

Interview with Howard W. Curry
Lucy F. Simms School Oral History Project

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Interview with Howard W. Curry

Leah Hedrick 00:00

Alright. So, today is February 28th. I am Leah Hedrick, here with Ali Sheikh and we will be doing the interview today with Mr. Howard Curry. Mr. Curry, you understand that this interview is being recorded, and you consent to being recorded for this interview?

Howard Curry 00:14

Yes. I consent.

Leah Hedrick 00:15

Awesome! Let's get started. So my first question is, what age did you start attending the Simms School? Like, what were your first memories of attending?

Howard Curry 00:25

Okay. When I started school, it was [grade] one through twelfth. They didn't have kindergarten at the time. So I went from one through twelve, the whole time spent in this school. I think I started in 1949, and probably I finished in 1961. So I guess when I was in school, during the time, it sort of seemed like it was a long process. But looking back on my life, it was just twelve years, off summers, and I just enjoyed the curriculum and everything involving school. I wasn't an outstanding student, but I enjoyed especially the other students, and also teachers.

Leah Hedrick 01:38

All right. Could you tell me a little bit more about your most treasured memories at the Simms School? Like what really stood out to you when you were here?

Howard Curry 01:47

Any particular thing that?

Leah Hedrick 01:49

Anything. Anything that was your most favorite.

Howard Curry 01:53

Well, I like sports. I guess it's a guy thing but I really enjoyed sports. By being small numbers, you were able to participate in anything you wanted to. You didn't have to worry about whether you made the team or- Because we just small numbers. I enjoyed some of the plays but I just like to hope you know the whole camaraderie just being around other students.

Ali Sheikh 02:34

Well, did you excel at any certain sports, or what was your go-to sport?

Howard Curry 02:40

I loved football.

Ali Sheikh 02:41

Football?

Howard Curry 02:42

Yeah. I really love football. And so-

Ali Sheikh 02:51

Offensive guy or a defensive guy?

Leah Hedrick 02:53

This is all just [unclear].

Howard Curry 02:55

Both. Offense and defense. Like I said, we were small as far as numbers. So you didn't have to worry about getting playing time.

Ali Sheikh 03:04

You'd play both sides?

Howard Curry 03:05

Yeah. So, I mean, I wasn't a quarterback, but if somebody went down, you know. But my favorite side of the ball was defense. I'd rather be hit. I'd rather hit somebody than them get a free shot on me.

Ali Sheikh 03:27

Pads? Everything?

Howard Curry 03:29

Yeah. When we started football in the school, it wasn't always football. We had a teacher that came from North Carolina who went to a school called North Carolina A&T. And he was a football player, and he couldn't believe that the school didn't have football, so he decided to create a team. Well, we had no equipment. So our equipment was used equipment from Harrisonburg High.

Leah Hedrick 04:02

How old were you when you joined the football team? Like, what grade were you in?

Howard Curry 04:07

Probably fifteen, sixteen. I might have played five years. I mean, I'm not sure because there was a lot of restrictions. But I remember we had a guy, that he was pretty large-sized guy. But he was in one of the lower grades, but he was pretty big. So we said, "Hey, you can play with us." And he played an offensive lineman because of his size.

Ali Sheikh 04:40

So, like did anybody go from here to college sports or anything? Did coaches come from colleges to come watch y'all play, or...?

Howard Curry 04:52

When I was a youngster, Harrisonburg was small. Now you think of JMU and all?

Leah Hedrick 04:57

Yeah.

Howard Curry 04:58

No, it was small. Population, I think, was probably around 12,000 to 13,000. I mean, it was small. And so we had kids that came from the surrounding communities, which helped increase the numbers of students attending here. But yeah, it was small. So this is where I went to school. So out here is where we played football, baseball, and we ran track. We did a little bit of everything. But all that was farmland back then.

Leah Hedrick 05:33

Yeah.

Howard Curry 05:35

I mean, it's hard to imagine, but it was all farmland. And sometimes, I wonder, "Man, was things that small? That they were?" This [section of the school], right directly behind, they put an addition on in later years, which is the boys club and some activities that they have here. But when I was going to school, it was just a small piece of land that was part of the school campus. So I also-. During the time I went to school, the community got together and built a swimming pool. It's been since replaced, but I can remember really loving to swim. And we had our

lifeguard was a student at Hampton Institute, which is Hampton University now. He was an outstanding swimmer. So he became our lifeguard, and he taught a lot of kids how to swim. So I became a pretty good swimmer. And a lot of times, people would be amazed because we didn't have access to pools or a lot of facilities that as Afro-American that I could actually swim or some of my buddies could swim. And they were like, "How can you guys swim?" Because we just didn't have access to swimming facilities. You went to a river or somewhere.

Leah Hedrick 07:15

Right.

Howard Curry 07:16

Some farmer's pond, or- [laughs].

Leah Hedrick 07:19

Did you find it difficult to balance your academics with all the extracurricular activities you did? Since you were so involved with sports?

Howard Curry 07:27

No, it just seemed like normal. I mean, to do this, to do that. If you were passionate about- Passionate enough about anything, you know, it didn't seem like a chore.

Leah Hedrick 07:40

Yeah.

Howard Curry 07:40

Just something that you enjoy doing.

