

Episode #3 transcript - Cardell Richardson – Asbury UMC DC Oral Histories podcast

Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, DC

Narrator: Cardell Richardson

Interviewer: Pandit Wright

Host: Kelvin Childs

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INTRO CLIP:

“If I hadn't grown up here and been here during the -- during the transition, I routinely say if you drop me out of the sky ask me where was I, I wouldn't have a clue -- because it's so different from growing up where we had -- very low-rise -- [narrator makes clicking sound] buildings -- where development was very slow. -- Where we had -- especially after the riots of '68, -- where we had vacant lots all over the place.”

WELCOME TO THIS 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 CARDELL RICHARDSON, A WASHINGTONIAN, HOWARD UNIVERSITY GRADUATE, AND LONGTIME CIVIL SERVANT. AFTER 26 YEARS IN THE MILITARY, HE HAD SERVED FOR MORE THAN A DECADE AT THE NATIONAL GEOSPATIAL-INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, WHERE HE WAS INSPECTOR GENERAL AT THE TIME OF HIS INTERVIEW. IN THIS CONVERSATION FROM 2018 WITH INTERVIEWER PANDIT WRIGHT, HE DISCUSSES MEMORIES OF GROWING UP IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, SERVING ACROSS THE GLOBE IN THE AIR FORCE AND CHANGES HE'S SEEN IN WASHINGTON SINCE THE 1960S.

WE START WITH CARDELL RICHARDSON'S MEMORIES OF HIS EARLIEST DAYS IN THE CITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF HIS PARENTS.

2:10

Cardell Richardson: Yeah, I was born and raised in Washington, DC -- [narrator clears throat] been a DC resident all my life, well until going into the military. But -- yeah, in the early days, born and raised -- came home from George Washington University Hospital and I lived in that same house my entire life until I graduated Howard University and went into the military. And [narrator clears throat] in those

days it was a little bit unusual to be born and raised and grow up in the same house and not move around. But very fond memories of DC and Asbury United Methodist Church -- as a matter of fact after growing up and having multiple experiences since 26 years in the military, and subsequent to that -- there are two things that feel extremely familiar to me, very just right. One is my family because -- they've been constant and two is Asbury. I know people at Asbury I've known my entire life. They've known me my entire life -- and so Asbury is family and that certainly is a large part of my growing up.

3:31

My dad was a very disciplined person and my mother as well. And I -- and I hasten to say as my, my, my dad is --passed -- when I was only 11 years old, probably the most influential person in my life, quite frankly, was my mother because -- when I was 11, -- she had to be both mother and father. We didn't miss a beat as a -- as a result. And because she was also so incredibly disciplined. But also both of them were very -- [narrator pauses] they were very disciplined about church, and -- Christianity, and doing the right thing. And so [clears throat] that did have an impact on me. I think that's why the military so resonated with me because of the values that I learned at home I found in the military. Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in everything that you do. Those are Air Force values but -- I realized those were my personal values that I learned from home from my mother and my father. So -- it resonated -- in -- so, some of the very same things that I had to do in the military -- discipline, -- appreciating, recognizing, -- giving respect to authority -- those were all values that I learned at home.

4:58

Pandit Wright: Now you grew up in -- turbulent times.

CR: I did.

PW: Let's talk about some of that. What do you remember, starting earliest and then--

CR: Sure.

PW: -- continuing forward.

CR: -- [narrator makes clicking sound] Here's what I remember very vividly. [narrator clears throat] I was in the eighth grade and it was 1968 and -- spring of '68 and -- as fate would have it -- Martin Luther King was killed. -- We were released early -- from school **but** because I -- did grow up in a disciplined household where -- it was very important that -- you know, work ethic was something I learned from both of my parents, my mom and dad, I had a part-time job. And it was -- way up 16th Street -- it was the Webster all-girl -- college, -- female -- ah -- the women's college and ... got on the bus to go to my part-time job -- that evening. -- And -- and -- this story is about -- work ethic. [narrator makes clicking sound] Riots were happening all over U Street. I was on a bus that -- the bus driver had us to get off the bus at 16th and U. I had to -- but I know I had to go to work. So, I walked all the way up to -- 16th and Kalorama. [narrator makes clicking sound] -- I ... and got to work. Really no one expected that I would be there. [narrator clears throat] And we actually, it was myself and another -- guy that worked up there.

