Gerald Martin, in his official portrait as top administrator at FEMA in the 1980s

‘How Did I End Up Here?’ Gerald Martin of El Cerrito:

High level federal administrator, Berkeley Hornet, merchant seaman, craftsman, family man, NAACP leader

Conducted by Dave Weinstein.

Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy of Gerald Martin

In 2021, the society's magazine The Forge profiled the earliest Black families to live in what later became El Cerrito. Four families settled in the rural area at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century.

But a thriving Black community did not truly develop in the city until the 1950s, growing through the 1960s. The Martin family – Gerald ("Jerry"), wife Leona (Delcombre) Martin, daughter Renetia and sons Gerald and Michael – arrived in 1958, despite efforts by neighbors to keep Black people out of their hillside neighborhood.

Growing up, at times in poverty, in the segregated Black neighborhood of South Berkeley, Jerry thought of becoming a pharmacist. He worked for years for pharmacist William Byron Rumford, a civil rights leader who, as a member of the state Assembly, later authored laws to ban employment and housing discrimination.

Instead, instead of becoming a pharmacist, after serving in the Merchant Marines and the military, Jerry Martin built a career in the administrative side of government, first in cities.

In Richmond in the early 1970s, he was administrative manager for the city and its Manpower program; and or Compton in 1979 and 1980 he was assistant city manager and director of the Police Department's professional standards bureau)

Then he worked for a federally funded state training program for police, fire and other officials, the California Specialized Training Institute, where Martin served as chief administrator from 1971 to '79.

For the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) from 1981 to 1985 Jerry was the executive administrator. For the Selective Service System in 1986, he was the military personnel division manager. And for the Veterans Administration from 1987, Jerry served as assistant chief of staff, in Washington, D.C. and then in the regional office in San Francisco.

Jerry retired – for a time – in 1990. In 2001, he began working for the city of Oakland under Mayor Jerry Brown to establish the Oakland Military Institute College Preparatory Academy. Jerry retired again in 2003.

Throughout his career, Jerry served in the California National Guard.

In El Cerrito he became involved with the community, serving with his wife as co-presidents of the high school PTA, and as a board member and president of the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP.

Jerry comes across as an easygoing guy, trim and fit, impeccably though casually dressed, thoughtful, open to any question, patient, the kind of guy you can't help but like. The home, which he shares with his son, is attractive and well organized, filled with photos, pictures, mementoes, and an MG in the garage. Jazz plays softly in the background

Jerry seemed to enjoy the interviews.

Jerry in the living room of his El Cerrito home. Much of the art and some furnishings were collected on trips he and his wife Leona enjoyed. Photo by Dave Weinstein

This is an edited version of conversations between Gerald Martin and Dave Weinstein of the El Cerrito Historical Society conducted March 24 and 26 and April 1 and 8, 2021. An August 17 conversation added a few topics and provided clarification.

Dave has shortened some passages, edited for clarity, and organized the material chronologically and sometimes thematically. Most questions are paraphrased, or eliminated.

Gerald's son Michael attended portions of the conversations and we have included comments from him. Patricia Durham, a friend and Historical Society board member, attended the first interview, which she had arranged.

Spacing between sections indicates that sections are from different times in the interview. Some short sections appear more than once, as we use portions of the interview in different subject sections.

Gerald's parents, Alphonso Martin and Mildred (Davis) Martin, circa 1920.

Growing up in Berkeley:

Were you born in Berkeley?

We were living there in 1927 (*Gerald was born Oct. 18, 1927*). Of course there were no hospitals where Black people could go and have babies except Highland Hospital (in Oakland), which is a county hospital. My family was living in Berkeley at the time. I was born in Oakland but was living in Berkeley.

Did you graduate from Berkeley High?

Yes, more or less. I say that because it was during the war, and the latter part of the war, I had experienced, you could join the service and still be excused.

I went into the Merchant Marine when I was 16, which was in 1943, '44. Those days everybody was, everybody male was doing something. The younger people like myself, at 16, so and so is going away, so and so is going away, we've got to do something.

Tell me about your parents and where you lived as a child.

We had, my parents lived and I was born on Acton Street between Prince and Ashby. (*They lived in a single-family house*.) Over the next 10 years we lived in, we rented, my parents got a divorce early on when I was about 3.

My father was in the cleaning business, clothes. A dry cleaner. Over the years he apparently was pretty good. They got a divorce in the mid 1930s.

I had two sisters, both older. Theresa, Marylese. We always lived with my mom, at least till later on. They became teenagers and my father took them.

My sister and I used to raise so much hell around the house that my mother couldn't take it. So my father took the two girls and I stayed with my mother.

Father remarried and lived in the city (*San Francisco*). He kept his dry cleaning business in Berkeley. He was pretty good as a spotter. He could take care of delicate dresses. He was good in his business.

He really didn't come on the scene until much later. We moved around a lot. My mother got remarried. Apparently it was right in the depth of the Depression. We lived in Berkeley on Dohr Street, on Ellis Street, we lived on Grant Street. We must have moved six or seven times until finally, in later years, when things got better.

I can remember, the Depression, being hungry. We lived on Russell. I can remember walking with my stepfather towards … to pick up relief food, and how hungry I was, and how tired I was, walking all that way. And they gave you fruit, staple stuff. It got us through.

We were living on Russell Street at the time, and things were really bad. You're too young to recognize they were bad until you get older and recognize that they were really bad.

We had to go down to get food to maintain yourself. And then we moved from Russell to King Street. It was only, like, two blocks, if that. We moved at night. We couldn't afford a mover. I remember my stepfather and I moving the couch from the living room. And I was so … well I wasn't very big in those days. I could lift the couch, but I could only go maybe 10, 15 yards. (Laughs.)

I can remember at nighttime we would move, 'I gotta stop'. And we'd stop and put it down. Wait, until we got through the block. Every four or five minutes I had to stop, we had to stop to let me rest.

But things were more than difficult. I didn't realize until later years how bad things really were.

What did your stepfather do for a living?

He was a cook on Southern Pacific. He was out of work. In that business you go down and they give you an assignment. They would give you a train to go to work on. It's kind of touch and go. There wasn't a steady income.

Did your mother work?

Off and on. In later years she went to work as a domestic on a regular basis, which wasn't bad.

What education did your parents have?

My mother I know finished high school in Oakland. She and her sister finished. My father I think he finished in Mississippi. He went into the Army in World War I and he learned to be a tailor in the army. He got out and some sort of program they had, he was even further trained as a tailor.

He was good as a tailor and he got into the cleaning business.

They weren't highly educated, but they were educated as normal people were in those days. There weren't a lot of people who were around our group who went to university, if any. The percentage of people that I knew in those days that went to higher education was very sparse.

Young Jerry and his sister, Marylese, ca 1933.

What were you into as a boy. Sports, music, girls?

As a boy, I never got into sports, not to any extent. I mean I could play baseball, softball. But I wasn't motivated to go onto football or basketball. That was not my thing.

After school I would usually go to work. I never really got into any of that. The environment in those days was difficult if not impossible to describe how things, organizationally, were in the community.

You were not far from the university. Did you ever think of attending?

No. I don't think anybody in my age group went to, well maybe one, to college. Because the war interrupted a lot, and everybody went into service, as I did. I went to the Merchant Marines at 16.

After the war, the GI Bill came in and a couple of my friends went back to school. Everything at that point went up. You were exposed to a lot of different elements. People changed their goals.

Working for William Byron Rumford:

The reason that I was associated with Byron Rumford was that… When I was a kid, let me put it this way, he worked as a pharmacist. In those days it wasn't easy for a Black pharmacist to

get a job, and he was the first Black pharmacist at Highland Hospital (*in Oakland*). It was the county hospital. Still is.

But he also had a part time job at the drug store, which was owned by a Black guy named Montgomery. Montgomery gave him the job as a part time pharmacist. He worked nights and Sundays. He did that for many years.

So when Montgomery wanted to retire, he wanted to sell the store. Well Byron couldn't afford to buy the store.

In Berkeley, you went down to Sacramento and Ashby. At Sacramento and Ashby right now, there's a store on the corner. In those days it was really kind of a headquarters for the Black community. There was a grocery store there and a gas station, a drug store and a barber shop.

Byron couldn't buy it, so there was a woman Mrs. Jacobs and her son Dick. They changed the name of the pharmacy from Montgomery's to Dick's. Dick wasn't a pharmacist but his mother was. She ran the drugstore and Dick just poked around. They bought an adjacent lot on Sacramento Street and they had a building put up, a store building.

They opened a creamery and they put his sister in, Mona. It was Mona's Creamery, and there was a bakery next door to that. So Byron couldn't buy this store, and he went to work for Dick and Dick's mother.

Were the Jacobs Black?

No, they were white.

I was the delivery boy, and Byron worked Sundays, evenings and whatever, and Mrs. Jacobs worked during the day. She was, how can I put it, an older lady, kind of frumpy. As time went on Mona was not successful in the creamery. It was kind of a family affair.

So Dick finally decided he wanted out and Mrs. Jacobs got married, if you want to call it that, which is another story. So she wanted out, and as I remember I was the delivery boy. When I say delivery boy, they delivered the drugs, the prescriptions.

How old were you?

I must have been 11, 12. Yeah. I'd have to give that some thought. I had a bike. When I got the bike I was in the fifth grade.

I delivered prescriptions, if and when they had them. Mrs. Jacobs was kind of frumpy; she wasn't a bad lady to work for.

But you can imagine this. At my age I delivered, I swept the floor, pulled the awnings in, down and up, whatever, keep the sun out, and you know, did everything around the store that she told me to do. I must have been about 12, even a little older.

But she would drive… she couldn't drive very well. She lived up on Woolsey (*Street*) in Berkeley above Adeline, that's where white people lived in those days. She would come to work, open the store, she'd drive around the block until she could drive straight in and park right in the front of the store. That's her favorite spot.

And she would sit, the sun would come out, she would sit in the car, the door open, and fraternize with the people, the Black ... She was big on fraternizing with the men, not so much the women.

They would come along. They had a dialogue going. She would sit there in the sun. If somebody came into the store that wanted a prescription, I would go out and tell her there's a customer who wants a prescription.

She would say, tell him to come back in an hour. She wouldn't get up and do it. She really wasn't a very good businesswoman. The stock was going down, there were a lot of things we didn't have.

Was there a soda fountain?

When Montgomery was there they had a soda fountain. When they sold it to her they closed that down.

She really wasn't much of a pharmacist as he was, Byron. Byron came to work at 6, stayed till 10, worked all day Saturday, half day Sunday.

As I remember I was getting a dollar and a quarter or a dollar and a half a week. He told me he was getting eight bucks a week.

This is about '39, yeah.

So she did the business during the day. Dick didn't come by, I don't remember him coming by too often.

One day there was a man named John, a white guy, a retired PG&E guy. He would come in and flirt with her. He would just kind of stand around. Nice guy. I've got his name in my book over here. He lived up on California and Ashby in a big house, which is still there.

Anyway he said to me one day, 'Jerry you're a good boy, you work hard every day.' He reached into his pocket, one of those leather purses, tipped it open and took out a silver dollar and said 'here.' My mind starts going, this guy is giving me a dollar. I'm making a dollar and a quarter a week and he's giving me a dollar.

I told Byron the story. 'I'm thinking about asking Mrs. Jacobs for a raise.' And he said, 'Well, Jerry, as you go through life you have to make these decisions. I can't tell you if you should ask her or not.'

So I took a chance and went to Mrs. Jacobs and gave her the story. I'd like a raise, 50 cents or whatever.

I do remember Byron telling me he wasn't getting a lot of money, seven or eight dollars a week. Anyway she said, 'Well let me think about it. I'll let you know. You go home.'

I got on my bike and I left that day. The next day I came down and I saw another guy's bike out front. I said, I guess she's not going to give me a raise.

Shortly thereafter Byron Rumford, he bought the store. I could tell something was wrong because there was no stock coming in, things were going down.

I knew my way around the store, the stock. How many prescriptions do you get a day, how many are delivered, two or three, maybe. She would just sit out in the car in the sun. People would come in, I would wait on them. I had a stool, a box you would stand on, and I had the cash register. (Laughs.)

After a while, maybe a month or two, maybe a little longer, Byron called my house, my mother, told her to have me come by the store, he wanted to talk to me. It must have been six or seven months later.

He said, 'Well I bought the store.' Money was hard to come by in those days. He was married to an old Berkeley family, three sisters. He married one of them. Two of them were teachers and they owned a house on Oregon in Berkeley.

He apparently, I'm guessing at this, he wanted to buy the store, and they helped him. I really never knew that as a fact, but I presumed that was the case.

He said 'I want you to come back to work, but not as a delivery boy. I want you to be a clerk, just in the evenings and weekends and whatever. I'll pay you a decent (salary).' It was more than a dollar and a half.

I had to be 14.

My next step up, I guess. Working for Byron.

In the meantime, just before (he bought the store) Dick who owned the store, his mother worked there, his sister had built two stores on the end of the group there on Sacramento (street) on the northeast side of the street.

One of them was turned into a creamery called Mona's. Mona opened up the creamery, sandwiches, ice cream, like that. Next door they opened up a bakery. By that time I had come back to work as a clerk.

Byron bought the store and I worked there off and on for many years, which is a lengthy story.

He at that point was working at Highland as a pharmacist during the day, and at night time he would come and work at his store. They had a day pharmacist.

What was the neighborhood like?

It was the Black center of the community. Safeway store, not Safeway initially, and the Sacramento market, which was a Chinese market, (which was) in competition with, it wasn't Safeway in those days, the predecessor.

During this period when I was not at the store, I had inherited the weekend corner selling Sunday papers. I was on one side of the corner and there was another guy at the other side. We sold Examiner, Chronicle, Tribune, Sunday version. I had a stand, a tripod and papers stacked on it. (No roof)

How old were you then?

I guess 13, maybe.

How long did you work for Byron?

Off and on (laughs), I worked there, Army and out of the Army. I came back at one point and as an adult and worked for him, oh I don't know, I worked for him so long that Mrs. Rumford asked me to come back to work to help out at the store.

He went on to build a bigger building and a bigger store. When I got out of the army in 1952 I came home and he naturally said, 'You can come back to work.'

I worked there for a while. I worked there so long that as I moved up in the world of work it became difficult for me to merge all these workdays into my full time job after I moved so to speak, into management.

So I had to leave, which I did, and she asked me to please come back and help out from time to time. I consented to that. Finally I had to cut it loose which was 19…, maybe 1953.

Was working for Byron beneficial or was it a dead end?

It was like 60-40. In other words, I could use the money, at least at one point. And the other was more in terms of relationships over the years. From when I was a little boy to when I was an adult, he relied on me to fill in and help out. Even after he had gone to the Assembly. (*Rumford was elected to the state assembly in 1948*.)

Did working for Byron help in your later career?

In a sense of relationships. How you could get along with people. The people skills helped me a great deal.

I waited on people, the register, the stock. Helped stock the stuff and helped order it.

Did you ever think about becoming a pharmacist?

I did at one point. But an extra four years (in school), no I'll pass on that. He encouraged me.

Once you get into the world of work and you start a family, you have to make these decisions. What you want to be and what you have to be are quite different.

Rumford's pharmacy served as the center for the Black community, for discussions about civil rights and politics. Were you part of that?

That's right. I was too young for that, but he had a group that came down. The group was headed up by a guy named D.G. Gibson, a pillar in the community. He was always dressed in a suit. Everybody was in those days.

He was the representative of all the Black newspapers. D.G. Gibson was, he represented the Pittsburgh Courier and Chicago Independent. The agent. He distributed the papers, including at Rumford's pharmacy.

He would probably be the silent leader of the Democratic movement in the Black community. He and Byron were close. He was Byron's aide, assistant, he guided him. He was a very articulate person, kind of a slow talking guy that knew his way around the community.

I was never really part of that. There were three or four that would come by the store. D.G. headed it. They would caucus back in the office. I would be out front somewhere.

By the time he went to the assembly, I was still around. I didn't work on his campaign or anything like that.

Were you inspired by Byron?

I was inspired by not so much the work he was doing, but the person. He was like a father.

He was a very methodical. He had a personality of a businessman and a politician. He knew everybody who came into the store, who were regular customers. He had a real pleasant personality with people. White, Black and otherwise.

He was always, to me he was like a real, like a second father, a friend. I could go and tell him, 'Byron I'm thinking about this or thinking about that,' and he would give me some advice that was usually pretty good.