Leah Hedrick 07:44

Okay. Can you describe the relationship between you and your classmates? Since you said you had graduated with sixteen students they took? Last time?

Howard Curry 07:54

Yeah, and actually, that was considered a large class here at Simms. So, it was 9 boys. Nine boys- and did I say 16 or 18? Eighteen, I think, was the number that finished school. But we had a lot of kids that actually dropped out.

Leah Hedrick 08:19

Really?

Howard Curry 08:20

Oh yeah, you know. Back in that era, education was really- Nobody like today, 'Where you going to college?' 'Oh, I'm going to Christopher Newport. I'm going to do this,' [everyone laughs]. Your parents did the best they could. So education wasn't high on the priority list of things to do. I can

remember visiting colleges, just participating in, like- They might have a science competition or English, or you know. So, other than that, I never really was exposed to a college atmosphere.

Leah Hedrick 09:08

Were you close with any of the students that had dropped out when you were in?

Howard Curry 09:13

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Some of the guys, we were real good friends. You hated to see it. But I guess whatever other circumstances they were going through just didn't require that much education. But yeah, I had a couple of buddies. One guy in particular, we grew up together. But that came to a part. You get to a part in your life where you start kind of separating. You might have a buddy in the first, second grade, but by the time you're in the fifth, he's no longer your best buddy. And then. But-

Ali Sheikh 09:59

Yeah.

Howard Curry 10:01

But yeah, I had one guy; I wish he would have- I think he would have excelled in anything. Even if he- If he would have had a chance to go to college, I think he would have excelled in something.

Leah Hedrick 10:19

Could you tell me how it felt being surrounded by all grade levels in school? Since you said it was-

Howard Curry 10:25

Yeah. [both speaking] First through, yeah.

Leah Hedrick 10:27

[both speaking] One through 12.

Howard Curry 10:30

I guess it didn't seem odd because at one point, you was in a lower level, and you kind of looked up at older guys. "Oh. I want that," or "I'd like to dress like that," or "That guy's pretty cool, the way he carries himself". So I didn't find it odd. Because actually, a lot of private schools, man, they're one through twelve.

Ali Sheikh 10:56

Yeah.

Howard Curry 10:57

A lot of private high schools, especially military schools.

Ali Sheikh 11:03

Were you like a big- Did you feel like a big brother? You had to hold yourself accountable to certain things when you were in the older grades to the little guys?

Howard Curry 11:13

I had cousins and relatives. So sometimes, as a youngster, you want to tell on somebody if they were out of line. So sometimes you had to be- watch yourself around a youngster because he may go home and tell your uncle or your mom. "Howard did something in school today that I believe you need to know." [Everyone laughs].

Leah Hedrick 11:46

That's funny. Having little siblings. It's just different for us to hear because when we transition from like fifth to sixth grade, it's a lot different when you are with all the older students. Wouldn't you say?

Ali Sheikh 12:00

Yeah, I mean, you go 1 to fifth, and then- You always stay around your age group. You don't really [both speaking] see those younger than you.

Howard Curry 12:06

[both speaking] Right. Exactly.

Ali Sheikh 12:07

Trying to understand it, you know.

Howard Curry 12:09

So, you kind of- By being around students and older students. They kind of seem like they set a pattern or something that you want to, like, you know, if you got an older brother, you're like- You might not like everything he does, but there is some things where you're like, 'Man, I'll be glad when I reach that particular age, so I can be like my big bro.'

Ali Sheikh 12:37

Yeah.

Leah Hedrick 12:38

How they set the line for maturity, yeah, I definitely would say. Okay. So how would you describe the teachers at Simms? Like were there certain teachers that impacted you more when you were here?

Howard Curry 12:52

I thought, on the whole- I thought the teachers- I thought they were very good teachers. They seem to really want to teach and maybe they can see the fruits of their labor. I liked Miss Fairfax. She was my first-grade teacher. But I'm saying- But it was- But the coach. I don't know,

guys always pick out coaches or something, soccer coach, football coach... "Oh! Coach so-and-so did this!" [laughs]. So yeah, I liked the coaches.

Ali Sheikh 13:31

Were the coaches teachers as well? Or-?

Howard Curry 13:33

Yeah, they taught as well.

Leah Hedrick 13:35

So you had that connection with them?

Howard Curry 13:37

Yeah. We had a coach. Some guys didn't like him, but I kind of, I really, I thought the guy was cool. I might be 15 or 16. So he might be 22 or 23. Not that it was really that much removed. But you know, he's wearing certain ties or jackets. I always liked clothes. So, these guys out of college, they was wearing clothes and had a car. And so- And when we would travel to sporting events at another school, sometimes we would take a bus, but sometimes we would be driven by the coach. And maybe he had 2 buddies that had a vehicle; they would also provide us with transportation.

Leah Hedrick 14:32

So, you mentioned in January that your basketball team could only play certain schools, which is what we were talking about. Could you go into a little more depth about that?

Howard Curry 14:44

Well, when I said certain schools, we only played certain schools. We didn't travel down to the Tidewater area-

Leah Hedrick 14:53

Right.

Howard Curry 14:53

Or up to the DC area. So we played most of the schools that were located here. And remember, I'm talking about during the segregated era.

Leah Hedrick 15:03

Right.

