I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Leonard Waites

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2023

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Leonard Waites conducted by Ellery Washington on June 20, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders 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: Leonard Waites | Location: Albuquerque, NM

Interviewer: Ellery Washington | Date: June 20, 2023

Q: Today is June 20, 2023, and this conversation is taking place at the African American Performance Center. I'd like to start just by asking you to say your name, and when and where you were born.

Waites: My name is Leonard Waites. I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 11, 1953.

Q: November 11, 1953.

Waites: Yes.

Q: And would you mind starting telling us a little bit about the stories you may have heard, or the things that you know, or even that you imagine by piecing those things, you know, these little details together, about your family, from before the time you were born?

Waites: Okay. My family that I knew of originated from—in Marlin, Texas. My great grandmother, my grandmother and my dad are from Marlin, Texas, which is right outside of Waco, Texas. My family were sharecroppers. My dad came to Albuquerque with his three brothers, headed to California. They were bricklayers by trade, and my dad stopped here to build

a hotel, which was the Western Skies Hotel, and the other two brothers continued on to California. Well, when he stayed here—I mean, he worked here, and he decided to stay here, make this his home. So that's kind of where we—we got started.

Q: What year was that? Do you—

Waites: Oh, gosh, that would have to be—I want to say it was before I was born, so it'd have to be 1950—well, my sister was born, so it would have to be in 1952, somewhere around there. You know, because I was born in 1953, so—

Q: So were you the first, then, of your family born in Albuquerque?

Waites: I was the second. I was the second. I'm the third child, second son out of seven. So there's seven of us.

Q: And your mother's side of the family?

Waites: Our—you know, the history on my mother's side, there's very little we know about my mom. She was also born in Marlin, Texas. I never knew my grandfather or grandmother on her side. They died at an early age, she was more left to live with her grandmother, you know? So I knew her, my grandmother. My great grandmother, I'm sorry, it would be my great grandmother. Her name was Dolly, Dolly Allen [*phonetic*] is her name, and my mom's maiden name is Lovey Fae Allen [*phonetic*]. So I got to know her in this little small town.

Q: Are there any particular memories that you have of your great grandmother?

Waites: You know, one of the biggest things about her is that she had these couches with plastic on them, and she wouldn't allow us to sit on those chairs, you know. [*Laughs*] One of the things I truly remember about her, she was a little, bitty small lady, you know. And me being dark-complexed, she was a light-complected, you know, so she kind of catered to the lighter cousins and stuff like that, you know. But I remember, growing up, that we weren't allowed to sit on those plastic couches, you know. And she would yell and scream at us if we did, you know.

So, but, and I also remember, too, she was a diabetic. And she asked me to give her a shot in her arm, you know? And it's, like, oh, okay. But I would do it, because she asked me to do it, you know. But she interesting. The other one that was interesting was my great grandmother. My great grandmother used to drink Jack Daniels every day, and dip stuff, you know? And she would say, "Junior, go get my can," you know? And she had a little coffee cup, coffee can, and I'd go out and get that can, you know. "Oh, junior, put some dirt in that can," so I'd take that can back outside, you know. [*Cell phone rings*] And—I thought it—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So she'd have you get the dirt for that can?

Waites: Yes. She said, "Junior, go out there and put some dirt in that can," she would tell me. So I'd do that, "Oh, grandma, I have to carry the can back outside, put some dirt in it, and bring it back inside," you know. But like I said she—she dipped snuff and drank Jack Daniels every day, you know. But one of the things that when she passed away, she left me an acre of land, and I was the only one out of six kids that was mentioned in her will for this acre of land in Marlin, Texas, so I still own it to this day, you know? I just pay the taxes on it, you know. But it's not land that produces anything, or anyone live on it, but I own it. I think that's my reward for going and get that spit can, you know? [*Laughs*] Real funny, but she was a sweet lady, you know?

Q: And you have six other siblings?

Waites: Yes, I do. Yes, I do.

Q: And what was it like? What are some of your earliest memories, growing up in Albuquerque?

Waites: Well, you know, having six siblings, six other siblings, you really don't realize how big your family is, you know? We all took care of each other, you know? The older ones took care of the younger ones. Our house, our original house was on Spencer Street in the Kirtland Addition, and it was a two-bedroom house. So we had two sets of bunk beds, girls on one side and boys on the other side, in this one room, and my mom and dad had their own room. And I remember my younger siblings, they would put the younger, or the baby in a drawer, you know? Pulled out a drawer and put her—that was her crib, you know, in a drawer. We didn't think anything of it,

that's just the way it was, you know? But like I said, I'm the third child, second son. I have a older sister and an older brother. And I am with four other siblings behind that, you know.

Q: What was it like in the Kirtland Addition during those times?

Waites: Oh, that was the best. That was the best neighborhood, the Kirtland Addition. The Kirtland Addition, we had, you know, we did everything in that—you know, being outside was the greatest thing in the world. My mom used to say, "Come in the house." That was a punishment, because everything happened outside, you know? And the kids, you know, we all grew up together, we all lived—kind of lived together. You know, I had—one set of families, one family that lived on the end of the street, his name was David Cuspein [*phonetic*], you know, I'll never forget him. His mom used to make—he was Hispanic—his mom used to make tortillas and beans every day, you know? And we would say, "David, go get us some tortillas," because she'd make a stack of tortillas, you know? And we'd go get the—we'd sneak the butter out from my house, and he'd bring the tortillas, and we'd slap that butter on those tortillas and—but she made tortillas and beans for his dad, every day. That's what they ate, and that's what we ate, you know.