Over the years we became pretty close. I wasn't there all my adult life. Periods there he would ask me to come back. It was like, call Jerry, help out.

But I never got involved with politics. When he went to the assembly I visited one time. Never got involved with local politicians. Too young, early mid 20s.

I had a family, I was busy raising the family. I wasn't part of that D.G. Gibson group. I was like 18 and these guys had to be in their 40s.

It was a turbulent time, with movements for employment and housing rights. Were you involved with social issues then?

I wasn't really. Being in the National Guard is a part time job, it's a weekend thing. I never wore a uniform in and around the community. I didn't wear a uniform out in public, so to speak.

I was not that active in any of those movements, so to speak. You know Berkeley so you know that between Shattuck Avenue and the Bay, and University Avenue, that was the little square where we were, where the Black people were. You couldn't under most circumstances buy a house north of University.

I was brought up in that square, and I really had not been exposed to any discrimination until I came back in 1952 and we were looking for an apartment.

I was really never part of the group that Byron met with because they were much older than I was. Other than voting and maybe handing out some pamphlets or something, I didn't get really politically involved.

Working for his father, hanging with the Hornets, Pearl Harbor:

At 15, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Probably a pharmacist. I watched the pharmacists work. It was clean, you know, you were making a contribution. People were sick and you were bringing them medicine. At that point at 15, I'd say so.

But in the meantime, my father, I go back to those buildings, the drugstore, the barber shop, then they had the fountain and the bakery. So the fountain stayed, the bakery left. And eventually, just before the war, my father rented that bakery building and opened up a dry cleaners.

Then my family took a different, well, a different approach because I went in to help him and I learned to press clothes. My sisters learned to work the counter. My younger sister worked, she also learned to press clothes and whatever.

And I did that for a while. It was a period in our life when we came back in contact with our father, which had not been too close otherwise.

When was this?

Just about the time the war was ready to go, yeah. My father had a couple of contracts. They opened up Camp Ashby, a military installation in Berkeley. The soldiers would leave their military uniforms at the store and he could clean and press them.

You'd mentioned you had friends, the South Berkeley Group.

We had a club and we called it the Hornets and we rode our bikes. There was a place in Oakland at 15th and San Pablo that used to make these jackets, silk, satin, shiny stuff, nice line of athletic jackets, with the name, of your school. We had this club, it had a big H for Hornets and a little hornet in there. It cost 5, 6 bucks to do that.

I was selling papers and whatever. So I had a group of guys that were in the Hornets. There were five or six of us. I guess none of them are still alive. All of them went either in the Army or Merchant Marines during the war.

Everybody went somewhere and did something. And that was a motivating factor with me was, these guys are going off, I'm stuck here at the cleaners and fooling around at the drugstore. That's why I decided I was going to, in a 16 year old mind, I wanted to go out and do something.

Were you deeply patriotic?

I can't remember that that was a motivating factor other than the fact that I felt obligated to do that because everybody else was. It's like I've got to do my part.

Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

I was living on Stanton Street in Berkeley. And I remember the Sunday morning that it happened 'cause we were out, we didn't really understand what it was. And it took a while, you know. We had a Zenith radio. That evening was when I realized, really, what happened. Because we were out playing that Sunday.

Then it all began, and everybody was either being drafted or going off. I say everybody, everybody that I knew in the circle in Berkeley. (Laughs.) I went to my mother and asked her if I could go into the Merchant Marines, because at 16 you had to get your parents' consent.

I didn't know the reason they would let 16 years old, because the casualty rate was so high they had to let older people, retirees, and younger people, to man the ships in the Merchant Marine.

Going to sea:

Did you graduate from Berkeley High?

Yes, more or less. I say that because it was during the war, and the latter part of the war, I had experienced, you could join the service and still be excused.

I went into the Merchant Marine when I was 16, which was in 1943, ’44. Those days everybody was, everybody male was doing something. The younger people like myself, at 16, so and so is going away, so and so is going away, we‘ve got to do something.

The Merchant Marine was accepting people who were 16 with their parents’ consent. At the time, (I was) not giving it much thought, but after some years I finally thought, I wonder why they did that?

Well, the casualty rate (in the merchant marine) was so great they had to recruit people, so they took away the restraints (about recruits being) too old and too young. The older people could come back and the younger people could go

Well anyway I went to sea during the war. That’s how I got out of school. Then after the war I went back to school later on in the ‘50s.

Yes, I got my high school degree.

How long were you in the Merchant Marines?

Just during the war, a couple of years.

Where did you serve?

In the South Pacific, Guadalcanal, Carolines, Hawaii, maybe a dozen times, Guam, all of the Southwest Pacific, more or less. You say that to a merchant mariner, you stop at these ports, maybe a day, maybe two days. New Guinea, Australia, New Caledonia, all of those are on my (list). But maybe New Caledonia, maybe New Zealand a day, if that, maybe a day and a half, two.

Did you see much action?

I saw a couple of bombs, that kind of thing. But nobody actually shot or sent a torpedo at the ship or anything. A couple of misses. In those days, (laughs), you’re young and stupid.

At nighttime of course everything was blacked out, no lights no nothing. Occasionally you sighted a submarine or something and you’d have to do some evasive things. I was never actually shot at or torpedoed at, that I knew of.

What did you do on board?

I was a mess man and a porter. I served with Matson Line, the Lurline. When I first went in the Merchant Marine, I took a couple of trips on Victory ships and I came home,. And I wanted to stay more than five days (at sea). And so I signed up to go to (San Francisco) City College to be a cook in the Merchant Marine, which I did.

I think that took two months, and when I got out they assigned me to the SS Lurline, which is a Matson liner. And I got a taste of the big ships. Never look back! I was on a couple of small ships before that, but there’s nothing like those big liners.

So, (laughs), once you are a cook on one of those big ships like that, there’s no air conditioning. All the ship’s integrity, everything’s batted down. So I decided, well, I would just be sweating myself away. I was a young kid. I must have weighed 110, 15 pounds. Anyway I changed jobs and became a room steward, got away from the galley.

I learned a lot. It was a nice experience. My last voyage was to Australia which would be 1944, ‘45, ‘46. We brought back Australian war brides, 850 brides and 26 kids, which was a nice trip, but a lot of stories, you know.

Because the crew was ... It was against the law for them to fraternize with any of the passengers. But at any rate I would say those are probably some of my nicer memories, being on the ship out there in the middle of the ocean, at the will of the enemy. It’s a little precarious, but when you’re young and stupid it doesn’t make any difference. You’re looking for a little excitement.

The SS Lurline

The Lurline, that was a luxury liner.

The Matson line, they had the SS Lurline, the Mariposa, and Matsonia, they were the big deal in those days.

And what they did of course, the government just took over, they just painted them and outfitted them to take troops. They would cram on 8,000 in the Atlantic and I think 34 hundred in the Pacific because it's too hot (to cram in so many people).

All of them were converted to troop ships. I have pictures of various times, the big ships loaded up, coming into San Francisco or Australia, I think.

What did you do in the Merchant Marines?

There were many sundry ways you could go it. The cook and stewards were open to Black (people). You (Black people) could go into the engine department, and that was it. Everything was unionized, the engine department, the deckhands and the stewards department.

Did you resent the limits that were placed on Black men?

At the time, slightly. I guess if you are discriminated against long enough you get accustomed to accepting, you know. You can't do that. OK. And it's not like you're going to get, you know, you're going to revolt, or go to some agency and tell them you're being discriminated against. You just accepted it.

Was this the first time you were far away from Berkeley?

Oh, yes.

I'll tell you what happened. We were associated with, being around, listening to other people. Some of the older guys would sit around and tell a lot of stories about their living, about their social life quote unquote. And you learn a lot. You become mature in a very short period of time in how things are. You learn how the world of work goes. You learn to go with it or go against it.

I met a lot of interesting people. In the Merchant Marine you find an element of people who are not too discriminatory. In other words they accept the fact of African-Americans.

There are a lot of Asians, a lot of other races in the Merchant Marine, and there are a lot of people there who have been there a long time, and can give you guidance if you listen.

Career guys?

Yes. There were guys who, if you listen, which I did a lot, listen to those old guys talk about old days, new days, now days, you became educated.

Did the white, Asians and Black guys get along?

Oh yeah, I don't ever remember there being a problem aboard any ship that I was on.

Did the different groups have different sleeping quarters??

Everybody was integrated. The unions, particularly, you go aboard ship, in most cases they have about three different unions. The Sailors Union of the Pacific had no Blacks, but the Marine Cooks and Stewards did, the Wipers and Engineers, they had a few.

At lunch did you sit next to white people?

Oh yeah. On the ship there was no, there were no racial lines on the ship.

Were there many Blacks on the ships?

Most of them, no, maybe on a normal freighter there's got to be 30, 35 people in the crew. Of those you may have five, six, seven African-Americans, but you're also going to have a mix of Filipinos, Chinese, other races. It's kind of a mix.

Were Blacks able to move up ranks?

Not too .. . depends on what. Everything was segregated union-wise. The Sailors Union of the Pacific, that meant you worked on the deck. I met maybe one or two Blacks who worked as sailors. Most of the people I became familiar with were in the engine department. The engineers had a few (Black members) but they weren't high ranking. I mean I never sailed on a ship where they had a Black officer, OK?

During the war I guess I was on a few ships. Maybe an Asian, a Filipino, but no high ranking, no deck officers, no engineers were Black, that I can recall.

Did you resent that or was it just the way it was?

The way it was seemed to be the easiest course of action. I may resent it covertly, but overtly, that's the way things are. You just move on. In the Merchant Marine you've got a different ship every time. You go out, to the Southwest Pacific, two weeks over, some of the islands over there, Guadalcanal or whatever, then two weeks back, so you're six, seven weeks on one ship, and you usually get off.

You stay home for a couple of days then you go back to the union and bid on a job that is on the boards. I got to the point where I wanted to stay in a little longer. So I decided, I would talk to somebody of the old timers, which I did.

One friend sad, why don't you apply to City College of San Francisco and go to the cooks' course. That's how I stayed for a while in.

That's when you sailed on the Lurline?

I was on that about three trips, which would make it, four, fix, six, seven months. That was like the epitome of my Merchant Marine days. This huge ship that was, you're exposed to different people, you're exposed to a working element, particularly in the culinary field.

Actually I learned a lot, yes, Much of what I learned was from people. I was on the Lurline, after I got out of the training to be a cook. It was too much for me, and I got a job a little nicer. Cooler.

(*Gerald moved from cooking to being a steward*.)

What do stewards do?

A room steward takes care of the (room), cleans them. It's like a maid, only you're a man. You clean the rooms, you make the beds. And that's what a steward did. Takes care of the passageways. And some of them, it's actually a misnomer.

They have a chief steward, but steward quote unquote covers a lot, culinary field and otherwise. It wasn't just people who took care of the room, it was Marine Cooks and Stewards.

Marine Cooks and Stewards were so often left that eventually they indicted some of the staff in the union for being Communists.

Were you involved with the union?

You had to join the union to get on the ship.

Were you active with the union?

Oh no. You stayed away from that. Although I knew somebody, a couple of people, who got involved with that part. I was not an activist.

Were you interested in Communism?

No, not particularly. If you'd asked me in those days what it was I would probably have had a problem describing it.

Why didn't you stay in the Merchant Marine?

They went on strike in the latter part, when the war was over, the latter part of '45. Yes, it was for better pay and some other conditions. I think I was, I needed money. I didn't really grasp going out there, walking around and not having any income.

So I went back to work for my father. I was18 going on 19, yeah.

You had seen a lot by this time.

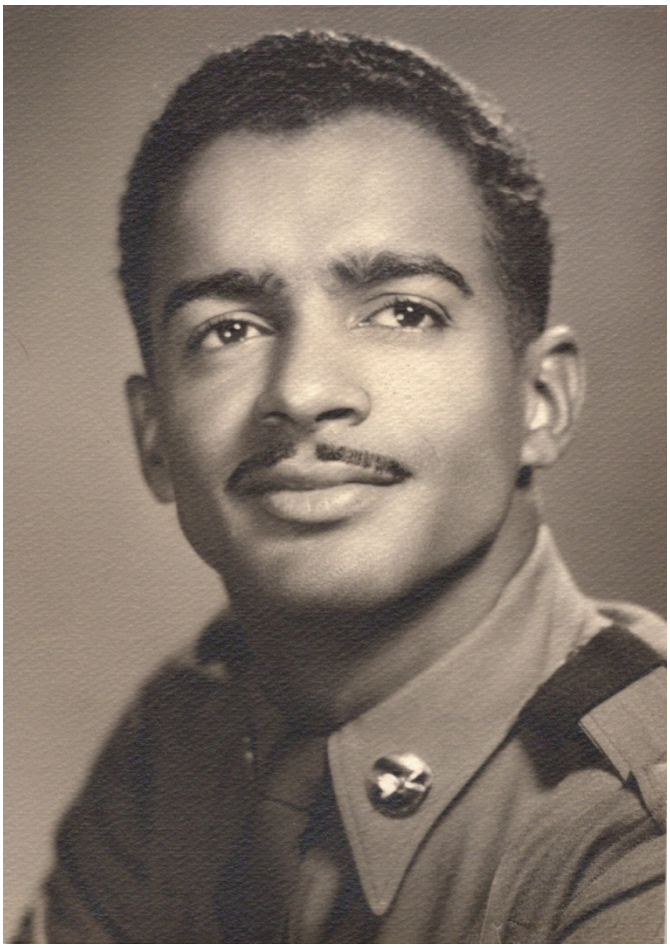
Oh yeah.

Working for his father's dry cleaners after World War II; social life and Big Bands:

Was it hard coming back to the cleaners after sailing the South Pacific?

Not particularly. Although I enjoyed going to sea, the romantic part of it, I did, the adventurous part of it, I did. But you get lonely out there. No women, whatever. I was at that stage where I probably needed more exposure.

I always had a job to lean on, so if I came in, my father would point to the press. I could not go to him and say could you loan me 20 dollars. If I did, he'd point to the press. OK.



Gerald in uniform, circa 1950, Fort Lewis, Washington

Did you like your father?

Oh yeah, I did, yeah. I loved my father, he was cool. I would go press for a couple of hours then he'd give me some money.

Were you still working for Byron?

Yes, off and on.

I worked for my father, and I also went back to work at the drugstore. I kept that routine up.

I was living in an apartment in Berkeley. I think I had left home by then. I would be about 18, 19. I think I was pretty much on my own. I had bought a car. I always had a car. My first car was a 1940 Ford.

My father had said, well, you double up, save your money, and I'll match it. He said we'll look for a car. We started looking around. He said you'll have to wait until next month when the price stabilization (ended).

I found car for 11 hundred bucks and I saved up 300 or something, and he matched that and I bought the car, or he bought the car. I had a car off and on since I was 16, 17, yeah.

Did you hang out with friends?

Oh yeah there was the usual. Social life was pretty happening. They used to have Monday night dances at the Oakland Auditorium, when big bands were in.

Cab Calloway?

Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, they would come. During the war they'd come and play at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland. They would play for the white people on Sunday and the Black people on Monday.

Was it integrated at the Auditorium?

Oh no. They moved after, it got so crowded, they had so many fights and things at Sweet's, they moved to Oakland Auditorium, but they kept the same routine, whites on Sunday, Blacks on Monday. You accepted whatever it was.

Did you catch blues or jazz acts on Seventh Street in Oakland?

Yeah I was very familiar with Seventh Street because my father had a couple of accounts down there. Seventh Street was adjacent to the Southern Pacific, their headquarters was there for the cooks and stewards, waiters and all of the staff on a train. That's where that center was. The union was down there.

You had Seventh Street from Peralta all the way down to Chestnut. It was all Black, Black businesses. That was the Harlem of Oakland, that's where all the Black businesses were.

They had a pawn shop there. Mrs. Flood's pawn shop. Slim Jenkins was there, a café and a nightclub. If you pawned your suit, the law was that the pawn shop would have to get it cleaned before they could give it back to you. All right, or sell it.

My father had this contract so I was always constantly down there. A friend I was running around with, his uncle was Slim Jenkins. So we would occasionally go by there just to go into Slim Jenkins and look around. We were too young, to, you know.

Yes, you had to be 21.

Anyway my father had that contract so I was down there quite often. After the cleaning and pressing I would take them back and pick up the old stuff. I never thought of guys pawning their clothes. But it was constant. How much do you need? Three dollars. Whatever.

