

Oscar Daniel Watts
First African Baptist Church
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Joe Thomas and Jermaine Buckhannon

Brother Oscar (Danny) Watts was born in Tuscaloosa on July 16, 1946 where he still lives. He attended Tougaloo College in Mississippi on a music scholarship. Brother Watts became the lead band director of the then recently integrated Central High School in Tuscaloosa. Watts is now semi-retired as he no longer works for the city, but for a local music store part-time. He still plays the trumpet for his church, First African Baptist, on Sundays.

Watts is the last son of a taxi driver and the first and only son of a teacher and principal. His siblings being much older had already spread across the nation before Watts was born, to Buffalo, to Los Angeles, to Dayton. A childhood friend was forced to flee the city of Tuscaloosa, when the Klan threatened his life.

Joe: [Let's] first start off from your name, your background, where you came from, your upbringing, everything like that.

Oscar: Ok, Let's start with my name first. (Laughs) My name is Oscar D. Watts III and I am a native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I was raised up on was then what was called the Southside of town which was about six blocks south of Bryant-Denny Stadium, University of Alabama. I was raised up between 10th Avenue and 11th Avenue, which was called the South Side of the City at that time. It expanded. I went to elementary school in the Tuscaloosa City School system, I attended at that time was called 17th Street Elementary; they later changed it to Parkview Elementary; they finally used it as an alternative school and then they closed it and tore the school down. There are some apartments there now off of 17th Street and 11th and 10th Avenue. I went to junior high school and high school, when I came along junior high school and high school were in the same building, there was a school here which was a segregated school called Druid High School. The high school was located on the west side of town on Martin Luther King Boulevard off of 15th Street, it's the same area as Westlawn Middle School now, [and] they finally tore that building down. I attended Junior high school and high school there. After I left high school I was blessed to get a band scholarship, I was a trumpet player, from Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi where I continued my education for the next four years as a band director. So I graduated in 1968 as a band director. So my career followed from there. I taught band in North Mississippi for two years and from there I came back to Alabama and taught in Greene County, which is one of the adjoining counties here. I taught there for the next three years and for the next thirty years I taught for the City Board of Education here in Tuscaloosa. And like I said, I started my career in 1968, in the summer, and I retired in June of 2003. So I've been retired 12 years; I've had a very illustrious career in the band business. I joined this church, First African Baptist Church, when I was 10 years old. I've been here for very many years. My mother was a member here, so I was here during desegregation. I was here in the city as a teenager in the sixties and then I was here during all of the transitions that took place here in the city. So basically I've been here all of my life except for two years when I was teaching in North Mississippi, little place called Okolona, which is probably eight miles south of Tupelo. It's kind of a suburb of Tupelo. I've been here since 1970. I married in '71. I have three children, all of them are grown now. The emphasis I put on education, I made sure that they got their education. All of them went to school. One went to follow her daddy, my oldest daughter went to Jackson State University. She got her Master's from the University of Alabama in Education. She presides now, she works for the Board of Education for DeKalb County in the Atlanta area. She's an Educational Specialist. My second daughter, she did her undergraduate work in Tennessee State University in Nashville and she got her Master's from Auburn-Montgomery. She's presently internal auditor for the health center in Birmingham. My son went to a small private school in Mississippi called Rust College. When he left college, he

got accepted into medical school Meharry in Nashville Tennessee. He got his doctorate from Meharry Medical School. He just changed jobs, we went to Washington (D.C), where he was at John Hopkins. He got his doctorate in cardiovascular research. Matter of fact he got a chance to meet Ben Carson. But he's [also] working on another job; he was a writer for the Philadelphia Enquirer in Pennsylvania. He does health articles as a side thing. My wife is a retired teacher from Hillcrest. It's been a good run; it's been a blessing. The Lord has blessed us, blessed me to get an education. My wife was an educator. My mother also was an educator.

Jermaine: Was that rare for your mom to be an educator?

Oscar: Well it was. Out of a household of 12, she was the only who attended college On an I.O.U. she went to Stillman. She did real well. She taught for several years. She was a principal for several years. She finished her career at Matthew Elementary in Northport in the Tuscaloosa County school system. She passed the last year; she was getting ready to retire. But she taught us the value of education. So that's why it's important. It's been a good run. Like I said, it's been a blessing more than anything. I have a lot of people to contribute, to push me when I was a kid. I came up through segregation, colored water fountain, white water fountain and separate but equal. We learned that there was no such thing as separate but equal. It might be separate, but it wasn't equal. So, being a member of this church, this was like the main ground for the civil rights movements where we had what was called mass meetings when I was a teenager. One of the pastors here, he was called the Civil Rights Pastor who was T.Y. Rogers Jr. who was also the associate pastor to Martin Luther King at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. So when he came here, he came from being an associate with Martin Luther King and Martin Luther King also came here and spoke here in the installation service with T.Y. Rogers.

Jermaine: Did you meet Dr. King?

Oscar: I was a teenager, I heard him when he spoke, when he preached. [He was] amazing. For teenagers , when you're 16 years old for you to pay attention to someone in church. Let's be real. But he had a way, just his voice, 16, 17, 18 teenagers in there we were just mesmerized to hear the man speak. So I did get a chance to meet him and hear him speak. He was greeting people after the service. I got a chance to see him, he stood at a podium, he was amazing. Like I said I was a teenager at the time and that had to be like 1962 or 1963. I was around the 10th grade when T.Y. Rogers got here.

Joe: How many siblings did you have?

Oscar: There were four other siblings, I was the youngest. My father was married twice and I was the only sibling that my mother had. My dad was 51 when I was born. I tell people, I almost

didn't get here. I never lived with them because they were so much older than me. It was just me. I went to bury my sister, my youngest sister, about four years ago out in California. She was my baby sister but there being such a big gap she was 92. There was a 27-year gape. My sister was old enough to be my parent. My nieces and nephews were older than me with the exception of two.

Joe: Did you have a substantial relationship with your siblings?

