

**Oral Memoirs**

**of**

**Curtis Rayam**

An Interview Conducted by

Eric Thompson

March 5, 2025

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories

(RICHS)

*University of Central Florida RICHS*

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## **Interview Histories**

Interviewers: Eric Thompson

Transcriber: Eric Peterson

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

## **Project Detail**

RICHES is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Eric Thompson is a PhD student at the University of Central Florida.

Curtis J. Rayam is a Florida native who grew up in the historic African American neighborhood of Parramore in the City of Orlando. He is notable for his success as an international opera singer and Professor of Voice at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.

## **Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Curtis Rayam is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 5, 2025.

## **Abstract**

An oral history interview of Curtis Joshua Rayam Jr. The interview was conducted by Eric Thompson at the Melrose Center at the Orlando Public Library in Orlando, Florida, on March 5, 2025. Rayam, born February 4, 1951, is a native of the Parramore neighborhood in Orlando and a successful opera and concert singer. Some of the topics covered include his family's move to Orlando in search of better educational opportunities, his experiences growing up in Parramore, and the influence of teachers and mentors such as Masie Cosby and Jessie B. Demps Smith. Rayam shares memories of attending Callahan Elementary School and Jones High School and reflects on the role that educators played in shaping his musical ambitions. He describes community life centered around churches such as Mt. Olive AME Church and Saint Mark AME Church and remembers the vibrant cultural and commercial activity in Parramore. He mentions streets such as Green Street, Jackson Street, Jefferson Street, and Orange Avenue, as well as businesses like Pyramid Cleaners and the Carver and Lincoln Theaters. He reflects on community figures including Chief Wilson, who attended the 1964 New York World's Fair, as well as other key figures like Queenie Powell, Augusta Rogers, Alma Polope, and Georgia Wallace. He also discusses the work of Jessie B. Demps Smith at the Magnolia School. Rayam recalls his later studies at the University of Miami, the legacy of segregation, the importance of entrepreneurship, and the changes he has witnessed in Parramore over the decades, including poverty and homelessness.

## **Curtis Rayam**

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Eric Thompson

March 5, 2025

Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

### **Moving from Bellville to Orlando and settling in Parramore**

**Thompson** All right. Today's date is Wednesday, March 5th, 2025. My name is Eric Thompson, and I'm interviewing Curtis Rayam as part of research with the University of Central Florida RICHES Project,<sup>1</sup> in cooperation with the City of Orlando's Parramore Speaks Project.<sup>2</sup> This interview is being conducted at the Melrose Center at the Orlando Public Library in Orlando, Florida,<sup>3</sup> and Mister Rayam has agreed to allow this interview to be recorded. First, could you start off by telling us your full name?

**Rayam** Curtis Joshua Rayam, Jr.

**Thompson** Alright. And can you tell us about your childhood and where you grew up?

**Rayam** Well, I was born in 1951 – February 4th, 1951 – in a farming area called Bellville, Florida, in Hamilton County, Florida, up near the Georgia line.

**Thompson** And when did you and your family first arrive in Orlando?

**Rayam** We came to Orlando in 1958 to stay. That is to say that we had been to Orlando on several occasions. My parents were divided about either being city dwellers or farming people. So, uh, my mother won out in 1958 because she was, um, very, very interested in her children getting a better education than she did. So, we moved to Orlando finally in 1958.

**Thompson** And why did they come here? Just for education?

**Rayam** Education, uh, employment, of course. I mean, we had our farming, but uh, they were looking for a new experience. They both had been farmers all of their lives. And especially my mother. My mother had wanted to be a WAC,<sup>4</sup> and, uh, because her father was burned badly in a tobacco barn for, uh burning. And, uh, she and her two older siblings had to stay home

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1 RICHES is the Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories.

2 Parramore Speaks is a collaborative project between the City of Orlando and the University of Central Florida's RICHES dedicated to preserving the rich, multifaceted histories of the Parramore community.

3 The Melrose Center is located in the Orlando Public Library at 101 E Central Blvd, Orlando, FL 32801.

4 Women's Army Corps (WAC).

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and help their mother gather the crops. So, her out was to get married, she told me. And then from marriage, uh, it brought her along to Orlando, Florida.

**Thompson** And when you came to Orlando, where in Orlando did you live?

**Rayam** I first remember living as a little boy on Green Street, which really doesn't, uh—I don't think it's in existence anymore. It's near the Callahan Center.<sup>5</sup> And then from Green Street, we lived at the corner of Washington, right behind which was—which was, um, Callahan, which had been on the old Jones High School.