We wound up having to stay up there that evening because that evening when we left work, we got on 16th Street and we actually got -- we were shot at.

PW: Oh my.

CR: Yeah. So, we actually had to run down the alley back to Webster -- College. -- They put us up for the night.

7:05

PW: How old were you again?

CR: I was -- so I had just turned 14. Turned 14 in March. This was in April. -- And called Mom, told her that I was OK aaannnd -- and so came home the next day. Likewise, we get on 16th Street. We couldn't even catch a cab. No one would pick myself and this other -- guy I was with, -- couple of years older than I was but also ah -- African-American. [narrator clears throat, makes clicking sound] So we walked all the way home to 5th and L Street, NE. Here's what I remember: as we walked past -- as we walked past Mount Vernon Square, you know, right there not far from ah -- Asbury. I remember how pungent the -- the smell of tear gas was from the day before and -- [narrator clears throat] when I finally got to -- when I got home, and [narrator clears throat] all of the neighborhood stores, all the stores on 8th Street, the haberdashers, and -- department stores had been rioted, had been looted. And -- during the riots they had been looted. And it was just an incredible -- it was just a very turbulent time in America.

8:24

PW: How did you feel as a -- as a 14-year-old seeing your neighborhood and this change. How did you feel?

CR: -- [narrator makes clicking sound] Times were changing. It was pretty radical. I gotta tell you probably without a doubt the most -- I -- I think when I realized anything could happen to anybody, anytime, was when my dad died. Some three years previous. So, it sort of numbed me to really what -- could happen. -- So really, what I was really thinking is -- what does the future really -- portend for -- for Blacks, for people in general? -- When you take a peacemaker like Martin Luther King and someone would so violently gun him down. So -- I think it was a rude awakening for everybody. -- And certainly a 14-year-old, but for anybody.

9:20

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[NARRATION/BRIDGE] CARDELL RICHARDSON GOES ON TO TALK ABOUT HIS HIGH SCHOOL YEARS, WHERE HE DEVELOPED AN INTEREST IN ARCHITECTURE.

CR: I went to Terrell Junior High School and -- Terrell, although it was an incredible experience, -- seventh, eighth grade, ninth grade, -- wonder -- wonderful time in my life, -- wouldn't want to go back there, -- but it was a wonderful time in my life, but I realized it was -- I wanted ah -- something -- more.

Different. -- I was always interested in architecture and I found out that McKinley High School unlike Dunbar [High School] -- had certain programs. -- [narrator makes clicking sound] Something like a pre-med, pre-engineering, pre-architecture, pre-art, pre-oh, and music and music. And -- so I went there because of their -- pre-architecture program.

PW: How does a young Black boy get interested in architecture?

CR: I had taken mechanical drawing in the seventh grade. And -- there was -- something about the -- [narrator makes clicking sound] the sense of mechanical drawing that just -- completely resonated with me. It was the perfect combination between -- math -- and art. -- Because th -- there is a lot of geometry in -- in mechanical drawing and it was very neat; it was very clean; it was very precise. And [narrator clears throat] I've always been interested in buildings and construction. And so, -- architecture just seemed to be the right thing. So, when I found out about McKinley having a program in -- architectural drawing, I was very intrigued. -- I applied. I was accepted. It worked.

11:28

And I realized that -- the whole process of architecture was exactly what I really -- enjoyed. -- Ev -- even, I would routinely wear a tie.

PW: To school?

CR: To school. And because you -- you -- sort of get into the zone of being an architect. [narrator makes a clicking sound]

PW: Black instructors?

CR: -- Yes. -- Oliver Stover was -- was my architecture -- well, mechanical drawing, the architecture drafting instructor. And -- he was very pedantic. He was very hard to -- he was very hard to please. He was someone that you had to get it precise or -- he would draw circles -- around the corners -- if they -- if they were just a millimeter off. -- So he was very precise. So, if you could do well and I remember -- I had this very intricate -- mechanical drawing project that I had to do and -- [narrator makes clicking sound] I spent a lot of time on it. -- And I -- just -- wasn't -- sure how I was I -- quite frankly I didn't think the guy could be pleased at all. I got an A.

PW: Wow.