Oscar: Oh, yes. I knew who they were. And my sister would come home and visit and would bring her two or three kids with her and they were my little nieces and nephews, but they were older than me. But yes, I surely did.

Jermaine: Where did your siblings go when they left?

Oscar: My oldest sister, Willie-Mae, she was named after her daddy. My father's name is Willie. She left here in search of a job when she was very young, late teens, early twenties. And she went to Buffalo, New York, and got a job in the GM industry. She retired after 42 years in Buffalo, New York. And the next sister, she settled, she and her husband, John, in Los Angeles. She had been in Los Angeles since she was in her early twenties. And then my brother, James, worked for Dayton Power and Light, settled in Dayton, Ohio. And then the one that's closest to me, we're talking 17, 18 years, George, he went to Los Angeles. He went to school out in Los Angeles. Matter of fact, he attended UCLA. He worked for Western Airlines. He died in an auto accident coming from work with Western Airlines, probably tired got off at midnight. But all of them did well. My oldest sisters they did not go to college because they had to go work. They were born in the twenties so when they were 21 we're talking about 1940 or something. And for blacks at that time it was really tough. They couldn't go to school here. It's very ironic for older blacks. Most of them if you check they have higher degrees. They come from places like.... I know several who got Master's degrees from Indiana, from Wayne State in Michigan, from Columbia in New York. You'd be surprised where they were going to school. The reason for that was during segregated years they could not go to school at The University of Alabama.

Jermaine: They went North for school, did they ever come back?

Oscar: Yeah, a lot of these people just went there to go to school. They usually got their bachelors degrees from HBCUs like Stillman, and Alabama State, and Alabama A&M in the state of Alabama. Miles in Birmingham and Talladega College. But they couldn't get any further if they wanted to get an advanced degree. During the 50's they had to leave here, they had to leave the Jim Crow South. And that's why you'll see so many older people [and ask] "Why do you see so many folks with degrees from Indiana and Purdue and Columbia?" But that's where

they had to go. They would go during the summer to get those degrees. They might have to go three summers or four, whatever it took and they would come back here. I know a lot of teachers that taught me with advanced degrees.... Later on, as the University of Alabama opened up, you'll see a lot of them got undergraduate and graduate, master's from Alabama and Auburn. Fifty years ago you'd have neither one from there.

Jermaine: Why'd you go to Mississippi for school? Well, you got the scholarship...

Oscar: Yeah, I got scholarship. I got several. I got one from Jackson State, I had one from Tennessee State University, Again notice the schools that I'm naming. They're all HBCUs. I had one at Florida A&M. I had one to Stillman. The only reason why I didn't go to Stillman is because at the time you could not get an instrumental major from Stillman So why go to a school where I couldn't get a major? So that's why went to Jackson. I enjoyed it over there. I had a good time, learned a lot. I got my music instrumental degree from Jackson. I came back and I did some further study at the University of Alabama. This was late sixties and early seventies. And even then when I was there working on my Master's degree, for most of the class I was the only black. I'm talking early seventies. I was a rarity. I had a class of band directors 8, 10,12 of us in there and in most of the classes the only black would be me. Every now and then I would see someone black somewhere else. I'm talking 68,69,70,71. It was still tough.

Jermaine: What was it like on campus then?

Oscar: I didn't tarry. I would have my classes. Working on an advanced degree is different from working on an undergraduate degree. I was not looking for a social outlet. I was married. I hadn't had my first child but I was married. I was single when I first started. I got married one summer when I was still going to school. It was almost like you were in isolation, you sit, you listen, and you take down whatever you needed to take down, you go study, you come back and take the test. I'm glad I didn't go get my undergraduate out there. You know because students coming out of high schools back then and even now there's is a lack of maturity. Sometimes they would recommend you go to a smaller school like Shelton so they can develop a study habit, but I was [ready.] I started teaching back in 1968 when schools were still segregated. I watched the change, that's interesting too. I didn't feel any way threatened. I took care of my business. I did what I needed to do then I went on back home. I did everything I needed to do when I was taking those classes.

Jermaine: Did you go to the University as a kid, before you went to school there during segregation?

Oscar: I'll tell you why I would be out that way on campus, my father drove a cab; he was a taxi driver in the city of Tuscaloosa. He drove about 37, 38 years and he did a lot of pickups. There were a lot of blacks that worked on UA's campus, but they were in those minimal jobs, housekeepers, custodians, yard keepers, and those people back then especially back in the 50's and stuff. A lot of black were doing good to have a car. Now they have three and four. So they would have to use public transportation, like the city transit. Some would pay cab drivers to take them home on a daily basis and then what they would do at the end of the week they would pay the cab on Friday, Thursday, Saturday, whenever they got paid they would pay the driver for the entire week. I saw a lot of that. You'd be surprised back then that people didn't have cars, a lot of people would take a cab to church depending on where they were staying. Because they didn't have transportation. Back in the fifties, it was really rare, and in the late 40's to see blacks with a car period. And you would never see them with a new car. If a black had a new car you knew who they were. That's just the way it was and you didn't have that many blacks with the professions that would have the financial backing -- like you would have a black doctor you might have some black nurses, but just think even back then you wouldn't see that many black nurses because they couldn't get a job at Druid City Hospital. You got a nursing degree and the black doctor's only patients were black folks. You know? But the only other people of means would be funeral home directors and they didn't do any big hiring in these big plants like BF Goodrich until later on. You had minimal jobs, minimal paying jobs at that time people tried to make the best of what they made and there were goobers (lot's) of domestic workers. It was so surreal when I saw *The Help*. That's the way it was. And a lot of the maids had to walk to work as they couldn't get a cab. Some of the maids, because the distance was so far, had to get a cab and the ones who couldn't get a cab if the ones they were working for really wanted them to be there they would come and pick them up. And that's what my grandmother did, my mother's mother. She did domestic work, she worked for whites. Raised their children, you know. And that's what made the whole thing about the south and Jim Crow days, you had these black women just like on *The Help*, maids and stuff were actually raising whites' children. And they were crazy about those individuals they were raising them but you couldn't sit at the table and eat with them.