It was an interesting portion of my life, I have to reflect on.

How did you develop your love for jazz?

Oh I guess it was when they started selling record players. The dances. The Monday night dances, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, all the Black artists would come to town.

See them?

Oh yeah, I saw all those I just named.

Were you a good dancer?

Not particularly. Mostly I went to see and hear the band. (Laughs.) No I wasn't very good at dancing, particularly in those days. The jitterbug was the thing and I could never do any of that. Even the moderate jitterbugging was just, I couldn't do that.

But the slow dancing, I could kind of live with that.

Have many girlfriends?

(Hedges a bit.) Yeah, I had a lot of romances. It was a very active part of my younger life, so to speak, yeah.

First, brief marriage and a daughter.

You mentioned that you had been married before, and your first daughter was from your first marriage, right?

I was young, stupid, and. I guess full of vim and vigor. I was married for a very short time, maybe a year. I was young and we had a divorce or whatever.

She was a local girl from Berkeley?

Yeah, she was local. And my daughter, of course, stayed with her mother, and she became an adult or she was in school, at Cal, and she came to live with us for the rest of her time.

Jerry and Leona enjoyed visiting Fisherman's Wharf on a date in 1949. They married in June 1950.

Gerald's education:

OK, so the war ends, you return home, finish high school. Do you go to college?

Yes city college, Contra Costa College. That was after, that was later on. That was after the Korean War because I got caught up in the Korean war, put on active duty in the army. (*He served at Fort Lewis, Washington.*)

When I got back (*from Fort Lewis*) they had the GI Bill, so I went back to school. I finished at Contra Costa College (*a community college in San Pablo*), and went on. Later on I started at San Luis Obispo, a state college.

What is your most advanced degree?

I have about 3 years on a BA. I'm short of a bachelor's degree. But in those days, it wasn't important. But it was important, you know what I mean?

Living in Berkeley after the Korean War and deciding to move to El Cerrito:

During the Korean War Gerald served as a First Sergeant in the Army, serving with an anti-aircraft unit for two years in the Seattle area.

You know Berkeley so you know that between Shattuck Avenue and the Bay, and University Avenue, that was the little square where we were, where the Black people were. You couldn't under most circumstances buy a house north of University.

I was brought up in that square, and I really didn't, I had not been exposed to any discrimination until I came back in 1952 and we were looking for an apartment.

We went to look at an apartment up on Milvia. The woman told us, 'Much as I'd like to, I can't rent to you, because you're Negroes.' It was really my first exposure to housing discrimination. It suddenly dawned on me, we'd been down in this little section of Berkeley, and I've never been in any other business other than delivering medicine, it suddenly dawned on me that, wow!

It was the start of me recognizing.

Living in Berkeley with his family:

Michael: You noticed that most of the African American families in Berkeley who were moving up, they couldn't move to Elmwood, Thousand Oaks (*upscale districts in Berkeley*.)

Gerald: In those days Berkeley, you could not move. In 1952 when I came off of active duty in the army, you couldn't buy north of University (avenue). You were lucky if you could rent north of university

Isn't Francisco, where you were living, north of University?

Francisco yes, eventually we did get to move there, but that was after the Rumford act came through and what have you. In 1952 we were really looking for a place. You couldn't rent nor buy. (*Actually the Rumford Act, the Fair Housing Act, did not pass until 1963*.)

There were about three (Black) families north of University Avenue. You could forget going east (in Berkeley, towards the hills) because you couldn't go any further than Adeline or Grove. So you were at Grove on one side and University on the other. You could buy either south or southwest or southeast.

How did you know the restricted areas for Black people to live?

It was just known. In some cases you found out by actually being rejected. But it was common knowledge. You can't buy a house there.

When you looked in the paper for houses you looked for the key words. If it said "all welcomed," that meant you could buy the house or rent the house. If it didn't say "all welcomed" or some other innuendo, don't get your feelings hurt by going to look at the house and having the realtor tell you, you can't buy it.

On Francisco Street in Berkeley, did you own the house?

We owned it.

Michael: We got it in 1954.

Gerald: We owned two or three houses. We owned one house before that on Matthew Street in Berkeley. Francisco was probably one of my favorite houses, the way it was built, the style or what have you. But it just wasn't big enough.

Knowing we couldn't buy in Berkeley we decided, let's build something and let's move north.

The move to El Cerrito:

In the beginning, so to speak, we lived in Berkeley, naturally. The family got a little larger and we decide we wanted to move out. In Berkeley African Americans were restricted to certain areas. You couldn't go north of University Avenue.

We were living in Berkeley at the time on Francisco Street. The family got to the point where we needed more than two bedrooms. So we decided like a lot of people to go north. You couldn't buy in Albany. They used to have people who would buy for you.

Why did you move to El Cerrito?

The space, and we wanted a bigger house. In Berkeley we couldn't find a house big enough, and if you could, you couldn't buy it.

Laughs. We had a realtor and she was white, but she was married to a Black man. She had the technique of going and finding properties in El Cerrito, bypassing Albany naturally because it was too difficult (for Black people to move there). She found this lot up here. In those days you could buy a lot up here for 35 hundred dollars, which we did.

We moved from Berkeley and bought this lot. Today you couldn't buy a lot up here for 35 hundred dollars. There was nothing on this block; nothing meaning African Americans. There were a couple of small shacks my son had talked about, up the hill.

Was it difficult to buy a lot here as Black people?

To say we had difficulties is minimizing the statement. There were people on the block who were very much against Blacks buying. Before we could even get a Cal Vet loan and get the house started we got two offers from people trying to buy us out before we could start building.

In this area, you go up the street to Shevlin (Drive), that was the little Black strip. There were six or seven families on Shevlin, Black families. That was about it.

Were those about the only Black families in town?

They had a couple of Black families in northern El Cerrito. But there were none from this point on, down to San Pablo (Avenue).

So anyway, we bought the lot and discarded all the offers we got to buy back, which occasionally we would get, this telephone call from somebody who was interested in buying the lot back for twice the cost.

Was the racism behind the offers explicit?

No, you had to see in between the lines; they were disguising themselves. They were interested in the lot, they were willing to pay 6 thousand for it. In those days you knew what it was, because we only paid a little over 3 thousand. So we stuck it out.

In those days you had to be discreet about everything you did. So we had an architect who drew up the plans. He actually was a draftsman. But at any rate he drew up the plans and we went through the process of being rejected to getting the house built, by American Trust which is now Wells Fargo.

But in those days they were very discreet about telling you, we can't loan you money to build the house. I applied for a Cal Vet loan. Cal Vet loans, they buy the property, it belongs to them, and then you pay them for the property. There are all sorts of safeguards within that. Getting through that process as an African American was difficult enough because you would always run into someone who was throwing a barrier of sorts.

We got through that mostly OK and had the house built, not without problems. We couldn't even break ground here before the lady next door came out and subjected us to, "show me the building permits," and etcetera and so forth. There were a lot of little innuendos and incidents like that.

"Why are you building here," etcetera and so forth. We were in those days, 1959, we were young people. I must have been 30, if that. We kind of got through that process, but it was difficult.

Did the city give you a hard time?

Not so much a hard time but they monitored probably more so than they did others. They were constantly up here to see if everything was alright.

We had a Cal Vet loan, and we had taken the plans for the house to the bank. The bank said we'll give you the money. After being rejected by American Trust we went to a savings and loan in Berkeley and got the loan. Cal Vet said you have to have the house built according to these plans and specifications, and we will buy it and turn it into a Cal Vet loan, which was fine with us.

Did the realtor you worked with tell the buyer the sellers would be Black people?

She was what they call a blockbuster. Her name was Arlene Slaughter. If you look up the hill on Shevlin, she busted that whole block. There was John Marion and the Brittans, and what was that girl's name across the street? And Huck Richardson lives at one end.

(*Michael mentions other Black families there*.)

Was this area essentially a small Black neighborhood?

G: No, not even close. They had maybe four or five families.

M: The Browns had to build. They bought a lot on Stockton (avenue). Sanford Brown worked for the postal service. They had two sons and their daughter Karen. They moved to Stockton in 1964.

Were there more Black people living in this area than in other El Cerrito neighborhoods?

M: I can tell you. I attended Harding (elementary school). I'm not sure, the Thompsons, Vernon and Rickie went to Fairmount (elementary school). The Thompsons, the Browns, Wendell, went to Harding. Greg Williams, Vernon and Ricky Thompson, this is the mid '60s, were over on Fairmount.

M: There were several Black people scatted about

G: There was no concentration.

Is El Cerrito less racist now?

I'd say yes. Yes, yes. I mean in the old days, they were tough, you know. The people who moved up (into the hills), when we moved here there were two or three (Black) families. There were no (Black) families on this block. Within the next 10 years we got maybe three. But you go up on Shevlin and they had eight or nine (Black families). They got in those houses because of what they call blockbusting.

When we moved in here and bought this lot, (Arlene Slaughter) represented us. She was white. But the people who owned the lot were Black. A doctor. He had plans to build and something came up and he changed (his mind).

And she knew that and she actually kind of mentored us through this purchase of this lot. Not that it was a big deal.

Did she warn you that neighbors might object to your arrival?

Oh yeah. She was white. She was married to a Black man. She didn't have to warn us (laughs), we could see that. When we first came up the lady next door, she was a terror. She would just stand there and look.

What's the problem, you know. Why are you here? What are you doing?

Would she say things?

She would say nothing insulting. But she would question.

But you know, years later, many years later, her son came from the Midwest somewhere and was going to move her back East to be with him because she was getting too old to be alone. And she came over and begged us to talk to her son to see if she couldn't stay here.

And I thought, what a turnaround, I mean. But whatever, we would tell him to change his mind, you know. It's his mother and he's going to take her back, which he did

She was a tiger initially, and she was in real estate.

Was she the one who organized the effort to buy back the lot from you?

No, that was our neighbor, the other neighbor over here.

But he came, (laughs), he came around. It was a big family, two boys, three boys, girls. Anyway, he owned a prefabricating company of some sort in El Cerrito, the industrial part of town.

Years later he…, somehow or other I belonged to the PTA and they were having a variety show and somebody asked him if he would play the banjo or the guitar if we had a singing group together. I was one of the group, four guys.

Are you a good singer?

Not really. But if you put a song together, maybe we can get a song together. It was one of the variety shows for the PTA. You guys could get together in a little group. Ernie would play his banjo, I think it was.

Anyway it got to the point where he agreed to play with the group if he would be in charge. Sing what he wanted to sing and practice what he wanted to practice. We would go to his prefab company and use his office or his facility and we would practice, practice, practice. He was very consistent.

He became quite, I guess he had the kind of personality, he didn't have a lot of friends. You could tell that, because he would throw out little insulting innuendos to certain people. So anyway, (laughs), Ernie, Figley was their names, Ernie Figley, yeah.

Figley, in fact he, the performance in the variety was a great success so on and so forth. But he missed the camaraderie of the three or four people getting together with him.

He tried to make it continue. In fact he came over, rang my doorbell. 'I thought maybe we would get together.' He tried to develop a relationship.

It was kind of like, You can count on me, but I'm not going to be the head of this group to sing with Ernie. And he was terrible, initially. I mean he was the one who got the money together, he was the one who made the phone call.

Did he ever apologize?

Not directly. We had some conversations later on when he kind of said, well you know I really didn't mean it. You know. But I could tell by his presentation and his tone that he was trying to say, I did it but I'm sorry. But he wouldn't say that, you know.

He had 3 boys, he was married. He had an ongoing business.

Have there been other racist incidents in recent years?

I can't cite any, off the top of my head, going back 20 or more years, an incident or incidents other than when we tried to have the house built, discrimination by the banks, and the city and inspections.

'Well, you need to do this before we can approve the plans. But as time went on, as recent as … in answer to your question I'm not sure I could cite any given situation recently within the last 15 years.

That's good?

Well, I guess it's good. It's just that, it could have been a covert act and I didn't recognize it, or if I did I just ignored it. Sometimes you grow up in this environment, you learn to cast aside the things that happen to people. Why did he do that? Well. First thing you think about is race. If they just didn't approve this, that's the first thing that comes to your mind, you know.

And as you get involved with people through the schools, PTA and what have you, you get to know these people, the neighbors, and the neighbors become your friends. And out of the majority of those come more personal relationships.

I guess over time, where my wife probably could cite situations that I was not aware of, working, and she was (active) on a daily basis through the PTA. She belonged to the PTA, both of us did, particularly when Michael got to the high school, the PTA was quite active.

Schooling in El Cerrito:

Michael: Strangely enough, there were more Black people going to Madera (in the Hills, not in the flatlands like Harding and Fairmount schools), because they divided the (school border) line so weirdly down here. Someone built a lot on Havens Place (in the hills), and built. That was a little after we were here. The Nashes bought; William Martin already owned a house.

Did you children experience racism?

That was even worse (than for the adults). Michael at the time I think he was 5. He went to school. We talked about that after you left (after the last interview), the sorts of things that he went through.

How many children in your family?

Three. Michael and Gerald. Gerald died, he's been gone 15 years. And my daughter, Reneta.

How old were they when you bought the house?

Reneta was a result of an early marriage by me. So she didn't come to live with us until she was in high school. But Gerald and Michael were two years, three years apart. They would come home and relate.

They would relate, some kids … kids don't recognize it sometimes, you know. But when you use the word nigger they recognize that. And many times Michael, or both, would say there had been an incident at school, maybe.

(Laughs.) You kind of have to remember, or talk to them to really see what it was really like. On a day to day basis, the mother would know more than I did. She would tell me, Well they had

an incident. Or maybe she wouldn't. She just felt she could handle it herself. Michael had an incident or Gerald had an incident.

But they got through it all right. Michael left Del Mar and went to junior high. Gerald was ahead of him, in high school. He was the student body president at high school while Michael was president at junior high school, at one time.

By that time they had overridden all the insults and what have you. But when Michael went to Del Mar he was one of four Black kids in the whole school. Somewhere along the line, El Cerrito, as part of the Richmond school district, did some revamping, realigning, and the influx of Black kids at the elementary school and the junior high increased.

I have to ask Michel what year that was. But it did; it changed. When it comes to outright overt discrimination or racism, I can sense it with neighbors. You kind of get a feel for that. You knew who was OK and who was not, and you stay away from them.

We managed to get through it because you become, as a minority and as the enemy so to speak, you learn to kind of respond to it or live with it. And you've got to pick the things you're going to get excited about and respond to.

I guess in my work environment and my home environment I learned how to deal with that.

Can you give me an example of how you might respond to a racial incident?

Oh…(pause)…Let me see. I would at home, it would be more so at work. Work, at work they were, it was there but you just didn't recognize it. They could do it, it could be hidden racism.

Around here (at home) I would have to give that some thought, to go way back. And many times you dismiss these things, you know. I'd have to give that some thought. If my wife were alive and here, she would probably run two or three things by.

What was your wife's name?

Leona.

You called her Doll?

Yeah.

What was she like?

Great personality. If you go in the room and turn the light on, there are two or three pictures of her. (We go.)

She appears to have been a lively woman.

Yes, very much so.

Michael. (*Mentions one neighbor*.): He beat me up my first week of school. I knew about racism. I told my parents he was beating me up. I told them he was calling me Blackie when he was beating me up. As my mom was putting me to bed, she said, why didn't you tell me that?

She called the school (and spoke to the teacher) I could hear her giving it to Tommy McEwen.

M: I knew in elementary school who was who and what was up. Del Mar had a good mixture of people from up the hill, sons of professors, and strictly working class. They came together at Del Mar. By the time I was in second grade, you knew what was what.

G: (Mike) went onto Portola Junior High. There was an incident there. You were president of the student body. He was president of the student body and his brother was president of the student body at El Cerrito High.

M: I can give you all the stories of the racism I endured here in El Cerrito, how it worked out, who was who. When I came to Portola that was the first year of bussing. That's how I know Pat's (Patricia Durham) sister Michelle.

M: There was a time in the '50s I can tell from pictures that Portola had a lot of Black students. I don't know what they did with the (attendance boundary) line, but when we were in elementary school Portola was all white, but when I went into 7th grade (that had changed).

M: That was 1967. So prior to that, I told my friend, I am writing about being the first Black Yale Whiffenpoof, and I am writing about being the first Black everything on the way to being the first Black Whiffenpoof.

