: How long have you served on that committee?

DV: He just got there.

SI: I meant you.

DV: Oh, me? How long have I been a committeeman? Well, this time around, I guess about eight years, ... but I had been a committeeman years back, when the Democrats were a little group of people. In fact, I was the treasurer of the Plainfield Democratic City Committee. So, ... you know, as the treasurer, I wrote the checks, so, I basically knew who was doing what and where and when, and then, the boy--well, he's not a boy, he's a young man, he's in his twenties--he ran at the time Al McWilliams first ran and he knew that I had been a committeeman years ago. ... He asked me, "Uncle Donald, will you help me and become a committeeman again?" I said, "Yes, I'll run." So, that's how I got stuck into it again. [laughter] Yes, so, we shall see what we shall see.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to add?

DV: No, I probably talked too much already.

SI: No, you did not. [laughter]

DV: Yes, yes. Where are you going to go with that thing?

SI: This thing? We just do a lot of interviews.

DV: No, but where are you going to go with them?

SI: Let me pause this for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: This concludes the second session with Mr. Van Blake. Thank you very much for having me and for sharing your story.

DV: You're quite welcome, quite welcome. I just want to hear what it sounds like when you're through with it. You're not going to edit it, are you, cut stuff out and all that?

SI: Not the sound, but you can edit the transcript.

DV: That's the written stuff.

SI: Thank you again very much.

DV: Okay.

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

Reviewed by Michael Brusca 4/1/10

Reviewed by Krzysztof Swiatek 4/1/10

Reviewed by Devin Verhoest 4/1/10

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/8/13

Reviewed by Donald Van Blake 3/1/13