

Episode #1 transcript - Bill Johnson - Asbury UMC DC Oral Histories podcast

Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, DC

Narrator: Bill Johnson

Interviewer: Adelle Banks

Host: Kelvin Childs

Podcast episode recording date: August 29, 2020

MUSIC

INTRO CLIP:

“-- it was just a great time, a lot of singing and rejoicing and -- but we had no idea that Martin Luther King was going to give such an epic sermon, speech that day. It was all a surprise.”

WELCOME TO THE FIRST EPISODE OF ASBURY UMC DC ORAL HISTORIES, FEATURING INTERVIEWS FROM ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, DC.

THESE EPISODES ARE DRAWN FROM ORAL HISTORIES OF MEMBERS OF ONE OF WASHINGTON’S HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES. ASBURY HAS BEEN AT THE CORNER OF 11TH AND K STREETS, NORTHWEST, SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1836. THESE CHURCH MEMBERS SHARE THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH BLACK HISTORY, NATIONAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON, DC, AREA.

THIS EPISODE WILL FEATURE BILL JOHNSON, A RETIRED LONGTIME DC GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE. IN THIS CONVERSATION FROM 2019 WITH INTERVIEWER ADELLE BANKS, HE DISCUSSES HIS KENTUCKY CHILDHOOD, HIS WORK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST OFFICE, AND HIS ROLES IN NUMEROUS DEPARTMENTS OF THE DC GOVERNMENT FROM 1963 TO 1989.

WE START WITH BILL JOHNSON’S MEMORIES OF HIS FAMILY IN KENTUCKY.

1:40

Bill Johnson: I was born in Lexington, Kentucky -- a family of 15 people in one household, two bathrooms, six brothers, four sisters, two grandparents and my mother and father. And we had a great time, a robust time with all these people in this house and I never will forget it and will forever cherish the relationships I had with my parents and my siblings and my grandparents.

Adelle Banks: What would you say -- you can tell us about your parents? What they did back when you were in that house full of all those people.

BJ: My father was quite the scion in my family. He had a sister and a brother and was raised in a rural area. But, fortunately, our grandparents who lived with us, was fortunate enough to send him to Hampton Institute back in 1919 and he finished in 1924. And, of course from, from that, my father married, met and married my mother in Hampton, Virginia. She was from Hampton as well, and a student at Hampton Institute. And, he, was a accomplished and professional brick mason to begin with. And, right after, the crash and the Depression, he was able to establish a brick masonry company of his own and held that company until 1969. Of the seven boys in the family, his seven sons, five of them were accomplished bricklayers, including myself. You had to learn brick masonry, or else. [narrator laughs] And as a result, they were all accomplished brick masons. My father was one of the most famous bricklaying contractors in the state of Kentucky without doubt, built nearly 500 homes in Lexington, Kentucky, and those homes are well documented and we all grew up building these brick houses. And I personally got so enthralled with brick masonry [narrator laughs], I thought maybe I wanted to be a contractor once I finished my college years, but I was never able to accomplish that -- I went in a different direction.

AB: And, tell me a bit about your experiences with schooling starting with elementary school. What schools were they? What do you remember? What stands out about that time period in your life?

4:37

BJ: Obviously, we started out in kindergarten. We had kindergarten in Kentucky and, 19 -- when I finished kindergarten during the year of '38 and '39, Mrs. Jackson was our kindergarten teacher. And, we had great fun together, learning to play and learn together.

And, as a result, we moved on through the lower grades in elementary school until my time in Lexington, my hometown, was interrupted by the Depression. Things were real tough for large families at that time. And as a result, my sister and I were sent to live with my mother's brother and his wife in Clinton, Tennessee, for two years, being schooled in a one-room schoolhouse with my aunt teaching all eight grades in one room in Clinton, Tennessee, which was quite an experience. Those two years I remember vividly, with my sister and it was just a great time. And, of course, when, when the war began to, cede, we were returned to our parents in Lexington, 1944, where I resumed elementary school in the fourth grade and found that, as I remember, I was head of the class as a result of my two years in Tennessee, which was phenomenal. But, at any rate, we rejoined our family in Lexington in 1944 and we went on to finish elementary school and then high school, finished high school in 1951, Dunbar High School. And, following that I went off to Hampton in September of 1951.