Jermaine: Did you play with any white children when you were growing up?

Oscar: Yeah, I did. Over by Denny Stadium, where I grew up on 17th Street. Central High school is on 15th Street. That street behind Central is 17th and on 16th Street there was a lot of whites. The neighborhood was kind of integrated. They're more segregated now than they were then. And I played with a little boy, they just tore the place down, his father had a mechanic shop called Thigpen's. The young man's name was Doug and Doug and I as little boys used to play together but that was it. At that time, hatred is a learned. You're not born with it; it's learned. So we were coming up playing together, in the streets playing together but as night would fall or get

dusk I would go my house, he would go to his, I wouldn't see him anymore because we were going to different schools. He was going to one school, I was going to another. Schools were segregated. But I had such humiliating incidents when I was a little boy. Some of the fellas were 7 or 8 years old on Tuscaloosa High's campus, which is Central now. We were in the back, we used to play catch football and a motorcycle city cop would come by and tell us the Big N word you need to get off this campus. We couldn't play football on the campus.

Joe: Was this a white school?

Oscar: Yeah, Tuscaloosa High was all white. Blacks started attending Tuscaloosa High School around '66, '67, somewhere along there. When I graduated high school in '64 there were no blacks going to Tuscaloosa High. About two years after, some blacks started going. And what they would have were certain blacks, the smartest kids. That's the way that went. Everything was segregated during those years. You didn't see any black kids representing as school queens, homecoming queen. There was no such thing as proms and stuff were separate. Here, they didn't have a black prom or white prom. Even when integration hit the whites were having there own little thing and the blacks said well, we'll have ours too. It was sad, but that's the way it was. And it was gradual movement towards true integration and we've come along ways, still got a long way to go as far as that's concerned. Look's like we're regressing right now. Things are about to go separate again. Like in the city school system, they're gerrymandering the lines of neighborhood schools. Do you know what I'm talking about when I say gerrymandering the lines?

Jermaine: Yes sir

Oscar: What they would do, it's like that now. I'm going to give you an example. They would go to certain black neighborhoods where the homes were owned they would encircle this area. These blacks are ok because they own their own homes and they would gerrymander the lines. Then watch out Rosedale Court. Watch out Mackenzie Court. Watch out East Circle, which used to be in Northport. Those are the federal housing, the projects, as they called them. They put the federal housing out of certain school districts because they feel like there was going to be some problems with the kids there because a lot of kids were poor. (Phone rings, he answers). You know where Central is located? You know where Northridge is located? You know where Bryant High is located? Bryant is up the highway? Are you familiar with all those apartments down Highway 69 called The Avenue? I stay right across the street from the Avenue. The neighborhood I stay in is for homeowners, and it's predominantly black. It's 90-96 percent black neighborhood. Homeowners. All those students in my subdivision, they pass by Central. Know where there zoned?

Jermaine: To Bryant?

Joe: Northridge.

Oscar: Northridge, they go across the river.

Joe: Just because they own the homes?

Oscar: They figure we're going to send the best kids, not that they're the best kids. But economically, you got a lot of homeowners. They're going to see you're better economically off than someone in federal housing.

Joe: They think they're less of a risk.

Oscar: Thank you. You're a smart young man. So here I am staying right across the street from The Avenue and all those kids down there, they're a lot of them down there. They go to high school and pass by Central about five miles

Joe: They take a longer trip. So the Board of Directors are real happy.

Oscar: There you go.

Joe: Waste of time.

Jermaine: It's weird, but are the families happy they go to Northridge than Central? Or would they rather them go to Central?

Oscar: Well, you ever heard the saying, "what you don't know will never hurt you?" They don't know because that's all they've known. Except now my kids went to Central, but my youngest son he'll have a birthday coming, he'll be 36. And I got a daughter getting ready to turn 44. So look how long ago that was when they were teenagers. So they went to Central, but when they went to Central, the whole city of Tuscaloosa went to Central. Central was a real powerhouse athletically and academically. They won every state championship there with the exception of baseball.

Jermaine: It was a 6A school then right? And went down to 5A?

Oscar: You do the math. 2600?

Jermaine: That would be 7A now I think.

Oscar: Oh, definitely.

Jermaine: What were sports like back when you were a kid between high schools. Like between the black high school and white high school? Did they play together?

Oscar: Oh it was awesome. You say the black high school and the?

Jermaine: The white high school.

Oscar: Oh, no. Black folk played against black folk, white folk played against white folk.

Jermaine: So there were two state championships?

Oscar: Yeah, the blacks had their own league, same as the band and band directors. The whites had ABMA, Alabama Bandmasters Association, and the blacks had the Black Alabama Bandmasters Association. This whole thing was separate but equal. You got to understand. Everything was separate. From the rooty to the tooty. Everything was separate. Churches, and churches still are. Sunday is the most segregated day of the week. I'm going to give you an incident. Alberta Baptist, which was taken out. During the late '60's the majority of the churches were Christian churches, you got Jewish churches, you got Catholic church. This and that. But some blacks visited, a team of about 16 or 17, Alberta Baptist in Alberta City. They come to the door, knocked like they were about to go in the church. Told them they were not welcome at Alberta Baptist and closed the door in their face. This is a house of the Lord, but that's the house of the devil. It is what it is. Presenting as if [they're] Christian. Can you believe that? Can you believe that this happened right here a group of blacks went to Alberta Baptist and they closed the door in their faces and told them that they were not welcome.

Joe: That's crazy.

Oscar: That's how deep it goes. And the whole thing that happened here, that Bloody Tuesday. What is was is they were getting ready to march from the church where they were [in a] mass meeting, to the courthouse in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the county courthouse.

Jermaine: We've been there, it's right there.

Oscar: When they built it with taxpayer money. No, you always paid your taxes, just because you were black that doesn't exempt you from any taxes. But they were marching because when they said they were going to build the place they did what they said they wouldn't do. They put separate water fountains and all that in the county courthouse. So blacks were marching, going to march to protest that. They wouldn't give them a permit to march. But they gathered here and

when they walked on to the outside to march -- looked like the blue sky had fallen in, police uniforms. They were there with their gas masks, cattle prods and this church right here... What happened here has never happened anywhere in America. What happened?

