

I See My Light Shining: An Oral History of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Larry [Darnell] Phillips

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2023

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Larry Darnell Phillips conducted by Ellery Washington on January 10, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: An Oral History of Our Elders Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center

Session Number: 1

Narrator: Larry Darnell Phillips

Location: Albuquerque, NM

Interviewer: Ellery Washington

Date: January 10, 2023

Q: This interview is taking place on Tuesday, January 10, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, just north of Tramway [*phonetic*], Northeast Heights, north of Tramway Manal [*phonetic*] at approximately two o'clock. So, I'd like to just start by asking you to say your full name, and when, and where you were born.

Phillips: Yes, my name is Larry Darnell Phillips, born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, January 26 of 1952.

Q: Thank you. Larry, would you mind telling us if there are stories that you've heard or things that you know or even imagine about your family before the time that you were born?

Phillips: Yes, before I was born. my parents, Rubin Nell Phillips, and my mother, Ernestine Phillips. My dad was born in Waxahachie, Texas, in 1918 to Richard and Willie Mae [Toler] Phillips. He had three siblings, his sister, Willie Mae, and two brothers Richard Phillips and John Nell Phillips. My dad, Rubin Nell Phillips was the oldest. Willie Mae and Richard, my grandparents, divorced. I'm not sure of when they divorced. And they lived in Waxahachie. They divorced in Waxahachie. Willie Mae migrated to Slayton, Texas.

She was raised with two siblings Roy and Josie Toler. I don't know that much about my grandfather, though. My dad at the age of eighteen years old, graduated from Evans High School in Slayton, Texas. By age twenty-one, he was employed with the Santa Fe Rail Company as a mail and baggage man at the Lubbock Texas Depot. He held his position of employment for a period of three years there. While still employed with the Santa Fe Railroad Company, he transferred to Slayton, Texas.

Q: Do you know much about Slayton, itself?

Phillips: I don't know that much about Slayton. This was during the early years. I don't know that much about it, other than once a year, we'd go on vacation there, stay with my grandmother for possibly a week, sometimes two weeks.

Q: Is it a big, small town?

Phillips: It's a small town and it was segregated. The Blacks, and the few Spanish, they all lived on one side of the tracks, whereas on the other side of the tracks, I guess you'd call them Europeans, or the whites, lived in a very nice area of Slayton. And where we were, well, it was a rundown area, not because they did not have pride in what they had, but sometimes economics will dictate what you have.

Q: And so, your dad then getting employed for the Santa Fe Railroad and transferred to Slayton, is the place a hub, or how did that work?

Phillips: Yes. Okay. So, my dad, he transferred to Slayton and he moved around quite a bit. By being on the railroad, quite naturally, I guess that's going to happen. So, he was able to see a lot of the country. His route was from Chicago [Illinois] to Los Angeles [California]. And on his route, he came through Clovis, New Mexico, Albuquerque, even down into Belen [New Mexico], on his way to Los Angeles. And he saw different areas that he liked, and Albuquerque was number one on his list. So, he really liked Albuquerque. And he had told his mother that one day, this is an area where he would like to stay.

Q: What did your dad do, what was he employed as?

Phillips: On the train, he was a porter and also a cook. That's what he did on the trains. So, it gave him a chance to—actually, by being the cook, from what I understand, he would go out and ask people, “How did you like this dish?” Or. “How did you like that?” And that would inspire him to either make it better or make adjustments.

Q: And so, you said he had said to his own mother, that one day he wanted to move to New Mexico, Albuquerque. When did that actually happen?

Phillips: Oh, I don't have the dates. But he was a pretty young man. I don't have the exact dates of when all of that transpired.

Q: And did you talk to your dad ever about what it was like, leaving Texas and his family there and coming to New Mexico?

Phillips: Yes, he wanted to leave Texas because of racism. There was a lot of racism there against minorities. So, he did say, “Well, I want to get out of Texas. I want to move to New Mexico,” which he did. He moved to Clovis, New Mexico. And he liked Clovis. The only thing about Clovis was it was segregated also. And that was a disappointment for him. My older brother and sister, they were born in Clovis. And this happened—actually, my brother was born in 1949 and my sister was born in 1948. So, during that time, he did not want them to grow up there in Clovis, because of the segregation, and coming through Albuquerque, he saw that it was a little bit better town. He did not see the segregation here in Albuquerque.

Q: That he'd seen also seen in Clovis, you said, right?

Phillips: Correct.

Q: So, Albuquerque was somehow freer.

Phillips: It appeared to be freer, to him. And so, he really liked that. So, he came to Albuquerque in 1949, and he wanted to set up stakes here, in other words. So, he started looking for a home here. And they found land. They call it the Northeast Heights. And they like the area. And so my dad said, “Well, we'd like to build a home here.” Well, the sad thing, he was unable to get financing. So, he had to go to Houston, Texas. While he didn't go there, he found a Houston,

Texas investment company that said they would lend my mom and dad the money to build here. So, that's how my dad was able to get the funding to build his home here. Well, he ran into another stumbling block. After they got the money to build, they could not find a builder in Albuquerque to build his home. So, what my dad had to do is go outside of Albuquerque, and he found a Black builder. His construction company was called the Great Southwest Construction Company out of Arizona. And the builder's name was J.S. Jones. J.S. Jones is the man that built the homes on Virginia Street.

Q: On Virginia Street. So, it was a Black contractor from Arizona that built these houses for Black residents, then, in Albuquerque.

Phillips: Correct.

Q: And your dad had to get that financed outside of Albuquerque in Houston.

Phillips: Correct. Correct.

Q: Just to situate that neighborhood a little bit as we're talking, if we think of Albuquerque as divided by Route 66, in some ways, was historic route 66, or Central Avenue between North and South, right? And then East and West starts to be pretty close to the Rio Grande River, not quite the dividing line, but that's a landmark that people naturally recognize. Then, that neighborhood, then, would be north of Central, or 66, and quite a good distance east of the Rio Grande.