**0:02:51 Childhood memories and family life in rural Florida**

**Thompson** And you mentioned a little bit the farming history. Once they came to Orlando, what did your parents do for a living?

**Rayam** Well, my mother became a maid. She worked in the old San Juan Hotel<sup>6</sup> down here on Orange Avenue. And my father picked oranges, and later became an—a fruit loader. And then went on to move houses with Sandroni Company and all.

**Thompson** And, uh, do you have any siblings?

**Rayam** I have. I certainly do. One sister who has passed. My sister, Linda. And, uh, four brothers. My brother Hardy, my brother Linarus Rayam, who has passed, and my brother Alfred Earl, who has passed, and my brother Thomas, who is still alive. And we do have a brother also we call Tootie, but his name is Alphonso. My father's son. He's actually the oldest [laughs].

**Thompson** Um, and what sort of, um, memories do you have of your family and childhood that really stick out to you?

**Rayam** Oh my God. Going fishing when we lived on the farm. Going fishing with my grandmother. Playing with my cousins. There were so many cousins. We did not have to make friends with anybody else. Just, uh—just that country life going from one church to another, going down to my mother's—mother's house in the evenings on Sunday—Sundays. And, uh, all the ladies in the evening would, uh, walk down in the—in the fields and, uh, children couldn't follow them. So, as they came back singing we would go to our respective parents and bring them back. I never knew what that was about, but it reminds me of something of—of an African tradition, where the women got together and probably talked about each other's families, husbands and children and got, uh, advice

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<sup>5</sup> The Callahan Neighborhood Center is located at 101 N Parramore Ave #1713, Orlando, FL 32801.

<sup>6</sup> The San Juan Hotel was located at 32 North Orange Avenue 32801 in Orlando, Florida from 1885 to 1979.

from their mother. But, uh, it was Sunday evenings and, uh, Easter programs and sing your Easter speech and – and uh, all of those good things.

0:05:12

**Discovering his voice and early musical education**

**Thompson** And you mentioned singing. So, let's talk about that. Your career is very unique. Um, can you tell us what you do for a career?

**Rayam** I was an opera singer. Concert singer. I, uh, started in the church, of course. Uh, my—I have to go way back to the country again. My whole family sings. My father used to sing with his brothers and cousins. They were called the Bellville Jubileers. And my mother sang with her sisters, and they were called the Amazons. They were tall, pretty women who had beautiful voices. So, all of my siblings sing. I'm the only one that decided to make a living out of it. Uh, so it's—it's part of our DNA. So, when I go home for family reunion—union now everybody's singing. So it's nothing unique [*laughs*].

**Thompson** Um, and you mentioned a little bit, um, but what type of education did you have?

**Rayam** I, uh—of course, I had my elementary school education at Callahan.<sup>7</sup> And it's at Callahan that, uh, Mrs. Masie Cosby<sup>8</sup> discovered my voice. We used to have what was called chapel. A devotion. And, according to her [*clears throat*—excuse me. According to her, she heard this voice. So, she did a series of elimination until she got to me, and she said, “well, here you are!” She told me what I had. You know, it was, you know, nothing to me because we did it at home. She said, “I always wanted to sing.” She said, “But you could sing. You could go around the world and sing for me.” Okay. All right. Go around the world. I love National Geographic magazine. So, I had seen other places in this magazine. And so, my mind—my imagination took over and, uh, one thing led to another. Going to Mt. Olive AME Church.<sup>9</sup> Then to, uh, Jones High, uh, School.<sup>10</sup> Being discovered by—from—from one, uh, director to another director. And onto the University of Miami<sup>11</sup> on scholarship.

**Thompson** Um, and what was your favorite subject in school? Was it music?

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<sup>7</sup> Callahan Elementary School was located 101 North Parramore Avenue 32801 in Orlando, Florida from 1952 to 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Maisie A. Cosby (1939 - August 15, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Mt. Olive African Methodist Episcopal Church is located at 2525 W Church Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>10</sup> Jones High School is located at 801 South Rio Grande Avenue 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>11</sup> University of Miami is located at 1320 South Dixie Highway 33146 in Coral Gables, Florida.

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**Rayam** Music, uh, drama, French, uh, history. Uh, least favorite [laughs]: mathematics. Ran away from physics and calculus. Still get the shivers when I think about it [laughs].

0:08:00

**Attending Jones High School and some of his influential teachers and singers**

**Thompson** Uh, and you mentioned Jones High School. Can you tell us about the school, what it was like when you were there?

