

ALEX PRYOR (INTERVIEWEE) INTERVIEW

CONDUCTED 12/15/2021 BY

ARABETH BALASKO (INTERVIEWER)

BEGIN – Transcription completed by Charles Balasko

ARABETH BALASKO (AB): Hello, my name is Arabeth Balasko, and I am an archivist and historian serving at the Greenbrier Historical Society and North House Museum. Today is Wednesday, December 15th, 2021, and I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this oral history interview which will primarily focus on your youth during the time you attended The Bolling School in Lewisburg, West Virginia. Before we begin, if you could please tell me your full name and the years that you attended school.

ALEX FRANKLIN PRYOR (AP): My name is Alex Franklin Pryor. I attended school at Bolling Elementary, from one through six

AB: Thank you, Mr. Pryor.

AP: Uh-uhm.

AB: I'll be asking you a series of questions—I'll be asking you a series of questions from your time at Bolling...

AP: Uh-uhm.

AB: ...and if there are some that you do not...ah...would like to answer or do not relate to you we can skip over them.

AP: Okay.

AB: If there are some of that you feel you would like to share some more about your time at Bolling School that I didn't cover, please feel free to share anything during our chat.

AP: Okay.

AB: So, again, Mr. Pryor, you went to school here, you said, from first grade to sixth grade, correct?

AP: Uh-hum

AB: Great. So, I will begin a series of questions now...

AP: Okay.

AB: ...and once again thank you for taking your time to share your story with us.

AP: Okay.

AB: So, Mr. Pryor, can you tell me about Bolling School? What did it mean to you at the time that you were attending and what does it mean to you today?

AP: I think that some of the best education that I ever got, in my time of participating in education, I got here. Ah, the teachers that I had here, they wanted us to learn.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Ah, they would come to your house...

AB: Oh, wow!

AP: ...okay, yeah, because... (AB heard in background saying "That's dedication") ...we all lived in this neighborhood. They would come to your house. They didn't send notes home, you know (AB laughter in background). If you...if you wasn't doing what you were supposed to be doing, then they would show up at your door. And, in my younger years, I ain't like 'at, but as I got older, and seeing how things are now, I appreciated that, you know, that let me know that they wanted me to learn. They didn't want me, when I got older, to go out in the world and not know. So, I appreciate them for that. So, I say to you, anybody who listens to this, the best education I got was one through six at Bolling High School.

AB: That's great, Mr. Pryor.

AP: Yeah.

AB: Mr. Pryor, what was one of the reasons that maybe they came to your house (chuckling)

AP: Because...because they wanted the parents to know...

AB: Uh-uh.

AP: ...they wanted to talk to...you know...today they have PTA meetings...

AB: Yeah.

AP...Okay, well...then, they wanted to talk...they didn't have PTA meetings, not that I remember. But, if you weren't in their class, they didn't give you a note to take home to say well, hey, Alexis is not doing what he's supposed to do. When school was over, I'd look outside and I'd see Ms. Cabell (sounds like), that was my first grade teacher...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: I'd see her car pull up in front of the house. And once she, you know, first things, when grown folks came to the house, the kids went and played. It's not like it is today. Kids get in

grown folks' conversations. Well, that was something that didn't happen. And when she come to the house, whatever she said to my mother, okay, once she left, then I would get that look...

(03:12 TIME MARK)

AB: Uh-oh.

AP: ... and I would get that talk, and I'd have an ultimatum...either, or...you don't want the "or" (light laughter), you know, so, and I appreciate them for that. But I especially appreciated her for coming to my house talking to my parents.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: There was no second hand information. Wasn't like that. I'm not giving Johnny a note to take home to his parents, and it might get there and it might not.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Wasn't about that...

AB: Yeah.

AP: So...

AB: Well, that is. I mean, that also shows, like you said, the care and the dedication...

AP: Yes.

AB: ...of wanting you to succeed and all of the students to succeed...

AP: Yes...Yes

AB: And that's what a good teacher, I think, would do.

AP: Yes...Yes.

AP: That's great. So, ah, Mr. Pryor, what about your school experience is different do you think, from schools maybe, as perceived today? So, I note, that say for example, how you had mentioned how the teachers would come to your houses and different things like that. What's something that you think or maybe something that you wish was still going on during your time at Bolling that would happen today in today's school?

AP: Ah, uh-huh. From what I know about schools today...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: The teachers, the teachers, not throwin' any spite on them...the teachers are not as strict on the students today as they were when I went to school.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: The...to me, the student has so much more say so in what goes on in schools today than the teachers.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Ah, you know, I'm not sayin' that the way they taught us made us better students, but the number one thing that a lot of teachers don't get, from what I can understand, is respect. Okay...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: They don't. And, how can I teach you something if you don't respect me?

AB: Yeah.

AP: 'Cause number 1, you're not going to listen. You're not going to pay attention. Okay...

And you're going to make sure (pause) Look, I don't care what she says, I don't care what he says...Well, see back then it wasn't like that.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: The first thing you did was you respected your teachers. It was "Mrs. and Mr." It wasn't no "Alex" and it wasn't about that.

(06:05 TIME MARK)

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: So see, that's where...and I don't just fault the teachers...don't just fault the students. Respect is learned at home.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Okay...if you don't learn it at home, when you get out here in the world, you're not goin' to apply it in the world...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...so, ah, that's something I wish that they would change. So many kids graduate from school and they push 'em through...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ... you know, okay, I'm gonna give 'em a diploma just to get them out of here. But they haven't learned anything. And when they go out in the world, they're not prepared.

AB: Yep.