M: What dad was talking about was being an ombudsman. It was a new thing sweeping the nation, a liaison between the students, and having a stronger, more assertive voice, and the faculty and administrators.

In El Cerrito High, myself and a white guy (were ombudsmen), and National Scholastic Magazine did a story about the whole national wave of ombudsmen, and had pictures of all the ombudsmen in the story.

M: They took a picture of me and Jeff talking to the principal, and then article came out they cropped me out of the picture. This is not straight out racism. This is early '70s racism. They already had a Black ombudsman, an ombudsman from Chicago. They didn't want to over-Black the story.

(Laughter by Gerald and Pat.)

Gerald and Leona were co-presidents of El Cerrito High School PTA:

I guess over time, where my wife probably could cite situations that I was not aware of, working, and she was (active) on a daily basis through the PTA. She belonged to the PTA, both of us did, particularly when Michael got to the high school, the PTA was quite active.

They had some people on the board. We were co-presidents of the PTA at El Cerrito High (in 1970 and 1971). We had a board that was just super people, getting involved in a lot of things, racially and otherwise. They developed some preliminary classes for kids to take the SATs, stuff like that.

That was in later years. It was very gratifying to know you could put together a group that could demand through the principal, who was a very nice guy, he recently died, to have people come and bring their kids, and you could provide tutoring for them, and stuff like that.

Other than with the PTA and NAACP did you and your wife get involved with other groups, Rotary or city commissions?

Not anything local, no.

Career: Coast Guard in Alameda, Model Cities in Richmond, Emergency training program in San Luis Obispo, city government in Compton:

Your career seems to have been eclectic. You were in administrative positions, wearing a uniform for National Guard.

That's correct.

You ended your career working for the Veterans' Administration and FEMA, and worked at Model Cities in Richmond, then for some institute in San Luis Obispo, then assistant city manager Compton. What is the through-line with these careers? One seems to be you were good at your job.

It started out when I got off of active duty in 1952. I went to work for the National Guard. And National Guard in those days, full time people didn't have a retirement program, although it was federal. Everything that I did, occupational wise, was because of someone I was associated with who felt I had some talent, something to offer.

So I left the guard as a full time person and went to work for the city of Richmond. And somebody I had been in the guard with worked for the city of Richmond employment training program, and that's how I ended up working for Richmond, which was one of the Great Society programs. It was one of the Manpower programs in Richmond.

Was it a jobs program?

The Model Cities had a jobs program. They had a couple of programs they administered. I got involved with the jobs part of it, what they called a comprehensive employment program. One of the people I knew in Richmond, who I had worked with in Alameda in the Guard, offered me the job to come up and be the administrative officer for the program, for the employment program, which I did.

I was there two or three years and then somebody I'd worked with in the Guard said the National Guard had properties, San Luis Obispo particularly. They had a big facility there. The Guard had put in for a grant from the federal government for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. That's LEAA, I don't know if you remember that. It was back in the old days and I guess it was, it was a Republican thing, yeah.

At any rate they opened up a training facility in San Luis Obispo called California Specialized Training Institute, and they trained city, county officials and police, fire administrators, in civil disturbance.

I handled that. They called me up with the city of Richmond. Somebody I'd known or worked with in the Guard. Since the Guard was the proponent, the sponsor of it, they were the administrators.

And that started out with one course and ended up training police, firemen, what have you. It ended up (being) four or five years. When LEAA was ready to go out, the state picked it up as an agency, which I think worked under one of the agencies in the state. At any rate that's how I ended up in San Luis Obispo. I was there five, six, seven years.

(*At the training institute, Jerry worked for its head, Louis Giuffrida, who would later take Jerry with him to work for FEMA in Washington, D.C.*)

When you get to upper management you've got to move around every six or seven years, otherwise you're dead. Which I believed.

At any rate I got a job offer from the city of Compton to come down as the assistant city manager. The city manager came to one of the courses and apparently was impressed with my presentation, or whatever.

Where were you living then?

I was living in San Luis Obispo but I was commuting to Compton.

Long commute.

It is. I did it on a weekly basis, or maybe every 10 days or so. At any rate I wasn't planning on moving because we'd bought a house in San Luis Obispo and we were renovating it and restoring it. It's kind of complex.

But at any rate, just about the time we'd got finished, the head of the Specialized Training Institute in San Luis Obispo who I'd worked for before, got selected by Ronald Reagan to head up FEMA.

Reflecting on his good fortune in the world of work; how he got the job at the Specialized Training Institute in San Luis Obispo:

My lifestyle, I've been fortunate, particularly in the world of work. I've never, as I go through the periods of jobs, I've always been asked to take a job, as opposed to wanting a job.

Somebody would always say, I want you to come to work for me. Even to the point of the Washington D.C. job where my ex-boss asked me to come back with him, which was the epitome of flattery in terms of, I need you to come back with me.

What did you do to make this happen?

I got along with people very well. I guess it was just my frame of mind, you know. I could get things done, one way or the other, without stepping on somebody's toes or whatever. I've always been, I remember when I was in the National Guard a colonel called me up and said, I want to make you an offer to work for me.

I said there's not a lot of advancement in this now, but I see a great future. I said, well I appreciate the compliment, I appreciate the offer but I can't accept. So I stayed here, I was working in San Francisco at the time for the National Guard.

So after I left the guard and went to work for the city of Richmond, somebody had recommended me to work in San Luis Obispo. He called me up and said we're getting ready to do the staffing here. We knew one another. It wasn't Jerry and Bill. It was colonel and mister you know.

I said yeah, to make a long story short, somebody had recommended me, and he called me to ask me, could he present this to the adjutant general as part of this new institute they were forming in San Luis Obispo.

And knowing the system, I said, there are too many people who are going to apply for that job that far exceed my academic (background) and, I don't know about the work experience, but otherwise.

I said certainly you may, you know. And I saw the applications after I got the job. People there were far exceeding academically me, my credentials. He called me up and we negotiated a salary. I was making 12, 11 or 12 (thousand), and he said, he offered me 17.

And I said Jesus, how can I pass that up? The kids were in school, you know, before we moved to San Luis Obispo.

Anyway he came out of my past, where we had a kind of cordial relationship. But I never could figure out why he picked me. I could tell maybe having an African-American on staff at a specialized training institute would be a plus, as opposed to a minus, as we were dealing with law enforcement and federal government. Maybe that was it.

I said, if that's it, that's OK with me. At any rate it was a good job, it was a big jump in salary, my kids were at school, I could use the $5,000 raise, whatever it was in those days.

I said yes you can.

The National Guard has a major general who is heading the guard. He called me in. He said, 'I'm glad you accepted the position. I want you to know that the environment you're going into is a little questionable, so if you have any problems, I want you to call me.'

He gave me a sense of support that I needed inasmuch as the environment I was going into was police, firemen, a lot of people that I'm not accustomed to. I took the job in San Luis Obispo, which was a great experience, you know, for seven years.

You escalate to a huge building with all the ramifications of a functioning institute, with 18 or 20 employees. It was one of the great experiences of my life. I thought maybe that was the end of my escalation, you know, but no, that wasn't it.

I have just been most fortunate whether it's developed over a period with personal relationships with superiors or with certain people. It's hard to tell. It's hard to tell what a person's thinking, whether he's your boss or not, whether he's a subordinate, or you're his subordinate.

I've never really been out of a job. I've always been offered a job, left a job to go to a better job. I guess I've just been able to meet the right people at the right time with the right attitude and have them say, that's who we need, let's go with him.

Living in San Luis Obispo, keeping the house in El Cerrito:

Did your wife work outside of the home?

She worked for years. She worked for the government, over in Alameda for one of the transportation facilities the government had, the federal government. You could always rely on the federal government to get a job.

I was working for the federal government, so she did also. In those days you had to have two incomes to maintain the lifestyle you wanted to. There was no way you could do it on eight thousand five hundred dollars a year.

When we moved to San Luis Obispo she went back to school. When we moved to San Luis Obispo, all three of the kids were in college and she went back to finish her degree. Cal Poly, Polytechnical university, which was right there in San Luis Obispo.

I told her, you just go to school and I'll take care of everything else. She did, went through and got her masters in communications, and went to work for the university, which was good. Tax-wise it wasn't too good. She had a nice career, yes.

You lived in a lot of places yet kept the house in El Cerrito. How come?

We didn't see any need. We knew we were coming back. We had it rented, and all those years we had it rented I think we had two bad renters. We had my wife's sister taking care of the property and rent and all of that. All of the time we were gone, which was like 12 years, she took care of that.

So when we came back, we weren't quite sure we wanted to come back to El Cerrito because we had a house in San Luis Obispo, which was a restored house in a great part of town. We lived there.

We were two blocks from downtown. It was a great house. We had three houses while we were in San Luis Obispo. We were in San Luis Obispo at the time when real estate was going at 5 percent a month, sometimes. Year-wise it would go up 15, 20 percent. We were buying houses for 20, 25 thousand, we were just moving on up.

There it is, that picture of it there.

It's a nice looking Victorian house, 1880s, right?

Yeah. An old Victorian we restored. Actually I painted that house. I painted this house (the one we are in). I came back from Washington, DC. Outside, and inside. It took a lot of paint, a lot of time. But what are you going to do? You get up in the morning like you're going to work, you paint.

The Martins bought this modern home that had been dEsigned by architectural students near San Luis Obispo.

Homes in San Luis Obispo:

(Looking at pictures:))

Yeah, but this is all stuff I gathered over the years. This is a picture of a house we bought, when we first moved to San Luis Obispo. It's a no-maintenance house. The guys that designed it went to Cal Poly.

It looks like a very modern design.

It was, yeah.

What was the name of the architect?

It was two kids in architecture school, and that was their senior project.

So you actually bought this house?

Yeah, we actually bought it for I think sixteen thousand or something like that. They had built it as a senior project. If you go to Cal Poly, Polytechnic, you must have a project when you graduate.

It has a bit of a Frank Lloyd Wright look to it.

So they had a little model.

Michael; You should see it now!

Has it been badly altered?

(*Michael shows pictures he shot a few weeks ago*.)

G: By San Luis Obispo, next to Morro Bay was Baywood Park, which is a little community where this was. And you could look out, nothing but sand dunes. You could buy a lot, a twenty five foot lot, when it was cheap. We paid $2,000 I think.

Well, we had a view of the dunes. Sand dunes out there. In fact, the house is built on sand.

(*Jerry and Leona lived in the house two or three years, then bought a Victorian fixer-upper in San Luis Obispo*.)

Why did you move from the beach to SLO?

If you live in that (beach) area, you wake up in the morning and the fog is there. It's overcast. By 10 or 11, the sun is out. By 5:30 it closes in again.

And when I was working, I would get up, go into San Luis Obispo, and when I would get to work, it was like driving into a big bellow of fog. And my wife had started back to school to get her Masters at Cal Poly. So we decided to move.

And so we moved into town. We bought a condominium and then we sold that. We bought this (*shows painting of a Victorian house*). (*They kept the condo as a rental and gutted and restored the Victorian. They restored in to the Victorian style, replacing detailing. Gerald painted the house himself. The local paper had a magazine insert that included a picture of Gerald painting the house*.)

Compton city government:

You were the city manager of Compton?

I was the assistant to the city manager. That's an interesting job.

You got that because of connections through the San Luis Obispo institute?

Yeah. You know, what happened was, when we had these emergency management courses, we'd invite a whole variety of people, the chief of police, somebody from the mayor's office, from finance, the whole spectrum in the city.

So one time the chief of police from Compton came to the course, and his name is Joe. And we had to feed all the students the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. They have a box lunch. And then on Friday is the final graduation and etc. and a luncheon.

Anyway, this guy came to the course, and I used to teach a class on fiscal management and expenditures of a city, particularly when it came to disasters.

He went home and he called me up one day. He said, I'd like to talk to you about something. So I said, well, on my next trip. I went through Los Angeles and met him at the airport and he said, I want you to come down and visit Compton.

So the wife and I went down, drove down over a couple of hours to Compton and stayed at his house, slept in his bed. He took us out to dinner. He wined and dined us.

And then he offered me, he said, 'I'd like you to come to work with the city. I developed a new position in the police department and I'd like you to take it. And I'm going to go before the city council and get it approved.'

And it was tempting because I had been at CSTI for six, seven years, you know, and where am I going to go from there? They have this thing: If you don't go up, you need to go laterally.

So anyway, he developed this position as a director of the, special operations or something. Anyway, I decided on this, and I'm not sure my wife was excited about it.

And, you know, it was a change. And so that's how I ended up in Compton. I was there a couple of years. And then the director at FEMA was friends with Ed Meese. Meese I guess he was the number two or three man behind Reagan.

I knew him (Meese), and I knew him through a strange set of circumstances because he went to Yale. He was on the board at CSTI, OK. And he knew (my son) Michael was at Yale.

And he said, well, how's Michael doing? So he's doing fine. And then we'd always kind of talk it up about Yale.

Michael is in his second year, and in his first year he came home and worked in a canning plant. And he needed a job for the summer. So Meese asked, 'Jerry? How's your son doing? 'I said, 'He's fine. He's coming home. He'll be looking for a job.'

And he said, 'Well, a summer job.' I said, yes. He said, 'You call this guy, and I'll tell him you're going to call, and see if we can come up with something for Michael.' So I did. And Michael came home and got a job anyway.

So that's how, you know, how that developed. But anyway, when they made me the job offer in Compton, I said, OK.

Now you were the assistant to the city manager and police chief in Compton?

Well I was down there for, oh, two, three, six months I think. And the city manager got fired and the chief of police, the way the structure was, was the assistant city manager. So when they fired him, they moved the assistant city manager, the chief of police, into the acting city manager (role).

Yeah. And so when I came in on the Monday following the time that they dumped the city manager, assistant city manager and chief of police, they called me and said, get yourself a box and get your stuff together. Come on over to city hall.

So I ended up going over to city hall and becoming his assistant or the assistant city manager. Then he and the city council met, and appointed him city manager. And as it turned out, they had me appear before the city council. And one of the people on the city council was a guy that I had been in the army with.

He introduced me as his new assistant city manager and he had to get their approval. And as it turns out, one of the city councilman's sons was in law school with Michael, and somehow or another that got into the conversation.

So, small world. Yeah. So I got a couple of supportive people on the council that said, yeah, that's good. So anyway, I ended up as the assistant city manager to the city manager who had been the chief of police.

How long did you remain?

Oh, that role. I was there not quite a year. I had oversight for two or three departments. I think the parks department, and two other departments. And it was it was a pretty good job. I mean, you get a car.

I was living still in San Luis Obispo. I was commuting. I would just drive the car to the bus station and leave it, and take the bus up to San Luis Obispo and come back on Monday.