Howard Curry 15:03

So we didn't play Harrisonburg [High]. We didn't play TA [Turner Ashby High School]. We wouldn't have wanted to anyway [laughs]. I mean, they probably had 40 or 50 guys out there. We come out with 14 or 15. But I enjoyed wherever we went. Oh, man. I'd love to go to another school, to interact with other students. A lot of times after the- It wasn't just a sporting event; it

was kind of social get-together. So, and therefore you got to meet other students. And then, after the game, they would have what we called a social, which was a dance where we would mingle with the students, dance with them. Dancing, I don't know. Is that still a big thing?

Ali Sheikh 15:54

Dance?

Leah Hedrick 15:55

We have like, prom.

Howard Curry 15:58

Oh, man. We loved to dance. And then you maybe go to a school, and they got an outstanding guy that could maybe dance real well, so you almost a little competitive thing. This guy can make a certain move. Because guys and girls didn't dance together, you didn't see no girls and guys- It was a guy and a girl. It wouldn't be like- Sometimes you see more girls dancing together than you see- But back then, I really liked what we called, referred to them as a socials. We'd just meet after the game. They would allow us time to stay maybe an hour or hour and a half after the game to mingle with other students. And so.

Leah Hedrick 16:52

Were there any activities you liked to do outside of school other than basketball?

Howard Curry 16:57

Out of school? You know, it's kind of funny because the school was kind of the center place of everything. Churches. Schools. There wasn't that many places that you really could mingle. Because- You have a car, right?

Leah Hedrick 17:19

I do.

Howard Curry 17:19

Ali has a car.

Ali Sheikh 17:20

Yeah.

Howard Curry 17:21

Well, back then -Your whole family, there might not be a car in the whole family. So-

Leah Hedrick 17:28

Right.

Howard Curry 17:29

So a lot of- you was limited to how far you could go. I remember as a youngster, a big thing in my life was when I got a bicycle. Oh, man. And sometimes, I might have a bike, and maybe a buddy of mine didn't have one. So if we go somewhere, we'd ride double [laughter]. And sometimes we would call a shift going on rides. Like if you had a girlfriend or are seeing a young lady that you kind of liked, you'd say, "Hey, how about going on a ride with me on a bicycle." [Everyone laughs]. So anyway, yeah. I enjoyed different things. But I went to work at an early age. Not coming from a family that was wealthy. You had to- You learned early that some things you had to do to help your family provide for them as well as you. So I worked at an early age, but I enjoyed that too. I got to meet some real good folks.

Leah Hedrick 18:56

What did you do? Like where did you work?

Howard Curry 19:00

I did kind of what you call odd jobs raking leaves or mowing lawns. But I worked at a cleaners. That was my first big-time job, working at a cleaners. This gentleman hired me. He didn't have to hire me because I was Afro-American. But he saw some reason that he hired me. And I- all my life, I remembered that guy because he gave me a job and gave me the freedom to feel like I was somebody. And I told him- I said, "Well, you know, I like sports." He said, "Well, we'll work around that." So he allowed me, like if I was going away on a trip or something, to let my hours be flexible. When I was a youngster, everybody pretty much worked. Youngsters, you know. It wasn't like, "Oh, you got to hit your books," or "You got to do this." You had to fit everything in whatever was. It was work, school, church, or whatever.

Leah Hedrick 20:29

So, can you describe how your school was like a community? Like, I know you touched a little bit on how you'd have socials after the basketball games, and it was like a community center. But could you touch a little more on that?

Howard Curry 20:44

After activities- social activities after the game itself?

Leah Hedrick 20:50

More how it was- How your school was like a community?

Howard Curry 20:55

Well, as I say, we were a small community. And we pretty much lived in a short radius of each other. It wasn't like, I lived out on- We all kind of- So we was all- It was like a family. It was a family structure. Community. You may not be family or blood with somebody, but you were still like family. And people, they tried to help you along. Even though- I had a friend and his mom, she was an outstanding woman. And sometimes, she would allow me to come to eat supper. Man, I thought that was the greatest thing. And she was a good cook. And they would sit down as a family. Because my father passed when I was 6 years old, so I never had a father per se.

But I had a mother, a great mother, but she worked quite a bit to provide for her family. So I guess I missed out on some things, but in other ways, it made me a stronger individual in life.

Leah Hedrick 22:16

Did you have any other siblings with you?

Howard Curry 22:23

I had older siblings because my mom was married twice. And then, later in life, she remarried. And I have a sister, which is- She's a year younger than I am. She'd be interesting for you guys should to talk to. She probably had more to say than I do, actually. But my other sisters and brother, they were older than I. Like I just had a sister that passed. She was 100.

Leah Hedrick 23:06

Wow.

Ali Sheikh 23:07

100?

Howard Curry 23:08

She was 100. So, I'm at 80. So she was 20 years older than I was when I was born. But she lived in New York City. Brooklyn, actually. And I was able to in the summertime sometimes able to go to New York. So that was an experience in itself.

Leah Hedrick 23:30

Could you tell me a little bit more about that? When you were in New York?