**Rayam** Well, Jones High was, my lord. It was junior high and senior high. I had never seen so many people in my life than when I was in seventh grade.

**Thompson** [sniffs].

**Rayam** I'm told by—by uh, church members who were teachers or retired—retired folk who said, “Oh. When you get to Jones High, make sure you take Latin.” So, when I got there, there’s Mrs. Brayboy<sup>12</sup> who was the Latin teacher. Retired. So, there was no Latin. I met Miss Queen E. Oh, what was Miss Queen E.’s last name? Uh, she was the French teacher. She heard me talking. And she said, “Hello, little boy. Come here.” She said, “So, what’s your name?” I said, “I’m Curtis Rayam.” She said, “Now, in ninth grade, I want you to sign up for French.” Powell was her last name, Miss Queen E. Powell.<sup>13</sup> I said, “Okay.” So, when I got to ninth grade, she had retired. But I followed her instructions, and I signed up for—for French. And it’s been a love affair ever since. So, I took French in high school, French in college, of course, and studied in France. Later on, after college.

**Thompson** You mentioned a few of your teachers, the French teacher and some of your music teachers. But are there any teachers that stand out in particular as influential or memorable?

**Rayam** Well, my lord, they were all advice givers [laughs]. They were all transplanted mothers and fathers. Uh, Mrs.—Mrs. Cosby, I spoke to you about. Mrs. Polope[sp] who taught me the Lord’s Prayer. Uh, Miss Alma Polope[sp]. That was back in Callahan. But at Jones High, it was Miss Augusta Rogers,<sup>14</sup> who encouraged me to make sure I go and sing for the choir directors. Mr., uh, Roderick Rockheel[sp] Williams. Uh, then, uh, Miss uh—Miss, uh, Roberta Manuel,<sup>15</sup> Mr. Norman Choice. And then came Mrs. Edna Hargrett Thrower,<sup>16</sup> the one that took me over and got me ready for university and, uh, the world. She had—and that was the

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<sup>12</sup> Esther Hull Braboy (1882 - 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Queen Elizabeth Powell (1928 - August 31, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Augusta F. Rogers (February 23, 1915 - October 20, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Roberta Bacon Manuel (1929 - ?).

<sup>16</sup> Edna Sampson Hargrett-Thrower (July 15, 1935 - April 19, 2010).



time that I was coming—coming down to the library—to Orlando library when it was first built. And, uh, she introduced us to our opera, to oratorio, to Broadway musicals, um, gospel, of course. The secret—uh, the sacred music of—of the church and spirituals. So, she prepared me for the University of Miami. But Mrs. Hargrett, uh—w—w—we'll call her Mama Hargrett—was the one that really put the fire up under me.

**Thompson** And what did you want to be when you grew up? Was it always singing?

**Rayam** I always wanted to be a singer. First, I thought to be, uh, a ballad singer. And then I found o—found out about, uh, [smacks] uh, the Broadway musical. Then I saw my first opera here in Orlando, which was, uh, Puccini's *Tosca*,<sup>17</sup> with Gabriella Tucci<sup>18</sup> and Plácido Domingo.<sup>19</sup> And I—I thought it was nice, you know, ok, “lalalala.” But the next year we came to see—uh, Charles Gounod's, uh, *Faust*.<sup>20</sup> That did the clincher. A young Beverly Sills,<sup>21</sup> Plácido Domingo, Dominic Cossa,<sup>22</sup> uh, Kay Creed, and, uh, th—the Or—the Or—it was the Orlan—the Florida Symphony Orchestra<sup>23</sup> with Henry Mazer.<sup>24</sup> Henry Mazer. And then Herman Hertz<sup>25</sup> was the conductor after him. Well, that did the clincher. When I saw, uh, Beverly Sills rise into the heavens, I said, “I want to make that magic. That's the magic I want to make.” So, I fell in love with opera on that—on the spot.

#### 0:12:13 Attending the University of Miami and beginning his opera career

**Thompson** And I doubt most folks are familiar with the career pathway of an opera singer.

**Rayam** [laughs]

**Thompson** Can you tell us a little bit about what that journey was like?

**Rayam** Oo, it can be helter skelter. Not necessarily, uh, designed. Although some people are, uh—have a designed, uh, money trail. Marketing scheme. Mine was by the good Lord and good people who heard me and, uh, propelled me from one thing to another. The—the—the basic thing was to

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<sup>17</sup> *Tosca* is an opera by Giacomo Puccini that premiered in 1900.