AB: So before you went on to college at Hampton, what was the situation like with segregation in the times that you were in school prior to college? What is it -- what was it like for you? What do you remember?

BJ: Lexington, Kentucky, was supposed to have been and had the thoughts from most people that it was a liberal city, race relations wise, but that was really not the case. Lexington was as hardscrabble as some of the western and eastern parts of Kentucky, where the coal fields are. And while there was some sense of white liberalism, it did not help segregated schools, segregated churches, segregated shopping. We -- we -- we, we never were able to overcome that when I was growing up. Now I think since that time Lexington has improved in its race relations. But when I was coming along, it was hardscrabble.

AB: Do you recall that you didn't have some of the benefits that you may or may not have been aware the white kids had when you were growing up?

7:57

BJ: Historically, we always had used textbooks. Ki-- textbooks that white kids had used for several years and when they got worn and tattered, they shipped them off to our schools. I never will forget that. We never could compete interracially athletically. We were always segregated: whites in one side of town, Blacks on the other. But I think we were blessed a bit because there was some tolerance, some racial tolerance in my hometown, but, but it was still Kentucky.

8:36

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] BILL JOHNSON HEADED TO HAMPTON INSTITUTE, NOW KNOWN AS HAMPTON UNIVERSITY, A HISTORICALLY BLACK SCHOOL IN VIRGINIA. IMMEDIATELY AFTER GRADUATING, HE SERVED TWO YEARS IN THE U.S. ARMY, LEAVING THE MILITARY IN 1958 WITH THE RANK OF SECOND LIEUTENANT.

8:57

AB: And then you were in Washington and didn't you first work for The Postal Service after the military?

BJ: Yes. Yes.

AB: What was that about? How was that?

BJ: That was during the period of -- the Eisenhower years where work was hard to get. Construction had fallen off to almost nothing. So I did what I knew best. The Post Office was always good place to go and, and find a job. And I did. I found a job with the Washington Post Office. Stayed there three years.

AB: What did you do for them?

BJ: I was a letter carrier.

AB: So what neighborhoods do you remember going through? What was -- what was DC like at that period of time?

BJ: I worked in only one neighborhood. The Friendship neighborhood, which is out in far Northwest.

AB: Friendship Heights?

BJ: Yes. Friendship Heights.

AB: Can you describe what that neighborhood was like back then, especially as you walked around delivering mail?

BJ: Well, Friendship Heights is populated with folk who are very rich, very well known, notable people. I would say that Friendship Heights does not have many marginal economic people. People have plenty of money in Friendship Heights. [narrator laughs] They did then and they do now.

10:20

At that time, there were a number of high-ranking military officers that lived in Friendship Heights. And I'm talking about generals and admirals. I remember Admiral [Chester] Nimitz, who played a major role in World War II, in the Pacific area -- delivered mail to him and his family.

AB: So that would have been in the late 1950s, early 1960s?

BJ: 1960 through 1963.

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] BILL JOHNSON MOVES ONTO SPEAK MORE ABOUT 1963, A PIVOTAL YEAR IN HIS PROFESSIONAL LIFE, IN WASHINGTON, DC, AND IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

11:02

BJ: Back in 1963, after the March on Washington, President Kennedy ordered the DC commissioners, which -- there were three. We did not have a mayor then. We had three commissioners running the city. And President Kennedy ordered those three commissioners to do a high-profile job of recruiting and hiring Afro Americans in professional jobs. And I, as a result, became the recipient of that. I was one of many who were hired from that presidential edict. As a matter of fact, I became the first Afro American construct -- engineering construction inspector for the old Department of Sanitary Engineering. I went to work the first week in September of '63, just two weeks following the March on Washington and the -- and the presidential edict to the commissioners. I was a direct beneficiary of that. And -- and -- and I kind of had somewhat of a celebrity status because I was the only Black engineering construction inspector they had. They since got more, but I was the first one.

AB: So before you tell me more about that --

BJ: Yes.

AB: I want to go back to something you just said.

BJ: Sure.