Phillips: Correct, yes. At one point, I'm not sure when, but I guess some of the people that my dad knew here in Albuquerque, they were telling my dad, "Well, why don't you build here, down close by the railroad tracks?" Which would have been I guess you'd call the Broadway area? Because of my dad's experience in Texas, he wanted to be as far away from railroad tracks as he could possibly be." So, that's why he went further east, from the railroad tracks to Broadway area. And so that's how that pretty much was established.

Q: And you said that then you were born in Albuquerque, right?

Phillips: Correct.

Q: Were you the first child born in Albuquerque, or how many kids in all in the family and where were they born?

Phillips: Okay. Oh, Rubin and Lavonne, were born in Clovis, but as my mom and dad migrated to Albuquerque, I was the first born in Albuquerque, and my sister, Ruenette, was the second born in Albuquerque. And by the way, I was born right in the home that my dad had built in the middle bedroom. It was a three-bedroom home, but I was born in the middle bedroom. And, actually, from what I understand there were two neighbors that helped my mom deliver me, which was Mrs. Bryant, and also Mrs., oh, I can't think of her name right now. Hopefully I can come back to that. But there were two ladies, Mrs. Bryant and Niecy Mangrum that helped to deliver me.

Q: Was that a common occurrence in that neighborhood, that the neighbors and people around were there for each other in those kinds of ways?

Phillips: Very much so. We were like a family there on that street. There were sixteen Black families on that street. There were eight homes on one side and eight homes on the other side. And I do have, I guess, the list of the neighbors. [*Flips through pages*] Okay. And by the way, from what I understand, the Palmer's, their home was the first home built on that street. And the Palmer's home was also used as the model home. The first home on the east side was the Hillys. The second home was the Atkins [*phonetic*], the third home the McMurrays [*phonetic*] the fourth home was Mr. and Mrs. Howard [*phonetic*] then the Lambs, the fifth home was the Lindseys [*phonetic*], the sixth home was Mr. and Mrs. Jones [*phonetic*], the seventh home was Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, and the eighth home were the Mangrums [*phonetic*]. Then on the other side of the street were the Robinsons [*phonetic*], the next home would have been the Liggins, then the Barnetts [*phonetic*], then the Palmers [*phonetic*], then the Claytons [*phonetic*], then the Bullhorses [*phonetic*], then Mr. and Mrs. Bryant [*phonetic*], and then the Morgans [*phonetic*]. They were all Black families. As kids growing up, we'd get out and play and families would be out, watering their lawn or whatever, they'd wave, or talk to us. It was a sense of community. I also remember, Lomas and Wyoming [Bldv] were dirt roads as a young man growing up.

Q: And those are actually two streets now, Lomas being parallel to Central or Route 66, as we mentioned before, and Wyoming, those are really two streets now that almost feel like they're near the middle of the eastern portion of the city. And so you're saying at that time, those were

dirt roads. So, the neighborhood that you were raised in at that time that was surrounded actually by dirt roads?

Phillips: Yes. And to my knowledge, when my mom and dad decided to live in that area, it was tumbleweeds. My dad said there were jack rabbits, and also rattlesnakes. But they decided to pitch their tent there, in other words.

Q: It sounds like it was far out from what was ostensibly the center of the city at that time.

Phillips: It was. It was far out. I guess you could say they were visionaries. They saw something that maybe, who knows, maybe the next person would not have been able to see. There were horses out in that area, too, wild horses. So, that gives you an idea, if you can picture that.

Q: Wow, that is something to picture. One of the things that I remember speaking with you about that we've both learned in recent times was that that property was part, initially, of a Black family homesteader tract. And I wonder if that's what made it even available for Black families at that time. Do you know anything about how they were able to buy that land there?

Phillips: I don't have much information on that, other than I believe the Ballous' a black family owned property from, I think, Pennsylvania to Wyoming, and from I believe Central to Constitution, if you can picture that square.

Q: So, Larry, you've mentioned the word community. It sounds like this was just, for you, growing up, a wonderful community space. And I just wonder if there are particular stories or memories of your family and yourself in that community that you'd care to elaborate on?

Phillips: Yes. My dad was married, previously, to a beautiful woman by the name of Jewel. My dad and Jewel, had two sons, beautiful brothers, Cloyd and Choice. On my mother's side, she had two daughters, Linda and Gloria from a previous marriage to Booker Holley. So, when they got together, there were two brothers and two sisters before Rubin, Lavonne, myself and Ruenette were born.

Q: And was that also in New Mexico, those other marriages?

Phillips: No, my dad's marriage was in Texas and my mom's was in California.

Q: And your other siblings, were they, in some ways, a part of that community in Albuquerque or not so much?

Phillips: Not so much. Cloyd, Choice, and Linda, they came around briefly. They were much older. Linda and her sister lived in California. Cloyd and Choice lived in Texas. But like I said, they were much older than us. So, they did not spend much time in Albuquerque or in New Mexico as a whole.

Q: With your community, and with the wild horses and all that was going on there, it sounds like it was a childhood that was surrounded by lots of people, possibly lots of other kids. What was a typical afternoon in your childhood like?

Phillips: Yes, by being, I don't know if you'd call it a small neighborhood or not, sixteen homes is not really that many homes, but we found a lot of different activities. There were several kids at my age, and we'd find things to do. There was another street called Vermont, and there were a few homes there. But there were three lots that I remember that we would play flag football, we would play baseball, and believe it or not, we even found a way to play basketball. [Laughs] So, it was truly a sense of community. A lot of laughter, just a lot of fun. We just didn't know actually much more outside of Virginia Street. And when we did go outside of Virginia Street, to a certain extent, I felt a little lost, to be honest with you, because of my core group of friends and family members.

Q: What was school like in that time, then? I mean, if there were sixteen houses in that community, was there in the nearby elementary school? What was that environment like, for you?