<sup>18</sup> Gabriella Tucci (4 August 1929 – 9 July 2020) was an Italian operatic soprano.

<sup>19</sup> José Plácido Domingo EmbilV José Plácido Domingo Embil is a Spanish opera singer, conductor, and arts administrator.

<sup>20</sup> *Faust* is an opera by Charles Gounod that premiered in 1859.

<sup>21</sup> Beverly Sills (born Belle Miriam Silverman; May 25, 1929 – July 2, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Dominic Frank Cossa (May 13, 1935 – October 6, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> The Florida Symphony Orchestra was a full-time symphony orchestra founded in 1950 which operated until 1993. The Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra was founded sometime between 1953 and 1957.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Simon Mazer (July 21, 1918 – August 1, 2002) was the music director for the Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra from 1962 to 1963.

<sup>25</sup> Herman Hertz was the music director of the Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra from 1967 to 1970.

be prepared to learn, uh, all the different genres, uh to f – to familiarize yourself with French opera, German opera, Italian opera, American opera, and – and – and – and on and on and on, uh, to have a chance. Also, before you were discovered to say – to, uh, have those chances to get up on your feet and practice, uh, the, uh – the art of the opera. Singing opera. So, in University of Miami, we had the opera workshop.

And Miami was a very good market. I didn't realize, but, uh, I knew it was bigger than several other places that I considered. But M – Miami, uh, of course, had the – the Miami Opera.<sup>26</sup> Uh, you had several symphony orchestras around, and, of course, the opera workshop at the University of Miami and my teacher, Mary Henderson Buckley,<sup>27</sup> and my other teacher, Dorothy Zeigler.<sup>28</sup> And, uh, Emerson Buckley.<sup>29</sup> And all of these people gave us chances to sing in the chorus, to be around the international stars. Placido Domingo again, uh, Montserrat Caballé<sup>30</sup> Leontyne Price,<sup>31</sup> uh, Fiorenza Cossotto<sup>32</sup> and – and uh – and on and on and on and on and on. And so, you got a chance to hobnob it. To see these people really practice their art, and to – to talk to them and get advice from them. And to get to know them. And get their address or phone number. So, if you – if you went to New York, you could call them and say, "I'm gonna bug you to death!" But, uh, yeah. Being – being prepared. Hopefully when you're in that right place to – to step out and do that thing that you would like to do. And it has been – it has been a – [smacks] I must say, a blessed, blessed journey for me.

0:14:58

#### **Family talents and activities outside of music**

**Thompson** Uh, and you mentioned, um, growing up that there was a lot of singing in the house and fishing. What other sorts of things did you do in your spare time?

**Rayam** Well, there – the other side of that is athletics. My father was – my lord. Sunday afternoons was baseball. My father could play baseball like crazy. And my mother was a fabulous basketball player they say. I never saw her play basketball. But, my brothers and my sister, they not only played in the band and sang in choir, but uh, my brother, Hardy<sup>33</sup>, played football and went to Notre Dame<sup>34</sup> on a scholarship back in, uh, '72, I do

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<sup>26</sup> The Miami Opera was founded as the Opera Guild of Greater Miami in 1941, later operating under the name the Greater Miami Opera, and today is known as the Florida Grand Opera.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Henderson Buckley (December 17, 1912 – February 6, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Ziegler (July 20, 1922 – March 1, 1972).

<sup>29</sup> Emerson Buckley (14 April 1916 – 17 November 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Montserrat Caballé (12 April 1933 – 6 October 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Mary Violet Leontine Price (February 10, 1927 - ).

<sup>32</sup> Fiorenza Cossotto (April 22, 1935 - ).

<sup>33</sup> Hardy Rayam (July 1957 - ).

<sup>34</sup> The University of Notre Dame is a private Catholic university in Notre Dame, Indiana, which was founded in 1842.

believe. And my brother, Thomas<sup>35</sup>, went to the University of Alabama<sup>36</sup> in Tuscaloosa. And went on to the pros with the Redskins<sup>37</sup> and then the, uh, uh, Bengals<sup>38</sup> and then Canadian ball. He, uh – th – the others, although they sang, became accountants [*laughs*] and mass communication majors. And book writers and poem writers. And all of that. Po – poets and all.

0:16:16

**Memories of old Parramore and its community businesses**

**Thompson** We'll change, uh – we'll change gears a little bit. And looking at, um, the community once you're here in Orlando.

