

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2256

Leon Stennis

Interviewed by

Tilisia Williams

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Interviewee: Leon Stennis

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams and Cassie Nespor

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: August 7, 2023

TW: This is an interview with Dr. Leon Stennis for the Youngstown State University project on the Black student experience. This interview is being conducted at Maag Library. Today's date is August 7th, 2023, and my name is Tilisa Williams.

Hello Dr. Stennis!

LS: Hello, how are you?

TW: I'm good, how are you?

LS: I'm doing fine.

TW: Can we start off with, where are you from? Where did you grow up?

LS: I grew up in Arkansas. I was born in plantation country, where they grew a lot of cotton. My parents were sharecroppers. My father had been a sawmill worker but, ya' know I don't know what happened there. I know more about the sharecropper side. I don't know if you know about the sharecropping. It's where they planted plants of cotton, and the sharecroppers picked the cotton. Back then they didn't have a lot of machinery, a lot of technology, to grow cotton, and pick it, and take it to the mill and all that stuff. So, they would pick the cotton, and the owner of the property would give them a portion of the finances that were gained from the sale of the cotton, which wasn't very much.

My mom left my dad with five kids and nothing but the clothes on our back to go to a little place called Noble Lake, Arkansas. That's where my grandfather lived. She chopped cotton. I don't know if you know what chopping cotton is. That's where you cultivate the little, small cotton plants and get the grass out from between them and thin them out so that they can breathe and grow faster. My roots go back to that period- that would be in the [19]40s. We headed to Little Rock, Arkansas, where my great-grandmother lived in a little hut that Black soldiers had used over in North Little Rock across from the river from Little Rock. After the war

they didn't need them anymore and they sold them to people- my Great grandmother... If I get a tad bit emotional at times, please excuse me. My journey has been emotional.

The seven of us lived in that little hut until the Deacons from the Baptist church built us a room by room, a house. Well, actually, the neighbor built a third room. When I came here in 1961, we had three rooms- no running water, outdoor toilet, all of the above. We got electricity when my seven-year-old sister died of bronchial pneumonia and diphtheria. Which you don't hear about today because everybody gets their vaccinations. We were so poverty stricken; my mom only had a third-grade education, too. There was a lot that she didn't know. My great-grandmother died of breast cancer. It was terrible. They didn't have all the medications and pain killers that they have now. She had her breasts amputated. She found out she had breast cancer by the woman that she worked for, over in Westwood. As you know, the South was segregated back in that time. It [Westwood] was a White area [neighborhood] across from John Barrow where we lived. The nurse told her she should see a doctor about the lump in her breast. She had a lot of agony. Then a couple years later my sister died of bronchial pneumonia and diphtheria.

Then my cousin had come to Little Rock. At that time a lot of people were leaving the country, rural areas of Arkansas to come to Little Rock because it was more progressive and [had] more jobs. But, you know, African Americans only got the menial kind of work- housekeeping, dish washing, yard work. Jobs like that. Yard work, whatever. But anyway, my cousin had come to Little Rock, brought his family to Little Rock where we were. By the way, this was a rural area. It wasn't in the city limits. I went to school up...well, you know there's so much here that I kind of come back and correct myself on timing and things like that. I was a victim of- I shouldn't say victim, that's negative- the Little Rock school desegregation crisis. You heard of the Little Rock Nine that desegregated Little Rock Central High School in 1957? I missed a whole year of schooling because the governor closed off four high schools, including the one all-Black high school. But that's another story, we can get into that later if you want to.

But anyway, you asked about my beginnings. That was my beginning. We came to Little Rock with nothing but the clothes on our back and lived in a little hut, all seven of us. I don't know how long it took the Deacons to build it. It was just one room at a time. And what I started to tell you about was my cousin that got killed in a honky tonk. I don't know if you know what a honky tonk is. Some people call them Juke Johns- all Southern language. It's like a bar where people can go and dance and have a drink or two, sort of fraternize with each other.

On a Sunday morning, he was killed. It was jealousy, this older man who was running the bar killed him. Some say he pulled the gun in front of my cousin; some people say my cousin pulled a gun first. I don't know. The guy got off, so apparently, they [the jury] believed it was in self-defense. The reason why I mention these incidents is because they sort of scarred my youth, seeing this kind of violence and seeing my great-grandmother suffer with cancer and my mom struggling to keep a roof over our heads, clothes on our back, and food on the table, and my dad not being there. I'm trying to write a book. I haven't gotten around to finishing it. My wife just passed March 13th. I know I'm going back and forth with this, excuse me.