Howard Curry 23:33

Well, when I'd go to New York, it was during when baseball was big. And I really liked baseball. And it was during the era when Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball. So in New York at that time, you had the New York Giants, you had the New York Yankees, and you had the Brooklyn Dodgers. I know you guys, you know, that won't mean a lot to you. But I mean, they had all these great ballplayers during that era. And that was back when baseball was a thing. Football was still a college game. It wasn't- And there was no such thing as soccer or- You know, there were only basically three sports that really stood out. And baseball was -That's why they call it major league because, I mean, it was big time. So I was able to see Willie Mays. If you might say something to your grandparents, you can say, "Mr. Curry said he saw Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese. The guy that played for- Mantle, Mickey Mantle." So older folks, you know, like, when you guys get 80, you gonna say, 'Oh, when I went to school...' And the kids are gonna be like, you know, [sighs]. But anyway, it was a big deal to me.

Leah Hedrick 25:11

That's good to hear. So did your siblings, like your stepsister, attend the Simms School as well?

Howard Curry 25:16

Yeah, I had an older sister. And now, she was older than I was. So yeah, she, she would kind of look out for me. You know, like, if I lost my lunch money, "Okay, here's 15 or 10 cents," or whatever. So that's- I really enjoyed having somebody that I could go to. Like, if I wanted to Main Street or something. I remember one time, we were on Main Street in downtown, and I supposedly got lost. How you get lost? But you know, when you're a young kid. And I was- Somebody found me and took me to my mother. But overall, I'd say my experience, I wouldn't trade it in. Somebody said, "Would you like to be some movie star?" Nah. I enjoyed my growing years, going to school here, and the friends I've met along the way.

Leah Hedrick 26:31

It's really impactful to hear. Let's see. What were your thoughts when you found out the Simms School was going to be integrated?

Howard Curry 26:42

Okay. Yeah. You have to understand, as an Afro-American, we come out of slavery, you know, no words. And so you always wanted- you always were taught that there's better days ahead, and things are going to change. So, when integration came, they were supposed to better days. Now you get opportunity to go to TA [Turner Ashby High School] if you live in that area, or Spotswood, or you know. So I- When the school started segregating, I mean, integrating, I was already out of school. I was already out of school, so I didn't go through that transition period where I left Simms and went to another school. But I know hearing younger kids, how they say they- Some said they had problems. Some said they didn't have any problems or just small problems. There was a guy that lived in Harrisonburg. His name was Howard Stevens. He went to- And see, at first, they didn't just close the schools down. Brown versus the Board of Education allowed, supposedly allowed, everything to just all of a sudden, but it wasn't in a way. So in Harrisonburg, you had to actually petition to go to school. They didn't just say, "Ali, today you're going to-" You had to, they had to petition themselves. Like they had to send documents 'I request that I go to Harrisonburg, and the law of the land now says that I can.' But Howard Stevens was a pretty bright guy. So he could excel at anything he wanted because he was pretty bright. But he was a good football player. And so he went to Harrisonburg High, and he probably broke every record over there. Just a little guy. So then, after he finished Harrisonburg, he wasn't really recruited because he was a small guy. So he went to Randolph-Macon College. He broke every record over there.

Leah Hedrick 29:15

Wow.

Howard Curry 29:16

So he had a coach that was leaving Randolph Macon to go to University of Louisville. So he said, "Howard, you don't need to stay over here. Come with me to Louisville." He went down and broke every record at Louisville. So his- Some of his records may actually stand. But he was drafted into national football.

Leah Hedrick 29:40

Wow.

Ali Sheikh 29:42

You know what team he played for?

Howard Curry 29:43

The team he first played for was the New Orleans Saints. And then he was traded to the Baltimore Colts, which are the Indianapolis Colts now. But at one time they were Baltimore. So he played in the pro league probably about eight years. Long enough for him to be able to qualify for a retirement. So, but I think it might be Harrisonburg's claim- first claim to fame as far as when students started mixing. Ralph Sampson was to come later, but Howard was the first outstanding student. He told me one day he was at a college, and some guys, some coach saw him and said, "Hey man, you ever played soccer?" He says, "Hey, man. I ain't a soccer player." [Laughs]. He said- But you know, he was built and looked like a guy called Pelé.

Ali Sheikh 30:44

Pe- Oh! The soccer player?

Howard Curry 30:47

Yeah. Imagine his stature, you know what I'm saying? The calves and short-

Ali Sheikh 30:55

Oh, yeah.

Howard Curry 30:55

But could turn on a dime.

Ali Sheikh 30:59

Okay.

Leah Hedrick 30:59

Are you still in contact with him?

Howard Curry 31:04

Very little. If we see each other, you know, "Hey bro!" But he lives in North Carolina. He became a good golfer and so North Carolina, I guess, seemed like an ideal place to play golf, especially in your later years.

Leah Hedrick 31:29

So, this is kind of a turning point where we were. So you mentioned a particular poem the last time we met -from Edgar Allan Poe. I took note of it. I was wondering, what are your favorite poems by him?

Howard Curry 31:43

Oh, when you're going to school, certain things you're exposed to, but I just remember "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Raven," a certain- And then they start coming out with these movies. They were like, it turned him into kind of scary movies. But what they were based on Edgar Allan Poe's writings. But it's a lot of poets that- I can't recite everything, but I enjoy, like Angela, Angela... I can't remember her last name. But these were outstanding poets. And some of them never really got their dues. But they would just- I always liked the arts. There you go. I liked doing the Broadway plays especially. My mother exposed me to that. And so, paintings or drawings, even though I never was good at anything, but I always enjoyed other people's works.