**Rayam** Yeah.

**Thompson** What sorts of businesses existed in the neighborhood when you were younger?

**Rayam** Lord, uh, Mrs. Georgia Wallace<sup>39</sup> had a fabulous boarding house, and she was quite a socialite. I remember she i – invited our family to go to the new Jones High to hear the Dondrells[sp] of Chicago. And I think for the first time, I recognized classical music. There was a pianist. There was a cellist. There was a singer, of course, singing [*laughs*] what my father desires as, “tweet, tweet, bird music” [*sings in French*] [*laughs*]. And they laughed and picked at that for – for some time. But I knew it was different from, uh, that music that I heard back in the country. Uh, the gospel, and the spirituals and the hymns. And even the music, I – I, uh – I heard also in Orlando. So that was in the back burner. I didn't act upon it. But, uh, Mrs. Wallace was very, very, very innovative in introducing my family to another side of the coin.

**Thompson** Thinking outside of your family, what type of work did the people who lived in the community do?

**Rayam** Yeah. Well, you had your teachers. You had your preachers. Uh, you had your first Black policeman, uh, Policeman Jones.<sup>40</sup> Yes. Uh, you had, uh – you had nurses. Mercerdese Clark.<sup>41</sup> Uh, you had – you had your cooks. You know? Cooks. You had your janitorial types. You had your, uh,

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Leon Rayam (January 3, 1968 - ).

<sup>36</sup> The University of Alabama is a public research university in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, established in 1820.

<sup>37</sup> The Washington Redskins were a National Football League team based in Washington, D.C.

<sup>38</sup> The Cincinnati Bengals are a National Football League team based in Cincinnati, Ohio.

<sup>39</sup> Georgia Lee Wallace (July 10, 1908 – October 6, 2005) was an entrepreneur who opened Wallace's Beauty Mill in 1941. The business was also a training ground for cosmetology students.

<sup>40</sup> Lt. Richard Arthur Jones (January 24, 1922 – September 9, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Mercerdese Richardson Clark (January 1, 1931 - July 28, 2012).

doctors. Dr. Schanck.<sup>42</sup> Dr. Smith,<sup>43</sup> who was my doctor.<sup>44</sup> You had  
Lawyer Perkins<sup>45</sup> who was —

**Thompson** [sniffs]

**Rayam** ...who was our lawyer. And his wife was my — my third-grade teacher at,  
uh, Callahan. You had almost every kind of, uh, em — employment in — in  
the neighborhood. Uh, secretaries. Pamela Woodley's<sup>46</sup> mother uh, Mrs.  
Woodley,<sup>47</sup> who was uh, quite the secretary and quite the [inaudible]. You  
had your seamstress, Louise McDonald,<sup>48</sup> my cousin. Uh, you had your  
cooks, like I said. You had some of — store owners. Yes. You had the — the  
neighborhood stores. Uh, cousin. And, uh — yeah. Hardy Wright. Oh,  
yeah. And you had your orange pickers. And you had your day laborers.  
And, uh, the whole — the music. Th — the mix of all.

**0:19:29                      Reflections on economic decline and loss of Black-owned businesses**

**Thompson** Um, when you look at the community now...

**Rayam** Hm.

**Thompson** How has business and entrepreneurship changed over time in  
Parramore?

**Rayam** Well, I — I — I've seen a lot of places that have closed down. Like, for  
instance, at the corner of Jackson. At the Jackson Street and Parramore  
you had the Pyramid Cleaners<sup>49</sup> owned by the Motsbys. And, uh, that's  
not there anymore. Uh, you have the funeral homes. Well, we still have  
those [laughs]. Fortunately or unfortunately, they s — they still exist but  
have changed hands. Uh, you have gas stations. Uh, you have your taxi  
services. Uh, not — about — of the same magnitude as it was when I was a  
child. There used to be the Carver Theater.<sup>50</sup> Uh, and the Lincoln  
Theater.<sup>51</sup> Uh, that does not exist anymore. You have a soccer field there  
now. And, uh, barber shops. And all kind of, uh, uh, clothing places.  
They don't exist anymore.

**Thompson** What does the absence of those businesses do to the community?

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. George Pervel Schanck (September 5, 1909 – October 27, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> Dr. J. R. Smith, M.D. practiced at 640 West South Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. J. R. Smith, M.D. practiced at 640 West South Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>45</sup> Paul C. Perkins, Sr. (October 1, 1918 – July 4, 1985).

<sup>46</sup> Pamela A. Woodley (February 5, 1951 - ).