Phillips: Yes, I went to a school called La Mesa Elementary School. I guess that was about a half a mile to a mile from Virginia Street, and my mom would load us up in the car and would take us to school. My experience there, well, my first great experience anyway, was I was petrified because I didn't know any of the kids. But I grew up with several kids. You know, I think kids at a young age like that, they do not know anything but love towards one another. We were taught

to give love and other kids will give love. So, I went to La Mesa from first grade to the fifth grade. And my sixth-grade school, I went to a school called Hayes-Embudo [Junior High and Elementary School]. Embudo was an elementary school from sixth grade to eighth grade. I believe that's what it was. Or was it seventh? But anyway, from—no, I'm sorry, from seventh to the ninth grade was a middle school, from seven to nine. Okay, so that's where I went to middle school. It was across the street so I walked to school.

Q: And so it was also the kids from your neighborhood?

Phillips: All the kids from the neighborhood.

Q: And kids who were outside of your neighborhood from outside your neighborhood.

Phillips: From outside, correct. Correct.

Q: And what was that mixture like for you?

Phillips: It was majority Anglo, and I'd say twenty-five, thirty percent Hispanic, five or ten percent Asian, Black, Native American, I would say that was the makeup. And all of us, from my memories, I really did not experience prejudice that I know of.

Q: Did you like school?

Phillips: I liked school. The sad thing is I'd only do enough that was required. And I guess my folks, they worked, I can always remember them working. So, they did not push us very much for education. They were always working, that I remember. And I don't know if it's because of such a large family, or just trying to make ends meet, but that's what I remember as far as that part goes.

Q: Were there activities or other things that you were involved in?

Phillips: Sports, possibly. Sporting events. I played football, and ran track. There was baseball. I enjoyed running track. I was pretty good in track. I was pretty fast and was able to long jump. I did get, what do you call it? Little certificates, lettering, they call it lettering. So, I lettered in track at Hayes, which I think I did pretty well.

Q: So, after Hayes, which is, we're up to middle school or junior high school, whatever it was called at the time, you went to high school. Where did you go to high school? What was high school like for you?

Phillips: Yes. Okay, I went to Manzano High School. And boy, that was a good experience for me. I don't know if it's because of Hayes, but kids from Hayes also went to Manzano, I excelled in track at Manzano. I lettered all three years, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth, in track, and I did real well in the long jump. My senior year, I did have scholarship offers but I broke my arm, and after I broke my arm, a lot of that kind of went away, I lost my scholarship offers.

Another big impact in high school was when I was fifteen years old my mom passed away, and that's a pretty hard experience for a young man. So mentally, I don't know if I lost the drive or what it was, because my mom was my cheerleader, my dad always worked. And when I would participate in track, my mom was always there for me. My dad, like I said, he was never there. The love was there, but I remember he was always at work.

Q: You mentioned a bit about the history, your father's history and being a porter and cook on the Santa Fe Railroad line, which in and of itself is a historical marker. Are there things about your mother's history that come to mind?

Phillips: Well, my mom, I only knew her for fifteen years. What I do remember, Mrs. Bryant would come over because it was such a community of family. I remember the knocks on the door and Ms. Bryant would come and say, "Ernestine, we're going to make some dinner rolls for dinner tonight." And my mom would always say, "Come on in." I remember them making dinner rolls, and some of the other neighbors would come over, they'd cook. And there was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Hotterman [*phonetic*]. He would come over because he loved my mother's fried chicken, he would always knock on the door and say, "Ernestine, are you having fried chicken today?" [*Laughs*] And my mom would say, "Not today, but for you, I will and she would fry chicken." So, you know, little things like that really meant a lot for a little boy growing up, seeing the love that was just expressed through my mom's cooking, and the laughter. That's something that I can picture today, there was a lot of laughter in our home. And to me, that's the sign of joy. That's what I remember.

My mom and dad, I must say they had a lot of fun together. Some of the memories that I have, my dad chasing my mom in their pajamas, and he would catch my mom and they would just laugh and just embrace one another. And then another time, there would be a song come on that my mom liked, or my dad liked, and they would kind of shuffle a little bit, get up there and dance. That brought a lot of joy. It just showed what two people can do. Another instance I remember, when we were outside, my dad was showing my mom different moves as far as when he was working in the yard. It was like a stutter step. *[Laughs]* And my mom would get a laugh out of that, also. But it was just good times that I remember those two.

Q: So, it must have been hard.

Phillips: For her to have passed at such an early stage in my life, it was devastating. That was, for a young fifteen-year-old kid to experience that, that was very hard. And my younger sister, she was thirteen years old. It was very hard on her, and also, my other brother and sister. It was just completely unannounced. And it is something that all families, I guess, go through at different times in their lives, some kind of traumatic experience, as far as that goes.

Q: Do you feel like your family healed from that? Or how did you move on?

Phillips: I would say we healed after my dad remarried. I'd say it was about a year and a half, almost two years after my mom's passing. My dad remarried to a beautiful lady. Her name was Myrtle. And she walked right into the family and just took over with love. When we needed advice, she was willing to give us advice. And nothing harsh, very soft. If I did something

wrong, she would point her finger at me and say, “Larry, come here,” and say, “Did you do this?” I would say, “Yes, I did.” And she would just explain why it was not the right thing to do. And after her explaining it, you wouldn’t want to do it afterwards because of her soft nature. But she treated us all equal. If we needed to go somewhere she would take us wherever we needed to go. If we wanted something special for dinner, or if it wasn’t us asking, she would say, “How would you all like this or this for dinner?” She was just a beautiful soul. Beautiful soul.

Q: You’ve talked a lot about love. I’ve noticed that that’s a word that has come up for you a lot during the course of our conversation, the love that you felt from your parents, but also the love that was in this community that you lived in and the way that you were taught to love, that you carried with you through elementary school. And I just imagine also that there must be, really, a lot of stories about the engagements in that small, tight-knit community. Are there events or stories and things like that, that have stuck with you about growing up there and engaging with the other kids and adults in that neighborhood?

Phillips: Yes. I must say I had a real close—well, I had several close friends. Robert Morgan was very close. We were like brothers. Victor Smith, very close. Morris Henson, Mike Henson, we were like brothers. And what we would do, if our parents could not take us to school, when we were in elementary school, we would all walk to school. And I felt a sense of security. I’m sure I gave them the same feeling. And on our way to school, we’d either have a basketball or a football and we would throw the ball as we were walking to school. So, it was all about fun. And once we’d get to school, then quite naturally, it’d be a few minutes before the bell would ring and then we’d all go our separate ways.