But we all grew up together. We—you know, we were probably poor, but we didn't realize we were poor. Everybody had something to eat. If you didn't eat here, you ate over at So-and-So's house, you know? So it was a great neighborhood, you know? Again, like I said, being outside was the greatest thing in the world. Being inside was a punishment. Because, you know, there was no fun being inside.

Q: What are some of your earliest memories of school, and that sort of thing?

Waites: School, early school—well, again, being in the Kirtland Addition, I went to elementary school in Lowell Elementary, which was on Sunset, which is by the University of New Mexico [UNM]. We'd have to walk to school every day. And one of the things that I remember growing up is that some of the older guys, you know, they used to chase us, you know? Chase us and what they called "pink belly" us, you know, they get you on the ground and beat your stomach. And what we would do was, we would strategically put rocks under bushes and tumbleweeds and stuff like that. And when they chased us, if we got to those tumbleweeds, man, we'd throw the rocks at those guys! We'd get them back, you know. But my childhood was great, that part of my childhood.

But we also, we had to move. We moved from the Kirtland Addition to the Northeast Heights, you know? I think I was in the sixth grade at the time, sixth or seventh grade. Seventh grade. So things kind of changed a little bit for me, because I was—grew up coming from a all predominantly Black neighborhood to a predominantly white neighborhood, where we and one other family was the only Black kids in this whole school district, you know, so it was kind of different after that.

Q: Where was that neighborhood?

Waites: Well, that was across Wyoming—I'm sorry, Wyoming and Eubank. It was across Eubank, in the Snow Heights area. And a little history on that, Albuquerque didn't allow Black people to live in certain neighborhoods during a period of time. They moved—you could only live up to Wyoming, and you couldn't cross Wyoming. Matter of fact, there's a covenant to this day that said that you couldn't sell houses to Negros or I think it was Asians at the time.

Well, anyway, my dad was fortunate enough to find a person to sell him a house in the Northeast Heights. And I remember to this day, we moved into that house at night. He made sure that we moved all our stuff in that night, so the next day, there were seven little Black kids running around the neighborhood. And he told me that they had a neighborhood meeting, to let the neighborhood know that Blacks are moving into that area. I don't know what the outcome was of that meeting, but we never did move. So that's how we went to Manzano. That's how we grew up.

Q: So there was this neighborhood meeting that happened.

Waites: Yes.

Q: What did it feel like to be in that neighborhood?

Waites: Well, the neighborhood in itself was a great neighborhood to grow up in, you know, being as young as I was, like I said, I think it was—I was in the seventh grade and going to Jackson Junior High School, I don't know if you're familiar with that, but—

Q: What year would that have been? Or what, like, late, early '60s?

Waites: Yes. It would be early '60—well, let's see. It would have to be around '65, '66 timeframe.

Q: Mid-sixties.

Waites: Yes, the mid-'60s, yes, because I think I was in the eighth or ninth grade when Dr. King was assassinated in '68, so it had to be around that time. But the neighborhood was great. You know, I remember that all the parents were real—they enjoyed us being around, you know? They helped us out wherever they could. I would join the Boy Scouts, one of my neighbors was a Boy Scout leader, and we got to do things that I probably wouldn't have never done in my lifetime, if it wasn't for them, you know? We lived—a Jewish family was across the street, and a Mormon family was around the corner, they had seven boys in their family, you know. And the Jewish family had five, so it was very competitive, you know? I think that's where my, I became an athlete from playing in the streets and doing the things that we did with those kids, because it was fun. Plus, growing up in the Kirtland Addition, too, we were very competitive as a kid, too. So running and jumping and doing all those athletic things that you do growing up. Yes, it was great, yes. I think I had a great childhood personally.

Q: Did you find there was any difference, for example, though, in going to a school in the way you were schooled, growing up in a neighborhood where there were more Black folks, versus being in a neighborhood where you and your family were among the few Black people there?

Waites: Yes. I do, and I thought about this years later, you know. The level of education, I know going from the Kirtland Addition, which is a pretty predominantly Black neighborhood and going to an all predominantly white neighborhood, I knew I was behind a little bit. You know, these kids were, like, doing the things that I should have been doing, but we didn't get there yet, you know what I'm saying, as far as math and reading, and different things like that. So it was real tough for me, you know? I had to really buckle down and try to get it done. And what really helped me to do that was being an athlete, because, you know, in the seventh grade, eighth grade and ninth grade, that's when you start playing football, baseball and basketball, and doing all the things that you do. And we had to maintain a certain grade point average, you know? So I had to really buckle down, and learning was a little harder for me than it was for my white neighbor, it came pretty easy for them. But for me it was a little bit tougher, you know. But we had to do it, if I wanted to play, you know? So I had to buckle down there. But there was a distinct difference in education, I saw, or I felt, especially when it came to reading and math, and those type of things.