AB: Which is March on Washington. Were you part of it? What was your role in it, if you were? What do you remember of that time in Washington at the march?

BJ: I had, I guess 15 or 20 close friends at that time, and we all decided that we were gonna gather at Seventh and E Northeast at one of our friend's homes, have breakfast, and then walk to the march site. And we did just that -- long walk from Seventh and E Northeast all the way to the Lincoln Memorial. And -- but we did it, and we made it and we had a good time. And we were in this classic march down Constitution Avenue once we got our placards and signs. It was a great day. I never, ever will forget it.

AB: Do you remember what your placard said or any of your signs that you and your fr --

BJ: Jobs, jobs, jobs, and I -- I -- I didn't know I was going to be a recipient of -- of jobs in the District government. I mean, I -- I'd never even considered the District government because things were kind of backward back then.

AB: Do you remember the crowd? Do you remember the speeches? What do you rem--

BJ: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah. Crowds were overwhelming. I happened to be -- our group -- we decided to be on the southwest end of the reflecting pool as close to the steps as we could get. So we were right on the corner of the reflecting pool and the steps before -- in front of the monument. And, it was a great day. I never will forget it.

AB: And everyone remembers or recalls the "I Have a Dream" speech by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Is that something that stands out most for you or something else?

BJ: Well that stood out as well. But there were other speeches -- that -- that I thought deserved a lot of merit. John -- the congressman from Georgia?

AB: John Lewis.

BJ: John Lewis. I thought his speech was, was right on time, despite the fact that they made him rewrite it several times [narrator laughs] before they would accept and let him read it and deliver it. But -- it was just a great time, a lot of singing and rejoicing and -- but we had no idea that Martin Luther King was going to give such an epic sermon, speech that day. It was all a surprise.

15:17

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] BILL JOHNSON'S INTERVIEW TURNED MANY TIMES TO THE CONNECTIONS HE FOUND BETWEEN HIS DC CHURCH, ASBURY UNITED METHODIST, AND THE ROLES HE HAD THERE THAT MIRRORED THOSE OF HIS FATHER, WHO WAS THE LONGTIME LAY LEADER OF A METHODIST CHURCH ALSO KNOWN AS ASBURY.

15:36

AB: Another area has been Male Chorus for, I believe, three to four decades, you were in, have been or were on the Male Chorus?

BJ: I joined the Male Chorus back in 1982 under Dr. Mack Statum and served all the way until 2017 and had to dismiss myself because of a, a bad back and some serious health issues. I plan to return to the Male Chorus, but I'm not quite ready yet.

AB: That's a many, many years of dedication to that group. Why, why, what did, what did it bring to you? What did you bring to it?

BJ: Well, I never considered myself an accomplished singer, but my father was the general manager and a member of a similar group back home called the Asbury Aires. And here again, trying to follow in the footsteps of my father, I thought it would be criminal if I did not join the Male Chorus here at Asbury. To be frank and honest with you my, my father has been a very strong influence in my life and, and I have governed my behavior accordingly, particularly my church behavior.

17:10

AB: You had mentioned being particularly proud of being an usher. Can you talk about why that role has been, in particular, something you're proud of? I believe from 1980 to 2018?

BJ: Right. Here again, some more of my father's [narrator chuckles] influence. I mean, all the things that my father did at Asbury, Lexington, Kentucky, I guess I'm doing here at Asbury. He was an usher, so I decided to be an usher. And, and I saw the importance of ushering and, and so, here again, just another chip off the old block.

AB: What was important about ushering to you?

BJ: Well it's, I think it's important to make sure people are comfortable when they enter your church -- members, friends, visitors. And as an usher, you have an opportunity to provide some outreach and some -- some -- cordiality, if you will, some appeal if you will, so people are comfortable. Visitors might choose to come back based on how they're received. And so it's just important, and you have a, a good chance of making that case, particularly with visitors. -- And all churches need to be as welcoming as they possibly can.

18:43

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] IN ANOTHER LIKE FATHER-LIKE SON EXAMPLE OF CHURCH SERVICE, BILL JOHNSON SERVED AS ASBURY'S LAY LEADER IN THE 1990S AND SAID HE ESPECIALLY ENJOYED DELIVERING A MESSAGE TO THE CONGREGATION ON ITS ANNUAL LAITY SUNDAY.