Jermaine: Did they come in?

Oscar: They came in the church, they beat the parishioners. That hadn't happened anywhere. Most of them were beat on the streets. They came in this church, they invaded holy ground, a sanctuary and beat the parishioners. and you can look on the board to the right here. And 90 something wounded, 30 something hospitalized. And they shot tear gas through the church. And the parishioners ran outside the church and they beat them like they were animals. Now that didn't happen anywhere. Most of the incidents happened outside of the walls of the church but here in Tuscaloosa this happened within the church.

Jermaine: What were you doing on Bloody Tuesday?

Oscar: On Bloody Tuesday? I was attending most of the mass meetings. This particular mass meeting I didn't attend. My mother said no, she had that eerie feeling. She said I don't think you better go. And some of my buddies they came on and when that went down about. Two of my buddies got beaten to a pulp. They came by, my mother bandaged them up. Bloody nose. My mother bandaged them up and I said, "man." In a way I was glad I didn't go. I might have gotten killed, you know. But they didn't respect a person. They were beating children, women, young men, old men. If you were in this church you were going to be beat. No respect of persons whatsoever. And stuff like that locks in your mind. And you know as a good Christian, you say you know you forgive. You've done heard this many times before you can forgive, but it's hard to forget. Watch your buddies being beat and when it came on the news. For a long time they kind of hide it in Tuscaloosa. Most of the attention was on Bloody Sunday in Selma. But see Bloody Sunday came a whole year after Bloody Tuesday. So that is what was going on at that time and you got to decide how we're going to overcome. I think the only way we're going to overcome is through education and prayer. (Turns to Jermaine) That's why young blacks like yourself go to school and stay in school. You see all over the news now that there is a resurgence of young black males, how they're being treated. Some of the tactics that are being used. A lot of the blacks are the last hired and the first fired. The last hired and the first fired. A lot of times you don't feel these discriminatory practices until you actually get out into the world. A lot of the blacks (turns to Joe) have been sheltered and protected until you can get out there on your own then you say, "Oh man, I didn't know it was like this." Being stopped in an automobile? I've been stopped so many times. "Let me see your license." "Well what did you stop me for officer?" "Just need to see your license." Profiling. I've been profiled as a bad man as a young man. I mean for no reason at all. Back then you were answering "yes sir no sir" 'cause it might

have meant life or death. It's been happening all the while. Stuff that's happening now isn't new. All that profiling it's been going on. With the outset of all this electronic equipment with the cameras and all that kind of stuff you're seeing it now. A lot of blacks have been killed and you didn't know why they were being killed, Shot in the back of the head in jails, talking about they were trying to escape, handcuffed with their hands behind them. The only way out is education.

Joe: If we can go back in time a little bit

Oscar: Sure

Joe: I guess when you were a kid, you said you played with white kids and went to a segregated school. I guess when did you at a young age figure out that you were going to a segregated school or that you were being discriminated against because you were black and that there was a better white school and you were going to a lesser school?

Oscar: Like I said, my mother was an educator. I realized that in elementary school. It didn't take me to get 16 or 17 years old to realize that. I realized that in elementary. When you get about the 5th grade you say, "Ok, what's going on here? Why we can't get water out of that fountain?"

Jermaine: What was the most surprising thing about white life? When you were a kid, what was the thing that shocked you the most about how white people lived versus how black people lived?

Oscar: well, I don't think there was anything that was shocking. Because in your travels you go into the white neighborhoods and you would see the big nice homes and that type of thing. I was seeing it as a kid. Like I said, my father was a cab driver and we used to take a lot of the maids who were using the cabs back then. And the whites were paying for the cabs. So we were used to the white neighborhoods and all these big houses and you didn't see that on a daily basis. You were in the ghetto and didn't know you were in the ghetto. You hadn't had any experience to compare something to. You don't realize. Even at your age now, if there's something going on in your life and you didn't have anything to compare it to, if you say I'm at the top of the world and you see something that's on top of the top. You say, "Aww, man," you know.

Joe: Did it make you angry? What kind of emotions did you have when you saw white privilege or whatever?

Oscar: You see, your parents taught you back then. You understood. You see what's happening now with your generation of blacks, you all don't understand. But we understood because our parents would tell us. We knew where danger was. We knew about the hatred. Our parents,

which would be your grandparents and great grandparents. They knew how to play that role. Yessir, Yessir. Nosir. Yessir. But they would do that to survive. The Indians said we going to fight, Where are the Indians now? You see what I'm saying?

Jermaine: Yes sir. Especially after Bloody Tuesday did you ever think that nonviolent, direct action would like not work? That violence would have to be a solution.

Oscar: My philosophy on that was, at that time I didn't have a philosophy on that. But black folks were being mistreated. I knew that nonviolence, that was the way. You had two factions then. I don't know if you've ever, but I actually had a chance to hear these cats speak. Stokely Carmichael, they were radical blacks. Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, The Black Panther Party. What's his name Newton?

Jermaine: Huey Newton.

Oscar: Huey Newton. See I heard some of these folks. I knew there were two ways at that time. Stokely Carmichael was on Jackson State campus when I was there as an undergraduate student. And check your history, they shot the girls dormitory up. You got to check your history book. Jackson State University. I want to say around 19 [trails off]. I had graduated when they shot the campus up. It was about a year or two after I graduated, try 1969, '70. It followed, I know you have heard about Kent State in Ohio where they killed those.... Well they shot the girls dormitories up at Jackson State University. See it was a black school, you didn't hear anything about that. See they opened fire, machine guns. Do some historical research on Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. So I during the movement they actually drove tanks on the campus down there. Army Tanks. There was a gunman in the tanks going round. I'm looking at this with my own eyes and some said, "Don't throw nothing at them, please, don't throw nothing at them." So I had a reality young, as a young person. I knew what time it was I surely did.