AP: Okay. Well, the one thing that I can say from the first through the sixth grade. From the first grade they started preparing, and as we progressed to another grade, it got a little bit more intense (AB acknowledging in background). Okay, but there was always that respect...there was Mrs. Cabell, Mrs. Leftwich, Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Sullivan...okay, we respected them as our teacher (AB acknowledging in background). Okay, and even though sometimes (slight laughter) we thought we had too much homework (AB laughter in background), and we didn't want to do that homework...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...we knew that by the time school started tomorrow, the homework better be done 'cause we don't want them pulling up in front of the house. So, and...school's not like that today. I'm...I'm...I'm an old school guy. I believe in old school ways. Ah, you see, back when I went to school, we didn't have time out, and a lot of people today say this is wrong, but every teacher that I had had a paddle. Okay...

AB: Uh-huh. You're the second one who's told me that...

AP: Yes.

AB: ...actually, "the paddlings."

AP: Yes...Every teacher that taught at this school had a paddle. And the principal had a paddle.

AB: I heard that...

AP: Mr. Clay had a paddle. Okay, as long as you were conducting yourself as a child and doing the things that your teacher told you to do, and not talking back, which we didn't do...'cause then we'd get a paddling here and get a "whupping" at home. But you see today, in today's

world, they say that that's child abuse. Okay, well (self laughter), my take on that is this...nothing that...none of the teachers I had...when I got a paddlin' I deserved a paddlin'. And it wasn't a beating: you get a lick...two at the most. It didn't kill ya, but you know you did something wrong. And you knew if you didn't want to get that paddlin' again, you don't do that same thing. But today...today's world...whew! It's tough. I feel for the teachers. I feel for the teachers. You got teachers, that go teach kids, that are scared, because...and that's not fair to them, you know. Back then, we didn't worry about that; we wasn't worried about that. You know, ah, so it's a big difference to me in the educational system...

(09:55 TIME MARK)

AB: Yes, yes.

AP: Ah, I think that it needs to be fixed. No, you don't go back to the old ways...the ways things were back in the old days. But, you got to implement some things to kinda get your point across (AB acknowledging comments in background). You got to let the students know and the parents. I'm takin' time away from my busy day to come to educate your child. Okay...?

I don't have to be here; I could be somewhere else. And I believe if that respect is shown to the teachers I think that would be a start in making the system better. I don' know...

AB: Yes, I think that's great, Mr. Pryor, then because it's so important like how you're saying, you know, if people are feeling invested in and having that mutuality of respect and that's important...(fading statement overridden by Mr. Pryor coughing lightly and agreeing with Arabeth's comments).

AP: Yes...yes, yes...uh-huh.

AB: Thank you, thank you for sharing that with us, Mr. Pryor.

AP: Yes, uh-huh (clearing throat)

AB: Mr. Pryor, now you talked a lot about your teachers. Can you tell me about your teachers? Your favorite teacher maybe....

AP: (groans)

AB: ...or funny stories (Mr. Pryor groaning), or anything that you liked about the teachers, or that was somewhat challenging ah, ah for teachers at the school?

AP: You know, all of them...as a guy, as a guy, okay, as a guy...

AB: Uh-huh

AP: Uh, I can't say that I disliked any of them. I liked all of them...

AB: Yeah!

AP: ...but I disliked the discipline that they gave (lightly laughing).

AB: I understand that.

AP: But as far as liking them and respected them, I loved all of them. I respected all of them. And, you know the thing about it, ah..., we didn't have a lot of kids in classes, so we got a lot of one-on-one. If we didn't understand something, then they were right there...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...to try to make you...to try to get you to understand...

AB: Uh-huh..

AP: ...you know, ah...they had that time. And I don't know about the other kids that went here, but me?...I was grateful for that because I got out in the world early. My father died at sixteen. I had to quit school when I was a junior in high school...to take care of my mother and my brothers (AB heard in background commiserating, saying "that's tough"). So, a lot of the things that they taught me...not just school, but about life...I had to apply that at a early age, and it got me by in...at several times. So the teachers...? I didn't like their discipline...no....

AB: Huh (in light laughter).

AP: ...but as far as...I love them...all of them...all of them, and every lick I got I deserved. (Laughing lightly) I was supposed to get, so...

(12:45 TIME MARK)

AB: Do you...ah... so, I know some of the folks that I've talked to have talked about, you know, about remembering like funny things about the teachers, or about one of them was talking about...

AP: Uh-huh.

AB: ...how, ah, when everybody went outside and lined in the morning and did like the pledge and stuff and...(AP acknowledges) could you tell me some of your memories of your time in this space and at the school and what you...'cause I know and it seems to me which I think is such a beautiful sentiment is that everybody I've talked to so far almost can close their eyes and remember everything about this school and I think that's so amazing...

AP: Yeah...

AB: ...that it imprinted (Mr. Pryor says "yeah...") on so many lives. So, would you be able to tell me a little about that experience for you?

AP: When we come to school in the morning, we all milled around out front. At eight-o'clock there were two lines...I was just telling a couple of teachers about that...

AB: Yeah, uh-huh.

AP: ...there were two lines in a row. Everybody lined up on that line. There was one individual who was at the flagpole. We said the Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, and as we were saying the Pledge of Allegiance, he was raising...this individual was raising the flag. Once that flag was raised and tied off, and we had got through saying the Pledge of Allegiance, then school started.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: You didn't have kids skipping class. You didn't have kids sneakin' and smokin'. You didn't have none of that. Everybody went to their perspective respective class. Uh, on certain days, we had assemblies, right here...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and some of us guys would come and put chairs on the gym floor (Arabeth acknowledges in background), and people...and kids would be up on the stage. Christmastime? Oh, this was big time at Bolling!

AB: Oh, wow! Uh-huh...

AP: Yes! Oh...school decorated. There were several plays put on by different grades.

AB: Yeeaah....

AP: Yeah, that was somethin'...(Mr. Pryor sighs, pauses emotionally, and gently laughs as if caught in sad reverie)...Things like that you never forget!

AB: Oh, yeah...