<sup>47</sup> Georgia Woodley (1923 – 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Louise McDonald (? – 2004)

<sup>49</sup> Pyramid Cleaners was located on 220 South Parramore Avenue 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>50</sup> The Carver Theater was located at 701 West Church Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>51</sup> The Lincoln Theater was located at 512 West Church Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

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**Rayam** Well, for one thing, it takes out an identity, especially to the, uh—for the young people that are coming behind us. And, uh, we tell them about 'em. You know? There are pictures here and there about that. I think that's what the Callahan Center<sup>52</sup> is all about to, uh—to preserve some of that, uh—that legacy so that our—generations that are coming behind us will know that—that they had people who were, uh, entrepreneurs of—of good—good standings. And you—you have the ones that were not so great, either. B—but, you know, it takes everything and everybody to make up a community.

0:21:43

**Defining the geographic borders of Parramore**

**Thompson** Before we got started, I told you that I was going to give you an activity.

**Rayam** Yes?

**Thompson** It's time for that.

**Rayam** Oh *[laughs]*!

**Thompson** So, this is a *[paper rustling]* map of downtown Orlando.

**Rayam** Okay.

**Thompson** And I want you to *[paper rustling]* draw on the map using any of the *[paper rustling]* markers of your choice.

**Rayam** Okay.

**Thompson** Define on the map: Parramore. What is Parramore as an area?

**Rayam** *[inaudible whispering]* That's Jackson Street. Where's the red? That's Jackson. Roberts and *[inaudible whispering]*. That's downtown. That's Madison *[inaudible]* *[pen clicks]* *[paper rustling]* *[pen clicks]*. I don't have on my better—best glasses today. Uh, South Street *[inaudible]*. And that's Lake—Lake Lorna Doone. Amelia. Livingston. Yes. Orange Blossom Trail. Livingston.

**Thompson** *[sniffs]*

**Rayam** You know, I see nothing *[paper rustling]* saying Parramore.

**Thompson** Right, I've removed the P—I've removed the place names, so if you just—

**Rayam** Oh, I see.

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<sup>52</sup> The Callahan Neighborhood Center is located at 101 North Parramore Avenue, Orlando, Florida 32801.

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**Thompson** If you just...

**Rayam** [paper rustling]

**Thompson** ...draw a box...

**Rayam** Uh huh.

**Thompson** or lines around whatever...

**Rayam** [pen clicks]

**Thompson** ...you consider to be Parramore.

**Rayam** I gotcha. Uh.

**Thompson** And it should still have street names to...

**Rayam** Yeah.

**Thompson** ...help keep you oriented.

**Rayam** I see. You know, in those days, you could only go as far [paper rustling] as your mother and father [paper rustling] would let you go. Okay. There we are [paper rustling]. I used to walk [paper rustling] Miss Penny over to—almost to [paper rustling] Division Street. There was a lady who sold the *Pittsburgh* [paper rustling] *Courier*,<sup>53</sup> which is one of the—the last Black [paper rustling], uh, newspapers—national newspapers [pen hits table]. And we would walk up Parramore to, um—

**Thompson** [paper rustling].

**Rayam** Oh. Or was it—almost to Anderson Street. 'Cause she walked—she walked very slowly. And, uh, we would talk all the way. And she would tell me all kind of little things about the past. And we'd stay and talk for a while. And eat some sweet potato pie [laughs]. And turn around and walk back home to Jefferson Street. That was Parramore.

**0:24:44** **Challenges in Parramore today, including poverty and homelessness,  
and local support**

**Thompson** [smacks lips] And so thinking about the community of Paramore, what sort of challenges have you seen Paramore face over the years?

**Rayam** Well, I see a lot of homelyn—ho—hom—homelessness now. And, uh, buildings that [background noise]—that are still I—I say still holding on

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<sup>53</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* is a weekly African American newspaper based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, founded in 1966.

that were – were new buildings when I was a child. Uh, which means [background noise] money. The money that [background noise] used to be there [background noise] – excuse me – is not there anymore to, uh – to repair them to – to attract a commodity of people to be there. Uh, but, uh, you have a – a lot of homeless people living in the area now.

**Thompson** [smacks lips] And thinking on some of the challenges. Are there or were there any local organizations or networks that stick out to you as helpful in some of those challenges?