TW: I'm sorry to hear that.

LS: I'm getting ready to move to Columbus [Ohio], so you guys caught me just in time. I'm trying to get a house sold. I'm trying to prepare and get into the market. I don't want to go through another winter doing that. My oldest daughter is in Columbus. She has Parkinson's disease. The reason why I'm moving is because to support her, she asked me to move in with her and that's a challenge because her house is already furnished and mine... I have to sell some, give some to charity, get rid of some, which is a multiple task. Probably the biggest task I've ever had in my life. But anyways, please excuse me if I go back and forth a little bit.

But back to Little Rock. We had no running water, a big round tin tub to take a bath, and we got water from the neighbor's well. We had an outdoor toilet, the whole nine yards. Country living! We went from the country-country, plantation life, to really rural, plantation setting to rural suburb. We took the bus to school. I started first grade in the Fall of 1959. We took the yellow bus. We passed several White elementary schools to get to our intercity school- Gibbs Elementary School. Dunbar had been the all-Black high school at one time, but the white community feared that after Brown vs Board of Education in [19]54, they feared that integration was coming. So they built a senior high school for African-American students in the [19]50s. Dunbar, which had been a senior high school, was named after Paul Laurence Dunbar. I don't know if you know the first African-American poet able to make a living writing poetry? I did my thesis for my master's degree on him and Rita Dove, who was well known. She won the Pulitzer or one of those big prizes for poetry writing. She's from Akron, and Dunbar is from Dayton, Ohio. But the reason I wrote the thesis on Dunbar is because all I know is that he was famous for his poetry, but they never taught us any of his poems in my English classes growing up in Little Rock. And I was curious to why. It was primarily because he became known more for his dialect poetry; "yuh suh", "Massa", you know the African-American dialect. And when the slaves were freed, the more intellectual ones started creating and establishing schools and colleges and so forth. And they saw his poetry as a disgrace, because his poetry was primarily read by White people. And White people thought that was the best (he wasn't enslaved, but his parents were) a Black person could do, and they were delighted to read his poetry. And of course, the more intellectual African American people were ashamed and felt this was a disgrace. So that's why his poetry was not taught for a long time in Black schools. All of the South was segregated until around Brown v. Board of Education, "separate but equal" could not stand because it was unconstitutional in 1954. But it took even longer for the South to not have segregated schools, that's why I go back because that's my roots.

I have people ask me, "Well if it was that bad, why do you go back?" Because it's my roots, it's my springboard. This is what drove me to accomplish the things I have accomplished. When I look back and think... you're probably familiar with this song "I don't believe he gonna..." no, that's James Cleveland, "I've come too far from where I've started from. I just don't believe He's brought me this far. believe me". I grew up listening to a Black station that played Gospel

Jazz, Blues, Negro Spirituals and that's the cultural inspiration that I grew up with. I'll talk later about my military experience which played a big role in my life also.

But anyways, go back to 'that's why I wrote my thesis' because I was curious about why didn't they teach Dunbar? He was famous, they named schools after him, you know name it! But why wasn't his poetry being taught? Even today his poetry isn't really taught. He gets a better mention today of his outstanding English poetry than his dialect poetry. But he was the first, to earn a living writing poetry. I compared the works of Rita Dove to his works, and I compared the biographies, and I did an interview...I'm sorry, I did a study of how they were reported on and written about in their hometown newspaper- The Akron Beacon Journal and I think the Dayton Daily News. I went back and did research about them, how the newspaper in their hometowns covered them. It was fairly even, of course it was an earlier time, the turn of a century for Dunbar and changed to the 21st century for Dove. I thought it was interesting and I'm still going to try to get that published. I had a lot of reasons for delaying- illness in the family, my wife's illness...

Anyways, I'm open to more questions. That was my beginning! If you want to talk more about Little Rock and how the Little Rock school desegregation crisis influenced me, we can do that. We can talk about what my life has been like since I came to Youngstown and Youngstown State University.

TW: I would like to hear more about the Little Rock Nine crisis and how that affected you and your education, and what led to your family coming to Youngstown.