AP: These are things that a lot of schools don't do (Mr. Pryor voices regret here). I want to say that was, even though we all lived in this neighborhood...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...but that was the teachers' and staff way of establishing order...getting all us kids together and doing something nice for the holidays.

AB: Yeah...

AP: Then we had a cafeteria that sat right back up here...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...right back...

AB: Up where the parking lot is? Uh-huh?

AP: ...some of the best food...(Mr. Pryor chuckles to himself here)...that you...

AB: Yeah...Would you tell me about it?

AP: Yes.

AB: I always love talking about food.

AP: (Chuckling lightly) Uh, Mrs. Cooley...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and I think we had two. I think fifty cents.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: But a lot of families didn't have money...okay, I mean back then a lot of families barely got by. Sooo...if you didn't have no lunch money, you still ate, you know.

AB: Yeah.

(16:00 TIME MARK)

AP: But they would come up here and start cookin'. And the hard thing is to sit in class...and you smell all that food comin' down...(Mr. Pryor's voices rises in anticipation and Arabeth agrees in background)...and Christmas... Thanksgiving and Christmas was special...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...'cause it seemed like they'd cook all day...and some of the best homemade food that you ever want to taste, come out of that lunchroom there. And I remember Mrs. Cooley, she was a...a just a nice lady...just a nice lady, you know. She, ah, she kinda reminded you of Santa Claus...was a little short lady...

AB: Uh-huh!

AP: ...ah, always had something good to say, you know...

AB: Yeah...

AP: ...and tried to help everybody, you know. Ah, it's just things like that you remember...

AB: Oh yeah...

AP:...because I was... I come from one of them families that didn't have lunch money help up there, but I ate every day...you know...

AB: That's so important...and then to always take care of the kids, you know. So that's great that they instilled that... (Mr. Pryor assents with "yes" during Arabeth's statement). So, what was your favorite meal, Mr. Pryor, as the one that...

AP: Christmas...

AB: ...stands out...

AP: Christmas... Christmas...

AB: ...do you remember the spread...what kind of food they had...?

AP: Turkey. Ham. Sweet potatoes, homemade dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy...(Arabeth acknowledging each item Mr. Pryor enumerates).

AB: Yeah....

AP: ...homemade rolls, assortment of desserts, yeah....that was... that was the one.

AB: Yeah...

AP: Thanksgiving was close, you know (Arabeth lightly chuckles in agreement). It was okay, but Christmas was immaculate.

AB: Well, I can definitely imagine how difficult that would be to sit in the class and smell all that greatness coming right to your nose.

AP: (Woof) Yes...you know, the kids get fidgety and I can remember Mrs. Cabell, ah...okay, Mrs. Cabell's classroom was outside.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Mrs. ah... Williams'... ah... classroom was outside.

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: And Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Leftwich alternated...

AB: Uh-huh. And what grades did they teach, Mr. Pryor?

AP: Okay...Mrs. Williams taught third...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Mrs. Leftwich taught fourth grade.

TIME MARK 18:15

AB: Uh-huh. So, they kinda did swing?

AP: Yeah, uh-huh. But you know, you're sittin' in the classroom, you're smellin' all that food, your stomach's growlin'...and they would make a joke..."Okay, you keep on doin' that, ain't nobody gonna get no lunch."

AB: Yeah... (with chuckling).

AP: You know...so then, you come to attention, and you know, it was just somethin' to keep the kids on their toes.

AB: Yeah...

AP: Ah, but it was great. I wouldn't trade it for nothin' in the world.

AB: Well, yeah, that's beautiful.

AP: Yeah...

AB: So, Mr. Pryor, ah, when you would do different activities...I know how you said the school, ah, the classrooms were out kinda where the parking lot area is now....

AP: Yeah...yeah...uh-huh.

AB: did you...I know you said that you played some different games in the gym...

AP: Yeah...yeah.

AB: ...so what kind of activities were you into when you were here from one to sixth grade?

AP: I was a basketball player. (AB says "uh-huh".) That's what I loved. I played a little football. We did things like basketball, ah...we'd go around here to what is now Dorrie Miller Park...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...but it was nothing but a cow field at the time (chuckles lightly)...there was nothing there...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...and we'd go around there and we'd play football. Then, right out in the front of the school, ah, where the parking lot is, we had a big ole ring 'ere and we shot marbles.

AB: Oh, fun, yeah.

AP: And we were very, very competitive. Well, we were all competitive, but you know, that was a big thing. We played marbles.

AB: So, were you a marble champ?

AP: Yes...yes...

AB: Okay!

AP: ... I had my day...yeah. (Arabeth chuckles lightly). Ah...(AP paused here as collecting thoughts). It's just like I said...some of my...even, I went to a couple of colleges...(AB says "Uh-huh")...ah, but some of my best days were spent here (sounds like finger tapped on table top).

(20:06 TIME MARK)

AB: And, uh, Mr. Pryor, what years were you here? I know you said...uh..ages (sic) one through sixth grade, but do you remember the dates?

AP: No. I'm sad, no.

AB: That's okay. (Arabeth says "yeah"..) (Mr. Pryor says "no...no") Would it have been in the fifties or the sixty..or the early sixties?

AP: I was born in fifty-one.

AB: Okay.

AP: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, uh-huh. So, it would have been probably in the early sixties that you would have been here.

AP: Yeah, uh-huh.

AB: So, Mr. Pryor, during that time, uh, for one through sixth grade, was Bolling still segregated at that time, then?

AP: Yes...yes...yes (pause) Okay, let's open this can of worms.

AB: Yeah...

AP: ...about seg..about segregation.

AB: ...please, I want to hear about it.