Jermaine: Were you active in the movement when you were in college in Mississippi?

Oscar: That might have meant death. I supported it but I was not active. In college I knew what I was going there for. I knew if I got myself in a situation that could mean death for a young black man. Definitely death for a young black man. So I tried to stay away from actually participating in. I participated more in high school because this was home. Over there in Jackson, Mississippi, mmmmm.

Joe: When you were a kid, just growing up in general, did you see a Klan presence?

Oscar: Yeah, I'm glad you asked me that question. My best buddy had to leave Tuscaloosa. Nineteen His name was Samuel Gibson. G-I-B-S-O-N. You know we had the segregated schools. Well, this afternoon whites were coming from Tuscaloosa High School, black were coming from Druid. Now Druid from Tuscaloosa High School where Central is located now over where Westlawn is, exactly 1.9 miles. Let's round it 2 miles. They were walking 2 miles and there was a school across the street. This afternoon the blacks and the whites had to share the sidewalk, whites were like, "Naw, we don't want to share the sidewalk with y'all." You were supposed to move to the right. You had a right of way here. And a right of way over there. We were having right and left of ways and they were passing each other. Sam was in the eighth grade and they were passing each other like this. And Sam was on his side she pushed him off the whole sidewalk and she hit him and when she hit him, he slapped her. Ok This was one school afternoon. The next day he recieved, his mother and grandmother, that's who he stayed with, Ms. Minnie Pearl. They received a telephone call that gave them 72 hours to get Sam out of the city of Tuscaloosa. If they didn't, he would die. And they burnt a cross in his yard. That was 19...let me get the year right, I want to say it was 1959 or 60. Maybe 1960. And from that day until this one Samuel left here his family moved to Dayton, Ohio. He's been there ever since.

Jermaine: Did you ever talk to him?

Oscar: I talked to him once. He was married. This was about twenty years later. He was married, had a set of twins, doing real well. Named Samuel Gibson. At the time he was 13, 14. Next time I talked to him, he was in his 30's. That was the last time I talked with him. Sam, if he's still living, would have to be in his 60's. I don't remember him coming back here since then. He was one of my best buddies, we would ride bicycles together, skate together, play ball together. I never will forget that. Threatened him, told him he had 72 hours to get him out of Tuscaloosa or they were going to kill him and then they burned a cross. See ,they were renting a little house and the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in their yard. That was about '59 or '60

Jermaine: Was that common? Cross burning?

Oscar: Yeah, 40's and 50's. I was born in '46 but it was going on in the 50's now. Big Time. Can you imagine what would happen if someone tried to do that now? They still do it now. Every now and then you'll hear about it some Ku Klux cross burning. I mean throughout the United States. In the Middle East, I mean Mid- America. They have some stuff happen up in Indiana. The Klan ain't dead.

Jermaine: What do you think about the Confederate Flag? The Confederate Battle Flag?

Oscar: It's a flag that represents, to me, it represents slavery. Slavery represents degradation. [There are] no words I could put to say it's positive. And for the people who say, "Oh, it's our history." Whose history? They say our. Who are they talking about? Are you talking about whites? Are you talking about the whites and blacks? Who is the "our?" Something that has symbolism like that and what it represents to blacks, I mean, it's inhumane, you know. So I don't think nothing about the rebel flag. I don't think anything about it. Do away with it as far as I'm concerned. Put it in a place where it need to be, in some kind of history museum. But it has no business especially over no governmental anything. It has a place in history. You want to put it in a museum and if you want to do it on your house so be it But on a public facility that is supposed to represent the people? It doesn't represent the people. It represents a certain segment of the people. So that's what I think about the flag. Far as I'm concerned it could be desecrated.

Jermaine: There's a Confederate cemetery across the street, and there's usually a flag over there do you see that often or not?

Oscar: You know what I really haven't paid any attention to it. You know how some things just become invisible to you? I never paid any attention to it. I've been here all my life.

Joe: This is a random question, but I thought it was interesting to ask, What do you think about President Kennedy? or Lyndon B. Johnson.

Oscar: Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson? I think Lyndon B. was trying to keep, carry out the legacy of Kennedy. And I think nothing has been really solved as far as assassination. A lot of people, we're still talking about it. I lot of people said his death was a conspiracy. A lot of things going on then. You had things going on in Cuba, the Bay of Pigs. As far as the North and South, southerners couldn't stand because he, President Kennedy, wanted to do somethings to help the poor and lift blacks up. If you were any other nationality besides black you did ok. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Joe: Right.

Oscar: But the Japanese had more privileges than Blacks. And America was built in the South off the backs of black slaves. That particular thing is I don't know, that's all I have to say about that.

Jermaine: What do you think about President Obama?

Oscar: President Obama? I never thought I would see it. I never thought I'd see a black president. But I did predict that two years before Obama ran that he would be the first black

president. How I knew? I don't know. Really, I'm serious. Most people didn't know who he was. And I have a friend of mine down in South Alabama, he said, "Man, you know you predicted that?" I said, "Man, I don't know why I predicted it, when, where, how. I said the next president of the United States is going to be this man from Chicago named Barack Obama." It came to fruition. It surely did. Don't know how I did it. I ain't no philosopher, I'm not a prophet but that one I called. But deep down inside I never thought that I would see a black president, definitely not in my lifetime. I figured it would come but not then. But I said that this man would be the next black president and his name is Barack Obama. He said who? I said Barack Obama. This was two years before.

Joe: That was 2006?

Oscar: Yes, I really did. Like I told somebody that the Republican nominee. They're talking about Donald Trump and Ben Carson. I told somebody the Republican nominee is going to be Marco Rubio. And if that comes true ya'll got proof. There's a prophet over there in First African Baptist Church named Mr. Watts.

Joe: Going off that, is 2015 better than you thought it would be or worse back in the 60's and 70's? Or equivocal of what you'd thought it would be.