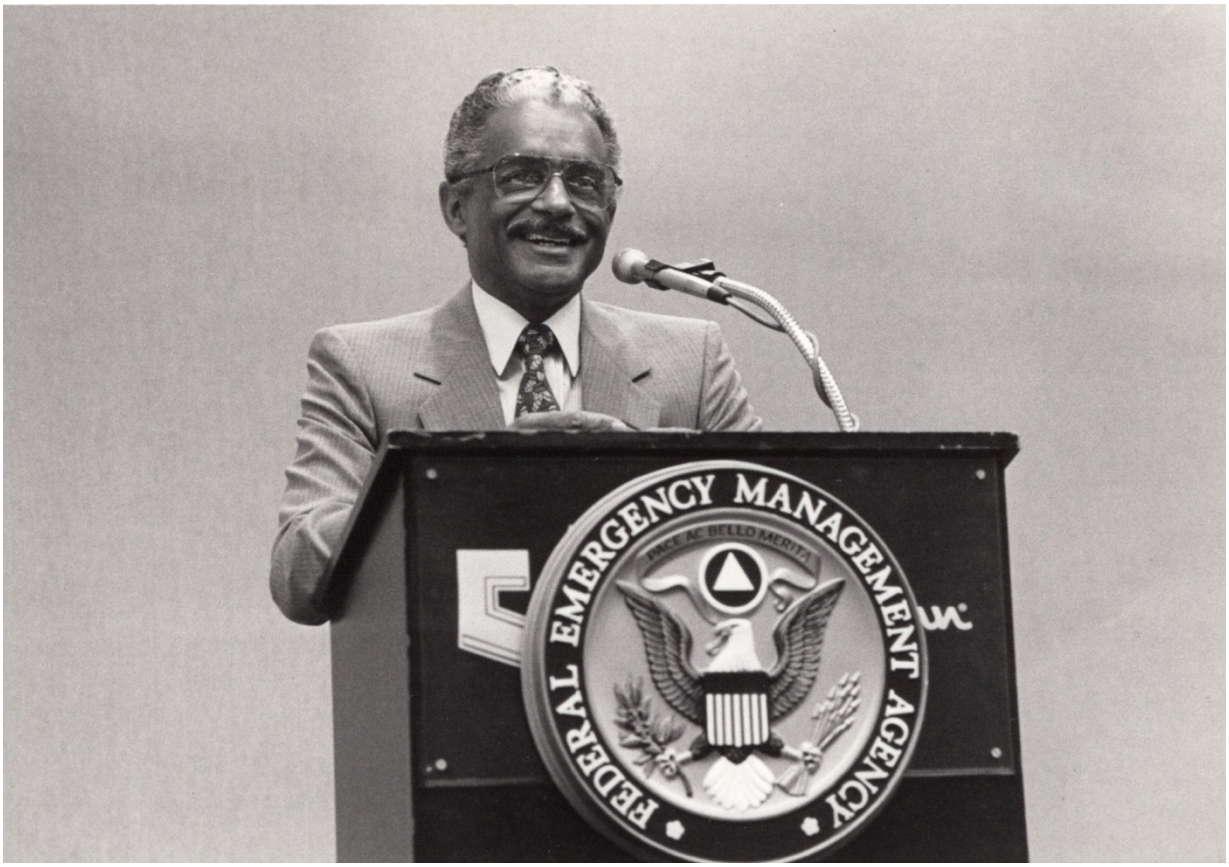
So then, as it turns out, the director at San Luis Obispo and CSTI got nominated by Meese, or Meese, arranged for him to be nominated, for the director of FEMA.

You were the police director of Compton, but you don't really have a law enforcement background, do you?

Well, at CSTI (California Specialized Training Institute) at San Luis Obispo I trained police, so I went from there to Compton.

You were police director. That's different than being police chief?

Well, I was director of the bureau, OK? And I wasn't a sworn policeman.



Gerald addresses FEMA employees during Black History Month.

Going to work for FEMA in Washington, D.C.:

So then, as it turns out, the director (Giuffrida) in San Luis Obispo and CSTI got nominated by Meese, or Meese arranged for him to be nominated, for the director of FEMA.

So he called me one day and he said, I'm coming to -- I heard this when I was home one weekend. My wife said, you know, I think your friend has been involved in some political stuff and might be going to Washington, D.C.

I said good for him. I never gave it a second thought.

So when I got back to the office on Monday, he called and said, I'm coming to Los Angeles to meet with Jerry Brown, to tell him that I'm leaving service and I'm going to go work for the federal government and I'm going to be nominated to be the director of FEMA.

And I said, OK. He said, I want to meet you down at his office in Los Angeles. Jerry Brown in his office here. So I met him and Jerry Brown. So one thing led to another.

And then we went to lunch and he said, I want you to think about coming to Washington, D.C. with me. I said, well, I'll think about that. You know, I'm flattered, to begin with.

So I got back to the office and the next morning, he had one of his people call and say that he wanted me to go back with him. And in some sort of senior capacity, they didn't know what.

And I said, well, you know, I'm not a Republican. And he said, well, I talked to Ed Meese and he said we could deal with that.

'Well, on next Wednesday, I'm going back and I'd like you to come back that Friday or something.' I mean, it was like boom, boom, boom, boom. And before you know it, I was packed and left my wife and San Luis Obispo to finish up the house, and got on a plane, went to Washington, D.C. and was sworn in.

And then they developed this position as an executive administrator, they call it, that I had oversight for about six or seven smaller departments.

Leona shakes hands with Ronald Reagan.

If he hadn't offered you the job with FEMA, is it possible the rest of your career might have played out in cities?

Well, you know, I think in my career plan, I had thought I really wanted to end up in city government. Yeah. Yeah. And so when I went to Compton, I said, this is a good beginning because I can go from Compton to Hayward to anywhere as assistant city manager. I had the background and the experience of being there.

What did you like about city government?

When I first started in city government, I started in Richmond with Model Cities. And I kind of liked how small it was, and how unique the politics were. I mean, it wasn't a lot of

cumbersome development. You just went from one level to the other, like to the city council and, you know, you had to kiss their butts and whatever. And I kind of like the structure. It was small.

But when I got back to Washington, D.C., and I took a look at some of the, you know, the sizes of government. In fact, you know, you're talking about millions of dollars. You know, that you're going to be in probably the biggest bureaucracy in the world.

(FEMA) It's number two after the Department of Defense, OK? And in those days, I think it was one hundred and seventy five million dollars or something like that.

But you know, you get to a point in your career when you work because you need to work, but you don't have to work. And I guess I was at that point of saying I really don't have to, you know.

So my attitude to managing what I was assigned to do became much easier because I was never in fear of being fired, so to speak. You were financially secure.

But on the other hand, job wise, I knew I could come back to California and have a job. OK. And so anyway, it started out at FEMA and the FEMA director, He got into a little trouble. So he had to leave FEMA.

In the meantime, there was a guy from California named Tom Turnage, who I knew through National Guard and my relationship with the state government, who was head of the Selective Service Department. And he called me, had his aide call me up and tell me, you got any problems, you let me know.

Career: FEMA, Selective Service, Veterans Administration, Washington. D.C. :

I wasn't a Republican, but I don't know if you're familiar with Ed Meese. He was the chief of staff for Reagan, and he was on the board at the institute in San Luis Obispo, and we became familiar with one another.

He'd gone to Yale, my kid was at Yale, one thing led to another. So we had a relationship to speak of, at least to say how are you, the kids, can you get my kid a job this summer? You know, that kind of thing.

When the head of the institute got called to be head of FEMA, he came down to Compton and talked me into coming back with him. That's how I ended up in Washington DC. At the time, he headed up FEMA and I was part of his senior staff.

I think I stayed there four years. He left; he got into a little political trouble. I left there and went to work for Selective Service, and then from Selective Service to the VA.

When the Republicans took over they didn't discover I wasn't a Republican. Actually it was too late when they did. They brought a lot of people from California back there and one of the people they brought back was going to be appointed to the Veterans Administration.

I knew him and we had worked together some years ago in San Luis Obispo on another project. He asked me to come to work with him at the VA, which I did. He was the director and my title was the assistant chief of staff. They had a chief of staff and two assistants, and I was one of those assistants.


Jerry enjoys a barbecue on the White House lawn during the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

Although I had some disdain for the Republicans and what they were doing, I did enjoy the work that I got involved in, even at FEMA.

At one point I was ready. I had everything I needed to retire. But I elected not to. But when you get into that particular mode, you become kind of ornery. Like I have a choice, so I could do what I wanted to do. And your whole attitude changes.

So my work at FEMA and at VA was very meaningful, OK. I felt like I was making a contribution, particularly when I moved to the Veterans Administration, which I enjoyed.

You know the VA is, in those days it was 185 thousand employees, 230 installations, hospitals and clinics. I think 32 or so offices all over the U.S. So it was a big deal. I enjoyed that. I felt I was making a contribution.

That was just about the time I was ready to move on, and so we enjoyed Washington D.C. It's something that not everybody should be exposed to, but you learn a lot. You really learn how the government is working. Once it is instilled into you, you follow that. In other words I follow all activities that are going on back there now, because I can relate to those.

Did you testify at hearings, that sort of thing?

Yes. Every year you have to go up to testify to defend your budget. They publish everything, and they have a book every year, it talks about the hearings. I made sure I brought home all of that stuff.

You'd have to defend your budget every year. And Al Gore at the time was chair of the committee that had oversight over FEMA. That was the time I was exposed to those kind of hearings.

When I moved to Selective Service and the VA, I didn't really get involved with any political stuff.

Were you with the Civil Service?

No, a federal employee.

The system is very convoluted, the civil service, senior executive service, career and non-career, and then the executive branch, the executive branch being the head of the agency and his two or three assistants. It was an education to say the least.

Gerald shakes hands with President Bush at an event to welcome Louis Giuffrida, center, to Giuffrida's new post as head of FEMA. Giuffrida would soon be out in disgrace.

OK, so you were executive administrator for FEMA. You know, one thing I didn't ask you when you were with FEMA, did you actually go out to disasters? Did you coordinate disaster relief?

No, I was not at that level. I was in the director's office, part of his staff. So if I went out to maybe one, two, over four or five years.

So if there was a flood, you wouldn't go rushing out.?

No, no. but we would make sure somebody did. But OK, that was not my function, right? I was an administrator. I had I had finance, logistics, EEO personnel, OK, something like that.

The Louis Giuffrida connection; Jerry a democrat among Republicans:

(The following conversation is from Aug. 17, after the interviewer read up on Louis Giuffrida, who played a significant role in Martin's career.

Giuffrida, an Army Colonel, met Martin while Martin was in the National Guard. Giuffrida brought Martin with him when he was founding director of the California Specialized Training Institute, and when Giuffrida was named head of FEMA, he brought Martin there too.)

I want to talk about two things today. One is the issue that you brought up, about being a Democrat and you were working in Republican administration. But even more than that, you're working for Louis Giuffrida, right? He was a colonel in the U.S. Army. And then he was appointed by Reagan, to establish the California Specialized Training Institute.

And, he had written a paper while at the U.S. Army War College advocating martial law in the event of a militant uprising by African-American. He proposed rounding up and transferring at least 20 million Negroes to assembly centers. So this is pretty hardcore.

I knew about that, of course, and unfortunately, he took a lot of heat for that. And he had an answer for it. I can't answer for him, but that was not his.... This is pretty hardcore conservative stuff, as opposed to being on the other side, of being more neutral or, Democratic or, you know. It just wasn't him. I mean, I can't answer for him, but I think he took a lot of heat for that paper.

Of course, National Guard is kind of a reserve component. And so one of the people that I worked for some years ago called me and said that they were getting ready to organize a school training facility at San Luis Obispo, and they had chosen the National Guard because the National Guard had the facilities, they had the property, they had the buildings.

All they had to do is do some renovations and restorations and they could start the school that they had a grant for. And they National Guard had applied for a grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to start a school for training police, firemen, etc., for civil disturbance.

And my name had come up to somehow or another to be on the staff, to be the administrative officer, and would I be interested in that? And I said, well, I really wouldn't really.

But a couple of calls later, they convinced me. From my standpoint, I was looking at the dollars. My kids were all just going in to college, and I saw I could get a raise from twelve thousand to seventeen thousand dollars. Yeah.

And I said, well, let me take a look at this, which I did. And I said, OK, I said, that's all right. So anyway, they were recruiting for the administrative officer and they had the freedom.

And he was a guy that I knew in the guard that I thought, I never thought much of him because I thought he was kind of a borderline racist. Turns out that is just the opposite. You just can't tell you.

You're talking about Giuffrida, right? *It was Giuffrida who recruited you for the institute?*

Yes.

The Guard was doing a national recruiting campaign. They needed instructors. They needed staff, and they needed a leader. Well, it happens that Giuffrida went to command and general staff college with the main guy who was on the selection committee. And in fact, he was the one that brought the paper (about rounding up African Americans) to the surface.

And of course his (Giuffrida's) response was that …. He had been younger and ill-informed. Anyway, he got through that. And any personal association with him would bear that out, he's just probably the opposite (of being a racist)

Giuffrida, you're saying, was not a racist?

Oh, no. Yeah, that's what I'm saying. My long association with him, and it was personal and professional. I mean, I traveled with him. I knew his family. Our families were very close in San Luis Obispo.

I was selected to be the administrative officer and work with him. And it was three people. They started the institute in San Luis Obispo and I was one of the people and he was the other, and it was one other person. They built the classrooms. They did all the work. They had a grant for like five hundred thousand dollars, which was primarily my function as the administrator of the grants and student participation and stuff like that.

One of the articles that I read indicated that the institute trained not just for earthquakes and floods, but also in crowd control, and the militarization of local police. To what extent is that true? And were you involved with that?

Well, there's a pamphlet here, these are announcements of courses. They started the course, and recruited the staff. OK, and this was the brochure, the announcement when it came out.

I mean, we went on to talk about officer survival, civil emergency management, school security, OK? They developed all these three courses.

And this, of course, is a picture of the classroom facility. If you've ever been to San Luis Obispo, it's one of those beautiful places you like to kind of settle down. Well, anyway, we moved there and I took the job, which I kept for quite a while, six, seven years.

And it went from one course, four hundred fifty thousand dollars, to maybe a million and a half, two million dollars, eventually. We were working all with grant money. No, we couldn't get any state money. In other words, every year we had to go in for this (federal) grant to get renewed. And that's how the institute survived in the state. California only had to put up a minimum matching funds for that.

Not only were you the chief administrator, but you were on the faculty.

Yes. In fact, I had a class called Emergency Management where I discussed the participation of the city's facilities. Police and fire would get involved and their pay would be affected. It was a long process. I had just the one class.

Several times when we spoke, you mentioned how you were working in Republican administrations, yet you were a Democrat, and they told you it didn't matter. Are you a liberal Democrat or are you a conservative Democrat? Or?

It depends.

It's funny. I'm here today to talk to you about two things they say you should never talk about, politics and religion.

You could talk about both with me. I'm kind of like in the middle. I'm a moderate Democrat, OK.

And to get involved with the institute, of course it was a Republican administration. And Ed Meese was a hard core Republican, and he was Reagan's right hand man. At the time, Giuffrida asked him to come down and be on the board.

Well, we wanted to get as many people who have influence on the board that you can. So he did. I was usually the secretary to the board, so to speak. I took care of, you know, of all of the administrative loose ends, and getting the people, the board members there and so on and so forth.

And Meese, as conservative as he was and a lot of other Republicans, you could walk in a room and everybody in that room would know that I wasn't, I didn't belong there because I was a Democrat. I was not a Republican. I was not part of their class.

Did that present problems?

Not with me. No. It came up a couple of times because the Office of Presidential Personnel knew about it. And Ed Meese, who had said, well, don't worry about that, OK? And it was all right as long as he was in and in power, you know.

At the institute or FEMA, when you were with them, did they ever pursue policies that you found politically unacceptable or repugnant or that violated your core beliefs?

All of those? OK. Well, I was there living in D.C. my wife, of course, and I kind of looked at it like a person in the enemy's camp.

In other words, people would say, why did you go there? I said, well, how many chances, opportunities does a person have in their history of work to go to Washington, D.C., with any government, to work, to see how the core of our country is run?

I said, I took the job because I saw it as an opportunity for myself and my wife and possibly some of my kids. I wanted to learn as much about the system as I could. I said, I want to be able to exist in it, but I want to be able to take back home some great knowledge of how this country is really run.

I said, how many people do you know who will get an opportunity to go back to be part of the government? Part of what was it? Nine thousand people who are brought in for each change of administrations? I said, with me, it was more of an education. A look at the other side, so to speak.

But did you have to implement policies that you disagreed with?

Not at FEMA, no. Political appointees have a. limited involvement in a lot of the policies, when you get down to an agency. In FEMA's case, they had eight political appointments at the top. They had 10 regional appointments.

You know, the federal government is broken down into regions, California being region nine, I think. And those were all political appointments, the head of that particular region. So they had 15 political appointments.

I could carefully watch or monitor some of the things that went on. If I had any input, I would certainly give it, you know. And Giuffrida wasn't a hardcore Republican as much as he was a survivor.

I mean, he had a family of four kids and a wife, you know, in the age of pre-college. So he was there for a while, because he had been in the military. And in the military, of course, your politics are set aside as Republicans and Democrats, at least on the surface. So I looked at it like an experience that comes once in a lifetime, to go back and really see how the government. functions.

The issue of militarizing the local police remains a big issue. People think that police shouldn't show up in tanks and body armor and looking like, you know, the military invading East Oakland Was the institute pushing in that direction of helping provide military training to local police? Was that something you were concerned about it?

It was an issue, particularly in emergency management, in the emergency management course initially. And it began to fade off on the side because of some of the board members, and just the government in general.

Police, I got to know a lot of how the police operate. And it's on the bad side. In most cases, if you're associated with a police department, it's … and I found that out when I went to work for the city of Compton. But in answer to your question, which was?

My question was whether the institute was militarizing the local police in a way that could harm local communities and in particular, to change my question a little bit, on communities of African-Americans.