AP: During that time, black folks as kids, if we went across 219 (note: this is a state road running north -> south through Lewisburg, WV), and we were caught over there after dark, the police would pick us up and take us downtown to the jail and come and get our parents. Okay...(pause), ah, we didn't have a basketball court (pause), they had one over there...and we used to go over a lot and play basketball. And there was a gentleman who lived up in that area, who is now deceased...I won't call his name...we had access to cut the lights on, but we had to leave the park by ten o'clock. At nine-thirty he would call the police on us, and, but I mean...all we were doing was playing basketball...

AB: Yeah...of course.

AP: ...that's all. He would call the police on us. The police would come, put a few of us in the car, 'cause they had a few of us picked out...we were bad people. I was one of 'em...

AB: That's terrible.

AP: ...we were troublemakers, you know. Ah...and they would take us downtown, come and get our parents, ah...and I don't know about the other parents, but the reception 'ey (light chuckle) got from my parents weren't good...okay. And I can understand why, because if the tables was turned...now, if my kid's out there doin' something, let the chips fall where they may. But if my kid is just on a basketball court...

AB: ...playin'...

AP: ...playin' basketball...whereas as when tax time come up (AB agreeing with "yeah"), I gotta pay taxes on it.

AB: Uh-huh...yeah...

AP: Yeah...but he's not allowed to be here. So, this is one of the many things that we ran into here as kids. The (chuckles lightly)... what we used to call the Mason-Dixon Line...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: When you're comin' up Court Street, and you turn off Court Street to come to Feamster Road...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...when you pass that stop sign...okay...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...this is Gospel Hill...that's the beginning of Gospel Hill...

(23:04 TIME MARK)

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...okay, ah, all black folks live up here.

AB: Yeah.

AP: We stay on our side...this is what I was told many times (chuckles lightly): "Hey buddy, this is how it's gonna play out: you stay on your side 'o town; I'll stay on mine". Ah, if we went downtown...as kids...and say at dusk dark the police would start riding, and they see us, say, maybe commin' home: "Hey, y'all better get on home!"...you know (Mr. Pryor chuckles lightly). It was tough back in them days, but we persevered, ah...but it's things like that you don't forget...

AB: Oh, yeah.

AP: ...when you...when you walk into a store...soon as you walk in the door...all eyes are on you, you know, and don't take this wrong...

AB: No...no...uh, please...it's ah...

AP: ...while they were watching us, there were white kids robbin' 'em blind.

AB: Oh, I'm sure...

AP: Yeah...yeah...

AB: oh yeah...a hundred percent.

AP: ...I went to school with a few of 'em, you know.

AB: Yeah...and it's disgusting.

AP: Ah, there was a restaurant downtown. We couldn't go in the front door. We had to go in the back...go around to the back and order our food. But everybody that worked in that kitchen was black. But we weren't good enough to go sit down at a table and order. Couple of people tried that...the police escorted them out.

AB: Did anybody ever stand-up for folks of color in town that you can recall, Mr. Pryor?

AP: There were...there were some people that said some things. But it was one of them kind of things where it's more of them than it is us. So, you know, your comments, ah, your grievances came on deaf ears. Okay...ah, things are a lot different now. People have a lot different views on how we live and how we should live...and that's good. Ah, I can remember that at the time when there were white folks that said that they would never to buy property up here. They said they didn't want to live with a lotta b...live around blacks. They didn't say blacks, but...

AB: Yeah...(trails off unintelligible)

AP: ...okay, but that's what they said. But now you see they know that it's prime property here...so, they're movin' here. Hey, cool! Good!..you know, but back then that was a no-no.

(26:06 TIME MARK)

Back then, if...there were times when like I have white friends...if I got caught with them, there would be racial slurs, there would be things said. And I've had a couple guys that I played Little League Baseball with...to say...'cause we used to go to Clingmans (former restaurant in downtown Lewisburg)...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ... and we would drink sodas and stuff...

AB: Yeah...

AP: ...well, man, I can't go to Clingman's with you, you know, because of this...because of that, see, those things I don't...I have forgiven, but I'll never forget.

AB: How could you? I mean you could never...I mean never, you know, it's...

AP: Yeah...yeah...yeah.

AB: I'm sorry that that happened...but I appreciate you...

AP: ...but, I appreciate you sayin' you're sorry.

AB: Yeah...but I appreciate you sharing with me ...because I know it's not easy...

AP: No...

AB: ...to bring things up, and it's...but it's so important to have those dialogs 'cause...

AP: Yeah.

AB: ...what happened should never have happened...

AP: No...

AB: ...and it should never happen again...

AP: ...yeah...

AB: ...and I appreciate you sharing your thoughts with me.

AP: Ah, when Greenbrier East (local high school) opened, I was the tenth or eleventh student to walk through those doors.

AB: Oh, wow!

AP: And there was a guy from Frankford (small community north of Lewisburg on state route 219) who made a comment, and the comment was: "It must be getting' ready to rain...a dark cloud is coming through." (Mr. Pryor chuckles). It's funny now once I think about it. But at that t..

AB: The ignorance of it...

AP: ...yeah, at that time, knowing what this individual meant...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...the first day of Greenbrier East, we thought all heck was... (unintelligible)...

AB: What happened then was absolutely terrifying that as a child you would even have gone into that situation.

AP: Yeah...we thought...there were no classes. There was no homeroom. There was fights. And they eventually rounded all the black kids up...okay...and put us in the gym. And when they put us in the gym, I remember the Lewisburg Police Department, the Ronceverte (nearby community south of Lewisburg on state route 219) Police Department, and I'm thinkin' a couple of sheriffs was in there. Like we were these bad kids and we were just gonna tear everything up. So...

AB: Oh, what a horrible...

AP: ...the...the first year...my first year at Greenbrier East there was not very much enjoyment. There was a lot of *watch your back*. Ah, it was known that if you went to...if you had classes, you didn't go up in C-building, 'cause if you go up in C-building, you get jumped. There was only one black kid that I went to school with that had electronics class in C-building...yeah. So, ah, it's done...ah, yeah, there should have been more done about it, yeah, but it wasn't. So, it's a part of life. You know, I look at life as being a circle...