Q: So you said sports and athletics. Which sports were you the most interested in?

Waites: Well, in high school, in high school, I lettered eleven times. So that means I did all the sports, you know. I played football, basketball, baseball and ran track. So I did that. But, you know, growing up in the Black neighborhood, that's what we did every day, you know? We competed every day, on baseball—played baseball in the street, played football in the streets, we did it all. I was fortunate to become a great—not a great, but a good athlete in high school. I played basketball, I was All City, All State in football and Basketball in Manzano, ran track. You

know, like I say, we did it all up there. Fortunate to get a basketball scholarship in college, so it was good. Yes.

Q: So during high school, were there any particular memories that come up from your time at Manzano? People or teachers or events?

Waites: Yes, there's so much. There was so much. I tell you, one of the things I do remember and do recognize today is that growing up in the Kirtland Addition, we were all good, you know. And the neighborhood started changing, where this family moved to the Highland District, and this family moved to the Rio Grande District, so we weren't all in the same district. All the good athletes weren't in the same district. And what I remember is, is that when Harold Clopton [*phonetic*], who was a great basketball player, Ron Padro [*phonetic*] was a great basketball player, we were all in the same area. We all started moving. We became good ball players in those schools that we moved to. And I think back, and I say, well, if we had been all in the same neighborhood together, first of all, could we all play on the same—you know? Or, how great could we be, you know? So fortunately, we all moved into different areas, so we became good in our own right at our own different schools. But I think the competitiveness, knowing those guys and playing with those guys at a young age, and then going back into the neighborhood and playing street ball and pickup ball, you know, that competitive, made us better athletes, you know? And you remember the competition days, you remember running in the street barefooted, and you were in your socks and beating So-and-So.

But it was all good. It was all, you know, competition has always been my forte. I love to compete, you know. So it was a good time.

Q: Did you go back to the neighborhood often? You mentioned going right—

Waites: All the time.

Q: All the time.

Waites: All the time. You know, there's one of the things I, a friend of mine, we used to do when we could drive, when I was able to drive, that's what we used to do, is go back to the neighborhood, especially to play basketball. And we had an area in South Broadway area called Killer's Park. I don't know if anyone has ever talked about Killer's Park, but that's where we all competed in basketball, Albuquerque High Valley, Manzano, we'd all go back, and on a Saturday afternoon, we'd be out there playing all day long. So it was real competitive, and it was a lot of fun, but—

Q: Killer's Park? What a name.

Waites: Killer's Park. That is on Cesar Chavez and Edith, there used to be a little basketball area right there, and everybody would meet there. And, I mean, the old guys would come back, the young guys would try to be as good. And that's where—that's where you got your stripes, right there. And the way it was played is that as long as you're winning, you stay on the court. If you're

not winning, you go sit on the sidelines, you know? And it was kind of cool, because on the sideline they'd be shooting dice in the corner, or doing some other things on the other side, talking to some girl, you know? But the real fun is staying on the court and beating everybody, you know?

Q: How were the teams made?

Waites: Oh, it was just pick and choose, you know? Yes, okay, it's you, me and So-and-So. It's us three against those three. It's just—or my friend and I, we'd come down and we'd get one other player. We're going to always pick one of the better players, or, you know. But it was fun, it was competitive. You know, growing up—I'll never forget this—the older guys, it was always the older guys that stayed on the court, and they were always good and beating everybody, you know? Well, they'd pick, "Waites, you be on my side, but you'd better not shoot. Your job is to pass me the ball. You'd better not shoot the ball." Then after a while, you said, "I'm going to shoot this ball." And then you get better. You get better, you know, and playing with the older guys, you always got better. And that's one of the things that I appreciate the most, is those guys always took you under their wings, and taught you the game, or taught you the competitive part of the game, which made you a better ball player, so, that was always good.

Q: How did your team—and then after that you go back to Manzano during the season and play with your team there. How good was the team at Manzano when you were there?

Waites: We were competitive. We just probably missed a few of the pieces, you know what I mean? We always had the big guy, six-seven, six-eight. But schools like Albuquerque High might have had the six-six guy, but he was a six-six great guy, whereas in Manzano, he was six-eight, [*unclear*] blah blah blah, you know? And we always had—we always missed the piece, you know? Even in my senior year, I thought we were just missing that one piece. We had one little guard that wouldn't pass the ball, you know what I'm saying? [*Laughs*] You always had those guys, you know? Pass the ball.

But yes, we were competitive, but we weren't great, you know? We weren't that team that was going to go to State and win State. You know? But we made it tough for the other guys, so, yes.

Q: And so your senior year, you got a scholarship.

Waites: Yes.

Q: What year was that? When did you graduate?

Waites: That would be 1971.

Q: Nineteen seventy-one.

Waites: Yes.

Q: And you got a scholarship to where?

Waites: I went to—actually, I got probably about twelve scholarships. But the summer of '71, I got a scholarship to Carnegie Mellon [University], which is in Pittsburgh. But I didn't stay at that school, so I had to come back, and the rule was, if you go to a D1 [Division 1] school, or a D2 [District 2] school, and if you want to continue playing, if you leave that school, you have to go to a juco, a junior college. And so I went to Carnegie Mellon, which is in Pittsburgh, and left there, and had to go to a junior college school, which is South Plains Junior College in Texas to continue my D1 education, or to play in Division 1 school.