CR: And that was motivation enough for me to -- it -- it gave me the confidence to know that I could -- thi -- this was something I was -- that was in my -- wheelhouse. -- And did that for three years. -- Applied to -- many -- schools of architecture up and down the East Coast. -- And I decided --

once I got the -- acceptance from Howard, why leave town? And so, I went there and -- the five-year architecture program and it was probably -- without a doubt one -- I think one of the best programs around.

13:38

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] IN 1977, CARDELL RICHARDSON ENTERED THE MILITARY, WHERE HE USED THOSE ARCHITECTURAL SKILLS. HE TALKED ABOUT THE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES HE GAINED IN THE AIR FORCE.

13:57

PW: How did you feel being a captain in the Air Force? This had been your goal. What was it like when you achieved it?

CR: -- it's incredible because you -- you get a tremendous amount of -- leadership, responsibilities and opportunities. But you get a lot of opportunities to just -- to do your craft. I was a base architect -- down in Texas -- then I moved to another position where I was doing building energy audits and -- [narrator makes clicking noise] you know as a captain -- pinned on captain in Korea and -- I had a huge responsibility -- for -- all the environmental engineering. -- Subsequent to that -- went to Andrews Air Force Base where I actually -- ran a huge engineering division. So, you -- I learned -- I was given a lot of responsibility but -- given a lot of -- opportunities and -- but you're given a lot of opportunity to develop confidence in what you can do.

15:00

PW: So, your family lived around the world? What's that been like for you?

CR: Yeah -- that's been incredible. -- uh -- I've lived in Korea, -- moved -- whole family, we lived in Europe, we've lived -- in Germany, we traveled all over Europe and -- what it's shown us is that people are... as much as we are different, we are more alike than we are different. And -- it really -- there's -- a sort of -- a basic to -- all people and that is -- and we've had -- you know, we've had neighbors all over -- we've lived all over the country. -- Out in Midwest, -- the Southwest, -- the East Coast and we've learned that [narrator pauses] -- it really is important to just be considerate. Treat people the way you would expect to be treated and regardless of -- how bad you hear people are, people are basically -- good. -- And I think if you look for the good in people, you'll find it. [narrator clears throat] -- We've had assignments where we've only been there for a couple years at a time. [narrator clears throat] In the military, you make fast friends and so that means you have to be a friend. And so, -- we've -- we've had acquaintances that we've had -- for decades.

16:34

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] BUT DESPITE LONG-TERM FRIENDSHIPS, CARDELL RICHARDSON NOTED THAT THERE WERE ALSO TIMES HE FACED RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE MILITARY.

16:49

CR: The context is -- some of the -- some of the situations I may have had as a -- African-American, as a Black person, as a Black officer in the, in the Air Force. And I remember in many cases I would find myself in places where I was the only -- Black officer -- for that matter, the only Black person in a -- in an environment. I do remember when I was -- going on a remote assignment to -- Republic of -- Korea, in South Korea. I was on assignment there for a year, remote from my family. -- And we had a very -- specialized project to -- bed down this weapon system called F-16 and they needed certain -- there were certain -- logistical requirements and bedding down this or preparing for this weapon system to come into country. And as a civil engineer officer I was responsible for going around to these area sites to make sure that -- it was -- set up accordingly. And I do remember meeting -- one -- officer who -- was -- of the majority race, a white person, who -- who asked me -- I'm there with two other individuals that are junior to me -- and -- he was in the middle of telling us something eh -- that was -- classified. And he stopped and said, looked at me, not the other individuals, and said, "Are you cleared?" And -- I just shook my head and said "Yes, I am." I -- but in my head I was thinking: You only asked me. You didn't ask anyone else. -- That was common fare. -- And it was -- it was those kinds of things that happened on occasions by certain individuals -- that would give you [narrator pauses] -- give you pause, -- would give me pause. -- But likewise, in the military -- 'cause incidentally the military was, quite frankly, -- where race relationships -- was really -- where it really -- matured. And the military is -- set the standard for the rest of the -- for the rest of America for the most part. So, I have -- you know equal stories about individuals that -- saw someone who was -- working harder, doing better than -- his peers and -- elevated me to -- officer of the quarter, officer of the year -- who also happened to be someone of a different race.