Leah Hedrick 33:03

Did you have any favorite pieces of art that you can recall or any favorite plays? I'm a big play person too. I like art as well.

Howard Curry 33:11

Well, I particularly like Afro-American art. But I wasn't exposed to it until later in life. But I have some things in my house that I bought through the years. I really like music, particularly jazz.

Leah Hedrick 33:15

Me, too.

Howard Curry 33:19

So, my dream was to be raised in Harlem in the '50s, '40s, and '50s. There just seemed to be an overly abundant people that were good at arts, but they never really got their dues. But later in life, somebody might pass, and then people start to enjoy their works. So, my daughter occasionally will send me a book written during that era or reflecting onto that era. So I really, I was a collector of jazz recordings. I probably got, I don't know, I mean. And they were vinyl. But now vinyl is coming back.

Leah Hedrick 34:35

I know. Everything is coming back.

Howard Curry 34:37

I mean, we had guys throwing them away and, you know, just- But some of them, quite a few of them, I got. So, I got some of the original recordings, and now they might be worth a little something.

Leah Hedrick 34:55

Do you have a favorite jazz artist?

Howard Curry 34:57

Well, my favorite was Miles Davis. I mean, I can go down the list of people that I enjoy listening to, but it was something about his particular music that I really enjoyed. There's a guy named Quincy Jones. I mean, he excelled in every era. I mean, he did a lot of Michael Jackson tunes when Michael Jackson was great. He did a lot of Michael Jackson tunes or recordings. He

produced them. A lot of music he wrote himself. But I really love music. I can sit and just, and I can play something that I've listened to back in the '60s and I'm like, 'Hey, I didn't pick up on that particular thing.' And so it's like oh, man. You know, it just kind of brings joy to your heart.

Leah Hedrick 36:02

Have you always loved music? Like, even when you were younger?

Howard Curry 36:05

Oh yeah. And there you go. By going to school here, I didn't have opportunities to learn an instrument. Now, there were people that taught music, like they might teach piano. But we didn't have a band, or we didn't have a jazz band or a marching band or- But I always enjoyed music.

Leah Hedrick 36:34

It's really impactful. So-

Howard Curry 36:37

[Remembers] Maya Angelou!

Leah Hedrick 36:39

Maya Angelou?

Howard Curry 36:40

Yeah. Look up her stuff sometime.

Leah Hedrick 36:44

I definitely will. My personal favorite is probably Ella Fitzgerald.

Howard Curry 36:50

Oh, yeah!

Leah Hedrick 36:52

'Summertime' is probably one of my favorite [both speaking-unclear]

Howard Curry 36:53

[Recites 'Summertime' by Ella Fitzgerald] "Living is easy. Fish are jumping, and the cotton is high."

Leah Hedrick 36:57

I know. My dad got me into jazz.

Howard Curry 37:00

Oh, man. You know, sometimes- I have three DVD players. [Bose]. They probably they don't make them no more. But I have one in my bedroom, one in my little den or little cubby,

and one- And I just go down, and I'm like, "What do I want to listen to today? Okay. Ella Fitzgerald." And I'll just keep repeating not the same song but the album, so it takes about- maybe the album is maybe an hour, a little over an hour, so for about three or four hours. And I don't know which track is going to come up next. Ella Fitzgerald. You know she's from Virginia originally?

Leah Hedrick 37:50

Is she really?

Howard Curry 37:51

Yeah. She was from the Tidewater area. But she moved to New York. And she was a good dancer. So she would enter these dance contests. But they found out that she could sing. And the rest is history. Oh, I love Ella.

Leah Hedrick 38:12

Yeah, her music. My dad is a huge fan of jazz. So he-

Howard Curry 38:15

Oh yeah? Who's your Dad? Man, I'm going to the Forbes Center Monday evening, my wife and I. And they're going to have a group from the Lincoln Center in New York City, a jazz group. So we're going out there to listen to them.

Leah Hedrick 38:36

Yeah, I wish more places just played jazz music. To me, it's so soothing, like in restaurants. I could listen to it for hours. So, what were some of your favorite memories from being in the Air Force?

Howard Curry 38:51

Oh, man. When I first went in and my first duty assignment, I was stationed on an Air Force Base and seeing all these airplanes taking off, landing, able to- At one time, I was a crew member on a transport plane. It was called a C-130. And I think it originally came out in probably the '50s. And they're still flying. Right? In today's world, they're still flying. And I just was amazed at these airplanes, and I just love to fly. I mean, I can't actually fly the plane. But, I was introduced to what makes it- what lifts a plane, how you maneuver it, and stuff like that. So, it was like [exhales]. You know, put in a situation introducing something, and you just amazed at. How did these things fly? How do- Who are these guys that are actually flying? And then there are some guys that became excellent pilots right from in this area. But I live- I just- If I see a plane flying over me, my attention is drawn towards it. It was- Just amazes me that- So, the guys that I met, the places I was able to go to. It just, it was a good time in my life. Eighteen years old and in California for the first time. From little Bridgewater, Mount Dayton [laughs], you know what I'm saying.

Ali Sheikh 41:04

Were you excited? Nervous?