19:00

BJ: I had a good time being the lay leader because that gave me a chance to be in the pulpit and it wasn't relegated to that. Rev. Matthews and Rev. Hutchins gave me every opportunity to deliver lay messages from the pulpit. And I enjoyed that. I really liked that. It's a matter of fact, Rev. Matthews was trying to get me to enroll at Wesley Theo[logical] Seminary. And I just told Rev. Matthews, I just really didn't think I could do it, but he kept bothering me about it. And, but I never, I never caved in. Should I have? I'm not sure. But, he really thought I should get some, some formal theological education and, and give a chance at becoming a pastor.

19:54

AB: Why did you say no, I don't think so?

BJ: Well, -- I spent 10 years working for Mayor Marion Barry in his cabinet and -- when you spend 10 rigorous years with a high-profile, big-city mayor, I'm not so sure you've got the energy to do much more. And, and I, and I loved working for the District government and working for the mayor. And so, I decided that I was not gonna do what Rev. Matthews suggested I do. But I spent more time trying to help our mayor and I, and I did what I could.

20:45

AB: During your time in DC you mentioned working at the Postal Service and then you became a part of the DC government. So, one of the things you did was have a rather remarkable trajectory. Could you describe that trajectory in DC government?

BJ: Unprecedented. It's, it's, it's never been done before. And it hasn't been done since. And that is the rise from a GS-5 to a GS-18. Unprecedented, to include 10 years on the mayor's cabinet.

AB: And the GS-5 to GS-18, are those similar to federal government --

BJ: Yes.

AB: -- rankings?

BJ: Yes.

AB: Was this -- what was it like to be able to live through that trajectory, especially given that you were one of the first African American employees, you mentioned, being given any opportunity in the DC government?

BJ: In simple terms, hard work [narrator laughs]. But realistically, I convinced myself early on that I should do all I could to encourage other Black professionals to come into the department. It -- we were not properly represented back then.

AB: Which department?

BJ: Sanitary engineering. And, as a result, I did all I could, to be influential, even at this low grade as the first African American engineering inspector that they ever had. But [narrator laughs] I didn't stay there long because three years later, we had the riots in '68 following Martin Luther King's murder. And -- April the fifth, the next morning following the burning, I decided to go and visit my director of the department. And of course, there was no government activity that day because of the riots. But somehow or another I made it down to the District Building and walked into his office and asked him -- could I be of any help. The Department of

Sanitary Engineering involved the distribution of water, the collection of sewage, the collection of solid waste, trash, garbage and whatever, and, and the construction of all the facilities that department needed, such as the sewers, both sanitary and storm, the pumping stations, and wastewater treatment plant at Blue Plains. All of that was a part of Sanitary Engineering. And that's what Sanitary Engineering is. And, the director was in his second week of the job because the previous director, prior to the riots, prior to the assassination, had just retired. And I had a feeling that this new director, which -- who was the assistant director -- or deputy director at the time, before Mayor [Walter] Washington, promoted him to director of the department. I thought he didn't have an idea of what to do. And, as a result, we had a long chat in his office and I had suggested to him what the Department of Sanitary Engineering could be doing to help Walter Washington, who was then the mayor-commissioner. And, and my feeling was that Mayor Washington was going to rely heavily on this guy to begin to stabilize the community wherever. And so, I played a role in that. And, along with the Police Department and the Fire Department, we organized teams to clean up behind the riots after things settled down. And that was three or four days afterwards. And we began cleaning out buildings, clearing sidewalks where buildings had fallen down. -- Sewers had become blocked up. I mean, it was a mess and I was right in the middle of that, representing that department. And -- I, I -- became his special assistant. Keep in mind, now, I was an engineering inspector, watching over construction, all these things the department was responsible for. And I'm in the middle of trying to make it more pleasant after a major riot. And -- we were successful in getting things cleaned up, but not fast enough because a lot of the buildings were hazardous. Walls falling so, Mayor Washington was very concerned about just how deep we would get into the cleaning up of these three riot-torn areas: 14th Street, H Street, and U Street. But we got through it and things begin to settle down.