Oscar: I figured that 2015, it's not worse. Not worse. A lot of young people, you don't know what worse is. We've come a long ways. There's still some things that need to be done, but it's definitely better. But out of all the things going on now, you all don't know what worse is. You know, I lived it. It's like when you lose a mother, people say, aww I know how you feel. No, you don't know how I feel. You don't know how this person has felt unless you've lost a loved one like a mother or something. You can sympathize with them, but you don't know how they feel. so as far as thing are better, things are better. But a lot of things have been done but we still have a long ways to go and within this, it's like a war -- you fight the war but you not going to win every little battle. A lot of battles are going on within the war but the war will be won. We will see an outcome, we'll see a better nation. I really do, especially as far as race relations is concerned.

Jermaine: What do you think holds progress back? Just a lack of education or....

Oscar: What holds progress back, you took it right out my mouth. One would be a lack of education. People will disagree with what I'm about to say now...everyone is not a Christian and everyone does not believe in a God. But the founders of this country, a lot of things in this country were based on religious principles and ideologies. I think we need to get back to that. A lot of things in the Constitution were based on religious principles. If you had to summarize the

Bible up -- the Bible would be summarized as a book in which man is directed to live more of a righteous living. Those things that are good, those things which are bad. If you could sum it up. And I think a lot of those principles within the Bible relate to now. Those things with a spiritual connotations thousands of years ago were good and they're good today. They've been kind of swept under the rug. We're deteriorating. America reminds me of Rome. We're deteriorating from within. If we fail, it's not going to be because some power or superpower, some other superpower comes and wipe us off the face of the earth. It's gonna be destruction from within. You know that's what took down the you know for 400 years the Romans they ruled. But that's what took them down from the inside, some of the same things the currency, inflation that went on. Morality killed them. Men with men, women with women. You can say what you want to. I hope I'm not stepping on anybody's toes. But I mean that's not, that morality, it's not natural. There's no norm and it's not natural. And that's what happened to the Romans, immorality. And this is based on the church. Immorality will send you to hell if you believe in a heaven and hell. Those are some of the things that I think we're dealing with here in America. And some of those same things, that's why we're having so many problems with the Middle East because they feel like America is trying to put some of our cultural ways on them and they say naw, we're not gonna have it. There's a religious war going on. There's a holy war going on. And that's the way I feel. And if we don't get it straightened up we, America is going to crumble up from the inside. When you see a lot of things going on now, a lot of things working against nature as far as morality is concerned. Just tends to be like that. Like I said, I hope I'm not stepping on nobody's toes, but that's how I feel.

Joe: I want to step back in time again. Yyou had much older siblings. Did you ever travel outside the Jim Crow South when you were a kid?

Oscar: Yeah, my mother was an educated woman. I'm glad you asked me that. I went to Washington D.C.. The first time I went to D.C. I was fifteen years old. I went to Washington to visit the capital. That was something that a lot of young blacks back in 1950 something, they were not having that experience. Late 50's. Early 60's. They were not having that experience. This friend that I just got off the phone with. His mother and my mother they drove us, we were like 14, 15 years old. They drove us to Washington D.C.

Joe: That's a haul.

Oscar: In a 1953 Ford. With no place to stay. No hotels, the first hotel we ran into was in South Carolina. Ran into one in the Atlanta area and the next in South Carolina. Had no other facilities to go to. We had no restaurants to eat at. We had chicken sandwiches and crackers and peanut butter. That's what we ate. And when we got ready to use the restroom we would stop on the road somewhere and the boys would go somewhere into the woods. Me and my buddy. That was

hard man, but they were determined to take us to D.C. So I went to D.C. back then. I'm almost 70. So that was 55 years ago.

Jermaine: Why'd they want to take you?

Oscar: For the traveling experience. And they wanted us to see the capital. I guess out of every black kid growing up then out of 25 you probably had 1 that had been to Washington D.C. Not even D.C. 1 in 15 had probably been out of the state. The black parents, the dads, they didn't make good money to take their kids anywhere and where were you gone stay? We had somewhere in D.C. once we got to D.C. But all along the ride you know. And they didn't have the luxury of paid vacations. See you got to reset your mind too. Oh we going to take our vacation and daddy's going to be off for two weeks. Daddy's going to be working for two weeks, trying to put some food on the table. Mom going to be working. See you have to reset your mind. But see I've seen both worlds now. I was 15. I wasn't deprived as far as you know.

Joe: Was it culturally different in D.C.? Did you see the different races interacting more up there than down here? Or was it generally the same, segregated?

Oscar: It was generally the same. Segregated. Just a bigger ghetto.

Joe: Same as it is now.

Jermaine: Did you expect it to be different when you were 15?

Oscar: Well, I was excited , yeah. But what I really saw, folks in D.C. especially blacks, they were living harder than the folks down here. In this little apartments and rundowns.

Joe: Southeast, Southwest.

Oscar: It was a mess. I said ooh man I wouldn't want to stay up on top of each other. I said I'd rather be in the country in Alabama.

Jermaine: Did you ever feel like moving out? Or did you always want to stay here in the South?

Oscar: You know what? I was going where the job took me. As a young man, you run after the dollar. If it took me to diddy wa diddy, and diddy wa diddy was paying me a good salary and I could take care of a family, Diddy wa diddy here I come. And I was a musician so I had an outlet; I used to play in these bands. I had an opportunity, an offer with The Platters. The Platters wanted me to tour Europe with them. I played the trumpet. I backed up a group called Jo Jo Benson and Peggy Scott. I backed up a little tour by Denise Lasalle, a little tour behind "Mr. Big

Stuff.” I backed up all these folks. So I had an outlet. I was not closed in. I had an outlet and it was because this musician thing, I traveled. It kept you on the road. When I was young I played at every major university around the southeast. We used to play at LSU. We used to play down there and we used to go to Athens to play at the University of Georgia. We used to play at Auburn, University of Alabama. It used to be a school up in Tennessee up in the mountains one of the most expensive schools, a school called Sewanee University, now it’s called University of the South. You know what I’m talking about up in Tennessee. We used to be all up in Tennessee and all down in Florida. We used to travel the whole southeast. I was moving it out.