But I can say that when I had physical education, PE, I had a coach that, in my opinion, I think he treated me a little bit harsh. And I don't know if it's because of me being Black or not, I don't know. But we were out practicing running during exercises. And he pointed to me and he said, "Larry, you're talking too much. Stretch your arms out. And you hold them until I tell you to put them down." And I did what he had told me to do. I was in the third grade. And so, PE, I believe, was for half an hour. I had to hold my arms out for that whole half an hour. And I was crying. And after the bell rang, he told me to put my arms down. He said, "I told you not to talk during class." I thought it was a little bit harsh. I had a great experience during school, except for that incident. And it has stayed with me to this day, today. I remember it like yesterday. And I can see his face, right as I'm speaking now.

Q: It sounds like a standout incident in an otherwise marginally positive experience.

Phillips: Yes, I do feel that it was over the top. I don't think any child in third grade should have to—I think you can verbally discipline a child better than what I went through. But it was that one incident. And it's something that has stayed with me. Yes, it has. But now on a better note, after elementary, junior high and high school, I had some great experiences during high school. I ran track, and also, I played in the band. I was fortunate enough to have my own car [*laughs*] and I would drive to school and I'd take some of the neighborhood kids to school. And when I'd get out of school, I'd also work. My dad instilled in us, if you want anything in this life, you have to work for it and do it honestly. And that's what I did. I worked at a restaurant called the Sundowner. I was a dishwasher while still in school. It was only a few hours during the week,

but I saved my money. That's how I was able to pay for my car. I learned, I was self-taught on how to tune my car up, the little simple things, change the oil, antifreeze, or a flat.

But now, speaking about being in high school. So, I did a lot of these things on my own. And I met a beautiful, beautiful young lady when I was in high school, and her name was Becky. And she encouraged me in a lot of different ways, not only letting me know that there's nothing in this world that you can't do, but when you have support, which she supported me, it encourages you to persevere, I guess you could say. Because we all need a little bit of a push. But yeah, we had a lot of fun together. We played games together; we'd go to the movies. We'd go bowling, we played what they call putt-putt, I don't know if they even call it that today, or miniature golf. So, we would go and do that. And just the fun we had there.

And my friend Robert Morgan, his girlfriend, Jean, we'd all like double date, and go to the movies. Back then there was only one pizza place that I know of, and we'd go and have pizza, or doughnuts. And back in the day, we would even go and watch a movie. But I can't remember what the theater was called, other than it was a drive-in movie theater. We would drive in, stick the speaker on the window and watch the movie and listen to all the sound. I thought that was the neatest thing. And yeah, we had our own privacy that way. So, there were several theaters like that around Albuquerque. I don't care where we went in this town, I never felt threatened. I just felt accepted. I don't know if it's because we were so small numbered and not a threat to anyone. I don't know if that's why but it did not matter where we'd go, everyone was very friendly. After high school I worked at a store called McClellan's as an assistant manager. I was blessed.

Q: So, I just wonder now, around what year are we talking now? High school was around what years for you? And then, you're saying that you graduated and you started working at McClellan's?

Phillips: Well, actually, let's see. That was in [19]70, [19]71. Yeah.

Q: When you graduated.

Phillips: Yes. I graduated from Manzano in 1970. A little bit after that. I started working at McClellan's. And I was the assistant manager there. My manager was from Arkansas. I would oversee the lady workers, who would fold the clothes and serve the customers. The manager would stay upstairs.

Q: What did McClellan's, as a company, what kind of company were they?

Phillips: It was a five and ten cent store. It was geared to families. I had a bad experience there. The manager called me upstairs to the third floor. He sat me down, And he said, "Larry, I have a problem And I said, "What? What's wrong? What's going on." He said, "Larry, I do not want any of the ladies on the floor speaking Spanish." I said, "Oh." He said, "I want you to tell them to stop speaking Spanish." I found that to be awfully rude or bad, because these are Spanish-speaking people. And he was Anglo. And I'm a young man. So, I did what he wanted me to do. And I did not think that was right. So, that's something that has stayed with me also.

But other than that, I had a great experience there. The ladies there, we got along real well. They respected me. And I think when people respect you, you're able to just loosen up and just give. But I think when you've lost respect for a person, you kind of clam, or close in, a little bit, because you don't know what that person is going to do or say to you that can maybe hurt your feelings. So, yeah. I had a great time then. From there, I worked at UNM [University of New Mexico] Data Processing Center as a sorter. As a young man, I was making decent money back then. We would drive around delivering all the paperwork to the different departments after it was printed off the computers. I would deliver and help sort all the paperwork. Now, mind you, I'm only what, maybe twenty, about twenty years old. So, yeah, I enjoyed that. And actually, a friend of mine, Robert Morgan, from the neighborhood helped me to get that job.

Q: So, that friend from the neighborhood, earlier on, you talked about this proper little gang, or group, that hung out together. And that began in elementary school, you seemed to grow up with these folks. Tell me, if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about how those friendships progressed, did you maintain through high school, and afterwards those friendships? And are there any stories that represent what it was like to be in that group of friends?

Phillips: Yes. Robert, and myself, we were close from, actually, babies up and to this day, we're in contact with one another. Robert lives in Stockton, California right now, but we stay in touch with each other. Growing up, we had a lot of similarities. We had similar cars. When we would get ready to go see our girlfriends, we would discuss where we were going, or if we wanted to meet up. And if we'd meet up, sometimes after our date, at maybe, I don't know if my dad would like this, 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, we'd go and have something to eat, [*laughs*] knowing that

we should be home around that time. *[Laughs]* But we would do things like that. And we would even go to movies together. If not movies, outside of the neighborhood, we were always doing something in the neighborhood to pass our time, either riding our bikes or playing basketball, playing baseball, all the sport activities, right there in the neighborhood. We just did. It was a sense of community.