LS: 1957 was when the nine students, all of whom I knew. I didn't know them personally, but I knew who they were. I had seen them at one time or another. They picked the brightest and the best [students] to desegregate Little Rock Central, and it was a surprise to me because they kept it quiet. They didn't want it to be explosive and get out of hand. So, when the nine students desegregated Little Rock Central, the National Guard was supposed to protect them, and they didn't do a good job of protecting them. So President Dwight David Eisenhower sent federal troops. Well, first of all, he federalized the National Guard, so they had to protect them. They came under his power. And then when things got really out of control, when all the violence occurred, "Ike" sent the [National Guard]. By the way I want to write a book about him also. The tentative title is "Why we liked Ike and not the others" – referring to the other Republicans, since Eisenhower got the largest percentage of the African American vote. He was the last president to get that higher percentage, I think about 30%, of the African American vote. No other president or candidate for president got anywhere near that percentage of votes. So, Ike sent the troops in. The students continued their education at Central High through that year. They were spat upon, called all kinds of derogatory names. The troops protected them. I can remember, I was in the 8th grade at Dunbar Junior High school and I played football that year. I can remember us going to Quigley Stadium - they called it Quigley Stadium at that time. I think the name has changed- to play football. I think we were playing the Black school over in North Little Rock at that time. The coaches all wanted me 'cause I was

always big. My size was always an issue, I mean with guys. Guys would always come up, slap me, and run. You know, trying to impress a girl, trying to impress the guys. But my momma would always tell me, "if trouble starts Leon, you leave". Of course, I wouldn't have time to leave if they came up and smacked me and run. That happened to me a number of times. They were bullies. Even though schools were segregated, there were people who thought they were better than me and my sister and others that came in on a yellow bus 'cause we lived in the country. When the classes took field trips, you know we'd go to the zoo and the amusement parks, but they would also go out to the country where I lived. I always thought "well, dang" 'cause usually when we're in the rural area they know what that was like.

But the next year the desegregation was successful with the protection of the troops. That was the first time the troops had ever been used in that kind of situation since the Civil War, if I recall correctly. Anyways, I was leaving Dunbar Junior High School to go to Harshman [High School]. Dunbar was right in the center in the city. As I told you, they had built a new senior high school hoping to avoid desegregation 'cause Brown v. Board of Education had come about in 1954, and now it's 1957. So I was supposed to go to Harshman in the 10th grade that year. But the governor decided that after one year after desegregation, he was going to out do Ike Eisenhower and not have any desegregation. So, he closed all four of the city high schools, including my high school- Harshman City High School. There was a technical high school, then there was Central, and another one. I can't think of the name. Three predominately White high schools and one predominately African American school. So, everybody had to decide what to do. That was unexpected that the governor would close all the schools. He said he was very defiant. "There will be no desegregation under my watch," or something like that. Anyways, there was a minister who lived on the west end of Little Rock who was transporting students. He was a World History teacher. He was transporting students to J.C .Cook High School in Wrightsville, Arkansas, which was another rural area outside of Little Rock about 20 miles or so. My mom struggled to pay him \$30 a week to transport my sister and I to J.C. Cook, but here's what happened.

He taught World History, and I was in his World history class. He stepped out of the room for a couple of minutes and this guy who was a bully who I played football with decided to put a belt around my neck. He might have choked me to death if I hadn't been as strong as he was. But I wasn't assertive and aggressive like he was, and he probably remembered that, playing football with me and all. And I didn't really want to play football because I didn't have transportation after practice in the evening. He probably remembered me by not being excited about playing football. I only played because the coach wanted me, and I was big on the line. But like I said, my size was always an issue. Guys would always try to take advantage of that and girls... I was already shy growing up. I didn't really come out of my shyness until I went into the Navy. They won't let you be shy in the Navy. But anyway, the guys made a big issue of my size and the girls shied away from me because of that. He put that belt around my neck and the teacher came back into the room. And I guess he thought we were both clowning around. He didn't realize I guess. At that time, I didn't speak up for myself. Like I said, I was very shy. He suspended both

of us for a week. And here my mom was struggling to pay \$30 a week so me and my sister could go down to Wrightsville 'cause the governor closed the schools. And I told my mom 'I'm not going back. That guy is crazy! Stupid and just...' and he would do it again! And I think the teacher was afraid of him.

I didn't have the capacity at that time. You know how you just don't feel like you're as good as other people? [That] other people laugh at you all the time? Whatever the reason. I just wasn't very outspoken. I should have been, but the truth of the matter is that I wasn't. I decided I wouldn't go back, and my mom agreed with me. My sister continued to go for that year. My sister graduated in 1959, and she fell short of one or two credits, so she went to Scipio Jones High School, the Black high school across the river. There's North Little Rock and there's Little Rock. Everybody thinks it's all one big area, but they're twin cities. North Little Rock is a separate city from Little Rock. She had to take the bus. We took the yellow school bus to school, but we had to take another bus to go into town to go shopping and so forth. Anything else you wanted to do you had to take separate transportation. She had to catch the bus into downtown Little Rock, take the city bus across the river into North Little Rock to Jones High School. So, she graduated that year and thank God. My sister was smarter than I was to be honest with you- always on the honor roll, always conscientious about her assignments and everything. The teachers liked her and everything. Unfortunately, her later life was not as uplifted as mine was for a number of reasons. I can get into that later if you want me to.