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19:58

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] IN 2003, CARDELL RICHARDSON RETIRED FROM THE MILITARY AFTER 26 YEARS WITH THE RANK OF COLONEL. HE CONTINUED IN FEDERAL SERVICE, WORKING FOR THE NATIONAL GEOSPATIAL-INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, WHERE HE PREVIOUSLY WAS DIRECTOR OF DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AND EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY AS WELL AS DIRECTOR OF THE AGENCY'S INSTALLATION OPERATIONS OFFICE. HE HAD CONTRIBUTED 41 YEARS OF GOVERNMENT SERVICE AT THE TIME OF HIS INTERVIEW.

PW: You've been recognized for some pretty significant achievements. Can you tell us about them?

CR: [narrator makes clicking sound] Yeah, I have. -- [narrator clears throat] Most recently -- it was a Presidential Rank Award. It's -- it's a a award that's given to senior executives in the government -- top one percent. [narrator clears throat] I was told last year I was going to be nominated. That was an honor in itself, and -- I was good, but then -- in December -- I was home -- on leave during the holidays and I

got a call from the director saying I was -- I was actually selected so I was awarded the Presidential Rank Award -- under this current administration. --But eight years ago -- nine years ago, in 2009 -- during -- President -- President Barack Obama's administration -- I was honored with the award the first time and so -- so I'm somewhat proud of that.

PW: For what criteria are you selected? What puts you in the -- even in that conversation?

21:51

CR: So, it's a meritorious -- rank award for leadership. And it's a body of work. -- Then, the first time it was for a body of work of over -- six years for -- This time, it's a body of work for over the last nine years. -- As I mentioned, since I've been in this agency, -- in a civilian capacity as a senior executive, I've had multiple opportunities. And, I've actually had -- four -- this is -- my fourth, fifth director so -- it -- it's not as if it was a single director that has -- recognized this. So, -- [narrator makes a clicking sound] at every opportunity -- I've been given -- I've been blessed to be able to do -- to do a -- good job. A job that's considered, I guess, well enough by those that are -- certainly observing, that I've been recognized for it, so. So, I'm honored, I'm proud, I'm pleased -- but I -- give -- I give a lot of credence to my team but I give all the -- credit to God.

23:06

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] LIKE OTHER WASHINGTONIANS, CARDELL RICHARDSON HAS OBSERVED THE STRUCTURAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN HIS NATIVE CITY. HE TALKED ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION ON NEIGHBORHOODS HE'D KNOWN SINCE HIS YEARS GROWING UP IN WASHINGTON.

CR: I routinely say if you -- [narrator makes big sigh] if -- you -- If I hadn't grown up here and been here during the -- during the transition, I routinely say if you drop me out of the sky ask me where was I, I wouldn't have a clue -- because it's so different from growing up where we had -- very low-rise -- [narrator makes clicking sound] buildings -- where development was very slow. -- Where we had -- especially after the riots of '68, -- where we had vacant lots all over the place just where -- businesspeople would not invest and -- kids growing up here had to make the best out of what they had. -- Also -- when I think about some of the -- some of the books we had in -- public school and the lack of -- really good Black history because it was written by -- people who didn't know Black history. --[narrator clears throat] But I've -- I've -- I've seen an incredible change. -- A lot has changed. There's been a lot of development. You talk about gentrification -- the demographic here in Washington, DC, has changed immensely. -- I remember when -- purportedly there were over 90 -- it was like 90 percent Black. I don't think that number -- is exactly what it was, I think it was something closer in the 70s, but I know now it's -- probably closer to the 50s or -- or less. But you can -- but there's been -- a development explosion where, I remember walking from 5th and L Street NE, to 11th and K Street NW, and as I mentioned, low-rise buildings. A lot of my friends who went to Terrell Junior High School and went on to Dunbar they lived there [narrator clears throat], all of those are gone. [narrator clears throat] Commerce has happened. That's all high-rise condos **and** high rent, I might add. -- We've seen the streets developed --

for goodness' sakes -- the trolley car, which is just a novelty for a certain demographic, -- that would have never been put there -- back when I was growing up and it really was -- a chocolate city.

26:03

PW: Can you contrast the -- the youth experience that you had growing up to perhaps what your kids and -- and what you are seeing for your grandkids right now?