Oh, my goodness, even when we've done things that were wrong, I can remember we were at one of the neighbor's house, visiting two young ladies. And we were not supposed to be there. We were there just having fun, playing, shooting pool, and laughing. We had snacks. While we were shooting pool, we hear a knock on the door. One of the young ladies goes to the door, she says, "Dad is home, Dad is home." They had a sliding glass door in their den, I run out the sliding glass door, I was not thinking, I close the sliding glass door, my friend Robert runs through the glass door. Oh, I felt terrible. He was not hurt. But we both take off running down the street. He runs to his house, I run to my house. Can you believe it? We both thought we were safe. Mr. Robinson walks down the street, knocks on my door, tells me to come outside. I come outside, he goes to Robert's home, knocks on the door and tells Robert to come out. The reason he knew it was us is the daughters, Linda and Jackie, told him that we were there. So at that point, he has us walk back up the street and he points out to us what we had done. He let us know that our parents would hear about it, which they did. And we were disciplined for that. It was a good lesson we learned. But the closeness of Robert and I, if we were in trouble, we were in trouble together. *[Laughs]*

Q: And you said you were disciplined for that. Do you mind sharing what discipline was in that neighborhood and with your families?

Phillips: Yes, my folks, they would use I guess you'd call the paddle. But my dad, when he heard about it, actually my mom told my dad, and when my dad found out about it, the way he would discipline us, he would always have us go to our bedroom, pull our pants down, and lay across the bed. I cannot remember how many lashes I had, but I had enough to know not to do that again. So, that's the way my folks would discipline us. Usually my dad was the one that would spank us. My mom is the one that would let him know what had happened that day. I believe Robert's family was pretty similar to that.

Q: You mentioned that after high school you went to McClellan's, you worked at Data Processing Center at UNM, at the Data Processing Center complex. How long did that job last and what kinds of other experiences after high school, in the time of your life after high school, did you have?

Phillips: Okay, yes. When I worked at Data Processing, I worked there, I believe, about a year, year and a half. Then I started part time at UNM. I went to UNM for about close to two years, I was working different jobs trying to sustain me while I was at UNM. I did get a pretty decent job a little bit after that, in retail. It was called K&G Men's Store. I liked the store. I worked fifty to sixty hours a week but I'm a young man. I did the window displays and they sent me to Denver [Colorado] to learn how to do that. And I used to dress pretty prominent figures here in Albuquerque, a man by the name of Val De La O [*phonetic*], he had his own TV show. I used to

dress him. He would come into the store and he'd asked for me. He would buy anywhere from five to seven suits at a time, two or three sports jackets. I felt honored, having that opportunity to work with someone like that. But he'd come in every three months or every six months. I enjoyed KG's because you had to dress nice. I mean, it was a clothing store of men's nice-suits, sports coats. I really enjoyed that part of my life, a little bit after high school. I was fortunate enough to be offered a manager's job in Dallas, Texas at the Redbird Mall.

Q: And this was still at K&G Men's Store?

Phillips: Yes, this was still at K&G Men's Store. They gave me a couple of weeks. They flew me to Dallas from Albuquerque, and they flew me back, and they gave me two weeks to decide whether I wanted that store or not. Another gentleman that I used to dress at K&G Men's Store, was [James] Jim Posey. Jim Posey used to work at General Electric Aircraft Engine Group. He would come into the store and I would dress him as well. He'd pick out his suits or sport coats, or his slacks. While he's trying on the different clothes, he asked me, "Larry, how many hours are you working a week?" I said, "Fifty to sixty hours a week. I don't have Saturday or Sundays off," which didn't matter, because I was making a decent paycheck. Jim Posey said, "Well, Larry, I could get you on out at General Electric. You could work forty hours a week, and you'd have your weekend off with your family. And You'd make real good money doing this." That sounded pretty good. So, Jim explained some of the different jobs that were available. He said, "Come on out and put in an application," which I did, that following week. I put in an application. And within a few days, they called me and told me that I had gotten the job.

So, that was a turning point in my life. This was in 1978. So I turned in my resignation at K&G Men's Store. Within a week, I was working for General Electric Aircraft Engine Group here in Albuquerque. I started in June of 1978. I was able to work there up until my retirement. That was in 2010. So, thirty-two years of employment at General Electric. So, at this point, I've been retired twelve years.

Q: So, it sounds like that was, just in thinking of your interest in cars and mechanical things, did that somehow also enter your way that you enjoyed—did you enjoy working there, at General Electric?

Phillips: Well, actually coming from K&G Men's Store, General Electric was a big change for me, because I'm a people person and I was able to mingle with housewives looking for clothes for their husband or their sons, or whoever. And the public atmosphere I enjoyed. K&G Men's Store was a factory. I'm sorry, not K&G Men's Store. General Electric was a factory. That was kind of a rude awakening for me. All you would hear were machines running, grinding fan cases, or parts, or whatever. It was a different environment. But the pay was very good. So, I said, "Well, I'll stay here because of the pay." I saw an opportunity to have a lifetime career there. So, I worked at GE, but early in my life, like I mentioned, Mr. Jones always said, "If you can, become your own man," and that has always stuck with me.

I had an opportunity to save up money for an investment. There was a company out of Houston, Texas, selling franchises for an aircraft cleaning called Fly Clean and New Mexico could use their services. So, I did my research. At the time, I was married. I said, "Well, look, I'd like to

buy this franchise.” So, I went through all the training programs in Houston then I came back to Albuquerque. During this whole time, I’m still working at General Electric. GE was real generous as far as our vacation time. So, I centered all of this around my vacation time to fly to Houston for a week to get my training, and I was able to rent a truck to come back to Albuquerque, towing the equipment. So, I set up shop here in Albuquerque, while still working at General Electric, on the graveyard shift, which was from 12:00 to 7:00 a.m. I was able to run my Fly Clean business during the day until I’d go back to work at 12:00 p.m. till 7:00 a.m. It was a lot of work, it was hard, but I was able to do it for a while.

Q: So, you started working at General Electric, you said, in ’79?

Phillips: [19]78.

Q: Seventy-eight. And then, how long was it before you also started your own business, the airplane cleaning?