So, she graduated that year, and I was a year behind. The next year, Thurgood Marshall, whom you know was Supreme Court Justice- the first African American to serve on the Supreme Court. He, at that, was with the NAACP, the chief legal counsel for the NAACP. He came to Little Rock to file a lawsuit in the federal district court. You're familiar with the federal courts? The local Federal District Court, the Appellate [Court], which is in Saint Louis and ultimately the Supreme court. He filed a case against the government, and it took a year for him to litigate it all the way up to the Supreme Court and have the Governor's decision overturned. We missed a whole year of school- mainly myself because I refused to go back and be humiliated by that guy- but my sister graduated. A lot of kids went out to other rural schools and segregated schools around the Little Rock area. A lot of them went out of town to live with family members, attend school, and some just didn't. It was a disaster for some students. Some students never went back. They went into the workplace. Some girls got pregnant. In my book I'm going to refer to that group as the "Little Rock 900" because I've read somewhere that after the nine students left to go to Central High there were about 700 of us at Harshman, the all-Black high school. And I'm going to add to that- I'll explain all of this in my book- another 200. There were 700 at Harshman and at least another 200 that left town and never came back. Or girls got pregnant and didn't came back. Guys went into the work force. I know personally a number of situations like that. I would say that somewhere along the line an additional 200 students were affected by the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, closing of the schools the next year.

Now, what did I do? I went back one year behind in the 10th grade. After Thurgood Marshall had the Governor's decision overturned and the schools reopened. Tenth grade and 11th grade I completed. Then I was to go into my senior year at Harshman, but I was really struggling. I dropped out of school. I was disgruntled. I was about ready to give up. I looked at my family situation...

My sister came here [Youngstown]. My grandfather who I never met, George Stennis, was here. He and his wife- not my grandmother- I guess it was his second wife that lived here. He had worked in the steel mills for a number of years, and retired. His second wife died, and my sister came here to live with him and attend YSU. She attended YSU for a year. Then he died, and he had so much debt that she didn't have the finances to continue her studies and just a lot of circumstantial things had continued with her life. I can run the details about that later on but part of thinking about my past is about what happened to other members of my family, siblings. But I'll pass over that for now. Anyways, she never finished college. She never went back because of a lot of circumstances. But I came here because she was by herself. She had some renters who rented my grandfather's house, who didn't really pay the rent. After he died, she struggled. I won't go in to detail here. But anyways, I came here to be with her because she was basically by herself as far as family was concerned. I graduated from the old East High School- the Golden Bears. So, I graduated from East in 1962 and tried to find a job around here. Even the guys that worked in the steel mills, many of them had been laid off. They had 20 years and I tried to get into the steel mills. I tried to get into the department stores as a stockboy, all kinds of jobs, and I knew nobody would hire me. So, I decided I was not going to be stagnated and hang around not doing anything. That wasn't my make up. So I went into the Navy. I almost joined the Marines. I was impressed by the "They'll make a man out of you." All that good stuff. I almost joined the Marines. But thank God! They were the first ones to go to Vietnam. I don't know how much you know about the Vietnam War. You probably read more about it. But anyways, I was interested in journalism. I had taken journalism at Harshman [High School] in Little Rock, in the 11th grade. I took journalism class at East [High School]. Ms. Clark, everybody knew her. I had some background in Journalism, but I didn't score high enough on the Navy test to go to Navy Journalism School. They have their own journalism school.

CN: Really?

LS: They told me I could gain rank, if you will. Well, they call it another terminology. It's in Navy use. But anyway, I could do on-the-job training, take correspondence courses, and work with other journalists to learn the skills. And that's what I did. I made third class. The enlisted ranks in the military, you can go all the way up from one. I wanted to see the world. I went to recruit training in San Diego. This was in August of [19]62 after I graduated in June. We went to boot camp [as an] E-1. I graduated from boot camp in San Diego [as an] E-2. And the next rank of enlistment- I forget the terminology in Navy use. Anyway, [at] E-3 I became a seaman, learned all the skills I thought I would be serving on the ship- how they help the navigators of the ship, the ropes they throw out and stuff- and basic Navy training. I made E3 and then I got on-the-job