CR: Yes. -- When I was growing up -- majority of -- I would say the larger population of Blacks --were not going to college. -- Something happened, -- I would say probably just about the time my wife and I were graduating high school -- there was a real push, a realization, -- I would say a consciousness that said [narrator makes a clicking sound] if Blacks were ever going to do anything, -- education was a must. And I saw more and more of my contemporaries going to college as I did. And previously that was not the case. --

PW: They would go to the military or --

CR: They would go to -- they would generally -- go in the military. -- They would go imm --immediately into the wo -- to work for -- Bell Atlantic, or --

PW: Government?

CR: Government, or -- construction work. -- But most people didn't see themselves -- going to college, blue collar workers. And then at some point -- that -- changed. I think the riots had a lot to do with it. -- That is, where people were no longer waiting for opportunities, but they were pushing the edge of the envelope. -- If you remember in '64, the Civil Rights Act -- was passed and then in '65 the Voting Rights Act passed. And so I think a lot of that had to do with the progression, a lot of -- Martin Luther King's March on Washington for equality. And I think -- so -- I think -- people like myself, my wife, my siblings, I think we were benefactors of -- of that struggle -- quite a bit. So, to contrast that, -- many of us also went to -- historically Black --universities and colleges. As I said, I went to Howard University and my wife went to -- Morgan.-- Most of my friends that I graduated college with went to -- places like Cheyney State and --[narrator makes clicking sound] Morehouse and -- places that were -- historically Black universities, Howard University as I mentioned. Fast forward to uh-- to my kids, -- and after --seeing the world and seeing what's out there --, and we ironically wound up back here -- in Centreville, Virginia, both of my kids went -- graduated from Centreville High School. And both went to schools -- and went to school on scholarship. My son, athletic scholarship -- to Wake Forest. -- Very wonderful small school. Extremely well-endowed. It's not -- a historically Black university. -- My daughter could have gone virtually anywhere -- She went on -- academic scholarship. She wound up going over to -- going out to Iowa State -- predominantly -- white. Matter of fact, I think the African-American population was three percent. [narrator makes a clinking sound] -- And she went out there, it's a ... it's a big school like 20,000 and she went out there on a scholarship for -- chemical engineering. The point is -- it proved that -- Blacks can compete on any level, anywhere, with anyone. -- And I don't think that we always knew that when I was coming up and -- but thank God for historically Black schools because they always knew that, and it was -- it was certainly an opportunity to -- to do well and -- and to progress.

30:20

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[NARRATION/BRIDGE] AS CARDELL RICHARDSON HAS SEEN CHANGES IN HIS CITY AND IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIS FAMILY, HE ALSO SEES A HOPEFUL FUTURE FOR HIS CHURCH.

PW: [interviewer makes clicking sound] What do you think is the next chapter for Asbury?

CR: You think about this: Asbury is almost as old as Washington, DC. Washington, DC, has only been here since 1790. Asbury's been here since 1836. So -- we're coming up on 200 years. -- And -- we've gone through a lot. I mean just edifice alone is -- we're on the third one. Expect it will still be there but the point is -- these are -- times have changed, they've been changing, they didn't just start. -- What's in the next chapter? I think as long as we can continue to -- be a place where people can worship, as long as we can be a place where people, -- where we can serve, -- as long as we -- recognize our community and really provide service to that community. -- [narrator makes clicking sound] And as long as we're a faithful church, as long as we're a faithful church --

PW: What does a faithful church feel like for you?

CR: [narrator makes clicking sound] Putting God first. Which means -- whatever we do, because you know Asbury, as we talk about it, I think as we think about it, we think about that gray structure on the corner of 11th and K Street, but the church is -- in each one of us. And I remember -- I remember a young minister -- [narrator makes clicking sound] when we were out in Kansas, Tyrone Gordon, saying, "Sometimes -- you are the only -- [narrator makes clicking sound] people will only see Christ when they see you. Sometimes you will be the only Bible anyone will ever read. So, you have to present yourself as such -- and they need to know there is a grace of God in all of us but it has to be exemplified in each one of us." Which means the way I present myself -- and then when I tell someone that I'm an Asburyan or that -- invite them to Asbury, they be -- may be inclined to come because they see something -- that -- would draw them to that -- that edifice. But each one of us is the church and we can't be confused about that and so, I think we -- when I say faithful, [narrator makes clicking sound] I think we have to put God first and we have to have faith, that if we're doing his will, Asbury will not just survive but thrive.

33:12

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34:15