Jermaine: Do you vote every year?

Oscar: Do I vote? What I’ve been through? Do they put a ballot box out? Ain’t no way I not vote, man. Ain’t no way. I’ll tell you I had a unique experience. My father had never voted until he got about 60 something years old and we went there to vote together and tears rolled down his eyes. Because they would give blacks all kinds of test. There would be a jar and they’d ask how many cookies in that jar? I mean it was wild, man. And when all that stuff got banned and the voting rights act [was passed] my father was in his 60s. And when I saw him with tears coming down, tears came down mine. I was in my late teens, I was like 19. He was in his 60s, you know. He had never voted. And that was a big privilege. We went down to register at Tuscaloosa Courthouse, same place where all the people here were beaten because of the separate facilities there. I had experienced that, my father had never voted. He couldn’t vote; he was 60 something years old before he voted. And you ask me what? You figure it out.

Jermaine: What do you think about voter suppression?

Oscar: Aww, man, that’s something that’s going on now. When you get into that political arena, voter suppression is, I think, it’s awful but it is real. I’ll tell you what’s going on now with the thieves trying to make it hard for a lot of people. They’ve changed to voting, ballot boxes, putting them in unfamiliar territory. Putting them a long ways from certain people, a lot of elderly people can’t get there. That’s the suppression you’re talking about. I’m familiar with that. So once blacks became registered voters, that’s when all the other stuff started. Like you said, trying to suppress the vote each year. And a lot of different tactics have been used to suppress that vote. I stay in prayer! You can try to suppress it, but you’re not going to be able to stop it.

Jermaine: Was there any special purpose to the suffering of black people? Did it lead to anything?

Oscar: What was that?

Jermaine: Slavery, Jim Crow, Segregation was there any special religious purpose to the suffering of black people?

Oscar: Well, I'm not quite understanding the question.

Jermaine: I guess I should rephrase it.

Joe: I guess, It's kind of hard to rephrase. Was there a reason, a beyond human reason, that black people I guess we're kind of picked out for slavery, for segregation, for everything. Do you think there was a higher power in this or do you think there was....

Oscar: No, that was only part of man. If you look back at history, I don't care what it is. I saw a movie one time, I'm gonna fill you all in on this. It was a B-movie, a tv movie. Guess what it was about? It was about people who were black on one side of their face and white on the other. Some were black on the right side and white on the left. There was another group of people, they were having a war and guess what the war was about? Can you think of it?

Jermaine: The two different sides of the faces?

Oscar: You're right. The different sides. The others were black on the left and white on the right. And there has been since man [was born] discriminatory practices and sometimes they're the most minute differences. But it's always been the whole makeup of man -- superiority. There's always in the makeup of man one being superior to the other. Survival of the fittest. And that's going to exist no matter what. You think of Germany and how they did the Jews. If it's not blacks, it going to be now...look at what you got going on immigration laws. It's always going to be somebody. Somebody's going to think they're better. That's a human perception. It's almost like it's innate. That's almost like it's something that ain't learned; it's innate for somebody to be the superior. But one got the right ear shorter than the left ear, the left ear is shorter than the right ear. I think that's part of the flaws in human characteristics, you know. No matter what. If everyone in here were white, and your hair was blond, his hair was blonde, and mine was brownish brunette like then I guarantee it you all would, because of the color of my hair, [discriminate]. So that applies to what you're saying there now. It's going to happen regardless.

Jermaine: Why do you think there were so many people against the movement? Black, white. Or like black people who weren't involved. or white people who were against. Not necessarily against...

Oscar: Well, people, the whites were against it, the movement. You were destroying a way of life for them. I mean, that's a simple one there. You're destroying a way of life, the way it always has been, now there's a change. Now when you speak on the blacks. It was not necessarily a whole lot of blacks against the movement. You had some blacks that didn't participate, physically. But you had a lot of blacks that participated monetarily. It wasn't so much as they were against the movement, something that's going to help you. And if a black was against the movement that meant they had some kind of way along their journey in life, they had been brainwashed to think that you are inferior. That's almost accepting you are inferior, you don't deserve to vote or you don't deserve to come and sit down at this restaurant and eat a hamburger with me.

Jermaine: Did you know anybody who bought that?

Oscar: I didn't. Not during my time. You had some folks, some blacks, you call them "Uncle Toms." They'd go back and tell the "you know." But even Uncle Toms didn't you know. And you know blacks among blacks, they'll call Clarence, Uncle Tom of the Supreme Court. For him to sit up there and say I will vote down affirmative action. You're a black man voting down affirmative action? In a lot of places where blacks have made it up the social strata now is because of affirmative action, because they say well we don't have any black surgeons or whatever we need to hire at least one black surgeon at our hospital. We got 12 surgeons, 8 surgeons and we have not a single ethnic surgeon here. Let's see can we find one. And Clarence Thomas says, "no, no, no." That's a contemporary Uncle Tom for most blacks. "Thomas, I'm out of here." Contemporary Uncle Tom. And he voted against some other stuff too. "I made it, I'm Thomas."

Jermaine: What do you think the movement would have been like without the church?

Oscar: There would not have been a movement. It wouldn't have been a movement because black people are praying people, they're church people. They believe in God, they believe in mercy, and they believe in grace. And you hear a lot of those black anthems, "We have Come This far by Faith" and "On the Lord." It wouldn't have been a movement without that. Most black people are very religious people and they do believe in what the Bible says. That's why you have all these black anthems and stuff they sing.

Joe: What do you think about Malcolm X?

Oscar: Malcolm X? Well, Malcolm X, a light came on. I think that's why he was killed. The Muslims their head man was doing some things. Again, morality. When they found out he had five or six babies by young girls in the church. Was this a person to follow? You're not morally

correct. But you want me to follow? And it was like a light came on in his head and the black Muslims they didn't like that because he went against their leader. That's just like saying Jesus was this or Jesus was married and had two or three kids. You know what I'm saying. And it had him destroyed and they killed him.

Jermaine: Did you meet any Black Nationalist during the movement?