AB: I agree with that.

AP: ...that's part of my circle of life. I've learned a lot from that. But, far as this school here...there'll never be another school in my life...

(29:29 TIME MARK)

AB: Yeah...

AP: ...like Bolling School. Ah...and, you ask any grown-up...'cause everybody that went here now is old, but you ask any grown-up that's went here...they'll tell you the same.

AB: Yeah, that's true...you are exactly right and again I just find that so...it's very moving because again when I try to think of my school experiences, you know...

AP: Uh-huh.

AB: ...I never feel, I guess, that. And just talking (Mr. Pryor says “Right...Right”) about all the different folks who have gone to the school, you know, remember so much, and I just think that that’s amazing, and it just again show how meaningful it really was...

AP: Yeah.

AB: ...for the students here, which is beautiful.

AP: The day that this school opened back up, I walked in the cla...in this school...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and I just felt cold chills...I felt giddy...I was lookin’ around, and I was sayin’ (here Mr. Pryor begins speaking in a whisper): “well, if I’m gonna become a school kid, I gotta straighten up” (here the whisper stops and natural voice resumes)...you know...you know (light laughter from both participants), but it just made me feel like that because I have so many good memories...at bad times...about this school...you know (whispering and then light chuckle) I guess I can say it now.

AB: Yeah.

AP: Ah, in our house we had a coal stove...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: My dad was disabled...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and we burnt coal. Lot of times we’d run out of coal. The janitor here used to leave the door to the boiler room open...and at thirteen years old, I could put two fifty-pound sacks on my back of coal and carry ‘em from here to where I lived. I used to go right through the yard...

AB: Oh, uh-huh.

AP: ...through the Johnston’s yard. That was my shortcut...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and my dad would be holding the bags and a lot of times that's how we heated our house. That's the love (Arabeth says "Yeah") that the people had for the people here. And I...I don't think nobody...he never said nothin' to nobody. He would just always say...I'd be getting out of class, and he'd ask me and say: "You all..you all got coal?" "Yes sir, Mr. Jeff, we got coal". He said "Okay. Well, you let me know when you need some. The door's open". Now, he could've lost his job. But he didn't care about that. All he cared about was us stayin' warm...

AB: Yep. I guess...(unintelligible)

AP: So...(Mr. Pryor lightly chuckles and his voice drops and he sounds emotionally wrought) um-um-um..

AB: That's important again 'cause again it's the sense of community...

AP: Yeah...

AB: ...that you had mentioned that truly this was a true community...

AP: Yes.

AB: ...and that again is something that is so important to share and preserve...

AP: Yes.

AB: ...and tell the story of because it's just, you know, I mean to think of again the influence it had on all of the folks here... (Mr. Pryor says "Yeah")...Could you tell me a little bit about you community here 'cause I know you said, Mr. Pryor, that you lived here...

AP: Sure can.

AB: ...when you were young and you lived in this area to now. Could you tell me a little about it?

AP: Yeah, I sure can. You know they say it takes a neighbor...it takes a neighborhood to raise a child.

AB: I believe that.

(32:52 TIME MARK)

AP: Okay! This neighborhood's raised every child that's ever grew-up, was born and raised in this neighborhood. What I mean when I say that is this: I lived down here, but if I was up on Maple Street and I did somethin' wrong..."Come 'ere"! I might get licked, and you tell your Momma, when you get home ,what you did. Well, we didn't have a phone, but when I got home, mama said, "What you doin' up on Maple Street"? So I'm thinkin' to myself, "Now, we don't have a phone..." and the lady that used to always get us, you know, she was a heavysset lady...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...she didn't get around very good. So, I'm thinkin', "Now (Mr. Pryor laughs lightly) I just left from up 'ere..." But, it was like 'at. It didn't matter where you were on this hill, if you did somethin' wrong and a grown-up saw you doin' it, you'd get chastised for it. So, that made...and it wasn't about cussin' 'em, (AB says "Uh-huh, yeah") it wasn't about fightin' 'em back...I mean you might said a few words under you breath...(AB laughs lightly) you know...which is normal, you know, but you didn't say it to them. And, you know, "Hey, you tell your momma why". It was always, "You tell your mamma why this happened, you know. And when I get home mama said, "Well, what you doin' out the road? Well, what you doin'? What's wrong with you?"...huh, you know. "Well, mama, how..." and you didn't lie...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...no, you didn't lie. You tell the truth because, see, then if you lie...and they know if you're lyin'. So, this neighborhood raised a lot of us, it did. I love this neighborhood. Ah, when I retired, I was in Bristol, Tennessee. I'd been there thirteen years...

AB: Ahh, uh-huh.

AP: ...and my brother got sick, and I was able to come home and take care of my brother the last five years of his life. And I had had three heart attacks...

AB: Oh, my goodness.

AP: ...so...so, I was given the ultimatum: Go back to work and die (light laugh from Mr. Pryor), or, you know, you have the VA pension, you have Social Security comin' soon...Go home and go fishin'...

AB: Yeah, go relax.

AP: ...so, that was my way to give back here. And once I got here, this is what I said to myself, I said: My life started here, my life will end here...you know. This is home. And I've had people...you know, Bristol, I love Bristol. Bristol's just like this...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...but it wasn't home, see. Anywhere I've ever went, and I've been on the other side of the world...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...I've never been ashamed to say where I'm from. Lotta of people, ah, "I'm from New York, I'm from Ohio". But, they're from right here. Why be ashamed of where you're from?

AB: Uh-huh.

(36:18 TIME MARK)

AP: Uh, and I've never been that person. Ah, I just love it here...it's quiet...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Ah...ain't no whole lot of people...you know. You know, everybody know (sic) everybody (AB agrees in background), you know. Ah, it's like my church, John Wesley Methodist Church just had a dinner, and we invited everybody, you know, and that's the way it should be...people helping one another...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...you know. And I think some people got away from that, and I think that if it went back to that, I think the world would be a better place.