training for E-4. So, I was E-4 when I came out. I served four years. My first duty station was Jacksonville, Florida, Naval Air Station. I served there for a year, then I was transferred to Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, in Puerto Rico. I spent some time in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I spent 3 months there and the rest of my year and a half at Roosevelt Roads, Naval station in Puerto Rico. I think they might have shut those bases down lately. I'm not absolutely sure, but I know they were talking about shutting them down. So, I served there for a year and a half. As I look back in retrospect, I didn't take a foreign language in my high school class, but I wish I had. If I had taken Spanish and served in Puerto Rico for a year and a half, I'm sure I would have become fluent in Spanish. That's the one regret I had. Well, first of all, I never thought I'd be going to college. I just wanted to graduate in my circumstance- coming out of poverty and all that. Anyways, Jacksonville Florida, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico. I wanted to advance as high as I could in the Navy. My best Navy job in journalism was in Morocco [Africa]. It was a communication station for the Navy, facilitating the communication of the ships operating in that area over Europe and Africa. It's a big deal, a really important part of the Navy- communications. But I wasn't in communications. I was a journalist. I published a newspaper.

We had families that lived on the base. We had guys in communications. They all loved my [news]paper because I was the only one. It was an isolated area. My paper had who won the softball game in intermural sports, who was going to show at the theater, if there was a group coming to perform for the USO. My paper was it! I was a hot shot. My ego shot up there. If my paper was late, guys would be lined up waiting for my paper to come out. This is real stuff, amen, amen! I used things like this to come out of my shyness and to be more assertive and believe in myself. I had a terrible time coming out of my shyness and being more assertive and everything. When I was in bootcamp in the Navy, we would have to "fall out" in formation early in the morning. We'd go to what they'd call "chow" breakfast. We'd get everything together. My company, which had about 20-some people, sometimes I would be a little slow falling out in formation. My company's commander was concerned that maybe I had a psychological issue. (Well, I probably did but it wasn't as bad as he thought.) So, he sent me to a psychologist or psychiatrist, I don't know which one it was at the time as they didn't tell me. They just told me to go. He wanted to know what motivated me and why was I so slow in getting out in formation? The fact was, I was thinking about the first time being so far away from home. I couldn't swim. I joined the Navy. I couldn't swim, so they made me go back in the evenings to take swimming lessons- jump in ten feet of water, go crazy and they pulled me out with a fishing pole, the old fashion cane finishing pole. I was just feeling not very inspired, but what he told was "look, if you don't do all the required stuff we have here, we gon' kick you out of the Navy". I did not want to have to go back and have to explain to my friends why I got kicked out of the Navy. He (the Commander) told me to shape up or ship out.

And I thought about when I went back to school at Harshman, I was put into a higher-level English class. They didn't focus on the base sentence structure; it was more of a focus on essay writing, like you do in college in your writing classes. We were supposed to do a research paper

on the origin of jazz. The teacher was a jazz lover. He was a disc jockey on weekends on the radio station. Well, maybe I could have gotten what I needed for the essay from the school library, but I just wasn't up to snuff. I wasn't highly motivated, and I didn't do the essay he wanted to write about on the origin of jazz. He was one of the younger teachers, he had a big ego, he was on the radio jazz and stuff. He told me, "Leon, you might as well go on into the Army. You'll never amount to much". You know with my ego almost nonexistent already, that just kind of soured me and I thought about that when I had to go into the session with the special psychiatrist in the Navy and I just broke down crying. That was the first time I'd ever gave it a lot of thought to not having a father in my life. I just broke down crying. But I also thought about what my mother had said. And my aunt who lived in Oakland, California when she came to visit us. It was during the time of the Little Rock crisis. She um...

TW: Want a tissue?

LS: Thank you.

She asked me, what did I want to do when I grew up and graduated? I told her I wanted to be a journalist because I had been impressed by the news coverage of Eisenhower and that excited me. But she told me, "Boy, you better come out of your shyness. You can't be a journalist, askin' folks questions about all kinds of things if you don't speak up!" And I thought about all that when I was called in for the session with the psychologist/social worker, whatever and I just broke down crying. Here I was, the first time away from my family and everything. My mom had always told me she wanted all of us to graduate from high school. College was out of the question. Anyway, that was one of the things that jarred me. I know I didn't want to go back to Youngstown and work in the steel mills. Although I did when I first came back. I'll get back to that later. My ego started to climb when I was publishing. My paper, even though it wasn't a classy newspaper, won the first of its class in all of the military- the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corp, Coast Guard. That was powerful and uplifting for a minute to receive that award. As a matter of fact, I had gone up from Morocco to Madrid, Spain where they had a huge Air Force base. I had to have surgery on my eyelid, and our small hospital in Morocco didn't do that kind of surgery. So, I went up for four days to Madrid, Spain. I was gone for four days and the award came in while I was away. There was a guy who was a yeoman who was like a secretary or clerk, and he wanted to accept that award for me. And I told him, "No way José! That's my award!" I have pictures. We were all out for inspection and the captain handed me the award. They said I was walking with a classy walk! This is a part of my story. It really is! It all happened and that's why I'm going to write the book if I live long enough to get it done.