Q: What was that like, going to Pittsburgh, from New Mexico?

Waites: Ooh, don't you know? [*Laughs*] That was a culture shock for—you know. And coming from Albuquerque going to the East Coast was totally different. I had never been—well, my only travels had been to Texas, or Arizona, or California where my uncles were, or something like that. But going to the East Coast was totally different. Totally different. During the time I was in Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh was more of a manufacturing town, plus it was a little bit more difficult, demanding. It was an engineering school. Carnegie Mellon is engineering. And the level of education was very high, very competitive. There was a lot of engineers and scientists coming out of that school. Along with that, my high school sweetheart had quit me too, so my mind was—I wasn't focused on school. I was focused on a lot of other different things, so things happen. Life stuff happened, so I left there, you know. And so I had to go to a junior college to continue my education in a Division 1 school. Yes.

Q: And so you came back to the Southwest, to Texas.

Waites: Yes, to Texas, yes.

Q: Was that that—did that—how did that feel, more—

Waites: Well, it was—West Texas is not, to me, a place for people of color during that time. That was around 1972, '73 timeframe. You know, Dr. King had just passed away, there was a lot of rioting going on, there was a lot of distrust between cultures. West Texas was not, again, like I say, was not a place for a person of color, whether it's Hispanic or Black, , because we had—on our team, we had a lot of those—you know, both of those cultures there. So it was real difficult for us. But we stuck together as a team, we did well. We won our conferences, so we done—as far as basketball and that part of it, we did very well.

Q: So when you say there was a lot of distrust and that sort of thing, were there any particular events or things that happened that maybe exemplified that?

Waites: Well, no. Well, West Texas is one of those that it's kind of like New Mexico, racism, you know? It's not as apparent, but you can really feel just walking down the street or going into the restaurant, or just how they treat you or react to you, you can really feel the prejudice, or them not wanting you to be where you're at. You can really feel that. So that was real tough. And coming from Albuquerque and not seeing a lot of that, and coming from Manzano, which is a

pretty predominantly white school, didn't see a lot of prejudice. And going to West Texas, you saw—you know, you could feel that. It was real difficult. It was not only difficult for me, I know it was difficult for a couple of ball players that were from Albuquerque that was on that team and they were Hispanic, too.

Q: And this wasn't something that you felt, for example, in Pittsburgh either?

Waites: I didn't feel it in Pittsburgh, because—maybe it was because of the amount of Blacks that I was surrounded by, you know? I never felt that in Pittsburgh. But going to that junior college, and being in West Texas, you definitely feel it.

Q: Yes. So after the time at the junior college, what did you do? What came next?

Waites: Well, I came back here. I had other offers, but I wanted to be closer to home, you know, and went to the University of New Mexico. Did not play basketball after that, you now, that kind of—you know, my focus was more on my education. So, yes, came back here.

Q: So what did you study at the University of New Mexico?

Waites: When I got to the University of New Mexico, my study was going to be psychology, but coming from Carnegie Mellon, it was more of a engineering type background. But I said, no, I'm going to study psychology. Well, that only lasted for about a semester. I told the professor, I said, "I'm going to change my major." He says, "What are you going to change your major to?" I said,

"Well, I'm going to change it to business," you know. He says, "Well, why do you want to do this?" I told him, "I think I figured out this psychology thing," I said, you know, "I think it's I'm okay, you're okay, we're just okay at different levels, you know? So I'm going to change this." [*Laughs*] So he said, "Okay, Leonard. Have a good life."

But, you know, it's something—I wasn't big on theory, which is what psychology is, and sociology. It's learning the different theories of those people. So yes, University of New Mexico was really—it was a good critical time for me. Socially, things were happening around the world that, coming from the West Texas area and seeing that prejudice, and then seeing the world the way it was, and that was changing. The Vietnam War was going on, or ending, or trying to end. And our people, as far as Black people, were trying to find their way in the world. You know, it was always a protest about something, you know. Equal rights was very important at that time. So, you know, going to the University of New Mexico, there was a lot of sit-ins, there was a lot of protesting. I think one of my biggest protests was, we had a person that wanted to play on the baseball team, a Black athlete that wanted to play on the baseball team. Well, they didn't even give him the opportunity to try out. So we had a huge sit-in, all the Black players, the basketball players, the football players, everybody. You know, I think that was promoted by Dr. Bailey. And we just decided we were just gonna stop everything. The basketball players quit playing, the football players protested, the guys on the track team, just so that this one person could at least get a tryout. Well, they didn't give us that tryout, but we did protest against the university at the time, along with a few other things that was going on, too.

I think another big event that we had was the law school, they had never had a Black student complete law school. And we had to protest that, and a few other things. So it was a good time, a good learning time for me. And I think it created some of my true feelings and thought processes of how the world is, and how the world should be, you know.

Q: I mean, that's one of those—it's just interesting to me that growing up in Albuquerque and going to Jackson, which is a predominantly white middle school, or junior high school at the time, and then Manzano, and then going to UNM and actually seeing that there was racism there, whereas maybe to the naked eye before, it wasn't apparent.