AB: I agree with that, Mr. Pryor.

AP: Yeah, so...

TIME MARK 37:01

AP: So....I didn't (AP chuckles lightly to self) I didn't mean to take up all your time...

AB: No, not at all this is beaut...I love talking about...like I said (Mr. Pryor saying "Yeah...yeah")... I love hearing all about, you know, your different experiences, and again the community truly being a community. And like I said (Mr. Pryor saying "Yeah...yeah) I think that's so important.

AP: Yeah, I don't think you'd find a better one. (AB commenting in background overridden by Mr. Pryor). It might be being a little prejudiced on my end

AB: Ah, Nope, not at all...that's nice...not at all (Mr. Pryor saying "Yeah...yeah").

AB: So, Mr. Pryor, do you have anything that you'd like to share, or think that it's important for people to understand and reflect upon regarding the African American history or experience from your perspective...ah, for folks to think about?

AP: I think that, first of all, there's a lot of history...(AB says "Oh, yeah")...here. (AB says "Uh-huh".) I think that there's a lot of history in the surrounding area. And I think that, ah, I know that...for example, I knew that some of my descendants were slaves...didn't know who, but I don't know...God sent this person in my life and gave me this piece of paper, and said, "Why don't you go around to the history archives?...and it's amazing what I have found out. So, (AP coughs) I have two daughters...forty-four and forty-five...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: My forty-five year old daughter I have enlisted her into finding out as much as she can about my family history. History is something that I don't think they teach in school anymore...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: I know they don't teach West Virginia history (AB says "Yeah"). There is so much, for example, there is so much history in the state of West Virginia, and these kids today have no idea 'cause that's not in the educational curriculum...okay. There is so much history in Greenbrier County that a lot of these kids don't know. Their parents know...okay, but that doesn't do the kid any good. (AB says "Yeah") And, right here on Gospel Hill...there is so much history up on this hill, and this...this place where we live and where we were born and raised...there is so much history that a lot...ah, I don't know about it. I can remember...I can remember a lot of

things that happened when I was a kid here, but I can't...It's hard for me to remember what happened yesterday.

(40:09 TIME MARK)

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Ah, I...I walk a lot...well, not a lot, but I walk pretty much... (AB says "Uh-huh")...and I just walk and I look and I remember what house used to be here and who used to live here, and what house to be here and who used to live there. Ah, and sometimes I shed a little tear because some of the people that I grew up with...they're not here anymore...okay, but I think about the good times that we've had...that we had. You see, when we was kids these streets were full of kids out playin' and...and doin' little things. Well, see nowadays with modern technology they got cellphones, they got laptops and all that. I'm not sayin' it's a bad thing, but to a degree it is...okay...to a degree it is. Ah...ah, a lot of these kids...if you would tell them, "Look, I'm gonna give you a tent, a backpack...I'm gonna gi' you some canned food, a fryin' pan and a piece of meat and you gotta stay out in the woods for a week and survive...", they couldn't do that...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...they couldn't. They'd be lost...okay. In my era up on this hill...that's what we did. (AB says "Uh-huh"). We didn't have no money. We would...we had a place called Georgia Springs...

AB: Oh, uh-huh.

AP: Yeah. Ah, we used to go out there, and now it's...they've built houses in and around...

AB: Aw...uh-huh.

AP: I tell a lot of kids I was drinking spring water before they put it in the bottles.

AB: That's right.

AP: Yeah, yeah...you know. We would hike out there...ah...it jus'...ah, the rock quarry up...up here...

AB: Oh, yeah, uh-huh.

AP: ...oh, we used to have different little hideouts and (AB chuckles lightly) and stuff, you know and that was cool. We played football in the road, you know. A lot of the houses had basketball courts. We had a...down at the end of Maple Street...(AB says "Uh-huh")...in the Lowlin's (sounds like) yard...we had a basketball court...we called it the Dust Bowl...

AB: Oh, fun...the Dust Bowl...

AP: ...because...yeah, the Dust Bowl, yeah. But it was things like that that we did that these kids...they have no interest in today. Ah...got this beautiful park up here... (AP chuckles to himself)...you look at the participation of the middle aged kids at the parks...you see more grown-ups up there than you can see middle...you don't see a lot of kids playin' basketball...you know...because they got these seven and eight and nine hundred dollar cellphones that, huh, you know, so they stay online all day... (AB says "Yeah")...you know. I'm not against that, but you have to learn survival (AB says "Yeah"). Yeah, you have to learn how to survive. But, see now, a lot of these kids' parents...they'll buy 'em a eight-hundred cellphone jus' so, "Well, I know where he's at..." Yeah, you know where he's at, but you don't know what he doin'...

(43:29 TIME MARK)

AB: Yeah.