Howard Curry 41:07

Oh. Just, you know, kind of nervous. At a young age, you think, you know everything, but you know what I'm saying...

Ali Sheikh 41:15

Yeah yeah.

Howard Curry 41:16

A lot of guys think- But there's so many things that just out here in life that you get exposed to, and some things you become very passionate, you know, you become just so-

Ali Sheikh 41:31

Yeah.

Howard Curry 41:33

But all I can say is, live your life and live it. There's nothing out here that's dumb, you know. You can always have a friend that's "Alright, man, that's dumb," you know, because they can't make that connection but- So, I never would have believed as -I was a third grader here in this room. And now, all these years later, I'm sitting here being interviewed by 16, 17-year-old kids.

Ali Sheikh 42:10

Eighteen.

Leah Hedrick 42:10

Seventeen.

Howard Curry 42:11

Okay. [laughing] So see, when you young, "Oh, 16. Oh, no, 17. 17 and a half." No, you know. When you get older, you're like, "Uhh, I'm 70." "No, you're not 75. You're-" "Oh, okay."

Ali Sheikh 42:11

Yeah.

Howard Curry 42:29

Yeah. So where are you going to school?

Ali Sheikh 42:33

Right now. I'm probably going to JMU. I haven't committed there yet, but...

Howard Curry 42:36

Well, wherever you go, I mean, all these schools- Now, that's one thing I kind of I wish I would have done. Gone to college. I don't care if I would have flunked out. Or whatever. I would've

liked to had that experience. So one thing I missed out on was going to college. But I'd still go [unclear]. Yeah, I mean, there's no reason- I mean you could go back today. 'Who is that old guy?! Is he a student? I thought you were a retired professor?' [Everybody laughs].

Ali Sheikh 43:24

It's about the dream. I mean, you got one dream left. Might as well just do it.

Howard Curry 43:27

There you go.

Leah Hedrick 43:31

So, we were just talking about when you were drafted in California. How were some of those moments? Like, how did they impact your life? Looking back?

Howard Curry 43:39

Some of them what?

Leah Hedrick 43:40

How are some of the memorable moments you made when you were drafted in California? Like, how did those impact your life?

Howard Curry 43:47

Well, first of all, I wasn't drafted. I volunteered.

Leah Hedrick 43:52

Did you really?

Howard Curry 43:53

Yeah. I never even signed up for- Back during that era, each male had to sign up when he became 18. I never signed up because I went right in. But most of the guys that I know were drafted. I guess they said, "Who volunteers for the military." But I don't know. Some of the older guys that had gone to school here, they would come back with their uniforms on. All the kids that would go to school here, wherever they went, when they would come back to Harrisonburg, they would always come to Simms. And I did the same thing. The first time I came back to Harrisonburg, I came to the school. And one of the teachers said, "Curry, you a worldly person. Come and sit down and talk to my boys." And they'd want you to- They'd always used to say 'the boys,' 'them knuckleheads.' I want you to talk to them. I'm 19 and 20. Like I know so much now. But anyway, but I can just remember guys would come back. And back in the '50s and '60s, there wasn't a lot of opportunities for Afro-Americans. You know what I'm saying? I know you don't know what. But I'm saying there weren't that many opportunities. It just wasn't. If I wanted- I knew a guy that he became a banker. I'm like, 'How did he become a banker?' Or guys that would- I got a friend, and he reflects on his memories. He was working for a local factory. But he could only be a custodian. So when they, I guess the owner said, "I'm gonna give you an opportunity to be to be something beyond [unclear]." And he says, "But you got to

succeed because I'm taking an awful chance." And my friend said, "I had just as much education as some of the guys. And he's talking about, "I'm taking an awful chance," I mean. But, yeah. I know what I'm saying sounds kind of colorful. But when you're- If somebody tells you that you can't do something because you got long hair or your pigmentation is darker or, you know what I'm saying?

Ali Sheikh 43:53

Yeah. Yeah.

Leah Hedrick 49:05

Right.

Howard Curry 49:05

You speak with an accent or something. And they refer to you as some derogatory- It's- But you've got to be made out of good stuff, strong stuff, to survive. Because a lot of people buy into certain things. But, I'm saying my experience in school was under segregated conditions. So when you try to separate people or deny people of anything in life, it takes an effort. So just think of people that were trying to deny you; that was wasted time. So don't think what I'm saying is all dancing and bliss. It was- In other words, I got a friend right now- I got friends that have that went on and got their doctorates degree. They excelled. And everybody used to refer to if you went to Simms, well, you can't know too much. But the only reason you didn't know certain things was cause you was denied.

Leah Hedrick 49:05

Right.

Howard Curry 49:05

You know, I can't be a chemist if I've never had the basics in chemistry. So, a lot of my friends that did go to college, they had a rough time. Because they didn't- they weren't allowed to be a learning person in certain- But then you had people that- I got a friend. He's at VMRC [Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community] now. And he became a psychologist, a psychiatrist. But he went to Simms, but we didn't have a- Nobody said- You didn't have nobody to bring you in and say, "Well, I think you'd be a good student in this area," or- We didn't have guidance counselors or nothing like that. We just, a teacher was everything. I mean, they were like your big brother, your mom, your uncle. They encourage you to be ready because when that opportunity comes, you better be ready. Because one day, you're going to have to go to Harrisonburg High, and you're going to have to compete against the best minds in the world. Whatever. I mean, that was, you know what I'm saying? But in a lot of ways, it made you want to strive to, 'Hey, I can compete against anybody. At any level.'