Waites: Yes. You know, in Jackson, you didn't see it. I think we were just too young to really understand what was going on. At Manzano, you saw a little bit of it, because of—we were a small group, and when I think about Manzano and how we were at the time, we had kids that were bussed in to Manzano, and they lived in the Texas-Utah District area.

Q: Which is near Central [*unclear*]—

Waites: No no no, it's Lomas, and Wyoming and Pennsylvania, in that little area right there. So those kids went to Hayes Junior High School, and they would get bussed to Manzano High School. So when they'd come in, we'd all meet in the lunchroom. Because we had to wait for the first bell, so everybody'd meet in the lunchroom, and that's where we'd turn on the jukebox, and you know how we do, we were just going to dance and have a good time. And that was a pivotal part of—it was an important part of our culture at the time. Everybody wanted to have big fros.

And the Dashikis and, Black Power, and being as Black as we could, you know? So it was important to us at that time. And we're talking about the 1970s and '69, '70 and '71 timeframe. So it was real important.

Q: Meanwhile, what were your parents doing in Albuquerque? I find it interesting that your dad stayed while his brothers continued on, right?

Waites: Yes.

Q: A couple of people have said New Mexico is the Land of Entrapment.

Waites: Yes.

Q: Right?

Waites: Yes.

Q: Maybe that entrapped your father in some way. What were your folks doing in Albuquerque?

Waites: Well, let me—I'm glad you even mentioned that, because we go back, one of the things that was important—not important as far as history is, my mom was a beautician here in Albuquerque. She was one of two licensed beauticians. Now there was a lot of people that call themselves beauticians, and they're doing kitchen curls, and doing all that stuff. But my mom

and Miss Ruby Foster were two of the licensed beauticians in the city. And my mom had her beauty shop for almost thirty years. So that's what she was doing. My dad worked at General Electric [GE], which was one of the manufacturing plants here for a long time. So he was real instrumental in the union, and getting other Blacks jobs at GE, so that was important.

Q: Your dad was also very political.

Waites: Very much so. Did a lot of work in the community. You know, well-known in the community in a lot of different circles.

Q: So when we talk about your dad and politics, I just wonder if there was any particular cause that your dad had been involved in, that still somehow stands out to you?

Waites: Gosh, he's—you know, my dad did so much as far as the community. He was well liked in the community, well-respected. One of the things I think I previously mentioned is that he worked at General Electric, helped hire a lot of the Blacks in that company. Was big on promoting and trying to get the first Black supervisor there. Worked a lot, and worked real hard for years in the union part of GE, along with his political involvement outside of GE, working with the mayor and governors, and different things like that.

One of the things that I know and remember, and it's documented, is that the job that I'm in now, my dad was instrumental in creating the Martin Luther King State Commission. And he was one of the first commissioners appointed to this job, to this commission, I should say. And as we

were talking earlier, and seven years ago, I was appointed the Executive Director of this Commission. So this thing has come full circle. He created it, I became the Executive Director. He was alive when I was appointed, so I could see how happy he was that this thing has come full circle, so it meant a lot to me for that to happen. So to me, he was a great guy. I loved him to death.

Q: Your mother was also very well-known in the community.

Waites: Yes. Yes, my mom was one of two licensed—and I say "licensed" for a lot of reasons, because there was a lot of people, a lot of ladies that did hair in the community, but they weren't licensed to do it. You know, we called them—they do "kitchen curls," put the impressing curls in people's hair in the kitchen, you know? But she was one of the two ladies, one of two. I think her name was Ruby—what's Miss Ruby's last name? Banks? Ruby Banks was her name. one of two licensed beauticians in the city. So we were proud of her. She's still alive to this day. She now lives in Denver, Colorado, and doing very well. Has all her wits about her. I know a few years ago, she had two ladies that she still did their hair. They come to the house, and it would probably take her two hours to get it done, 'cause they'd sit up there and talk all day long. But she was very instrumental in a lot of different ways, too. Well-known in the community. She's done so many ladies' hair that I can't even imagine. So she's a beautiful person. I love her to death,

Q: So you were saying that you changed your degree in college to business.

Waites: Yes.

Q: And that it was also a time of just a lot of social activism, and that kind of thing. What year did you graduate from UNM? And did you continue in business?

Waites: Yes, I didn't graduate from UNM. I got my degree from the University of Phoenix, going to night school, reason being is that I had three kids at the time, and then it was a little bit hard to complete your education the regular way. University of Phoenix offered me an opportunity, the structure of the University of Phoenix offered me the opportunity of getting my degree. But that was a critical time, too. Just being at uni was a critical time. Like I said, a lot of—I'm trying to identify myself, trying to find myself, and trying to find, I don't know, my niche in society of my thought process. It was a critical time, '72, '73 timeframe, Vietnam War, those type of things were real important to me. One, I almost got drafted, so two, all my friends that did get drafted, they were coming back—if they came back—without limbs, or they were on drugs, or different things like that. And during that time, being in Vietnam was not the place to be, you know? They would have to change their uniforms before they got off the plane, because kids were protecting at the airports, and different things like that. It was just not a good time for someone that was in Vietnam during that time.