27:10

Marion Barry put together Price Incorporated.

27:21

Marion Barry at that time, thought that we must do whatever we can to put these young Black boys and girls to work, get them occupied, particularly during the summer. And hence Pride was created. Mayor Washington asked me would I be the coordinator, the city's coordinator to Pride. And I told him, yeah, we'll do it. [narrator tapping his hand on a nearby surface] And that developed the relationship between me and Marion Barry. Pride lasted a number of years, but in the early years, they didn't have -- they got a grant from the Department of Labor, but the grant was only to pay for salaries for these young boys and girls, and I think there were somewhere in the neighborhood of between 8 and 10,000 kids involved here. I mean, they got a big grant and -- but they didn't ha-- and they wanted to clean up streets and alleys, particularly in the inner city, and clean up some of the continuing remnants and debris following the riots. And they didn't have any trucks. They didn't have any tools. Didn't have any uniforms. I mean, all they had was a salary, the base pay that he could pay them. And Mayor

Washington agreed to -- to provide them with these things that they did not have and could not afford. And I wound up being the coordinator between Walter Washington and Marion Barry.

AB: And who was mayor?

BJ: Walter Washington. That's not withstanding the fact that the mayor -- Barry wanted to be mayor one day, and he would be.

29:24

AB: But the overall help that the city needed --

BJ: Mm-hmm.

AB: -- the skills you had and the department you were working in, were -- it was like a --

BJ: Perfect match. And as a result, I developed this very strong relationship with Mayor Barry and that --

AB: -- when he became mayor.

BJ: --continued -- Huh?

AB: When he became mayor.

BJ: When he became mayor. And, I met him, just accidentally on the corner of 13th and E, right down the street here [not far from Asbury United Methodist Church at 11th and K Streets, NW]. He, he was walking to the District Building. I don't know where I was going. But we ran into each other at that intersection. And -- he said, "How would you like to come to work for me?" I said, "I'd very much like to come to work for you." Had no idea what he was talking about. And he says -- "I need a new director of environmental services," which was a forerunner of the old Department of Sanitary Engineering. It got renamed in 1970, for whatever reasons. It became Environmental Services and more comprehensive in its approach. And he asked me did I want the job. And I told him, "Yeah, I'll take it." And, about six weeks later, I was the acting director of the Department of Environmental Services

30:55

and continued working for him in his cabinet all the way to the time I retired in '89.

AB: What would you say are a couple of major achievements that you accomplished in these different departments once you were working under Mayor Barry?

BJ: I think the single most facet of my career is that the work I was able to accomplish with citizens in this city. -- And citizens recognized that [his work], over a 10- to 12-year period, with awards and citations and all kinds of ways to recognize somebody that they had a genuine relationship with. I worked very hard to create that relationship with some 600,000 people in this city. And I think that was the most important, most significant achievement in my whole career. And that is not just working for Marion Barry for 10 years, but to be the recipient of awards, citations and recognition from the citizens of the city.

32:25

AB: You had mentioned that you were very much interested in trying to improve the lives of the employees. And is that something that you worked on through various departments and could you describe that a little bit? What you mean -- what you, why that was important to you, what you did to try to help their lives?

BJ: Well keep in mind, -- we were not -- people who were running the government when I joined it were not the most enlightened people in terms of race relations. With the exception of one or two of -- a 24-department city government, only two were Blacks.

AB: The department heads.

BJ: Yes. This was a all-white operation ran by all white people in princ--, principally a congressman from South Carolina, Congressman Thomas McMillan. So in many cases, people thought that we were one great plantation and, figuratively it may have been. It was not good. And, I think Walter Washington did much to improve it. I think Marion Barry put the capstone on it and made it an up-to-date urban environment, racially and otherwise. People got put in jobs they've never been put in before. I, I'm a clear recipient of that. But that's what the, that was a kind of negative profile we had way back then. Things have changed now --

34:20

AB: Did you see yourself having a role in that change?

BJ: I think so. Without being overly self-conscious about it, I think I did my share of improving the image and the substance and the resources of the city. I worked very hard and others did too.