Leah Hedrick 49:42

So, what fueled your decision to volunteer to fight?

Howard Curry 49:47

Eighteen. Stupid. [everybody laughs] You know how you do things you don't really- Your buddies might say, "Hey, come on, man, let's go over." And you just kind of follow the leader. Then you get into some trouble and your dad said, "What in the world was you thinking about?"

Ali Sheikh 50:11

Yeah.

Howard Curry 50:12

Well, Joe Schmoie said, "Let's do it." So, yeah. But I expected more. That's all, I'm just saying, like, it wasn't like I was a patriot or anything. Like, I'm going off, and I'm going destroy the enemy. I'm just like, 'Oh, they got nice uniforms,' and-

Ali Sheikh 50:34

Yeah.

Howard Curry 50:36

I can get a chance to go to California. Otherwise, how was I going to get to California? I could've, but you know. But I'm saying at a young age. Like he's going to Christopher Newport. [To Leah] What are you going to study?

Leah Hedrick 50:50

I'm still deciding, but it'd be in business.

Howard Curry 50:53

At least, you undecided. You ask an 18 or 19-year-old kid. 'What do you want to be the rest of your life?' 'Well, I want to be a doctor.' Okay.

Ali Sheikh 51:12

I get it. I get it.

Howard Curry 51:13

So, at a young age, under any kind of conditions it's- I would say I'm a better grandparent than I ever was a parent. Because with young kids, dads, and sons. It's a big difference. You know, here's a dad. He's what? He's 40? So, you know, his idea of life is- And for you to say you like jazz... I'm like, 'C'mon. I can't believe that.' So you guys go to the same school?

Leah Hedrick 51:58

We do. Turner Ashby.

51:59-52:45

[Redacted]

Howard Curry 52:46

I would- I married my wife. She was in third grade with me.

Ali Sheikh 52:51

I mean I wish I had something like that, you know, someone I can grow up with.

Howard Curry 52:56

I mean, but what- I appreciate her more now than I ever have. Third grade. And I said, "Didn't you love me?" "Noo." I'm like, "Come on. I was cool. I was... Didn't you want to wear my sweater or something?" Yeah. [Laughs] It's just all fun. Yeah. So this is how you guys got assigned to do this project?

Ali Sheikh 53:27

Yeah. Random.

Howard Curry 53:28

Alright. There you go. I met a guy, Mohamed. He was going to JMU, and I was a mail carrier. So he was on my route. And he had finished, came to JMU. I think he was doing grad work. But he had already finished a four-year program. And we became like buddies. And finally, he finishes his schooling and he brought his wife and his kids over. He was real proud of that. I was like, "Mohamed. You come a long way, buddy."

Ali Sheikh 53:32

Yeah.

Howard Curry 53:40

[Imitates his friend with another tone] "Alright, Curry." [Everybody laughs].

Leah Hedrick 54:03

So, did your wife go to college after she graduated from here?

Howard Curry 54:25

No, no, she didn't. Neither one of us went to school. Our kids- But she went through a program at JMU- not JMU- at RMH, the hospital. And she became like a technician. But neither of us- We didn't have a lot of schooling. But always, I enjoy being around folks that are a little smarter than I was. I got a friend, and he's a realtor. Actually, he owns the company. He's called Joe Funkhouser. He owns Funkhouser Realty. And we've become friends. He went to a separate school. But in life, you know. You never know.

Ali Sheikh 55:27

Yeah.

Howard Curry 55:29

So I know we kind of off track, aren't we?

Ali Sheikh 55:32

No, it's fine. You know.

Leah Hedrick 55:33

It's okay.

Ali Sheikh 55:34

I enjoyed it.

Leah Hedrick 55:37

Did you have any questions?

Ali Sheikh 55:39

No, I think you got the questions on here.

Leah Hedrick 55:45

I did want to ask you, so you said you won the state championship? For basketball?

Howard Curry 55:49

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Leah Hedrick 55:50

Could you describe what you were going through when you won?

Howard Curry 55:57

The coach we had, he coached everything. Basketball, football, baseball. So anyway, he would say like, "Well you know, if you want to play on the football team, you got to come out for the basketball team. Otherwise I have to deny you what you're- " But in 1960, we won state championship in our classification. I mean, it'd be like TA [Turner Ashby High School] now, if they'd win in whatever. It would be a big deal. So for us, to be from a small community- And sometimes we would play maybe down in the Richmond area or somewhere like that. And once we started advancing, so sometimes we would play places that you thought you were a little less than. Like, if you'd be from Harrisonburg and you go off to college. They say "I'm from New York City' or 'I'm from Boston,' or 'I'm from California.' And you think, 'Oh, man. This guy, he's got it going. Because I'm from little Harrisonburg.' But it ain't always the case. But anyway, well we won in 1960. Oh, man. The trophy is right out there. It's the only state championship that this school ever- that I've ever known about. Now, I can't reflect back years ago. But yeah, when we won that thing, woo. It was like- I'll have to say, even the community was proud of you. Not just black folks but white folks. I mean, you know what I'm saying? They hadn't won anything. I'm not trying to paint it- But really, they kind of rallied. I mean, if you look up the 1960 Daily News Record [local Harrisonburg newspaper], it was headlines. 'Simms School Wins State Championship!' But, it was just a very proud moment that we finally got over the hump and