**Rayam** Uh, for the homele – homelessness? Yeah. Well, your churches did at the time. Churches. You had your churches. You had your sororities. You still have your sororities. Uh, you had – well, and I would say mainly churches, and mainly families. Uh, there was – there was more of a, uh, mental health – healthcare and facilities, uh, that were – that were targeted to help the, uh, homeless and mentally ill. Nowadays, I – I don't – I know that they're not there as they used to be. The same type of care is not taken, uh – taken seriously as they once did.

0:26:40

**The role of churches in supporting the community, and his family's involvement in the church choir**

**Thompson** You mentioned that churches played a big role into these community support networks. Are there any churches in particular that stick out as important to the community?

**Rayam** Oh, Mt. Olive AME Church. St. Mark AME Church.<sup>54</sup> Shiloh Baptist Church.<sup>55</sup> Uh, oh, Lord, have mercy. Ebenezer, uh, CME Church.<sup>56</sup> Um, uh, oh, my dear. To tell you the t – eh – New – New – New – her – New Bethel. Every church basically in the community. But still – Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church.<sup>57</sup> Yes. During those days. Yes. Oh, yes. They – they really had a, um – a stronghold when it came to helping people in trouble.

**Thompson** And you mentioned, uh, gospel singing, obviously with your background.

**Rayam** Mhmm.

**Thompson** Um, what was your family or personal involvement in some of these church communities?

**Rayam** Well, we belong to – well [laughs], when we first came to Orlando, uh, we belonged to, um, St. Mark AME Church. And my mother sang in the

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<sup>54</sup> St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church was located at 750 Avondale Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>55</sup> Shiloh Baptist Church is located at 604 West Jackson Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>56</sup> Ebenezer Christian Methodist Episcopal Church was located at 594 West Church Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

<sup>57</sup> Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church was located at 701 W. South Street 32805 in Orlando, Florida.

choir. My father sang in the choir. And then we moved across town to the Parramore area, actually, and uh – and Jefferson Street. And we all belonged to, uh, Mt. Olive AME Church. We sang in the choir. And my mother and father, sister. We all – we all came through the choir [laughs] one way or another. Yeah.

**0:28:12                      The strength and leadership of women in Parramore**

**Thompson**      And, uh, thinking in the community. What role did women in particular play in supporting the community?

**Rayam**            They supported their men [laughs]. No. The women of – of the community were – were, uh – were backbones. They were entrepreneurs. A lot of times you found that the women had more education, uh, as compared to the men. And, uh, they were very vocal in – in, uh, making changes come to the community. So, yeah. Th – the women were very, very, very strong. Very strong.

**0:28:51                      Remembering educators and community leaders who shaped his life, working with special needs children, and the definition of “community”**

**Thompson**      And thinking back to these – these networks and community. Are there particular individuals who stick out to you as important to either your or the community’s past in the community?

**Rayam**            Well, I've mentioned one: uh, Miss Georgia Wallace. Uh, Miss Merced – Mercerdese Clarke. Uh, Mrs. Hargrett. Uh, Mrs. Jesse B. Demps Smith.<sup>58</sup> She was my godmother. Also a teacher. She was one of the first certified teachers in, uh, Orange County to do special education. She was over the, uh, Magnolia School<sup>59</sup> for kids with special aid, uh – special needs. And, uh, I worked with her – with the kids, uh, on Fridays. We had an organization called the Nightcrawlers, where we would assemble all the – the kids who were mentally disturbed. And in those days called them retarded. But to give them some sense of normalcy, we, uh – we would have a big meeting and dance and eating and what have you. Uh, uh, I think it was every other Friday night here at the Magnolia School. So, yeah. I – I – it – it – it – it gave me, um, another alternative to work with mentally disturbed children, which I did do. I worked with the, uh uh – when I was in school in Miami. University of Miami. I worked at the, uh – Oh. What's the name of the place? You get me out of, uh – it was in Coral Gables. Uh, well, anyways. I worked with mentally disturbed children. And, uh, I was offered a scholarship to get my master’s in child psychology. But, uh, Broadway called to do *Treemonisha* [laughs]. So, that's

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<sup>58</sup> Jessie B. Smith Demps (May 13, 1938 – August 21, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> The Magnolia School is located at 1900 Matterhorn Drive 32818 in Orlando, Florida.



what I wanted to do more so. Yeah. Variety Children's Hospital.<sup>60</sup> That was the name of it.

**Thompson** We've both used the word a lot. What does the word community mean to you?

**Rayam** Community means the people that are in your vicinity. The people that you, uh—you talk to. You check on. You, uh, fuss and fight with sometimes. But, uh, they have your back and you have their back. Uh, family.