AP: Yeah. And we've seen evidence of what can happen there...you know. (AB says "Yeah"). So, ah, I wanna say that...(Mr. Pryor chuckles lightly)...it might be a little prejudiced, but it is what it is. I grew up in the best era. The era that I grew up in was...it's much better than this one we live in today. Ah, I have praise for all the teachers I had, all the mentors that I had...all the mentors that...they see me doing wrong, "Hey boy, you know you ain't suppose to do that!" As soon as I get out of their sight, I was gonna do it anyway. But at least they thought enough of me and several of my friends to say, "Hey, you're not supposed to do that". See, you don't have that today. You don't have, ah...ah, grown folks tellin' kids when they're doin' wrong 'cause the first thing the kid's gonna do...he's gonna cuss you out, he's gonna tell you to mind your business, and blah, blah, blah...well, you know. And then it can escalate into somethin' really bad. So a lot of grown folks keep their mouths shut, you know. Ah, back then that wasn't the case. Ah, it's a different generation (AB commenting low in background—intelligible) And to think...see, here's where I'm at with that... (AB says "Uh-huh")...I'm seventy years old...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: Okay...and to think that these kids are the ones who...if I go to a nursing home...which I threaten my kids, telling them, “You all put me in a nursing home, when I die, I’m gonna haunt you”. (AB says “Uh-huh”.) You know (AP laughs lightly), well, I don’t mind... (AB quipping in background—unintelligible)...so, if you wanna be asleep and me wake you up... (AB laughs lightly in background and AP laughing lighty along)...then it’s...you know. Ah, but, you...you know this is the generation that we live in today. They don’t care about their parents, their grandparents...a lot of them don’t. Can’t speak for all of them. And I just speak on what I see. Ah, and...and it’s sad. You know, they...they throw their parents in a nursing home or their grandparents in a nursing home and forget about ‘em. It’s all about what they can give them. They talk to ‘em like they’re nothin’ or nobody...you know...and that (AP chuckles lightly). I’m one of those type of guys when, if I say somethin’, I get a little riled up...

AB: Well...

AP: So, sometimes the best response is no response, and I do a lot of that, so...but this right here, this is goal, you settin’ goal (AB says “Uh-huh” lowly in background). You...you’re interviewin’ me is a goal.

AB: I know. Like I said, I was so excited to get to talk to you (AP says “Yeah”) because I just, you know, just your enthusiasm (AP says “Yeah”) and your stories and your history and your feelings and I was just looking forward to our chat today.

AP: When John Kennedy got killed...when President Kennedy got killed, I was in a classroom out there...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...okay, and we had one of them little ol’ radios...ah, might have been ten dollar radio...and we had heard som...there had been rumor of an assassination...I think, ah, Mr. Clay came and said...’cause Mrs. Sullivan was my teacher...I was in fifth grade...

(47:03 TIME MARK)

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...and so, he came, and he said, "Turn the radio on". So, we were...I remember I was standin' up at the window...I was lookin' out the window and it came, ah, over the news that President Kennedy had got assassinated. I'll never forget that...you know. I nev...I can...I can take you in that room and show you where I was standin'...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ... how I was standin'. I can show you where the radio was...the whole bit (AB says "Wow"). I'll never forget that. I remember when they had a tornado ...here...

AB: Oh, wow...

AP: ...in Lewisburg...

AB: ...I didn't know that.

AP: ...yeah...and it come from...ah, where...it come from the military school. It was ah...it was GMS then...

AB: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

AP: ...yeah...Greenbrier Military School. Well, I was standing in that same spot...(AB says "Huh")...lookin' out at that same window, and I saw the roof to the gym just...(AP laughs lightly)...you know...

AB: Oh gosh...yeah.

AP: ...now, to my under...I don't think nobody got hurt or killed... (AB says "Yeah")...but I saw that roof go up in the air.

AB: (mirthfully...) That's something you never forget, too, I'm sure.

AP: Yeah. And I saw it come down through there and it got right to where Nancy **Hout** (sp? **sounds like**) lives... okay...and just went away...

AB: Huh.

AP: ...but I saw that black funnel...I saw it tearin' up stuff (AP's voice mirthful in retelling)...you know. Ah, and again, I can take you and show you where I was at...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...you know...what window I was looking out of... (AB says "Yeah")...yeah, so, it's things like that that I won't forget...I'll never forget...you know. But...this is a good neighborhood. (AB says "Yeah"). This is a very good neighborhood. And it's a blessing for me to be settin' back in this school...ah, it was a blessing for me to be here at the grand opening. (AB says "Yeah"). I wouldn't have missed it...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...you know...and, uh, I saw a couple of other people that went to school here...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...yeah. But for me, ah...(Mr. Pryor laughs lightly to self) ...this was just somehin'. My head was floodin' with memories and...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...ah, you know...classes I had...where this was and where that was, and I got to talk to some really nice people...you know...and they were, "Oh, you went to school...?"...Sure did...(AP gives small laugh) sure did!...(AB says "Yeah.")...was one of the little guys that used to walk up the road everyday (AB says "Huh")...yeah, so...

AB: So, Mr. Pryor, what is your favorite memory from Bolling? 'Cause I know you talked about...and it could be about anything...I know you talked about the marbles, your basketball, different, you know, important printed memories, but what is some things that you just...it could be funny...it could be anything...some (AB's voice trails and is unintelligible as Mr. Pryor begins to answer her question)

AP: My favorite memory (AB says "Yeah.") of Bolling is all of us guys gettin' in that gym and dividing up into teams and playing basketball. That's...that's something I'll never forget...because of all the guys that I grew up with, we were congregated right out there on that floor...

(50:26 TIME LINE)

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...and, of course (AP laughs lightly) you always got competition (AB says “Huh”)...there’s gonna be words said (AB laughs lightly), but all-in-all, when it was all over, we hugged each other, “Hey, man, I’ll see you in school tomorrow”. That’s my best memory. Ah, wasn’t no fightin’...ah, yeah, there were people that were mad they lost...that’s normal...but that madness would go away and the next day it was like it never happened. Okay, “Let’s do this again!” (AB says “Uh-huh”.) Yeah, so, that was...and I want to say those and the Christmas dinner...

AB: Yeah.

AP: Yeah. Those were my best memories here. I have good memories of my teachers...ah, I know they loved me, I know they cared about me, and I know they wanted me to learn regardless of how hard it was...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...for me to learn. Okay...they wanted me to learn and they pushed me and they gave me confidence. They let me know that there’s nothing in this book that you can’t learn.

AB: Yep.