actually beat somebody for the state championship. I mean, now it seems common. Spotswood wins in business. TA wins in wrestling, you know. But for us to win-It was- It was really a very great time. We had folks that said, "Well, we're going to throw you guys a reception." So they was, you know-Finally, you was doing something that you finally, that they wouldn't punish you for, saying 'You shouldn't do this.' Finally, they was giving you credit for doing something. So yeah, it was, if you go on, I don't know how you guys do it with all this information that is available to you, but 1960 in The Daily News Record, it was headlines. Any other time it would be like a little box down here that said, "Simms beats this school, and Curry's made two points..." But it was no more than that. So yeah, that was a great time for me.

Ali Sheikh 59:55

I bet.

Leah Hedrick 59:56

How old were you when you won?

Howard Curry 59:59

Hmm, how old was I? Was I 16 or 17? I was, yeah, between 16 and 17. Because we always had pretty good athletes. And so to finally even make the team and then to be on the team. Now I wasn't the star. You see guys sitting on the bench. The best guy sits beside the coach and you work your way down. The guy that's sitting by the water boy down there? He might get to play. So, I finally had to work my way up. But I'm just saying to be part of that, a championship team. It was a great honor for me.

Leah Hedrick 1:00:59

So, what were some of the places you were drafted to besides California? Like what were some other places you visited? When you were in the army?

Howard Curry 1:01:06

I was in Vietnam. I did a tour in Vietnam. And then, I was stationed in Texas, California, Florida, New Mexico, Alaska, Washington State. So, I got an opportunity to go and do a lot of things. Especially when I became a crew member. I can remember one time we flew to Houston, Texas. And I got to go to the Houston Astrodome. I think they still have it, but the baseball team and the football team don't play in it no more. But back then, that was high-tech. And Astrodome, it was an inside facility. Because down in Houston, man, it gets very hot and humid down there. I don't know how people live down in New Orleans and places like that. It's very hot and humid.

Ali Sheikh 1:02:20

Yeah. I've been there. It's pretty-

Howard Curry 1:02:23

You've been to-?

Ali Sheikh 1:02:24

It's dry. Like it's not a sense that it's like high in Fahrenheit degrees, but it's like really dry. There's no like moisture in the air.

Howard Curry 1:02:31

Yeah. But anyway that's- most of my life was due to [coughs] being in the military, traveling from different places. I remember the first time I flew into Hawaii. Now that's just the opposite of Houston.

Ali Sheikh 1:02:52

Yeah.

Howard Curry 1:02:53

[Coughs] Oh, man. It's so pleasing, the weather is so- you know.

Leah Hedrick 1:03:00

It's beautiful there, yeah.

Howard Curry 1:03:01

Yeah, but then Alaska, it was just the opposite. Cold. Oh, man. So I was glad to leave there. But then I ended up back into the Shenandoah Valley. Which must be very pleasing to me because I'm still here [laughs]. I love the mountains.

Ali Sheikh 1:03:24

Yeah.

Howard Curry 1:03:24

Yeah. I like the people.

Ali Sheikh 1:03:31

I mean, you ever go like hiking back in the day or-

Howard Curry 1:03:35

Oh, I forgot to say, I was in the Boy Scouts. Oh, I forgot to say, I was in the boy scouts. Oh, man. Now he talking about something that I really loved. I learned how to, backpack, cook out in the open air. Yeah, I really loved that. And the thing of it is, it was during segregation, and we wasn't supposed to mix with people. But they allowed us to do certain things. And it was never no problem. Because young kids they don't know about certain things. Unless you start instilling hatred and stuff in them.

Ali Sheikh 1:03:39

Oh! Yeah.

Leah Hedrick 1:03:58

Right.

Howard Curry 1:04:02

You go to school, you might meet a guy and y'all become friends. 'You can't be friends with that guy.' 'Well, why not? He's my, he-'. 'Well, here, let me explain it to you.' So whatever their explanation is. But yeah, I really loved the Boy Scouts. I even encourage the young guys, and they're like, "Man, you kidding me?" [coughs] Excuse me.

Leah Hedrick 1:05:04

You're fine. So thank you for taking the time to meet with us. Like, this was huge.

Howard Curry 1:05:11

Oh, man. My wife said, "Well, you like to talk." I'm like. [Everyone laughs]. But I'm like, when I was a young kid, I wasn't very outgoing or very, you know. I just seemed a little awkward or uncomfortable. But now, I'm just glad that I have something that's somebody's going to sit down and take time to listen to. It's hard to get the attention of young folks. I mean, it really is. So to have somebody say, 'Well, did you do this? Well, did you do that?' 'Oh, you wanna hear it? Okay, I'll lay it on you.'

Leah Hedrick 1:05:51

Yeah.

Ali Sheikh 1:05:57

That was interesting. It was good to hear, you know?

Howard Curry 1:06:00

Yeah.

Leah Hedrick 1:06:01

It was good to hear.