So I missed that. One, when I was in college, my first year, I was eighteen years old, they had the draft. And I remember being in the dorms, and all the guys in the dorms were sitting in the lobby where the one TV was, and we'd listen to them pull the balls for the draft. It's like the Bingo balls, you know, you get December 26, blah blah blah, if that was your birth date, you got drafted, And depending on the number, you know. Fortunately for me, that number was so high,

I didn't get drafted. But my roommate, his number was two, his birth date was the second number that they called. So he automatically had to go to Vietnam. What he did, he—instead of being drafted, he enlisted in the Air Force, because he didn't want to go into the Army, you know, so it was a critical time during that time, the Vietnam War was—

Q: How did your engagement just in life beyond that period happen? I mean, three kids—when did you become a father? How did—

Waites: Ooh, now you want me to really tell my age. Let's see, when did my son—I have one son that I adopted at birth. My wife was—we were real good friends, she had a son, and I had left and come back from college, blah blah blah, you know? And I just adopted him, I became his dad. If you ask him today, I'm the father, you know? But, gosh, when was Nathan born? Geez. I think he was in—I don't know, I'm not going to even try to guess and mess it up, you know. But he's my oldest. And then I have two, they're five years apart. I have a little daughter, Kerry, and Kelly. Each one of them are five years apart. So fatherhood was different, you know, for me. It was a little different. I was not one to, I don't know, how do I want to say this? I don't know, be the faithful one, you know what I'm saying? Yes. I had a lot of girlfriends, I was running them as fast as I could. But when my wife got pregnant, I made a decision—well, my mom helped me make this decision, because she always said that if you lay down with one and you make a baby, you're going to take care of her. And that stuck with me. So once Kerry was born, that was it. All the running and playing, and all that stuff ended, and I became a father, which meant that I had to go and get a regular job and be responsible, and do the things I needed to do. So fortunately, I started working at GE, General Electric. That started my manufacturing career.

Q: Was your father still working there at the time?

Waites: My father was still there. He was still there. I worked my way up to be a supervisor, one of two Black supervisors at General Electric. The other person was Jim Posey [*phonetic*] who was the first Black supervisor at GE, I was the second. And the third person that became a Black supervisor, and I don't think they've had any Black supervisors after that, was Bill Russell, Pastor Russell.

So that started my management career. The tough thing about that is that being in management, my dad was part of the union. And every year we would have to negotiate the union contract. And it just so happens, I was at a level where part of my responsibilities was to do part of the negotiations with the union. And it was real tough for me to see my dad on the other side of the table in a vulnerable position, because, you know, your father's always been the strong person that you looked up to and respected. But in my position, my job would—I didn't personally do this, but the group, the group that I was with was to tear that organization down, the union down, to get what we wanted. And they were fighting to get what they wanted, you know? So you see that battle between the two. And for me, it was real tough, because I've always respected my father in a different manner. So to go after him at that level, it was just real tough for me.

But we got through it. And we never discussed that at the dinner table. It was always, you gotta do what you gotta do, and I gotta do what I gotta do, so you know, it was one of those things. But

we got through it. And I think it made me a lot better person, understanding his position. And I think I gained respect from him, understanding my position, too, so that's real important.

Q: And how long was period of time?

Waites: Oh, let's see, probably about three or four years. And after a while, it becomes natural. I remember one time, being a supervisor, and we both worked at night. And there was one guy, this guy wouldn't' come to work, and when he did come to work, he wouldn't do his job, you know? So I said, well, I'm going to write him up. I'm going to—so I went over and talked to my dad, because him being the union steward, or the union official, I thought it would be best to talk to him before I do anything. So I said, "Well, So-and-So is not doing this, and, you know, blah blah blah, and I'm going to fire him." He says, "No, you're not.". "Well, what do you mean, I'm not going to fire him?" "Because you're not going to fire him," you know? "That's just the way it's going to work."

You know, I was so mad and frustrated with him, but I understood what he was saying, because his job is to fight for this individual. And what he was really telling me is, I don't have enough on this individual to fire him. Now, I might reprimand him, write him up, or whatever, "But you're not going to fire him." Which I couldn't understand that, why shouldn't I be able to fire this guy? But I understood what he was saying. I understood his position, and what transpired. I understood that, so that was really—

Q: So you said that GE was the beginning of your management career, right?

Waites: Yes.

Q: Your life as management.

Waites: Yes.

Q: Did you—was the entire time at GE three years? Or did it go beyond that?

Waites: No, I worked for GE for sixteen years.

Q: For sixteen years?

Waites: Sixteen years. Then General Electric had a huge layoff, where they took out all the middle managers, which are the supervisors, and brought, managers and people from the floor together. So they took out all of the supervisors. So the managers had a area of management. And so I got laid off. My second job was, I went from GE to Motorola, which was another large manufacturing company here. There I was a manager with probably 120 people 125 people. I was an ex-pat in China; my job was to build a manufacturing plant in Asia, so I did two years as an ex-pat in Asia.

Q: What years were those?

Waites: Oh, gosh.

Q: Don't worry, in late '80s?