AP: So, I’ll always love them and respect them for that...you know...’cause I have been in classes where you would just class (AP laughs lightly)...and...ah, you know, you didn’t really learn nothin’, and when the class was over, “Okay, see you tomorrow!”...you know. And that gives you that impression, “Hey, you’re just another student. Me, I don’t care”. So, see, I’ve been in them situations... (AB says “Yeah”.)...so, and it makes you appreciate this now... (AB says “Yeah”.)...you know, sometimes I’d find myself, “Wow! I wish Mrs. Cabell was here! Wow, I wish I could talk to them so...you know, Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Jackson, you know...ah, I jus’...I missed ya...I missed them, I missed those things, I missed those conversations, I missed those confidence boosters (AB says “Yeah”.) Ah...when I was commin’ up I didn’t have a lot of confidence...okay...I didn’t have a lot of confidence about myself because of---mainly because of my livin’ situation, but the flipside of that is I know my mom and dad did the best they could, so uh...but ah, I didn’t...in the end in seein’ the other kids, you know, who were a lot more fortunate than me...okay, and when I say that, there were a lot of times when I ate brown

beans and corn bread and they had brown beans and corn bread and a piece of chicken. Okay, little things like that...trivial...

AB: Yeah, but still not to chil...not to kids.

AP: Yeah, as a kid, you'd think about that. (AB says "Yeah".) So, I praise my teachers for catchin' this... (AB says "Yeah".)... "Come here! You wait after class. Now sit down and tell me what's wrong"...Not in a mean way or anything like 'at, but just like, "Tell me what's goin' on with you. I know something's wrong". So ,you know, it's things like that you respect, and these are things like this that these kids of today are missing. Oh, they... they are...they're missing, so...(AP chuckles lightly to himself)

(54:14 TIME LINE)

AB: Mr. Pryor, to end, what is, ah, did you have any advice or any maybe advice that was passed on to you from any of your teachers or hopes from your teachers that you would like to share with today's generation?

AP: Yeah. Respect your parents (AP pauses here) because, regardless of how you spin it, they sacrifice a lot to put you where you are. Respect your teachers, because your teachers don't have to come to class...they don't have to teach you...they can go somewhere else, but they think enough of you—they have enough respect for your parents to want to educate these parents' kids. So, respect them. No, you ain't always gotta give 'em a pat on the back, but every now and then, you know, go to the store and buy a apple, and 'for anybody come to class, put it on their desk. See, we used to do things like that...

AB: Yeah.

AP: ...ah, yeah, just set it on the desk. You ain't got to say, "Well, this come from me". Ain't nobody got to know who put it there. But show some kind of appreciation for your teachers, you know, 'cause they don't have to do this. And, go out in the world and...and... and be respectful—respect your elders, respect your parents, your grandparents...because...I'm a retired chef...(AB says "Yeah, uh-huh")....okay...and I have had the opportunity to cook at a lot of places, and my respect for my counterparts have earned me more than my just puttin' down on an application, "Okay, I went to culinary school at the Greenbrier...I went to culinary school

here”. But it’s just how I handled myself in showing respect that has gotten me jobs, you know. Yeah, ah, your experiences in the field that you go in...yeah, that helps, but if you ain’t got no respect...and people pick up on that...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: People who have big businesses and corporations...they pick up on that. So, for me, in being successful—and I was pretty successful—it took respect, it took hustle, it took responsibility, it took bein’ prompt...it took all those things for me to have the success that I have. So, I suggest to young people...to the young people—to the ones that had to have the attitude...whose attitude? ...Ain’t gettin’ you nothin’...that ain’t cool. And..and to the ones who are...they want to make something outta themselves would do that, but do the things that it takes to make something out of your life (AP’s voice drops to a whisper), you know. Ah, be smart, you know. If...if a person can be smart and think, “You know, all I gotta do is think”, you know, you can be successful. Yeah, so, that’s my advice to the younger generation. Ah, you see so much disrespect. You see...you don’t see kids opening the doors for their mom or their dad. They’ll go in a door...and I’ve seen them many times...they’ll go in a door and the door shut and they go on. You go into a restaurant to eat out, I mean how many kids do you see pull the door back...?

(58:04 TIME MARK)

AB: Not many, sadly.

AP: Ain’t happenin’, ain’t happenin’. One thing we learned when we started dating...if we took a girl to a restaurant...okay...and we go in the restaurant, you know, that’s points for us when we pull the chair out...

AB: Uh-huh.

AP: ...you know. Plus, it makes you look good (AB saying “Uh-huh”) Because they’ll get to talking to their friends, and then their parents, “Well you know, Alex took Such and Such out on a date and he pull...this person pulled the chair out for her. That’s respect, you know; respect will get you a lot farther than money (AB saying “Uh-huh”.) So, that’s...that’s what I say to the young folks. Respect yourself, and respect everybody around you, ‘cause if you don’t respect

yourselves, you're not going to respect nobody else—that's the bottom line. So, that's...that's what I say to the youngsters.

AB: Well, thank you Mr. Pryor...

AP: Sure.

AB: ...thank you again so much for speaking with me today and in sharing your voice...

AP: Yeah.

AB: ...your stories (AP says "Yeah"), and all of your experiences (AP says "Yeah") at...at Bolling. Best in life (sounds like)

AP: I hope...I hope it helps.

AB: Oh, it certainly does...

AP: I hope it helps.

AB: ...it's like I said, I really appreciate you talking to me, and learning more about you and about this really great community.

END— Transcription competed by Charles Balasko

*****TRANSCRIBER NOTES:

If a word or phrase is unintelligible, I have shown it to be so within parentheses in red following the word or phrase.

I have made some parenthetical comments about the speaker's manner of expression following words or phrases to enhance the reading experience. These are in black type.

I have underlined in black type words or phrases that the speaker stressed.

I have spelled some words or phrases in colloquial format to express how I heard the speaker pronounce those words or phrases.

I have inserted in parenthesis brief statements of speakers inside another speaker's dialog to avoid constant separate entries for words or phrases that are simply acknowledgements of what the other speaker has said.