**0:31:31**      **How the sense of community in Parramore has changed, the legacy of Parramore and how to rebuild the community**

**Thompson** Look—a little—a little bigger picture.

**Rayam** Yeah.

**Thompson** Um, how has Paramore changed over time?

**Rayam** Well, it doesn't have the warmth that I remember it having. It doesn't feel as, uh, inviting as it did one time. My mother would send, uh, all of us to the barbershop, my sister, too, because after we got our—our haircuts on Saturday, we spent the rest of the day in the Carver Theater. Uh, because it was—it had air conditioning for one thing [*laughs*]. And we didn't have air conditioning at all. And it gave my mother a little breather [*laughs*]. Um, we s—we felt pretty safe. Pretty safe.

**Thompson** What challenges does Parramore face today?

**Rayam** Uh. I don't—I don't live there, but I think renewal. Making it safe. Keeping it, uh—keeping the historical emphasis uh, in—in front of it. And uh, making it inviting. Now, all of that calls for money. As we know. So, the community of Orlando and the community of Florida need to come together and let's see what we can do in renovating not only that Parramore, but the Parramores from city to city.

**Thompson** And what is the legacy of Paramore?

**Rayam** The legacy of Parramore. Hmm. Well, for me, as a child—speaking from a child's standpoint, uh, we felt a sense of community. We felt safe. Uh, you—um. Hmm. You had—in that community, you had your teachers and your preachers and—and your professionals living right next door to your day laborers, your common laborers, your maids. And, uh,

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<sup>60</sup> Variety Children's Hospital is now known as Nicklaus Children's Hospital, and is located at 3200 Southwest 60<sup>th</sup> Court #104, Miami, Florida 33155.

everybody was your mother and your father, your sister and your brother. Uh, other than that, that's — that's what I know. Yes.

**Thompson** You mentioned it a little bit, um, but what can people who don't live in Parramore do as individuals to support Parramore?

**Rayam** People who do not live in Parramore? Well, you could ask for their aid. You could ask for their help, and for — ask for their advice on how to restore it. Um, more than that, you can't really expect much more than that. Um, but their cooperation. Yes. Definitely.

**Thompson** And what does Parramore mean to you?

**Rayam** It means that it's still there. But the only thing that I don't like is that the street of Parramore [laughs] is — is — is occupied by part of a — of a soccer field. I remember when I went down there to go through Parramore I was like, "Oh my God, I can't drive through." I know progress is progress and things do change. So, yeah. That's what Parramore means to me. I can't drive all the way through [laughs].

**Thompson** Um, [clears throat] those are the main questions I wanted to ask. But...

**Rayam** Okay.

**0:35:25 Remembering Chief Wilson and his lasting influence**

**Thompson** ...we'll give it to you now. What else didn't we talk about that you want to?

**Rayam** Well, let's see. Hmm. I don't know. I didn't mention Chief Wilson.<sup>61</sup> Chief James Wilson, who was the music man at Jones High School. I really — I came to learn a lot about him, even more after he passed, on how he and — when they went to the, um, New York World's Fair in 1964, he and, uh, uh, the band director from Edgewater<sup>62</sup> were very good friends. And I do not remember his name. But very good friends. They collaborated together, uh, even before integration. And they spoke up for, uh, each other. And they both went to, uh — to New York for that fair. And I didn't realize it had — it had gone down like that. Because I was a child. I knew it happened. But Chief Wilson used to, um, give everybody advice. And he was very, very, very, very, very instrumental and very dear to me. And that — you know — when I would come home from school, from university, he'd come over and talk and just to see what — what I was doing it. And — and just to — just to give me some more advice. And to

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<sup>61</sup> James W. Wilson (November 2, 1928 – December 5, 2018).

<sup>62</sup> Edgewater High School's band director in 1964 was Delbert Kieffner (1928 – June 1, 2016).

keep me encouraged. To keep on going and – and, "If you needed anything, boy, give me a call." But, uh, he – he was very proud to say that under his watch, he was able to produce a world class opera singer named Curtis Rayam. And that he was – he was humbled by that. I – I – I'd never thought about it like that, but I'm sure [*exhales*] kids in my position now are now thinking about things that I give to them like that. But they'll be in this spot one day [*laughs*] and will remember. Yeah. He, uh – but he also he tr – he trained the people who trained me. Namely Mrs. Hargrett. So, yeah. Oh, yes.

**Thompson** Well, if there's nothing else, thank you very much for your time. And we really appreciate it.

**Rayam** You're very welcome. Thank you.

*End of Interview*