Phillips: It was three years after, so, it was right around, let’s see, 1980, no, I’d say ’82, ’83, I think in that timeframe.

Q: And then so from ’83 for a period onward, you were actually basically running your own business, and then also working at General Electric.

Phillips: Correct.

Q: Those are very long days,

Phillips: Very long days. And I must say that's where I think I failed at Fly Clean because it was so many hours, you have to make a choice. General Electric gave me all the benefits, all the security I needed, whereas Fly Clean, I'm trying to build a business. Plus, the insurance, the liability, was through the roof because you're around commercial airplanes, Learjets. So, the insurance was very, very high. Plus, I did have my cousin, Jerry Phillips, my brother-in-law, Robert Mosby, my brother, Rubin Phillips, and my son, Kevin, all helping me to build this business. So, there was a lot going on during that period for me.

We did well. But what started happening, one of the places that I was cleaning their aircraft, they started catching on to the process. By them doing that, they learned what we were doing. So, they had people inside their company start doing what I was doing. So, they started cutting us back further and further until they said, "Larry, there's no more work for you." So, they took that part of the business over. So, I said, "Okay." Albuquerque Public Schools, we started cleaning their Albuquerque Public Schools trucks to keep the business afloat, which they did not pay as much, but I was able to keep family members employed. I was able to get a contract with the Unser brothers. We were able to clean their fleet of trucks they used to take their Indy car out to race. It wasn't enough, but it was another contract I was able to negotiate to get.

And then also, they call them the TIP trailers, I was able to get a contract with TLP, Truck Leasing Program. I would clean all the fleet trucks that would come in from different parts of the

country. So, the business actually was going downhill at that point, until I had to close the business. It was just too much for me.

Q: And so that business began in '81-ish, around that time, and it lasted until?

Phillips: Oh, let's see. It lasted for about, I'd say close to three years. I'm not real, real sure on the date, but about three years, I believe.

Q: And during that time, it sounds like a lot of your family became involved in the business and that kind of thing. And so, what was your family life like in general during those years? We're talking about the early through the mid to late eighties.

Phillips: Okay, my personal family life?

Q: Just how were you with your personal or beyond? Just, what was sort of like your social and family life like in Albuquerque during that time?

Phillips: Oh, when I had the business, I must say, it took a toll. Because I was always working.

And I had a young son at that time also, and I did not see him that much. Because when I'd go home, I'm exhausted. Plus, when I did clean aircraft, I was on a twenty-four-hour notice.

Sometimes, take for instance, the *Journal Tribune's* Learjet will come in, say at 11:00, 12:00 at night, but they wanted the plane clean by 2:00 in the morning. But I'd have to be at work at 2:00.

Well, sometimes I'd call in sick and go and clean that plane. So, yes, it took a toll on my family life.

Q: It sounds stressful.

Phillips: It was stressful. It was stressful, yes. But it was an experience. And that's what I can tell others, if you're planning to do something better make sure you've planned it out. You know, I thought I had it planned out, but I'm telling you, things will come up that is not foreseen.

Q: You said that Mr. Jones planted this idea in your head long ago, yet another figure from your neighborhood growing up, right, Mr. Jones. Who was Mr. Jones? It sounds like if he planted something in you that stayed for a long time, that he might have been a significant figure for you.

Phillips: Mr. Jones, when I talked to Mr. Jones, he was always encouraging. I'd sit at his kitchen table, and he'd ask me what I was doing, or what did I plan to do? Well, I told Mr. Jones, there's a magazine called *Jet*. And I would like to be the distributor here for *Jet Magazine*. And he said, "Larry, that's a great idea." So, I was able to become a distributor for *Jet Magazine*. And I would go around the whole neighborhood selling *Jet*. And the good thing about it, everyone bought the *Jet* from me, so, I would learn how to do my little bookkeeping and my reorders on my *Jet Magazine*. So, that was a blessing. So, that was teaching me. But this was early on. I was, oh, right around thirteen, twelve years old, I was really young at that point. And another thing that I did, I sold the Kirby vacuum cleaner. So, a lot of people I'm sure are familiar with that. But I did pretty well with that, too.

Q: Tell us about the Kirby vacuum cleaner and how you managed to sell them. Are there any stories about selling the Kirby vacuum cleaner?

Phillips: Well, the Kirby, you have to go into homes. My mentor, the man that took me under his wings, would take me out with him and he would show me how to do it. So, he would have appointments set up and we'd go out on a Saturday or a Friday, depending. And so we would take our equipment, and give a demonstration of all the different things that a Kirby will do. It'll shampoo the floor, it'll clean your window sills, the carpet, if you have hardwood, there's an attachment for each one of these different items. Then at the end, either the demonstration was good enough to sell, or not usually the equipment would actually sell itself.

Q: How old were you when you were doing that?

Phillips: Around seventeen or eighteen.

Q: But some of these things seem like they were inspired by Mr. Jones's notion of being a self-made, self-employed man.

Phillips: Mr. Jones, I had so much respect for him. He would encourage me to, whatever your dream is, go out and do it. You can do it. Mr. Jones, he owned Vanity Cleaners And back in that day, I could not figure out, how could a Black man back in that day even dream of owning your own business? Because we were always taught, go out and get a job. And Mr. Jones proved that

you can do it on your own. And I even feel that to this day, If someone was telling me, “Larry, would you be interested in this adventure?” I would at least have an ear to listen because I think God gives us all a gift. Hey, you don’t have to depend on somebody, you can do it on your own. And actually for—I hate to single it out like this, but I would say it’s a little extra harder for a Black person in a world that’s really not geared for us.

Oh, and I must add one other thing. The black comedian and activist Dick Gregory, out of Chicago came out with a powdered health drink. It was called the Bahamian diet. Well, that was up my alley. So, I said, you know, I’m going to see if I can market that here in Albuquerque. I did pretty well with that also. I think people, in a way, once they find out what it represents or who’s behind it, they can cut you off. I did sell it in our neighborhood. I must say, my neighborhood, they welcomed whatever I chose to do. But when I’d go outside my neighborhood, it was hard to get anyone else to buy my product.