No. I would say it was just the opposite. I mean, they tended to stay away from getting the military involved in police matters, and laying out the scope of the police. In fact, they were in some cases critical of how the police were operating.

You mean people in the institute?

Yeah, because we had in every course, we had a composition, in the emergency management course, we had people from city government, so many policemen, so many firemen, more firemen than police because the firemen, of course, were more involved in disturbances and destruction of property and what have you. Fires and etc…, as opposed to police.

But a lot of people that I talked to, policemen, were pretty hardcore guys. I mean, let's face it. I mean, it's just basically, when you look at the makeup of a department, the department is just like the makeup of the community.

So you go to El Cerrito and you say, where's El Cerrito in this spectrum? And I guess the answer would be, they're probably more moderate than extreme, but not too lenient. I mean, you're not going to find in El Cerrito to have any hardcore racial issues that surface.

I'm sure there are issues. But Albany, on the other hand, is more prone to go the other way. They're kind of on the spectrum, more extreme. But El Cerrito has always had a Black guy or two on the police force, which is not that big, as opposed to Albany.

Albany has an all white force?

As far as I know. I mean, I don't really know. I mean, El Cerrito had a couple of Blacks coming in and I don't know how many they have now, I don't know. But I think they're probably more moderate than they are extreme.

You mean in their political and racial views?

Yeah. Yeah. To make a long story short, my political views at the time being a Democrat. And they knew that, OK. I mean, if they had a meeting of all the political appointees in a room, I would stand out because everybody would know. Who is he? And a word gets around, he's the guy that Meese said was OK, but he's not a Republican.

Would you express your views on certain issues that would make clear that you were not a conservative?

Not particularly. You know, I was pretty moderate. I was never really put in a position of carrying out some program or what have you that I have to say, Well, I'm a Democrat and I don't do that or it's too farfetched or too extreme for me to get involved, or anything like that.

I tried to kind of stay with the function of the agency, in this case, FEMA, because I was with other agencies when I was back there.

I was with three. FEMA, Selective Service and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which was my last one that I was involved with.

You could sense the political views of people that you talked to, particularly those who are appointees, and appointees don't make that much noise. I mean, they're there because it's a job and it's for the prestige, and it's temporary in all cases, you know, so it's not like they're spreading the word of the Republican theme. And the fact that some of the Black Republicans that I met were pretty down the middle kind of guys.

I found it interesting and informative to meet some of the Black Republicans, and the other Republicans, how they felt about a lot of things. And it turns out, you know, most people don't, they're not really indoctrinated to be, you know, espousing Republican themes and what have you.

An agency would send over a guy for a job at FEMA, one of the 15 that we had, and. Giuffrida appointed me as the White House liaison, so I had direct contact with the office of White House personnel, direct. In other words, if they had a candidate or they had a problem, they would call me as a representative at FEMA to say, what about this guy? What about that guy? And did you interview Jack or whoever for a position.

Because if they nominated you for a position, you would come to FEMA and you would come to my office and I would pick it up from there. And have you see Giuffrida as the next step.

You would interview potential employees before Giuffrida would?

Yeah. And check them out. With me, you know, as long as this guy didn't come up with two guns, and whatever. And I found it to be kind of a fun job because there were so many weird people who came through there, through me to him.

And he didn't take everybody that they sent over. And people that they sent over, sometimes they would call me and say, 'Give him the interview.' There was a kind of a code, 'This guy is, you know, some lady would call up from someplace in Georgia who wanted a job in some sort of secretarial job or something.

And they would get the word to me that, you know, we don't want her, but they don't want to tell her. They want me to tell her, OK. And so that's the way the system worked.

And so I found that I just kind of went along and monitored some of the policies that the Republicans were espousing at the time. I didn't get involved in any debates or discussions. Most people didn't know I was or was not a Republican.

(*Looking at a formal photo of Gerald in uniform*.)

So in the meantime, Reagan came in and Giuffrida surfaced. He was the one that called me and said, I'm going to go back now. I really would like you to come back as part of my staff.

We had a good working relationship over the years, and a personal relationship. And so I did. Which was another long story.

And so they take you over to the Pentagon. The guys got this room with the flags and the fake books and all that shit, and they line you up and take the picture. So anyway, at one point I said, I'm going to keep all this stuff.

(*Looking at photos of Gerald on overseas trips with FEMA*.)

That's over in Brussels.

A hearing of some kind.

Yeah, international. You're talking about something needs some policing, some of those foreign involvements with the U.S. But they've been going on for years and will go on for years.

And this is the committee that he (Giuffrida) was on as a member of FEMA, which was, I think, the emergency management subcommittee. And that was our FEMA guy who was stationed in Brussels.

And he stayed over there for years when I got a chance to meet a lot of people and I had a chance to go to a lot of different places. I went to Rotterdam… and I got a chance to go to Jerusalem, which I thought was one of my better trips.

(*Photos of Gerald at the White House*.)

The White House always had kind of a picnic on the Fourth of July.

Now here's a picture of your wife shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, and it says your wife is a White House volunteer.

Well, she was in Washington and she had an advanced degree, but she didn't want to go to work for the government. But somebody asked me or asked her, would you like to come to work at the White House as a volunteer? And she said, well, yeah. She was only there one day a week, two days or something. And you get to see a lot.

She made good use of that. She met some people.

What does a volunteer do at the White House?

It's kind of like you may help out, answer the phones in one office that you know, But it's always a woman who runs the volunteer program and will assign you. And they need somebody for three or four hours and they send you over to answer the phone. No big deal except that you get invited to the White House picnic.

And was your wife a Republican?

No, no, she was a hardcore Democrat. But she was smart, you know? You know at San Luis Obispo, she decided to go back to school because the kids were gone. And so she went back to Cal Poly and got an advanced degree. She got a master's in counseling and guidance.

They gave her a job at the university. She loved it, you know, and then we went to D.C., she didn't have a lot to do. So somebody introduced her to being a volunteer. And this was the beginning of the end, as I call it, for Giuffrida to get in trouble.

Did you have any knowledge of his wrongdoing before it came out in the press?

In most cases, yes. I mean, I knew he was doing it. And I would advise him not to do it, but he would do it anyway,.

As I understand it, he got in trouble for two things. One, misusing funds, and two, sexually harassing aides.

No, that wasn't him. That was his buddy, (Fred) Villela. He was one of the three people who came back from San Luis Obispo.

Three people came to FEMA from San Luis Obispo and two got in trouble but you did not.

No. I mean yes, that’s true.

Were you guilty of anything?

No. I was always one of those survivors that knew. I would go to him and tell him. At that point in my life, if you asked me a question, I'm going to give you an answer. You may not like the answer, but I was in a position to, you know, job-wise and financially, otherwise, to tell you what I thought.

And I spent my lifetime telling Giuffrida, you know, I don't think you ought to do that, OK? And I had enough sense to know that between him (Villela) and Giuffrida to make sure I wasn't involved.

You did not become a whistleblower?

No, not to that extent. When Giuffrida got into trouble, I was the White House liaison perso. They called up and said, we want to see the director over at presidential personnel.

And he (Giuffrida) came down to my office and said, well, they want to see me over at presidential personnel. Well, presidential personnel was kind of like my thing. So he said you’d better come along.

We both went in (to the White House) and they asked me to leave. Personnel, the guy who was head of presidential personnel said, ‘Jerry, will you give us a couple of minutes?’ I knew

something bad was going to happen and I did give him a couple of minutes, and that's when he asked Giuffrida, "You're going to have to leave."

(Giuffrida) said, "I know you probably sensed this was coming. And I would probably suspect that you've covered yourself job wise and otherwise."

I said, well, I came from the streets, so to speak. So I had enough sense to know when a guy was doing something bad that you've got to protect yourself, you've got to stay away. And I would go in his office and preach to him about certain things.

And he was just hard headed, and he would listen to me and go home, listen to his wife, and then it just, you know. So I felt like always I had done my duty. I've come and I've told you, no, I won't. I don't think that's the right thing to do. Maybe you ought to think about A, B or C, D. And it just kept going.

And this guy was, he was just terrible.

You're talking about Villela?

So, in fact, he (Villela) came late to, to CSTI, and he was an old friend of Giufredda's. And we got along, and we didn't get along. But he was constantly disrupting my function.

And so when the opportunity came to go to Compton, I said, well, these are indicators. So I left.

But when Giuffrida was asked to go back by Reagan to Washington, D.C., he came to Los Angeles, he and Villela, we had a meeting. And Villela promised and apologized, that he would change.

'We want you to come, but I was wrong (about) what I did and da dada da da.' But those are just words; they had no base because he went back there and he started to say, well shit, you know. So eventually he was the downfall of Giuffrida. He went first.

Yeah, he was a loose cannon. So first of all, he came back as part of the staff, and he was going to be the deputy. Later on Giuffrida decided he wasn't going to be the deputy, the number two guy at FEMA.

But then he began to do some serious things behind Giuffrida's back. And something happened at one of the conferences where they were all going down for the conference that he was supposed to make the arrangements.

And so, Giuffrida, sent him home, literally fired him. (Villela)

Villela's wife came in, begged Giuffrida to take him back. So Giuffrida took him back, but he gave him a job way up in Emmitsburg (*Maryland, a FEMA training site*) where he really got in trouble.

And so anyway, as you see, the papers were full of it.

(*Looking at more photos, news clips*.)

Al Gore was senator then and he was chair of the oversight committee. …That was the beginning. Then Gore started digging, OK, and monitoring everything. And so they were constantly calling him (Giuffrida) up, you know, for one thing or the other. And that was the beginning of the end.

He resigned.

Your name came up in this story. It says you were expected to testify.

Yes. That was on the waste issue. So then, of course, he (Giuffrida) left. And I stayed. That whole administration was really bad.

(Another clip is reads "Morality among the supply siders. More than 100 Reagan officials have faced allegations of questionable activities."

Right.

(The clip shows mug shots of morally lax supply siders.) Your picture is not among them.

No laughs. His is, though (Giuffrida). And that goes on and on and on.

Then when it got really bad, I had a call from one of the California people. His name was Tom Turnage, and he was head of the Selective Service at the time. And he called and said, now, when you get ready to go somewhere, I want you to come over to Selective Service. He headed that agency.

Because all the time I had stayed in the Reserves of the National Guard, all my time even in D.C. And so he called. I had known him for years before. He knew me to the point where we had run into each other a couple of times in D.C..

Did you meet him while serving in the National Guard?

Yeah, yeah. In fact, it was even before. Well, it was during that period. So anyway, he offered me a job.

Selective Service has the authority to call on active duty, any officer who is retired from Civil Service. They had detachment of officers over there that I had been meeting with once a month, about 12 of us.

But at any rate, he called me over and said, I want you to come to work for me as chief of the personnel office. And you go on active duty for two years.

And I said, I can draw my retirement from the federal government, and get paid as a military officer. Why not?

A move from FEMA to Selective Service:

Anyway, I left (FEMA) and went to work at Selective Service. And I went there in January, 1st of January and February, March, he called me in the office and said: the president is going to appoint me to head up the VA.

I'm taking these people with me. I'm taking Jim and his secretary and his public affairs officer and I want you to come along.

He said I don't know how you're going to do this, but I'll make some phone calls and find out. So he did make some phone calls. And I got a phone call from somebody over at the Pentagon that said it's OK to begin with.

And Selective Service, we didn't wear uniforms because of the anti-draft thing and so on and so forth. And that's what Selective Service is, the draft.

So I said, well, so he said, 'You go ahead and amend the orders to read you're attached to the VA.' OK, so that's how that happened. OK…. I was one of two assistant chiefs of staff. And so that's how I ended up at the VA.

Veterans Administration to retirement:

In the meantime, there was a guy from California named Tom Turnage, who I knew through National Guard and my relationship with the state government, who was head of the Selective Service Department. And he called me, had his aide call me up and tell me, you got any problems, you let me know.

And anyway, make a long story short, I still was in the military, in the Reserves. I worked for National Guard Reserves, and Selective Service has a military connotation. And they had a detachment of about 13 officers in the Reserves that were assigned to Selective Service.

And so the director I knew from California arranged to have me leave the D.C. guard, and transferred over to the Selective Service and the detachment.

There is a small detachment of guys, there were five from the Army, two from the Coast Guard, Navy, a composition of military people who were really in the reserve unit. So I was assigned from the guard to the unit. And I was very familiar with the director.

And Selective Service has authority under a lot of different codes, you know, parts of the government. And so they had the authority to call on active duty, a number of people, officers. And so I said, well, since the director, got in trouble with FEMA, I stayed on, but I knew they didn't want me to stay on.

Really? Because you were so associated with your boss?

Right.

Was he in trouble for doing something corrupt?

Yeah. Yeah. He was accused of doing something corrupt, which he did. And so anyway, I decided that I would stay there, which I did, because it didn't involve me.

And then when I got this call from Selective Service, they wanted me to come and work for them. He said they were going to put me on a statutory tour. And they would take me back, put me on active duty as a warrant officer and assigned to Selective Service.

So when you worked with Selective Service, you were serving in the military, right?

Yeah.

Did you have to wear a uniform?

No, no. One day a week. Because we were in Georgetown; Georgetown was full of college and university people, and they didn't want the military's exposure to be too strong.

Yeah. I guess there were some wars going on.

Yeah. And so anyway, I went to work at Selective Service as the personnel officer and I had an active Army sergeant and a civilian clerk that was in my little section. Then I was there, two, three, four or five months it,

The director of Selective Service got nominated to be head of the V.A. So he called me into his office, his secretary, myself and the chief of staff who I worked for named Jim, you know, whatever his name was.

He said, I like you guys and I want you to come along as part of my personal staff. Jim was on active duty. He was a West Pointer. He was part of the military element of Selective Service.

And so he said, so Jerry, what do you want to do? Do you want to go back to the government as a civilian?

I said, well, I'll just stay like I am, you know? I mean, because I was drawing my civil service retirement and my active duty salary at the same time, which was not prohibited by law, but you couldn't do it in reverse. At that level they do things very simply.

So they amended my orders to read 'V.A.' So the order came out and I continued as a military person but I didn't wear my uniform at the VA, at all, and nobody knew really. I mean few people knew I was on active duty.

Where did you work for the V.A.?

In D.C.

So they made the chief of staff, the director and chief of staff at the Selective Service. So, when he got to the V.A., he appointed the same guy as his chief of staff at the V.A., and he appointed me as the assistant chief of staff at the V.A.

Well, you're at that level and you're number four or five on the list, and it's a hundred and eighty five million dollar operation. It's, you know, kind of a biggie.

So anyway, I was pleased to get both salaries. I'm doing fine. After we've been there about a year or about two years, I guess, we're getting near the end of the administration. And so the director was talking about this. What's going to happen in the future?

I said, you know, you need to make your move now. You don't want to end up at the end of the term when everybody's scuffling and negotiating to get away and get a job.

And so he said, well, I'm going to do some things. So he had one of his people work out, and I got discharged from active duty and got a political appointment as a senior executive at, you know, a high level.

And I was there for about a year, and then they said they're going to convert the position to be competitive, you know. (They would) come up with a list of five or six, eight or 10 people applying, and the top two or three would get selected. And then he takes one of the three.

And I was one of the three and was selected as the senior executive civilian, OK. And so anyway, I stayed in my job all along.

You continued to oversee several different departments?

Yeah.

During the time that you were serving in these various federal agencies, did it ever come up that you would say to somebody, you know, the policies that we're following are not fair to Black people. We need to change. Did issues like that ever come up?

Well, I always ended up having oversight over the equal opportunity part, so I could have some say in selection, some say in policy, which I felt needed to be changed, in a lot of things. I don't think I did anything major, but I made sure that minorities got a good slice of the pie and since I had oversight for the Equal Opportunity Office, I always made sure about what was going on, and number of complaints they were getting or whatever.

So, for example, with the VA, were there complaints from Black people that the VA hospitals were not treating them well?

It was mostly employment. You'd get complaints of somebody being discriminated against in getting a certain job, or something that that happened.

Can you think of any examples when this might have come up and what might have happened?

Oh, you'd get a complaint from some low level person, GS 10 or 15, that they felt they were overlooked, didn't get the job because they were more qualified. Those were constant. You got those all the time.

Were you able to help resolve them?

I would try to resolve them. In most cases, I did resolve them, because if there was outright discrimination, being who I am and what I am, I could sense it right off the top because, you know, discrimination can be so covert that a lot of people couldn't sense it. But a lot of people could and I was one of those who could.