Okay, so now we came to Youngstown State University. I graduated from East [High School], went into the Navy, became a journalist. When I came back the only job I could find was in the steel mills. The steel mills had sort of been revived. They were doing better. I'll put it that way. I got a job at Republic Steel down on Wilson Avenue - that 40-inch rolling mill where they pulled steel, stretch it. Its red hot and sometimes the molten steel would drop down in the pits after they did the stretching and all that. We'd have to go and clean those pits out. The dirtiest job I

ever had in my whole life. It took half an hour to clean up after you got out. I knew I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. So, I was going to YSU at the same time. When I was in [the Navy], Congress passed the Vietnam Era Education Bonus, where if you were in any part of the military, the Veteran's Administration would pay for you to go to college or trade school. I was so jubilant! I was set to extend my duty and reenlist, and I asked for the guy that had my job before with the newspaper in Morocco had gone to London. And I thought maybe I could get to London too. Until they passed his education bonus, and I said "Gosh, I'm not college material but if they let me in, they're not going to kick me out. Then I can become college material." And at that time at YSU, all you had to do was be a high school graduate. They didn't look at your test scores. I didn't even take the ACT. Even now, schools are pro-veteran. They make exemptions for veterans. That's all we had to be- was a high school graduate. And I got in. I did struggle with math and science but as I said I hadn't taken a foreign language, which everyone has to do all that stuff. You have to take all the maths. The only math I had was general math, algebra, and geometry. I didn't take any calculus or any of that stuff. I wouldn't have done well anyways. I always had problems with math and science. But I was always pretty good at history, social studies, English. But as I said, I enrolled. I was working in the mill Republic Steel and going to YSU part-time. That was 1966. My first contact with YSU was '66. It took me six years to graduate from the start of '66 and graduated '73. Right?

CN: Yes, that's what I have in the database. It said [19]73 and business [major].

LS: I majored in Business Administration with a focus on Advertising/ Public Relations. I wanted to do Journalism, but Journalism was in the English department at that time, and I would have to take a foreign language. I was still trying to escape foreign language at the time. I should have been putting my arms around it but I was young at the time. I graduated in 1973 and I got a job at St E's [Elizabeth's Hospital]. I got laid off from the Republic Steel [Mill] after six months. They called me back later, but I didn't want to go. I got another job for a short period at a pipe coating plant in Girard. I was majoring in Business Administration and this job was at the National Cash Register Company. You don't hear about it anymore. I think they went out of business, or changed their name, or they merged with somebody else. But at the time they were a big company based in Dayton, Ohio. They hired me as a clerk. They made cash registers, adding machines, and all kinds of business equipment. And I was supposed to be the clerk for their maintenance department. They made a lot of money through maintaining the machines that they sold. I had never done that kind of work, but I had thought by me majoring in Business, this was a big national company, I got my foot in the door, when I graduated I could advance and so forth. But it didn't work out. The guys in the office were supposed to train me. They didn't spend much time. There had been a girl, a Black girl, who worked there before. She was attractive, you know. I'm sure they were more receptive to training her than they were to me.

But anyway, it didn't work out, so I got fired after six months, I think. It was over in New Castle, [PA] and I would drive over. So, I went to full-time taking classes for a while, but you know...

that wasn't really working out. Because I thought I needed a social life, go to dances on campus and stuff like that. And I didn't perform in my classes well, especially with math and science. I did maintain a high enough grade point average to hang in there, and I did graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in [19]73. I had got hired at Saint E's – this is kind of funny – as the first administrative coordinator in the Emergency Room. At that time, Saint E's Youngstown had their front entrance on Park Avenue. I don't know if any of you remember that. They had people lined up all the way in the hallway waiting to get admitted. My job was to kind of expedite getting the lab results, getting admitted, getting x-rays, whatever was needed, to kind of speed that up. And deal with situations – maybe there was a shooting, somebody came in to the Emergency [Room] because they'd been shot, or there was an accident – then work with the police to get their information and so forth. Also, the registration. The first thing you have to do when you go to any medical institution is show your ID card, your insurance papers. That was administrative functions. I was the first. That was the first time they had anybody like that.