Waites: Yes. It was more of the '90s.

Q: Nineties? Okay.

Waites: Yes, because I spent most of the '80s at GE, for sixteen years. I started there in '75, '76 timeframe. Spent sixteen years there. So it was the early '90s.

Q: Just out of curiosity, was your father still at GE when you left?

Waites: Yes. Yes.

Q: Okay.

Waites: He retired at GE. He did thirty-five years there. So he did another fifteen years after I left. And when I went to Motorola, being an ex-pat and with my background, my job was to create a manufacturing plant in China. We were doing the pagers, remember the pagers everybody had? We manufactured those. We manufactured the first flip phones, the StarTACs, those types. You remember the brick phones, the big brick phones, analog phones that everybody

had, and drive around in their car, and they have phones. So we did that. That was my job. I did work for Motorola for twelve years.

Q: What were those years in China like? Did your family come with you, or what was it like?

Waites: My family—or my two girls, my wife never did come across, but my two daughters did. Funny thing, I remember in China, they don't have regular bathrooms, right? They squat, they have a hole. It just like the hole in the ground. And my daughter had just—my youngest daughter had just come over, and we were at the Great Wall of China, and you go into these bathrooms, so-called bathrooms, but they're not bathrooms, they were just holes in the ground, you know, actually. And she walked in there and she saw that, and she said, oh no, she's not going to use it. And we were at the Great Wall of China, which is a beautiful sight. She said, "No, dad, I'm going to wait until we get to the hotel." You know, "I'm just not going to do that." You know? And to this day, honest to God, to this day, that's what she remembers. I think she was, like, fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, if she was that old. But she remembers that. And that was—you know, when she talks about China, she's—that's the worst part of her trip.

But it was an interesting place. It was interesting, because being African American in a place—and let me go back. When I was there, Tiananmen Square, uprising had just happened. And that's where, if you look at history, in Tiananmen Square, the young man stands in front of a—this big, huge—what do they call them—weapon, and stops the whole thing, you know? And it's written in history that he kind of stopped the war in China. So but anyway, Motorola was well-respected in that country because they did—they were one of the only company that didn't leave. All the

other American manufacturers left because of that uprising. They left China, but Motorola stayed. So they were well-respected there. And you working in China had a lot of respect, you know, people respected you. So it was a little easier to build a manufacturing plant there, because of that, that respect.

Q: So were the folks that you were managing, overseeing in building the plant, were they Chinese?

Waites: They were all Chinese, yes.

Q: All Chinese.

Waites: All Chinese.

Q: And how was that, in terms of managing folks, like, going from managing Americans to managing actually Chinese folks?

Waites: Well, you didn't really manage them, per se. You managed their managers, their supervisors, and those people. You know, you had meetings with those people that communicated with the workforce, and things like that. So those are the people that you managed. And most of them were Americanized, they spoke the language. They went to the universities, in China, that taught them how to speak English. I remember one time I was coming out of my apartment in my hotel room, and there was a beautiful park down the street, and I

walked down there by myself. Normally you have an interpreter or someone with you all the time, you know, your driver drives you to work, and usually that person's with you. And there was a guy playing a guitar, or trying to, in the park. And what would happen, when you're out there, people that were at the university, they would want to have a conversation with you to practice their English. So they'd come up, and they tried to talk to you, or they held a conversation with you just so they can practice. And then there was one guy, he was trying to play the guitar. Well, I play the guitar, you know, part of, you know. So I said, "Let me play this guitar." And he let me play it, and I was playing a song. Before I know it I had, like, twenty people around me, you know? I'm looking, oh my God. And they always said, be careful when you in the environment, because in China, there's always someone watching you. You know, every time you left the hotel, they'd have eyes on you. It was, like, you being in a fishbowl. Someone's always watching you.

So da da da da da, played the song, and looked around and said, okay, it's time to go, because there was just so many people. Probably about twenty people, which sounds like—it feels like a lot. Like, fifty people, you know? But, you know, "Thank you very much, but it's time for me to go." So that was one of the incidents that I remember there.

And then in the market, in China, there's no prices on anything. Everything's on the bartering system. And there was another guy, American, from Arizona. He was same height as me, if not a little bit bigger, but he had red hair. His hair was orange, actually, true redhead. And him and I would hang out together, and we'd go to the market. And as we go into the market, we were, you know, the ladies would come out, and they would be hee-hee-heeing, and pointing, and we could

buy—we could get anything for almost little or nothing, just because they had never seen two people like us together. Him being six-five, six-six, with red hair, and me, six-four, dark-complected as I am. It's, like in some places they've never seen an African American, or a person with that color hair. So we were like icons in the city.

But it was interesting. It was fun. I was happy to get back to the United States. It really makes you appreciate being here, because the freedom that we have, people don't realize how important that is, to be able to travel and to move around the world, or within the city and not having any restrictions on your movement, or you can't go over here because—you know. So it was good getting back here. I learned a lot, it was a great experience, so, yes.

Q: Mmm. Then so after that, you stayed with Motorola for a while?