If you had been a white person, you wouldn't have the understanding, right?

Yeah. You wouldn't have the same sense of what happened. And so I usually ended up with those kinds of problems. I don't think that anything major was involved, nothing that made the newspapers. You know, when you made the newspapers, it was usually bad, not good. (Laughs)

The problems that you saw with discrimination, were they mostly individual problems or were they systemic? Were you able to deal with problems of the system?

Well, it was a little of each. The system was such that that you could look at the organization of a particular department. Particularly the medical. The medical department was the biggest department, thousands of doctors and constant problems, one way or the other.

You could you could sense something was askew, that it was racially (motivated), OK? And in some of those, I was able to inject myself and resolve a problem. If I got a call from some guy saying, I should have been number two on the list, or whatever. And I had to use some techniques to try to find out what really happened and help resolve it, if I could.

You retired from the VA and that was your last job, right? How old were you when you retired?

Let's see it was 1988 so I was 63, I guess. I was in my mid '60s which we thought was old at the time. At least I did.

Here's a picture of you with the VA. You're the only black person in the picture. Was that the case for most of your jobs, and with FEMA?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Was that uncomfortable or was that OK?

Well, it was one of those things where it was OK. I mean, you get used to that if you're a minority.

Wait, there's a Black woman standing there.

Yeah, she was his secretary.

Is that a Christmas party.

Yes. Christmas.

Traveling while with the VA:

(*We look at photos showing Gerald's many travels during his time with FEMA and the VA; traveling with Turnage*.)

(It was) to see how they were treating their veterans in China, or wherever.

It was great anywhere. He (Turnage) asked me and my and my wife (to travel with them). She became very close to his wife. And it was a kind of a mutual understanding of sorts.

So here you are in Japan.

Here we are in Japan. It was very good.

With the San Francisco office of the VA:

(We flip through the scrapbook and see interesting documents and more photos.) I didn't know you went to work for the San Francisco regional office of the VA in 1989

Well, yeah, what happened was they moved me. You're going to leave, he said. Why don't you just spend a couple of years in San Francisco.

When the head of an agency says that, it starts the ball rolling, and all of a sudden you're out here. So I went as his rep at the San Francisco Regional Office of the VA.

From the Oakland Military Institute to retirement:

(*The Oakland Military Institute is a charter school in Oakland started by then Oakland mayor Jerry Brown as a pet project in 2001*.)

So you were at the Oakland Military Institute from 2001 to 2003. Is that the last job you've had? I mean, other than framing, of course.

Yeah, I think that was it. I said, the bureaucracy has been good to me and I've been good in the bureaucracy. I'm going to leave.

But he (Jerry Brown) and I got into a little tiff about right and wrong. He was something else. He was bright, very bright. But sometimes, if you didn't agree with him, and I was at that stage, I don't have to agree with anybody.

And he wanted to fire some, I guess, the head of ... they brought some woman on to head up the institute. And she wasn't working out to his desire. And so he fired her, and he asked me to …. And I was also secretary to the board of the institute, which was, you know, get the agenda to make sure the minutes and places (were arranged). It wasn't a big deal.

He told me he wanted to fire this woman. And we went to the board meeting, and he laid out to the board that he was going to dismiss her. And he went on to indicate a list of things that she was deficient in.

And he turned to me and said, 'well, Jerry, you know, well, you know about that, tell them.'

And I refused. I said, 'I'm not going to comment on personnel matters, and I'm not on the board.'

And he got pissed because I wouldn't support him.

Did he fire you?

Well, he didn't really fire me, but I got the message. I think that this is about it.

In later years, did you vote for him?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I always, in fact we became, I mean, often when I saw him he was all right, I was all right with it.

But I just said, well you know this, I've had enough bureaucracy. Maybe it's time for me to really, truly retire. And that's what I did, OK, which would be about 2003.

But, (laughs), he was so bright that he was usually two floors above everybody. He was two steps above everybody. I mean, he, if he didn't know something, he'd go read the book that night and next morning he'd floor you.

He's a very bright guy. I liked working for him, except that I didn't agree with him firing that woman. I didn't comment on it. He got pissed. He felt like you're loyal, you should have said yes.

You know, I can't lie about it. I said I didn't think that she was that bad. But I mean, I was willing to go along with whatever you wanted to do. But I'm not in position to testify at a board meeting that she was incompetent.

And so anyway, I said she had some pretty good points. She was an educator. She had her master's and Ph.D. or something. And anyway, we got in a little disagreement and I said, well, maybe it's time that I depart, which I did.

Religion.

Let's turn to religion. To what extent has religion been important to you and to your family?

Well, you know, my wife, she always went to church. She took the kids to church. I was kind of the stand offish guy.

But I guess, I had a problem with a lot of people who claimed to be religious and follow religious doctrines and what have you. And it turned out that wasn't really the case. They were really bad people. So I wasn't really a churchgoer.

My wife was very much so. And the kids also.

Which church did they attend?

South Berkeley Community Church, Congregational Community Church. I went to some of the functions. I went to church occasionally if they were having something. But every Sunday I didn't go to church. My sisters were very religious. My mother wasn't too religious, as I recall,

because her family, they went to church all the time. But for some reason, my mother didn't push us to go to church. My sisters always went to church, as did my wife and kids.

Did your wife try to get you to go and was she disappointed that you wouldn't come along?

No, she understood. I did go to some of the church activities. I mean, it's not like I didn't go. I was in fact, I was on the board at South Berkeley one time. Yeah. It's just that I didn't go to church on Sunday. OK.

You'd told me it was an early integrated church.

Well, it was the first integrated church in Berkeley and it had some people who started it who were, I guess, pretty much on the left side. That was early on, and but over time, it just kind of disintegrated.

Is the church closed or inactive?

It's closed, I think.

My wife became the church secretary and so her involvement was really intense after, you know, we came back from D.C. and settled here. She got very much involved with the church. She was a church secretary and did the bulletin. The more she got involved, the more I got disinvolved.

The membership wasn't truly committed. You found people that went to church, took advantage of the church, but really weren't that religious. I mean, they were there because of something.

Some of the things that happened on the religious side, I kind of felt that religion could have played a bigger part in a lot of the civic activities. And they wouldn't. Or didn't

But I've never been a real churchgoer, although my family, all of them, went to church and got involved with the church.

And in my wife's case, she got too involved and it just went on and on. And she was the church secretary. She was on the board. And I was on the board too at one time.

But it was a long time ago and it was a pretty moderate church at that time. But anyway, they had their problems, mostly fiscal problems. And you don't run a church without having sufficient income to pay the pastor and pay the secretaries and keep the building going.

And I was a little concerned about that. And I let my wife from time to time know that. But she got too involved. In fact, I always kind of think that emotionally she got so involved that it was probably part of her destruction, you know.

I mean, it was just church phone calls, and the board and the meetings and the concerns. And I wasn't about to try to go in and change that. And I say involved, getting emotionally involved, which she did.

What was the cause of Leona's death?

She had a stroke, and then she recovered and she came back, but she was never really the same. And she was on medication and it just got worse and worse.

It was very, very emotional and a very difficult part of my life with her, the last five or six years. It's not easy to watch a person deteriorate to the point where they're consumed by this and you have to have medication to keep them.

And I was at the time retired. So I did most of the cooking and shopping. That gave her a lot more time for her church affairs, which I thought was I was doing her a favor. And what I did, on the other hand, I didn't have much choice.. So anyway, that's my answer to the religious question.

I have one more question. We've talked about the Black community in El Cerrito. To what extent is there a Black community?

Well, I think that the Black community in El Cerrito, there's no other place than the NAACP branch. That's the only real focal point for the families.

Wouldn't Pat Durham mention St. Peter's Church?

St. Peter's Church was, of course, where the NAACP met and are meeting now.

I was president of the. Branch for, I guess, two terms, three terms. Mina (Wilson), her father was the one when I came back from Washington, D.C., that tried to recruit me to be the next president. He was president at the time, and I told him, you know, I wasn't really committed to something like that.

And so at the time, the committee, the search committee said, well, if you won't do that, would you be treasurer? So I was treasurer for I don't know, two or three terms, I guess.

Gerald Martin and wife Leona, center, at an El Cerrito NAACP event in the early 1980s with Brunetta and Burt Wolfman.

The El Cerrito branch of the NAACP and racism in El Cerrito:

Let's talk about the formation of the NAACP branch in El Cerrito.

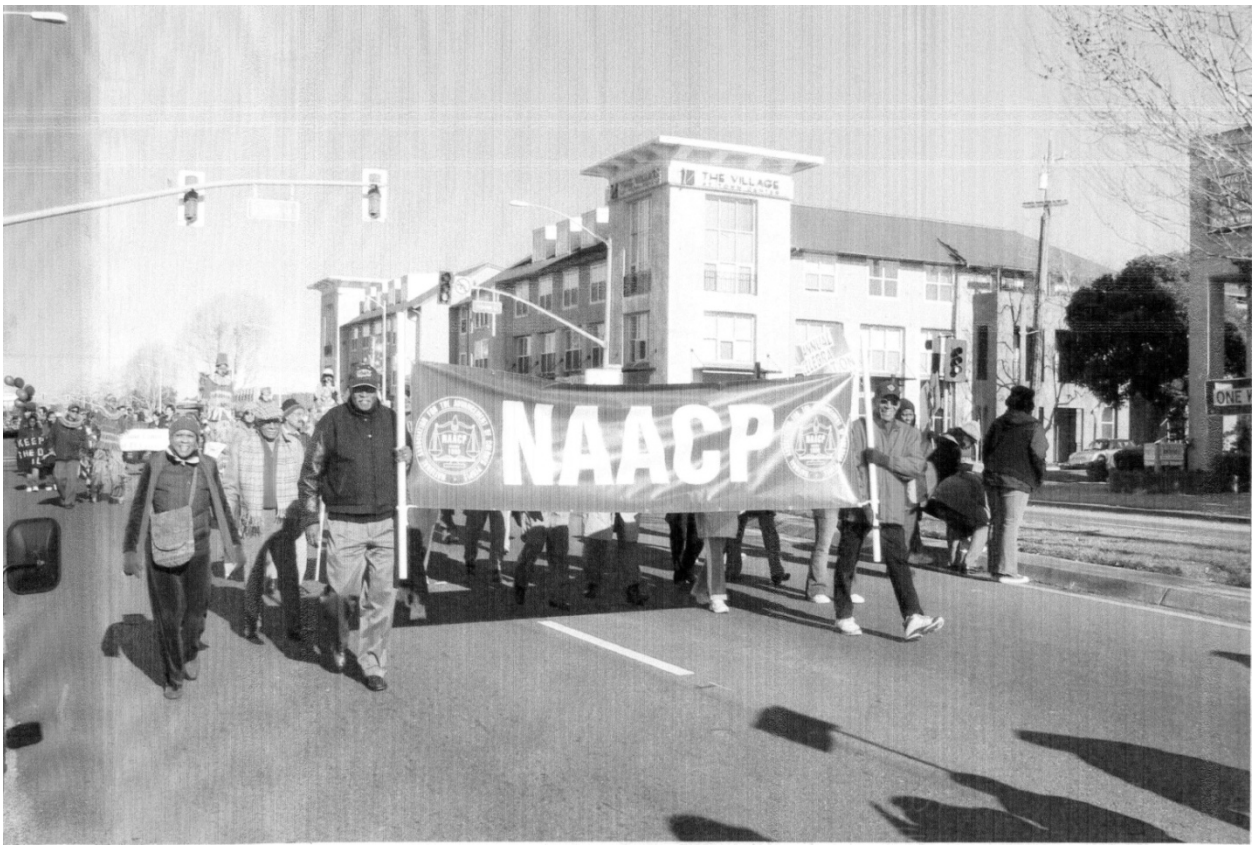
The branches are formed. You form a branch, activate it, apply, so to speak. So in1967 they applied to become a branch in El Cerrito. They had branches in Oakland, they had them in

Berkeley. El Cerrito figured they could take whatever was north of Berkeley and have enough members, which they did

That was in ’67. The guy who was the ramrod in that, who did all of the work, he knocked on doors of all the African-Americans and the whites also, to form, to join, his name was A.J. Radford. I’ve got a little piece here you’re welcome to have. It was because of him. His name was actually Alfred but they called him A.J.

He went around and knocked on all the doors, and all the African Americans and other people, who joined. As I recall, we were (living) here. (This was before moving to San Luis Obispo.)

We joined of course the NAACP, and we weren’t very active. We were young, two kids, three kids. I don’t know that I ever, I went to maybe one meeting every now and then in 1967. But A.J., he was the real person that got the branch started.



Gerald, second from left, took part if the annual Martin Luther King Jr. parade down San Pablo Avenue in the early 2000s.

Was he an older man?

At the time he was probably 10 years older than I was. Yeah, he was a young man.

What did he do for a living?

He was a teacher over in South City, South San Francisco. He lived in El Cerrito. He was a real, he was a real go-getter.

Was there a motivating factor to forming the branch? 1967 was a tumultuous year.

No, it followed the usual guidelines for the national (association). I always looked at national as being, as the branches as being truly branches. In other words, they didn't do a great deal except what they were supposed to do, given guidance by national.

You always had a couple of local issues. Employment. Somebody had discrimination on the job, stuff like that. But primarily you followed the national guidelines. So when you were forming a branch that's truly what you were, a branch to the national headquarters

I wasn't active in those days. I paid my dues. We paid our dues. Other than that we never really did a great deal. Well there were some things that went on.

Rallies and marches?

No. There was always a march once a year. In fact, El Cerrito didn't allow (it). Everybody in the state of California started recognizing February as the national holiday, except El Cerrito. It took El Cerrito another 19 years before they got around to declaring Martin Luther King holiday.

A.J. he did his work. He did fundraisers and so on and so forth.

How large was the branch in the early days?

Oh, 150, 200.

Did many people attend from Richmond?

They had their own branch.

Do most members live in El Cerrito?

Most of the African-Americans in El Cerrito belong to the branch, but you didn't have to live in El Cerrito to belong to the branch.

How does membership break down between Black and white or other members?

I'd say, when you look at some of these pictures (leafs through scrapbook.)

Most of these people have deceased. You can see by the pictures that it was truly, a … oh my guess would be 25 percent were white. That's kind of a risky figure for me to throw out there, somewhere between 15 and 20 percent were white, yeah.

Were you one of the founders?

Yes I was. My name was there as a founder. I didn't really become active until we came home in the late '70s, or '80s. They called me up and said they were having a meeting and wanted to make sure I was there. They wanted to recruit a president. They asked me.

No, I would not be. I said I would be more willing to serve in any other capacity. (Laughs.) And that's how I started out as the treasurer, went on to vice president and president. This was the end of the '80s, 1989 I guess. And at that point I really became more involved.

What was Charles Wilson's role?

He was the president. He was president when they asked me to run for president to take his place. They nominated him and he ran and I became the treasurer. I had a lot of interaction with Wilson.

Actually he, most of the people you see in here, are deceased. Time marches on. He was the president I think about two terms, if not three.

How long were you president?

I was president in the early 1990s, two or three terms.

Is there much work being president?

Not a lot. It's a monthly meeting. You head up the board, all the officers and sundry committees. You meet once a month but you always have a preliminary meeting with chair people to discuss the agenda.

One of the branches like Berkeley, that branch is bigger, Oakland is even bigger, San Francisco is huge. If you get any publicity it's usually because of an incident or two. In San

Francisco you hear about the reverend over there who's the president, whenever anything happens that is racially involved you get a little publicity.

Have there been incidents of that sort in El Cerrito?

We've had a couple of incidents at school, at Portola (junior high, later middle school, later demolished), when it was Portola. Mostly those.

What sort of incidents?

Some racial discrimination by the kids. They were given the opportunity, some of the kids were I guess mistreated so far as something they had done, that was inappropriate to (what) they had done.

They would come to us and say I've done such and such and they want to throw me out of school, or what have you. And we would take that up. When Wilson was president, his daughter (Mina Wilson) later became president. She became very active in handling discrimination in the schools. Individually people would have problems and she would address those. That was in later years.

She's still active. In fact I guess she was president some couple of years ago. Mina, she's into everything. She's one of those people that is involved with a lot of things.

Did you ever talk to school principals while you were president or on the board?

Actually when I was president, maybe the school, a school administrator or one of the officials at school, you would have a problem, we would meet with him and try to resolve that. There wasn't a lot of that.