Well, the only problem was there was a nun who ruled everything in the Emergency Room. She did not want me down there because nobody down there had that kind of authority down there other than her. She was it! She was the “godmother” and she wasn't going to have it. And the funniest thing I ever seen in my life is to see one nun chastise another nun- tell her “You gonna accept him whether you like it or not!” Sister Mary Consolata who was a top head Executive Director. She was a nun and Sister Mary Michael was a nun in the Emergency [Room]. And she [Consolata] called us all to a meeting and told Sister Mary Michael that a change was going to take place whether she liked it or not. Well, things got a little bit better, but not a heck of a lot better. I mean, you're working in an environment where people don't want you there. People resist your authority. It was just turmoil and hell. I asked to be transferred. I had majored in Business with a focus on Public Relations and Advertising. I had background in journalism from the Navy. I asked to be transferred up to the Public Relations office, so I stayed there the rest of my two years. And in the meantime, The Vindicator [newspaper] was publishing a lot of my stories. I wrote press releases that got printed in the [daily] newspapers and weekly newspapers. My writing was being accepting. I answered calls from the media. I helped different parts of the University doing communication materials and just a whole variety of things that enhanced my Public Relations. [This was] my drift to a career in public relations. And one day I got a call from the city editor of The Vindicator. They said “Leon, would you like to come and work for The Vindicator?” Okay, I was making \$6,000 at YSU. I would be making \$8,000 at The Vindicator. They had a union. I decided to accept it.

CN: We have an interview scheduled at 3:30 and we only have a few more minutes. And I wanted to hear more about your student time at YSU.

LS: Oh okay, we can do that. So anyways, very quickly. I stayed at The Vindicator for 21 years and became the Religion Editor. I wrote a column and that was a very successful part of my

career. Then I came to YSU as News Editor in the Marketing and Communications department for 10 years. And I became Coordinator of Diversity at YSU, so I have a long history with YSU.

Now, back to what life was like for African American students in the 60s and 70s. There was a lot of turbulence because of the Vietnam war, and college students were dealing with Vietnam and all the things that were happening there- especially the draft. There were a lot of guys being drafted who didn't volunteer. That was one of the reasons I volunteered, because I didn't want to go into the Army. There were a lot of protests and demonstrations. [1:00:05] And then there was the... I don't want to say "Black Power", but activities by Black students on campus. At that time, there was only one African-American professor that I know of, Ron Daniels. I don't know if you know of Ron Daniels? They let him go for some reason [in May 1968]. I don't know exactly why. But there were a lot of protest because of that. And you might know that the college attendance by African-Americans was not very high at that time. The two greatest things from the Civil Rights Movement were the Voters' Rights Act from 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. More African-Americans were going to college after the late 60s and early 70s than ever before. Some, like myself, came because of the Vietnam Era Bonus for veterans. Also, Affirmative Action with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, more African-Americans were working at higher paying jobs and families could afford to send their students to college that had not been able to do so before. That was kind of a boom. There was a lot of activities in the sororities and the one for the guys...

TW: Fraternities.

LS: Yes, Fraternities. They were very active on campus at the time. But there still wasn't a lot. There was a relatively small percentage of African-Americans at the time on campus. Things got better during the 70s. Like I said, the Civil Rights bill had been passed and more African-Americans were working higher paying jobs. But there was still an atmosphere of inequality among African-American students. One of the reasons was because there was so few African-American professors, and I think that is still a problem for YSU today. Like I said, a lot of students came. No one else in their family had ever gone to college before. That was a part of the struggle. And a lot of students were not aware of the financial aid process, and a lot of us came unprepared for the courses we should have taken in high school. Like I said, I didn't take a foreign language and had trouble with math, had trouble with my science courses.

But it was a struggle and determination that drove me, and the fact that someone else was going to pay for it. And that's been the case with me all the way through my Doctorate. I earned my Master's because I worked here. YSU has tuition remission for employees. And that was another motivator, as I told you how motivated I was when I found out the VA [Veteran's Administration] was going to pay for my undergrad [degree]. For my doctorate, I retired from here as Coordinator of Diversity Initiatives in 2005. I went directly into a doctoral program. I never dreamed that I would even go to college, let alone earn a Master's degree or a Doctorate. I was fortunate enough to get a graduate assistantship at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which is about a 2-hour drive from here. When I retired in 2005, I started almost immediately in

the doctoral program because I'd done well on my graduate studies degree in English, and got a Master's degree in English from here (at YSU) while working here. Motivation came to me largely because of opportunities that were before me that I never dreamed I would have as a child growing up in Arkansas. That's a big part of my story and my life. That's why I wanna write the memoir. I remember Little Rock from cotton to college. I've picked cotton. I've chopped cotton. I've done it all.