Q: So, Larry, we’ve been talking about your life here in Albuquerque, being born here, going to elementary, middle, junior high school, high school, starting to work in Albuquerque and a continuation of that work. Were there times that you actually thought of leaving Albuquerque, moving somewhere else?

Phillips: Yes.

[*Doorbell rings*] [*dogs barking*]

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So, I was asking if there were times that you actually thought of leaving Albuquerque and living somewhere else.

Phillips: Yes. California. My best friend here in Albuquerque, Robert Morgan, we both had decided, “Hey, why don’t we just move to California?” I told him, “Yes.”

Q: What year was that and how old were you? Do you remember approximately when that might have been?

Phillips: Let me see. It was around 1972, ’73-ish, in that timeframe. Little bit after high school. So, we did, we decided to move and we did. So, what we did, we followed each other out to Los Angeles, California.

Q: By car. So, you drove.

Phillips: Yes, we drove out there. Robert, his older brother, Eddie Morgan, was living there. And Eddie said, “Yeah, you guys, come on, you can stay here until you get on your feet,” because we were planning to move out there. Well, Eddie was living in the Crenshaw [Los Angeles, California] area, which at that time, I didn’t know it was heavily Black, and I believe Latino also, but more so Black. Well, I thought I’d be fairly safe in that area. Well, we get there to Los Angeles and it’s a little bit I believe, after the Watts Riot [August 11-16, 1965] real close to that

era. And when we get to California, we stayed that night, and the next day we said, “Well, let’s get out and venture out.” We went downtown Los Angeles, looking around. We were out all day.

That night, when we got back to Eddie's apartment, all of a sudden, police swooped in on us, coming from, I thought, everywhere. I saw them coming from the back of me, the sides. And I’ve never had a shotgun or a pistol pointed at me in my life. So, coming from Albuquerque to experience something like that was very traumatic. So, what they did, they had us put our hands up in the air and spread eagle. So, they saw the New Mexico tags, I guess that may have enhanced it, I don’t know, but they did a search. There were at least four of them. They were searching the inside of the car, the trunk of the car, looking under the car. In New Mexico at that time-mace spray was legal. They found the mace spray in my car. And they picked it up, showed me, put it in my face, and they said, “You’re under arrest for this here.” Well, okay. So they handcuffed me, take me to the police car, and they take me to jail. Well, I stayed in jail for about two weeks, almost two weeks for that. It was the county jail.

And the only reason I was able to get out is, I don’t know if they called New Mexico, or what, but they said, “You are free to go.” But I do remember this, being in jail with a lot of African American males. I don’t know if they had a section for us or just how it was laid out. But I do remember that. And that alone can change a man or a woman, if you’ve never experienced anything like that. And that was my first experience. And when I got out after a couple of weeks of being in jail, I went straight to my car, got my luggage, and I told Robert and Eddie, “I’m out of here.” I hit the road coming back to Albuquerque after that. And What it did to me, once I got back to Albuquerque, mentally, it made me paranoid. So, just that alone can change a person’s

life. But I did not hold on to it. After I got through the initial shock or whatever, I went back out beating the streets looking for a job. And one of the things that was on my mind while I was doing it, I thought about what Mr. Jones told me. He said, “You keep on moving. Keep on moving.” And that’s what I did. So, yes, I did venture out, but I never really did after that.

Q: And since that time, then, you’ve stayed here.

Phillips: I’m sorry?

Q: Since that time you’ve stayed in Albuquerque?

Phillips: Yes, yes. But I have gone to other states vacationing and things like that, but mindset of leaving, to live? No. I think that may have had a big reason why. I really do.

Q: So, you’ve had a very full life in Albuquerque, it seems to me. And there are things that in meeting here at your house, before, and seeing how you live here, and just hearing your story now, there are so many things that you’ve mentioned from your past that are really so much a part of your present. I think most notably and maybe most importantly, is you mentioned a young woman named Becky, that you met in high school, a beautiful young woman that was a part of your life then, and that you felt was really encouraging, who now is sitting with us as your wife.

Phillips: Yes, she’s helped me to do a lot of things in the positive realm, things that I would have not normally done. For instance, I don’t know if you could call me a workaholic, at one time. I did not care much about my health, or how I ate. All I thought about was making a bigger

paycheck, because you can work weekends and get time and a half or double time, or even what they call Sputnik time. Becky showed me a different path to take. She was a walker. She had a golden retriever, called Jubilee. She and that dog faithfully would walk every week, if not every day. And I would notice that. And she asked me to go with her. So, I said, “Yeah, I’ll do it.” Because I was not a walker. I was not. And at that time, I was around 230, 240 pounds. Yeah, I was up there. I’m only five nine and a half, so I was carrying a little bit of extra weight. But we walked from our house, I’d say about a quarter of a mile, half a mile, and I would have to stop. And she’s ready to keep on going. She’s looking at me, “Really? Why are you stopping?” Well, out of shape. My leg was hurting, because I was not a walker. So, we turned around, and we came back. And she gave me a few days’ break and we got out there again. And I did a little bit better, but I was huffing and puffing.

And my diet. She was letting me know, my diet has a lot to do with why I was in the shape that I was in. So, I started changing my diet, just watching the things that she does. And to this day, from our house now, sky’s actually the limit. It really doesn’t matter. We can walk, walk, and walk. And I attribute a lot of that to my wife for that.

Q: Did you and Becky from meeting in high school have a continuous relationship all of this time, or what was the sort of arc of that relationship?

Phillips: Well, we were young and hardheaded. It was a roller coaster. We did different things. She had a strong will; I had a strong will. And some things she wanted, some things I wanted, and vice versa. And so we decided that we should just be friends most of the time. And that’s

what we did. And that seemed to have worked, even though we had a loving relationship before that. But it came to a point where we were like competing, and it just wasn't working. And so, we split off. We split off for years. And we both got married. We both got married to different people. And in that time span, things just didn't work. And I feel it was the Lord letting us know that we were still available, because I had gone through a divorce, and she had gone through a divorce. But she lived alone for many years. I was still married, and then I had gotten a divorce, and then we got into contact, just talking. God works in mysterious ways. How He knew, only God knows that, but we were able to communicate and the rest is history. *[Laughter]*

Q: And when was that? When was it that you began talking again?