Waites: No, got laid off there. Again, you know, if you really understand the manufacturing business, the private sector of manufacturing, manufacturing is so cyclical, you have a few good years, and then you have those lulls. So they make changes. So after that, I went to Intel. Another huge manufacturing plant here in Albuquerque, and stayed there for about ten years. Decided I needed a change, and started working for the State of New Mexico.

Q: How did that come about, that you started working for the State of New Mexico?

Waites: that was interesting. That was very interesting. That's a whole story within itself. It just so happens that the job opened up because of some other issues, you know.

Q: And, which job?

Waites: The Executive Director's job.

Q: Oh, so that was—this is your—this is how you came to work for the—obtain that position.

Waites: Right. Right. There were some issues within the Commission, so the job came open, and I applied for the job. But that was a process within itself, because I think they were—I don't know what the commissioners were looking for, but what happened was that, once that certain community members found out that I was applying for a job, I had six recommendations to become the Executive Director of the Martin Luther King Commission; one, because of my community involvement. I've never had any work in the political arena, you know, so I didn't have any enemies, you know? Or, I didn't have a whole lot of friends. You know, I just knew where the bodies were buried, for a better choice of words. But it's been a huge, huge change in my life. You know, huge, different understanding of how policies and procedures work in the state, and the things that we need to do as a group of people, the things that we want to do, and what it takes to get those things done. It's been interesting. It's been a work in process.

Q: Two questions; when did this happen? What year did you have—

Waites: I became the Executive Director in 2016, so it's been seven years, seven years since that happened. Yes.

Q: Just if you were to describe some of the things that come across your desk on a day-to-day, what does your job entail, and, you know, what kind of—

Waites: It's interesting. I have three major projects that I do. One, one of my major projects is the MLK March every year, which happens on—during the Martin Luther King birthday. I created a youth leadership program that I now have around the state, where we, in all these little cities, the small cities, we create an environment for our youth to come and get involved in the community, and have community events. We teach them about the six principles of Dr. King. We talk about mental health, we talk about a lot of different things, you know? So that's the youth leadership program. We just got done with our youth leadership commission project—what do I want to say? Well, anyway, we just got done with that. And what it is, is a culmination of all the work that they've done throughout the year. And what we do is, we create—we bring them to a city, mostly Albuquerque, and we put them up in the hotel, you know, we feed them three meals a day for three days, and we teach them about different things that's happening in the world today. Again, we talk about the six principles of Dr. King, we talk about mental health, we talk about money management—those are the things that they don't get in a regular institution or school. So again, we just finished that in Las Cruces. We had 150 kids of all nationalities. You know, they had a great time.

Q: Wow.

Waites: Yes.

Q: It's something how this is this, as we sort of mentioned a little while ago, a full circle moment, right, that it is the entity that your father was instrumental in creating—

Waites: Right.

Q: —and now you're the Executive Director of.

Waites: Right.

Q: Was your father still alive when you became the Executive Director?

Waites: Yes. Yes.

Q: And what was the conversation with him like?

Waites: It wasn't really a conversation, it was more of, "I'm proud of you," you know? So, I mean, that's a touchy situation there. So, yes.

Q: Yes, mmm. So there's a question I like to ask as I am rounding out these conversations—

Waites: Yes?

Q: —as I'm focused on African American New Mexicans.

Waites: Okay.

Q: Sometimes it's folks who've moved here, and I'll ask them if they consider themself a New Mexican, or if they still consider themself a Chicagoan, or whatever that identity is.

Waites: Yes.

Q: And as you were born here, that question, I would still ask it. If you consider yourself a New Mexican, do you think of yourself in those terms?

Waites: Yes.

Q: And if so, you said yes, what does that mean to you? What does it mean to be a New Mexican? If you can describe that?

Waites: I don't know if it's—if being a New Mexican is the right word, because a lot of my roots come from Texas, you know what I'm saying? I'm a Dallas Cowboy fan, better choice of word. But a lot of the things that I've learned over the years has come from my hereditary—not hereditary, probably the wrong word—things that happened to me when I was growing up and going back and visiting Texas, and living with my elders, with my grandmother and my great grandmother, and those type people. Am I a New Mexican? I don't really consider myself that,

you know? I really don't. I'm more of an individual. I don't think Albuquerque has put a brand on me, or branded me as a New Mexican, you know? I don't know if that's the right answer for that. But I just don't think that. I live here, I love it, this is where I grew up, but I don't think I'm considered a New Mexican, you know?

Q: When you say "you love it," what does that mean?

Waites: I love the beauty of Albuquerque, when you look around. And I've been in a lot of different places, and I think Albuquerque has its own beauty, own colors, different colors. I was in St. Louis, or I was even in New Orleans about three or four weeks ago. And as you—being from New York, you probably didn't see this—you drive down the road, and it's trees and wooded, you see all the green area and all this, and then all of a sudden, there's a Walmart, you know? Somebody cut out a Walmart in the woods. Albuquerque, you can see for miles. And then the mountains are so beautiful, and it changes. And I leave and I come back, and when I see those mountains, I know I'm at home, you know. And it's comfortable, you know? I don't have to worry about, a lot of different things, that in a bigger city, or even a smaller city, that you have to worry about. So that part of it, I think that's me, you know, and what I appreciate.

Q: Mr. Waites, thank you.

Waites: Oh, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]