Now, what it was like as a student? Like I said, a lot of things that happened with the African American students was because of the influx of students coming. In many situations no one in the family had ever attended college. So, there were some problems in terms of preparation. And I think that still exists in YSU. Can I say a few things about the present?

CN: [To TW] Is that okay with you?

TW: [Nods] Yes.

LS: As I said, right now, and like I said, I worked here for 12 ½ years. I came back and worked as a part-time instructor in the English department. After I earned my Doctorate, I taught 4 years as an English instructor at Walsh University. Then I came to YSU, I taught another 3 years as an adjunct professor.

But the problem that I see for YSU right now, and I had a chance to talk to your new president [Dr. Helen Lafferty] briefly at the [Jim] Tressel farewell [reception, January 25, 2023]. But the problem I see for YSU right now as far as minority students are concerned: They hiked the ACT and SAT [test score] requirements and that eliminated a lot of students from applying to YSU and directs them to a junior college- which is a good thing. But I think a lot of students that go to junior college, if they just get the two-year degree that's it. They're not going to come to YSU as YSU hoped they will. I think YSU sitting in the center of an urban area, it's already not predominately African-American, it soon will be. Sitting in an area that's dominated by African-Americans needs to be more aggressive. [They] have to make sure they have students come in that are fully prepared before to start at YSU. What they do at the junior college is fine, but half the students become more prepared to enter YSU for the 4-year program. I did that as the Coordinator of Diversity Initiatives for three years. I went out to recruit students in school districts that had a sizable amount of minorities, not just Youngstown. At that time Youngstown still had four high schools. Well, they only have two now. But I went to those four high schools to do a lunch hour to recruit students to go to a pre-college workshop held on campus. That pre-college workshop talked about financial aid, admissions process, help for students who needed help, the campus dormitory facilities. The whole nine yards of college life and what it'd be like. Enrollment increased for a time there. I think YSU, if it's going to maintain a sizeable number of minority students, which would be Hispanic as well as African American, YSU is going to have to be more aggressive in its recruiting. Like I said pre-college workshops. Many African-American students come from families where no one has ever graduated from college before or never attended college before. Many of them don't know the financial aid process. Many of

them don't know the pre-college course requirements. Pre-college workshops can help motivate these students. Have them learn early. Have their parents know what it's going to take to be successful in college.

That's what I did, and it was a lot of work. I didn't feel like my pay was adequate for the time I spent. I went to Sharon, Pennsylvania. I went to New Castle, [PA] and Farrell [PA]. I went to all these schools during the lunch hour. I had the students fill out information forms so I could send letters back to their parents and invite them to this pre-college workshop. YSU has to be more aggressive, for its own sake and viability. It sits right in an urban area where the predominate population is African-American, Hispanic. I don't see them doing enough. They totally ignored the work that I had done here and no longer do that kind of thing. It's hard work but it's worth it for YSU to maintain its image. Sooner or later, there's going to be confrontations. I worked with the Superintendent of Youngstown schools to have them bring students here for the workshops. I'd have one each year on campus and one each year off campus. I worked with the Superintendent of Youngstown schools at that time to make sure we got adequate representation from the school district. But I went beyond- I went to Campbell, schools in Pennsylvania, Warren, Howland has a sizable number of African American students, Austintown, Liberty. All these schools I been out to. And excuse my language, bust my butt to make sure these students knew what you needed to do in order to be successful in college. I knew from my own experience. I could talk to them on a level, how I was not prepared. But I prepared myself. I worked my tail bone off to be a success driven by my past. This is what YSU needs to be doing now. But will they hear me out? I don't know. And my mom always told me "Leon, don't start anything you can't finish". With my family issues, I'm preparing to go to Columbus. But I tried to do it here.

And the other thing would be, I don't know how many African-American professors the school [university] has now. But I think they had 14 when I was here [in 2005]. All of these things are going to be vital for YSU's future. If they're going to have a good relationship with the African-American and Hispanic community, YSU has to be more aggressive and assertive in realizing the issues that these communities have. You can't sit right in the heart of a community like this and ignore them [the minority issues]. It's in YSU's favor to be more assertive in its outreach/ public relationship effort. That's about it.

CN: We're just going to have to leave it there so we can start our next interview.

LS: I hope I was helpful.

END OF INTERVIEW