AB: Is there an example you can give of how that change happened through work you did? Something that in your department you instituted? In one of the departments, one of the many departments you worked in, that you think made a difference that maybe helped it become a true urban city?

35:03

BJ: The Department of Environmental Services and its predecessor, Sanitary Engineering, was a preponderance of jobs that are on the lower end in terms of visibility, appreciation, professionalism. I mean we're talking about people who collected your trash and garbage. We're talking about people who provided your raw water supply. We're talking about people who collected the sewage. We're talking about people who treated the sewage and cleaned it up before putting it back in the river. What we're talking about -- about 3,600 employees that I was in charge of, and -- self-esteem was not wholesale in that department. And I knew it. I had been, been a -- I'd been a recipient of that. It, it, it was no secret that I was the first Black engineering inspector in that department. So what you had was a large number of people who were in thankless jobs, dirty jobs, jobs that were not recognized, per se, as jobs. So we're on a bottom of the barrel in many instances with -- and I thought I could do something about that. And I certainly tried by uplifting employees with awards programs and things like that. We didn't have those before. But I also had a chance because Mayor Washington instituted a program where senior management officials could get their master's degree at no expense to them. And I was one of, I guess about 25 employees that benefited from that program and, and, and was able to get a free master's degree [District of Columbia-sponsored program] over a period of about three years. But my, my, my thesis that would qualify me to receive my degree was based on a management theory by a guy named Fred Hertzberg. He was very popular back then, but his major concern was: if you could eliminate as many job dissatisfiers in the employment market on the job, you could potentially have a well-run, well-managed department. And so I did my master's thesis on the application of the Hertzberg theory and, simply put: eliminate as many job dissatisfiers as you can and increase as many job satisfiers as you are able to. And I took about 45 employees and they became my research base and over a period of three years meeting with them from time to time, we were able to effect change in some of the attitudes of some of the employees. And I think some of that's still going on. I think. I hope.

39:22

AB: Given that you oversaw hundreds of people sometimes, thousands of people other times and budgets of tens of millions--

BJ: Yeah.

AB: Is there something that you would say is your absolute fondest memory of that work?

BJ: Well, when you talk about fondest memories, that takes me way back to my final days in the government. There were a group of former employees, former managers, decided on their own to give me what I considered a very elaborate retirement program -- party-- at, at the Calvert. Is it called Calvert now? Shoreham. At the Shoreham Hotel [now known as the Omni Shoreham Hotel on Calvert Street, NW] There must've been close to 700 people in attendance. Some of 'em were sanitation workers. Some of them were middle managers. Just about the mayor's entire cabinet was there [momentary sound of muffled discussion in the background] and the

mayor made the principal speech. It was about three and a half hours of just plain joy, for me. And it was a capstone of my career and it was a great party and-- people came, in great numbers.

AB: Congratulations, belatedly.

41:18

AB: Of all the things you've done in your life, what has been the greatest blessing?

BJ: Serving a big-city mayor for 10 years, 10 consecutive years with -- moderate to distinctive success. It's been a nice trip. I enjoyed every bit of it. Hard work for sure. But I enjoyed every bit of it.

41:55

MUSIC

THANKS FOR LISTENING TO THIS EPISODE OF ASBURY UMC DC ORAL HISTORIES, A PODCAST OF ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, DC.

THIS PODCAST WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GRANT FROM THE DC ORAL HISTORY COLLABORATIVE, WHICH IS A PARTNERSHIP OF HUMANITIESDC, HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF DC, AND THE DC PUBLIC LIBRARY. IT WAS EDITED AND PRODUCED BY ADELLE BANKS. THE INTERVIEWER WAS ADELLE BANKS. I'M YOUR HOST, KELVIN CHILDS.

PLEASE CHECK OUT MORE ABOUT ASBURY AT [ASBURYUMCDC.ORG](https://www.asburyumcdc.org) OR ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE. YOU CAN FIND OTHER EPISODES OF THIS PODCAST ON OUR WEBSITE, OUR YOUTUBE CHANNEL AND ON VARIOUS PODCAST PLATFORMS.

MUSIC

42:44