Oscar: It was a group called the Deacons. They were, man. Yeah, they used to be in the movement. They were called the Deacons. And not deacons praying either.

Jermaine: What did they do?

Oscar: Man they were physical. They were protectors during the movement. They would get physical. They wore these overalls and white shirts. Deacons, you hit him, they were gone hit you back.

Jermaine: Were there any books that you read that inspired you to be involved or anything like that? Any speeches? Any particular speeches?

Oscar: I'm trying to think of any. Martin Luther King's speech, that came later in the movement. What's his name, Du Bois? I read some of his writing. W. E. B. Du Bois, I read several of his writings. Who else? You know, you read that story of Mary McLeod Bethune, you read her writings. Back then you did read stuff about the Underground Railroad. A lot of those things were encouraging back then. And when you think about it, especially when I was a teenager. It was not a lot of black literature there. All of the history in schools was European history. Most of the stuff we learned about black history, you were grown.

Jermaine: So you sought it out?

Oscar: Yeah, and then we used to get secondary textbooks when I was growing up. The whites, there used to be all types of names, Mary Jane and Sally Sue, and we'd get those books after they had them for three years. That would pass them down to the black schools. That kept you behind. Black folks, Sputnik the first satellite orbiting the earth. I had somebody laughing at me, I said Sputnik had been orbiting the earth five years before black folks know it was up there.

Jermaine: Did you kids have a better education than you? I'm talking like primary school. Elementary, middle, high.

Oscar: Yeah. I had a good education, it was just segregated. I had a good education. My kids, yeah, because they were able to go further. And I have a son with a Ph.D and my great grandmother was auctioned off as a slave in Louisiana. She was auctioned off for being a slave.

Jermaine: Do they lack any perspective or kids of my generation lack any particular perspective that you had since you lived through everything?

Oscar: Oh yeah. You teach. You pass down. They work hard, trying to be the best. And my oldest daughter, her son's in middle school and, bam, she's teaching him the same thing. It goes like this. See, your home life has a lot to do with it. Your ideas and your philosophies and the way you come to your philosophies. They say why are you a member of this church? Because I was conditioned. Why am I a Christian? Because that's the way I grew up, that's what I know. That's what I know because I was brought to church as a kid. You just don't form or get to where you say I'm going to be Christian when you're 17 or 18 years old and say I want to be a Christian. Your social and your ideas, it's the way you're brought up in your home. Are you a Christian?

Jermaine: No sir.

Oscar: Ok, what are you?

Jermaine: I'm not a practicing believer of anything.

Oscar: Oh ok. Did your parents believe?

Jermaine: My mom does.

Oscar: Your mom does?

Jermaine: Does still yes.

Oscar: Do you believe in any higher power?

Jermaine: I'm skeptical about it, but I believe something.

Oscar: Total atheist?

Jermaine: No sir, not totally.

Oscar: How about you?

Joe: I was raised Jewish. My mom's a practicing Jew and my dad's Episcopalian.

Oscar: Is your mother a Christian Jew or an Orthodox Jew?

Joe: She was a, my grandparents were extremely Jewish. My great grandparents came right off the boat from Poland, right before like everything bad happened.

Oscar: See, Orthodox Jews don't believe in Jesus Christ. They believe in God, but they don't believe in Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus Christ was a prophet, but not as the son of God. As a young man whatever your belief, I feel that there is a higher power. Now whether you're a Christian or you're Jewish or you're Muslim or Hindu. Got to believe in something. Got to believe in something. When you don't believe in nothing. Listen to what Mr. Watts is saying. Make sure you listen back at that recorder. I'm just messing with you.

Jermaine: All right, Thank you.

Joe: I have one last question, and you don't have to answer if you don't want to. What did you, during the movement you see these horrible things happening about these white people to black people, what did you think of white people at this time? Like, let's say it was 1970 and

Oscar: That's a good question. Let me tell you what black people were taught. You have blacks, out of all the things that happened to blacks throughout the movement, all the beatings and the killings. Do you know blacks, you can see this and I know you've seen it, blacks are more tolerant to whites than whites are to blacks. Blacks are more accepting, more forgiving, and have more tolerance to whites. Than whites to blacks. Write that down. You'll see that. So, I don't hate. Because I wasn't raised like that I was raised and taught to forgive. Now, I don't forget. But ain't no hate. Out of all that happened, the way they was treating us. I don't hate. I don't have that bitterness in my heart. I know that there was a time in history when it was going on. See you can't move forward until you accept what has already happened. If you hold that in, you can never progress, move forward. And I'm moving forward. Like I told you all earlier, I had a good life. It's been a blessing because I do believe in a higher power. I don't believe it just happened. It's been a blessing and God has blessed me. Blessed my wife and my children. They go on and get educated and so on. So I don't have time to hate nobody. Because if I hate you, you're up one. And I'm always thinking how I can get even. But that's my answer to that question. I enjoyed you fellows man.

Joe: Yeah, we appreciate it.

Jermaine: Thank you.

Oscar: Y'all visit the church sometime. See what's going on.

Joe: We came a couple of times

Jermaine: Yeah, we took a tour

Joe: Yeah we met... What's the bookkeepers name?

Jermaine: Ms. Gray

Oscar: Yeah, Ms. Fannie N. Gray.

Jermaine: Yeah, and then I came on one Sunday.

Oscar: I'm usually here during Sunday. I'm one of the deacons, secretary of the deacon board. I don't know if I was here when y'all came. I play trumpet, in the choir.

Joe: Is that what you play? I don't know if we went over your instrument. The trumpet?

Oscar: Yeah.

Jermaine: I played the trumpet in middle school.

Oscar: Great, great. You alright.

Joe and Jermaine: (Laughs)

Oscar: You play?

Jermaine: Not anymore. You still play?

Oscar: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I play during services.

Jermaine: Do you play at home just for fun?

Oscar: No. (Laughs) I just come and play for the service. I've played since I was 11 years old. I got a birthday coming up I'll be 70.. How many years is that?

Jermaine: 59.