Phillips: My dad passed away in 2011, January 16. He was ninety-two. I did not know that when my dad was in the rest home, Becky was going there praying for my dad. But some of the caregivers, when I would go see my dad, said, "There is a lady who comes and prays with your dad." They gave me a little bit of a description of how she looked. They never did say her name. But I found out it was Becky, that was going to pray with my dad. So, that alone was a miracle. So, she was able to see my dad in his last days.

Q: That's a beautiful story.

Phillips: So, it resonates with me to this day.

Q: I've also noticed that in just chatting with you and with Becky that your family has grown as well, over the years,

Phillips: Yes, yes. Our two sons, we lost one of our sons recently, actually in 2018. But sometimes out of bad, God can bring so much good. The Lord has given us ten beautiful grandchildren. Also, from our oldest son, Kevin, we have three grandchildren. And on top of that, we have three great grandchildren. So, I feel that our testimony in this life will be what our life experiences have been. Even though like I said, we lost one of our sons, tragically, and in 2020, we lost a grandson, tragically. So, I guess that's another area at some point we can either talk about or we just leave it behind us. But life is beautiful when you look at all the beautiful things God does, when He does take one of your loved ones. He brings good out of bad.

Q: So, Wow. Thirteen grandchildren and three great grandchildren. The beginning of quite a legacy. You are continuing quite a legacy. So, in a very light way, one of the other things I've noticed that remains in your life is cars. Having been in your garage and seeing that Corvette, it seems to me that your interest in cars has maintained all this time as well.

Phillips: Yes. Fortunately, my wife and I talked about it, she says, "You know what? Your interest in all of these toys, we need space for these toys." So, we had a detached garage built so that I can tinker and play with my toys. There's a Corvette club here in Albuquerque. The New Mexico Corvette Club. And we're praying that at some point, we'll be able to put this Corvette in this car club. We're going to renovate it. There's things to do, but we want it in top shape. It's

a 1990 Corvette. Not many were built in that year. So, we're going to restore it and get it up and running. It runs now, but like I said, I want to restore it to its old glory.

Q: And as now we're sort of arcing a little bit backwards in time, as we discussed earlier Virginia Street has become a historic site. And I'm just imagining that that must feel really wonderful. And I'm just wondering if you have any feelings about that? Wonderful, in a sense, I think that you've mentioned how meaningful that neighborhood is to you, you've mentioned how supported you have felt by that neighborhood, Mr. Jones, the other families there, so it is becoming a historic site, I mean, were you a part of that? How did that come in? Just what are your feelings about that?

Phillips: Oh, yes. From what I remember, Mr. Jones, my dad, and I believe it was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Lamb, they had talked about preserving that area. And so Mr. Jones, and my dad had said, "Well, look, let's research this and see what all it entails to get it put on national history format." So, they did do their work on it. There was a letter put out, and the letter said, "We need so many people's names to be put on it, and why should this area be designated as a historical site?" So, we did all the paperwork, turned it into the city, and didn't hear anything for a while, for a long while, then it comes back. And they say, "Well, we need this, this, this and this done in order for it to be on the register." You need sixty percent of the residents in agreement. Well, a lot of the older, original people that lived there either died or moved on, and Spanish people, and I think one or two white couples moved in. Well, they had no interest in it. They knew nothing about the history. So, it fell on the wayside.

Well, here recently, I don't know who was involved in it, but a letter came out. And the letter said that there was an interest of putting it on the national historical register. But they needed, I believe, a majority. There was a website and there would be a meeting, I believe it was on the 14th of last month, which would have been December. Well, it all went through. I understand a hundred percent of people voted for it. Finally it is on the register. It passed. It's a National Historic Site. I take my hat off to our neighbors who worked so hard trying to get it to this point. There's a lot of potential there.

Years ago, I had an opportunity to go to Atlanta, Georgia, where Martin Luther King was raised at his home, and that neighborhood is on a historical site. I had the opportunity to go into Martin Luther King's home, and the home next to his. It's a tourist site. My vision is that something like that is possible here for the Virginia Street. It's in such an early stage right now. For the ones that are living, I'm sure we will sit down and see what's best for that area.

Q: And so, the home that you were actually born in, will be preserved.

Phillips: Correct. Praise God for that. Praise God for that. And it's so dear to me, I guess because I was born there. My mom was unable to make it to the hospital. And like I said, there were a couple of ladies that helped to deliver me, Mrs. Bryant, Janice Mangram's auntie Niecy. So, I'm just so thankful for those two ladies. And after I was delivered, the doctor came in and, to my knowledge, they took my mom to, Presbyterian Hospital. So, I do have special feelings.

Q: I think that's pretty amazing. It feels like a kind of honor to have one's place of birth, one's home neighborhood preserved, and knowing it will be there. And now, even going even a little bit further back than that, as we kind of cycled near the end of our conversation for today, is there is, I've noticed that right on the table next to you, there's an object that you brought down when I came in today that belonged to your father. Could you just sort of tell us what that is?

Phillips: Yes, my dad, he was a cook on a train, and also a porter. Well, I still have my dad's hat that he wore when he was a porter and the bell he would ring when the train was leaving the station. This was way in the fifties. So, my dad would be hanging on the side of the train, making sure the steps were all placed in the train and there were no more passengers trying to board, the train was clear to take off. And my dad would ring this bell.

Q: And so may I ask as we close today, first, I just want to thank you so much, Larry, for this time, for sharing your family history with us, for even helping to create this important archive of voices and images. And as we sign off for our conversation tonight, can I ask you to ring the porter bell so that we can hear it, just to say that we're clear, for leaving?

Phillips: Most certainly. And I want to have the opportunity to thank you so much. And it's been a blessing to be here with you. And this is the bell that my dad would ring on the train in the early fifties. [*Bell rings*]

[END OF INTERVIEW]