

Johnny Ford: —grocery store downtown. I forget his name. But anyway, this guy, you could see him carrying the bags out, [indistinct 00:00:10] put in the cars of the professors who came downtown and bagged meat. He specialized in meat. But they kind of looked up to— Booker T. Washington was a highly respected man, that bourgeoisie. And there were many Whites who catered to the doctors and the professors on campus and looked up to them, quite frankly. There were certain things on campus that would be held, like the annual concert. You'd have more Whites there than Blacks, who would come and come from miles around to hear the singing.

Paul Ortiz: Would your family attend those events?

Johnny Ford: No, my daddy and my family, they're very humble people, uneducated people who very seldom went to anything like that. Because everybody used to go to commencement, and they called it 'mencement. Commencement was a holiday in the town. Well, matter of fact, they closed school, elementary school and everybody would go to campus. Because Dr. Patterson and then Foster welcomed the community. Everybody bring their syrup buckets with food and blankets and quilts. And graduation was just a big festive occasion.

Johnny Ford: But the highly cultured things, my family, getting my daddy to come to my graduation and mother was a great event, and class night things. But they supported me though in both scouting and baseball and everything. They did, they just were not highly cultured people. Good people. Solid, humble people.

Paul Ortiz: Were you able, were your parents [indistinct 00:02:16] then able to maintain contact with the family in Bullock County?

Johnny Ford: Yeah. Yes, they did. Of course. I was born, eight of us in family. My mother's name was Bertha Snipes. My father's name was Willie Patterson. And they were not married at the time that I was born. But my mother's name was Bertha Snipes Patterson, and my father's name was Willie Patterson.

Johnny Ford: And then my uncle, who adopted me, his name was Charlie Ford. And my aunt's name was Tennessee Ford. But they adopted me and said, "This is my boy." And so, he changed my name to Ford, so that's how I became Ford. But we always maintained our family very close, so my roots are Bullock County, Macon County. We visit back and forth and I'd go down and still spend the summers and back and forth, and my sisters and brothers come back and forth. Come on. Oh, I'm sorry.

Paul Ortiz: So you were able to maintain quite a good contact with family in Bullock?

Johnny Ford: Oh yeah. Right. Yeah, I loved, that's what my roots, going back. But my daddy kept me, boy. First, when he adopted me, he said he just going keep me for, I think he said to my mama, he said, "I like

that little nappy headed, snotty nose boy. The one that's so bad." Said, "I want that boy." Called my mother, said, "Get him ready, I'm coming to get him."

Johnny Ford: I never will forget that night. I was about three or four. I could hear the Greyhound bus or the Trailway bus stop up at Mount Andrews. Hear the brakes on the bus. Hear the door open, slam, then hear the bus take off, come on by and pass. And then I could hear walking on the highway, clip clap clip. There was the heels of my aunt and my uncle coming to get me. I was excited. All had my little rags packed. And they came and got me.

Johnny Ford: And they brought me. I owe so much to them because I guess I was the first in my family who had a chance to go to college. And that would not have happened had they had not adopted me and brought me to Tuskegee and gave me the exposure and the experience to go on and go to school and college. But would've not probably been able to make it.

Johnny Ford: But they loved me very dearly. And that's one of the reasons why I was wanting to come back, so I could spend that time with them while they were alive. And they got a chance to see me become mayor of a city, and my mama was so happy to see her boy become mayor of the town. And they were very supportive when I ran for mayor. My dad used to run into a grocery store. I told him, I said, "Dad, I'm going to quit my job with the Justice Department." And I said, "I need you to give me a hundred dollars a week and let me," I was recently married at that time, "and we need to be able to eat out of the store." He said, "You got it." So with that, I launched my campaign.

Paul Ortiz: What was the name of the store your father was running?

Johnny Ford: Ford's Superette. Was right down next to Bird's Funeral Home. Ford's Superette. I helped get my dad in the business, helped him get the business loan from SBA and set him up in business, and he was real proud of that.

Paul Ortiz: Did you have childhood heroes?

Johnny Ford: Yeah. As I said, I'd read about Adam Clayton Powell and think he's about the most visible politician at that time, and I'll say that one. But I guess my Reverend S.T. Martin. Of course, my dad and I were great pals to Charlie Ford. My uncle, because he did so much for me. And I got sick one time, got hurt, had internal bleeding, and I had to have transfusions. He gave me blood and got his friends to give me blood. So my dad was really great. I admired him very much and loved him very much.

Johnny Ford: But in addition to them, my minister, Reverend S.T. Martin, who was pastor of the church. And he was probably my biggest hero and he would inspire me to go on to, encouraged me to go on to college and become a fraternity brother. But then others right around here, Dr. King was in Montgomery and Dr. C.G. Gomillion was here. And Reverend S.T. Martin and other leaders, K.L. Beaufort, they were. So we had a bunch of heroes right along here.

Johnny Ford: But Booker T. Washington has always been, his philosophy is what I'm best characterized as being a disciple of his philosophy, of working within the system. I'm a strong believer of working the system from within. Although I've done it both ways, from without and from within. I'm chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Alabama because I've been in many marches and protests, going back to the college days when we, student non-violent movement in Knoxville, we marched.

Johnny Ford: But Booker T. Washington, I think, is probably greatest hero. Example of how two good friends get together. Marshall Cabiness, who's Booker T. Washington's great grandson, I guess, whatever. But Marshall and I were talking about how this side of town, that side of town gets together. Marshall was getting his Star Scout badge and I was getting mine, and we came together at the same time. Marshall Cabiness, Luther Foster, who's the president of Tuskegee University, his son was getting his badge. But we all brought the whole town together. Here I was, in the low-income area, but I was right with those guys. And we became good friends, Marshall Cabiness and I. Still best of friends today. But scouting brought us together. So we just kind of forgot about the barriers, the social barriers.

Paul Ortiz: One more question now. You mentioned earlier the Montgomery bus boycott.

Johnny Ford: Right.

Paul Ortiz: And was there a relationship between the emerging Civil Rights organization struggles in Montgomery?

Johnny Ford: In Tuskegee. Yeah. Yeah, it was. As a matter of fact, when they organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was organized a little bit later, but you had the religious leaders from here and Montgomery. In Tuskegee, we had Reverend K.L. Beaufort, Reverend S.T. Martin. In Montgomery, you had, and of course C.G. Gomillion. He was not a minister, but the relationship was still there. You had the Montgomery Improvement Association in Montgomery. In Tuskegee, you had the Tuskegee Civic Association.

Johnny Ford: And one would support the other. As I said, their leaders would come up here and speak for our mass meetings. And sometimes, I'm sure our people would go down there. But Reverend S.T. Martin was from Montgomery, so he had a very close working— He was a leader. And Dr. King would come here.

Johnny Ford: And then, for example, when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was organized, the leaders from here were involved in that original organization. When the Alabama Democratic Conference was organized, which is the largest Black political organization, I think it was organized 1960 or '64. In one of those years.

Johnny Ford: But C.G. Gomillion was involved in that, along with the leaders in Montgomery. So there was a relationship between the two, Montgomery and Tuskegee. And eventually Birmingham. Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, and Martin and Ralph in Montgomery. And Gomillion, Beaufort, Martin, W.P. Mitchell, all those folks here. Fred Gray. See, because Fred is from Montgomery, came here and then they got him to be the

lawyer. So that was a direct tie between. But in Montgomery, Rufus Lewis, and E.D. Nixon, all those folks. So it was a real tie-in.