The smaller things you did really weren't exposed. People didn't hear about minor things, like on the job or at schools. You would address those problems and resolve them, but never get credit for them.

Generally I would say we resolved a lot of problems that could have become bigger problems, major problems.

Did you feel you were successful with this?

Yes, if you solved a reasonable amount of problems in a year, you could say, we've had a pretty good year, whether it was a job discrimination issue and you spoke to the supervisor, or if it was a problem in school and you got involved and tried to resolve it.

For a while there were gangs at Portola. Did issues come up around gangs?

Yeah, the gang thing, but I don't remember the branch being involved too much in anything like that. Involved, meaning solution. That's a problem but it wasn't the kind of problem that we addressed.

Did the NAACP in El Cerrito have a youth component?

Early on it did and it was very active, but as time went on it diminished. You need somebody or someone, or bodies, I'd say, to be involved and get it going. A lot of the branches had youth programs, and we had a very active one, oh I guess back in the early days. But somehow or other it just kind of faded. It was overtaken by a lot of other programs and things the kids would get involved in.

Did the branch ever get involved with workplace issues with private business or the city government?

I can't at this stage, for me, I can recall one or two, but I couldn't put my finger on a particular incident with the city or other government agencies, without going back and digging out some.

Are you still on the NAACP board?

In fact this past year I was the first vice president. This year I opted out. I'm on the veterans committee.

I'm the longest tenured person in the branch, I'm sure of that. All the people who started out initially, I think I'm the only one (left).

What do you feel best about being with the NAACP, and do you have any regrets?

I think we could have done better, I think we could have gotten involved with more local issues with people in the government and the schools. The schools, we had a tendency to get involved with them more so than anything else.

We've had the chief of police and officials from the city come to our meetings and give a little talk, that sort of thing. But I don't think we really had a great impact on city government, or state for that part, here in El Cerrito. With 25 thousand people plus or minus (living in El Cerrito), I guess that doesn't carry a lot of influence, you might say.

Do you wish there had been more Black people on the city council?

Gerald, Leona, and Cynthia Gray of El Cerrito with activist-comedian Dick Gregory at the NAACP convention in Washington in 2006.

You'd like to think. We have one member who goes to all the meetings (of council). Of course he's involved with everything. Al Miller. Al ran our annual fundraiser for scholarship funds for nearly three years, with a great deal of success. We would raise 30, 40 thousand dollars every year. Al would administer that, going through a process, high schools from El Cerrito and Richmond, he would award scholarships.

If you fool around with Al, he'll get you involved

Do you think the work of the NAACP made an impact on attitudes towards Black people in the area?

In general I would say no. Most of the attitudes are there. They persist, or insist, persist in most white people, you know. Either they are or they are not. You can say well I'm not a racist

no, but I'm not inclined to do A or B. I would rather stay here. If you get the general feeling of what I'm trying to convey.

It's kind of like, either you're active mentally against racism or you're not. And there is a lot of hidden racism. 'It's OK, but. I'm for it, but.' And it's those buts that get you. You get that feeling. And I don't have anything personal, or I don't have any personal knowledge of people who are racist.

We used to have two or three of them on this block. But they're gone and you seldom are exposed to… There is some covert racism, but you have to be pretty clever to detect it. It's kind of like, 'it's OK, but.'

How do you detect racism these days?

It's very difficult, it's very difficult to detect. But every now and then you just get a little whisper of racism in some dealings you're having.

And I go back to when we had the house built. Cal Vet would come back and say, Well you need to A, B and C before we can approve it. And in those days I was too young and inexperienced to recognize that they're playing you. You could have done that while you were in the office. You get to the point where you recognize these little things.

But as you get older you're not subjected to some of those things because of your age and maturity. People are trying not to discriminate against you because of your age and experience, as opposed to some 22-year-old they may dismiss and send on his or her way.

Have we experienced any discrimination at our home in recent years? Not in this area. We've had two or three people on the block who were outright racists initially. Either they have gone, time has caught up with them. We've changed and they've changed.

The El Cerrito home, traveling and collecting:

We got the house built. He wasn't an architect, but he was a draftsmen. He drafted the plans. He worked for another architect and he knew what the local restrictions were.

We submitted the plans and they approved them. You have to wait. We got the loan. It was $13,500.

How did you decide what the house would look like?

We came up with some ideas of what we wanted, and we sat down with the designer and went through all that. 'We wanted a house like this,' and he contributed a lot of information. We were very young. For instance, we said we wanted a balcony He said access to the balcony should be restricted to where you had control. Originally, access to the balcony was from our bedroom.

The house is what we'd call today mid-century modern.

Yes I would regard it as a modern house. We learned a lot going through that.

The house is a little over 2700 square feet. We expanded it. Downstairs was just, it was bare. They framed it and I put in the flooring after. If you were making 8 thousand a year you couldn't afford a lot of extras.

How big was it originally?

1,300 square feet or so.

There are three bedrooms, actually 4, one downstairs. Two baths up here, and a half bath downstairs. Yes it has worked out very well, the house.

We were gone for nearly 10 years, had the house rented. We came back and we decided we wanted to redesign the house, which we did. We put in the skylights and we took down the initial doors and put in glass doors. Anyway, we changed the downstairs

Now we have 3 fireplaces. It was redesigning the house so it would be more contemporary for us in the late ‘80s. We had a professional architect come in and he redesigned the whole house. We put it out for bids, paid off the Cal Vet loan, and got another loan to take care of this.

Gerald, Leona and friends who during a visit to Tokyo in 1987.

The décor in your home is eclectic but it seems to have an Asian theme.

It has. As a veteran and a retired veteran and reservist we had space availability. Have you heard of that program?

The Air Force runs a program where you can go out and get on a plane if space is available, from the old days when servicemen would get a hop. The air force has a program, they publish arrival, departure times and where they are going.

They have terminals just for that. Our terminal of course is Travis (AFB). When we retired I started with another couple, they were at our wedding, they were friends and associates, so we started going on trips twice a year.

We would go up to Travis, we would watch the schedule. You could go where you wanted to go and all you had to do is pay for your lunch, if you wanted lunch.

We went from here to Delaware and Delaware into Spain, Spain into France. We went to most of the major European countries, over time. And many times we would go East. You can go to Hawaii, they must have 10-12 flights, which is a jumping off point. We went to Japan, the Philippines, to some of the major islands.

That was where we collected a lot. My wife would collect clothes in Korea, she would buy clothes, and I would buy art. She just enjoyed it and I got involved with it.

Did you go to China?

We didn't go to China; we've been to China, but we went to China much later, 20 years ago.

We would usually go, we would select times when the kids were in school, not out of school.

Starting in the 1990s, we would take two trips a year. We did that for 5 or 6 years. It was more an adventure. We would go out and if we couldn't find a flight that we wanted we would say let's go with this, that or the other.

We caught a flight to Washington, Delaware I guess, and then we gambled and said where do we want to go from here? We went to some island. It was a lot of adventure on our part. If the plane stops in some island country, if you want to get off, you get off.

You could stay in military facilities, wherever.

No, we never went to Africa. We did go to the Middle East, we went to the Southwest Pacific, Italy, England, France. Japan, Saipan. It was an adventure twice a year with us.

Did you have special objectives in traveling, or?

It was recreational only.

Swimming at the beach? Did you go to art museums?

You know, we would like to do the country. We like to get to the history of the country and we would, you know, go on tours of the facilities. Not too much lying around on the beach, none of that kind of stuff. We were beyond all that.

There's the Azores. We got hung up on Azores one time. The plan, stopped at the Azores and they had a change of schedule. I don't know whether you're familiar with the big airplanes, the big C-5s, hundreds of tons.

These were not commercial passenger planes.

Sometimes, yeah, but most times, not. Most times they were military planes. They would hold 60, 70 people aside from their freight. And then we would you know, we would be part of the passenger list. So they didn't have stewardesses or anything like that. They were like no stewardess, but they had an airman or a person that took care of, you know, they serve coffee and make sure you keep the elbows in and stuff like that. But, you know, it wasn't really exorbitant or flashy, you know.

These objects here, do they come from your trips to Asia?

The paintings, I mean, the pictures do. Most of this stuff did.

Do you have a real fascination with Japan or with Asia?

Not particularly. Only this. Where do you go when you go west? You know, you go to Hawaii, the Philippines, Japan, you know.

Did you manage to pick up much of the foreign languages?

No, no, not much. At least I didn't, you know. Not much you could do, and you only get to spend maybe a week at most at one country, in one country or the other, you know. Yeah, but it was to us, it was an adventure. And a vacation, you know.

Let's walk into the hallway. That screen that's kind of an Asian screen, is that from Asia?

No, that would be too big. Most (Asian collectables) are prints that were rolled up,

We bought this we bought this locally, here and we bought that locally. A lot of the stuff like that fan came from Japan. And of course, I framed it.

Jerry in his framing studio. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Gerald's downstairs framing studio; a classic MG.

We walk into Gerald's downstairs framing studio.

When did you become interested in framing?

Well, I started out in nineteen sixty, and when we moved to San Luis Obispo, which is the early '70s, I decided to go and take the class in town to frame some pictures.

I didn't do much more than that until I came home from Washington, D.C. and I started doing framing and then one thing led to another. I bought a piece of equipment and I bought another piece.

I didn't realize how big this studio is. This is as big as a professional frame shop.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, yeah. You know, this is the part (of the house) we opened up when we had the house remodeled. This was all just dirt, OK. We said, you know, this is space going to waste. And so they built it up and we wired to the point where we could use it.

This is like a factory back here.

Yeah. Framing, you get into it and then you go to the shows, and then you go here and there and it just graduates into an in-depth hobby. And I made it a business for a couple of years and then I stopped that.

How did people hear about you?

Word of mouth. Yeah. Somebody goes to somebody's house and everything.

Did you frame most of the pictures in the house?

Yes. Yes, just about.

What's the trick with framing? A lot of it has to do with proportion and color.

Well, it's kind of like a vision. You know, how you take the picture and then you try to put the matting to pick up some of the colors that are in the picture. From there you go, from the matting to the framing, and gold is a basic, you work from gold out, OK?

And you just, you know, your colors they're everywhere, so you can just about pick colors. You want the matting to pick up the colors that are in the picture itself.

Do you do much framing these days?

Well, I haven't.

Looking at more pictures.

Who's this guy standing with you? Is it Ernest Borgnine. Really wow! How'd you get to know him? Was he involved with FEMA?

No, he was at the V.A. when I was at the V.A. He came through there.

How many presidents did you get to meet?

Reagan and Bush, that's about the size of it. Yeah. Anyway, this is just what I've gathered over the years.

What is the appeal of framing? Meditative?

Oh, yes. Yes, it is. It's something you can do that's constructive. You enjoy doing it and you're busy. I'm a big believer in keeping the mind and the body active. You'll be around a lot longer.

I guess you're proof of that.

Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. In this kind of work, framing, you kind of go with periods, you know, do two or three days constantly working on something, and then I'll slack off and probably won't come in here.

Other than framing, do you have other hobbies?

I played golf for many years, and I quit that when the kids got to… (fades out).

Were you good?

No. I had a twenty two handicap, so that's how good I was.

Were you a member of the Mira Vista Golf Course here.

No, I played the public golf courses. I belonged to a club, but it was a club of all Black members and called Metropolitan. We were just playing the public courses.

Gerald is also a serious music listener with a large collection of recordings.

Do you play an instrument?

I don't play a thing.

Oh, you have a turntable right here.

Yeah, I've got a turntable. I've got the tape recorder. I mean, a player in the back. I had the house wired. We did the redesign for our speakers downstairs in my studio, in the other room, the den. So it's all over the house.

Jerry driving his 1965 MGB roadster.

Sitting in the garage is a 1965 MG MGB roadster.

Why do you like MGs?

It's English, sports car. I had it a long time. I bought it in 1970. And it was expensive. (It has provided) the whole spectrum of bad, bad, to good to good. (Michael) drove it back to Yale and back (here). Well, when he came back he had it loaded, and he drove across country, and then when he came back he gave it up and I had it restored.

Have you had other MGs?

No, just that one.

Michael: He's had one other a '71.

G: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. That was a car, it was like a daily though, we had two cars.

Do you work on cars?

No, no. I clean them up and that's it. I don't do anything mechanical. In fact, I had the engine replaced in this one, took the whole thing out, and painted the inside and put another engine in. Yeah. I don't do any of that.

You've attended all kinds of MG shows?

I've been in shows and stuff. You see (the plaques) out in the garage.

What is the fun in having an MG?

Well, the fun is in driving it and having something somebody else doesn't have, you know. And you get a lot of thumbs up when you're driving down the street in a restored, pristine kind of a car. And people appreciate those kinds of automobiles, and you get a thumbs-up and a toot on

the horn or something, you know. I like to drive it. It feels different than a normal sedan would feel.

Besides the many family photos hung on walls are many works of art and collectables, many collected on trips with his wife. Along the stairwell is a collection of Keane Big Eye prints.

So you're a big Walter Keane fan?

Oh, yeah, I'm a big fan.

Did you ever meet him?

No! Her, her!

Oh yes, I saw that movie. ('Big Eyes,' which revealed that Walter's wife Margaret Keane was the actual painter of the big-eyed portraits.)

Yeah. Yeah, she dumped him. He was nothing, and (she) went to court and got all the rights. So I started collecting this stuff, and I was in Hawaii and went to a store, kind of an antique store. And he lived, he -- the guy Keane, and he was telling people he painted them. And (the store) had a stack of these lying there for sale, and I think I bought them for next to nothing.

We are in the kitchen.

Are you a good cook?

I think I am, yeah. The way the story goes, 1944, before I got in the Merchant Marine in World War Two, I wanted to stay around for a while, so they sent me to school over at City College to learn how to cook.

And then I went back to sea as a cook for one long trip. And it was just too hot for me. I got out of there.

'How in the hell did I end up here?':

Jerry, what would you say is the most interesting and historic part of your life story?

Historic and important part of my life? I would say the late '50s.

Because?

Because things began to, they passed legislation that opened up (anti) discrimination and whatever. By that time Rumfords' fair housing (act) was on the board or (almost). You didn't have to be confined to the University to Ashby to Shattuck.

I'm trying to figure out what to focus on for my story about you for the society publication The Forge. You made a good life for yourself despite racism and other challenges. That might be part of it.

Making a life for yourself. I mean, how did I end up here?

In retrospect you can look back and say, oh, this happened or that happened, and that's why I'm here. But it was a struggle, and everything has its elements. It was a struggle then, you don't realize it, but it was. As opposed to being, nowadays everything is kind of like, everything happens.

You are not confronted with any racism to any degree. Covertly maybe, but covert, you wouldn't know it anyway. As I reflect, you've stimulated my memory and I've given that some thought the other day when I was thinking about our conversation. About who you are and where you came from.

It's a journey that I now find very interesting as I reflect on some of the things. How did I go from Sacramento (street) and Ashby (avenue) to Washington D.C., to being the number three guy at a major agency in the federal government? And how did I get there? I often sat at my desk in D.C., 'How in the hell did I end up here?'

And then I look back on what a guy told me, one of my friends I worked for over the years. He said he was doing a background check on me. And the investigator said, you know I never really did a background on a guy that had so many plusses. He said, from your Aunt Bea, who would be my mother's sister, who thought I walked on water, through all the people you worked for, I didn't get one negative comment.

Well, thank you.

He didn't know, but I read the report anyway. The background investigation was one of my sub departments so they brought it up and let me read it.

I guess my disposition has always been rather mild. I learned early on, don't get too excited about too many things. First place, don't try to get into any conflicts. Early on, I'm not sure what age, we used to work at Rollerland, a place at 55th and Telegraph for roller skating.

African-Americans could go there on Sunday when they had skating parties, but they couldn't go otherwise. During the beginning of the war I worked there putting on skates for the people. And the sailors used to come there quite often and go roller skating.

We got into a conflict with one of them and one of them knocked the shit out of me, hit me in the nose, because there is also some racial connotation.

Some guy comes in from Georgia, Louisiana, somewhere. There were six or seven of us working there, and there was always some hustle or muscle, insult. Anyway I got my ass knocked down. I remember thinking, well this will be the last time I am going to go jawing up in somebody's face. That was a good lesson to learn.

I tried to be as, not to get too excited about too many things. Choose your fights. Don't get excited about something you have no control over.

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