Curtis Porter

Curtis Porter was born on November 11, 1956 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He grew up in Dumfries in the community of Batestown, an African American community founded after the American Civil War, before moving to Manassas at 6 years old. He attended Saint Francis of Assisi for two years of elementary school and attended Bennett Elementary for 3rd grade. When the schools in Prince William County officially integrated, he was rezoned to Baldwin Elementary. Porter attended Jennie Dean Middle School and graduated from Osbourn High School. He earned a Sociology degree from Virginia State University and continued on to Virginia Tech to study Urban Affairs, where he led the graduate chapter of Phi Beta Sigma, a historically Black fraternity he was also a member of during his time as an undergraduate.

After school, he returned to Prince William County where he started as a juvenile probation officer in the county, running the Shelter Home program for runaway and homeless youth. He worked for other State and federal programs serving homeless and runaway youth and even spent some time serving as the acting Associate Commissioner for the US Department of Health and Human Services. He retired in December 2024.

Outside of his professional life, Porter was very involved in the Civil Rights movement, a contribution he attributed to his parents, both of whom were personally active in the movement. From 1988 to 1992, he served as president for the Prince William County chapter of the NAACP, where he led the proposal for Chinn Park's naming. He has also served as the Head Commissioner for the Prince William County Human Rights Commission since its founding, and also currently sits on the Prince William County Historical Commission as the representative for the Potomac District.

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Curtis Porter (June 4, 2025)

Interviewee: Curtis Porter (CP), PWC Historical Commission, Potomac District
Interviewer: Morgan Peterson (MP), County Intern, PWC Office of Historic Preservation
Date: Wednesday June 4th, 2025
Interview Location: Williams Ordinary, Dumfries Virginia

Please keep in mind that this document is a verbatim transcription of the spoken word rather than a written document.

MP: Hello my name is Morgan Peterson I'm an intern at the Office of Historic Preservation. The date is Wednesday June 4th, we are at Williams Ordinary, and I am interviewing Curtis Porter.

CP: Great, thank you Morgan.

MP: Uh. So first question, what is your full name?

CP: My full name is Curtis Orvel Porter, and that's a story behind the middle name Orvel. My dad wanted my first name to be Oto O-T-O. My mother couldn't think of anybody named Oto, so she convinced him that if we must have O in the name let's try Orvel. So it's not Orville, it's Orvel. ORVEL. Curtis Orvel Porter.

MP: Sounds like a very interesting middle name! Okay, can you spell that for me please?

CP: Sure. First and last, the whole name? Or first and middle name?

MP: Whatever you want to do.

CP: First name, first name Curtis. C-U-R-T-I-S. Middle name Orvel. O-R-V-E-L. Last name Porter. P-O-R-T-E-R.

Early Life and Family

MP: Where and when were you born?

CP: Okay, I was born on November 11, 1956 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. And back at that time, there were no hospitals in Prince William County, so people who were born in Prince William County, generally were either born either with a midwife, or they were born in Fredericksburg, Alexandria, or Washington DC. Particularly on the eastern end of the county.

MP: That's very interesting, thank you. Please tell me about your family. Whatever you want to talk about.

CP: I'm really very fortunate in that- and I shared this all the time- with my family goes back over 200 and some years in Prince William County, right here in the Dumfries community. We come off of the Bates side of the family, and people are familiar with Batestown[1] and Batestown road. Free landowners before the civil war. So there's a, you know, a lot of pride in, in that, in that history. One of my uncles, John Willmer Porter[2], was the first African American elected to municipal government in the Commonwealth of Virginia since Reconstruction, when he's elected to Dumfries town council in 1963. The important thing about that is, that election, is that that's two years before the passage of the Voting Rights Act. So we have been, you know, Porters have been contributors, you know, to this county in a variety of, of ways. My mom was a, was a teacher in in the county. I have served my first professional job as a juvenile probation officer in the county, been in a lot of leadership roles, including as a former president of the NAACP and now chairman of the Prince William County Human Rights Commission so, so we've done a lot. So we come off the Bates family. The Reeds, the Bates and the Porters together, you know that's, that's our family lineage.

MP: That's a very strong family lineage. What did your father do?

CP: My father retired from the federal government. He retired from the Interior Department, US Geological Survey, so that's where he, that's where he retired. And I'll also say you know prior to that he had a variety of jobs, as a younger person he worked at Fort Belvoir, and before I was you know, born I think he worked at Quantico. Worked for Saint Francis Assisi school[3], and finally within the federal government retired from US Geological survey.

MP: So you've kind of touched on this, but what did your mother do as well?

CP: My mother was a teacher. My mother graduated from North Carolina A&T in 1948, and she was from Thomasville, North Carolina, and somehow got a job teaching in King George County Virginia. So started teaching in King George County, met my dad here in Dumfries. They got married, started working with Prince William County public schools and she retired as a, as a teacher in, in Prince William County. She taught at Washington Reid Elementary School, which is one of the historic schools on Route 234, Jennie Dean High School at one time and she retired from Marsteller Middle School in Prince William, Manassas.

MP: Oh yeah. So how were your parents involved with the Civil Rights movement in Prince William?

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[1] Batestown began as a community of free and formerly enslaved African Americans, centered around the matriarch Betsy Bates. "Hickory Ridge, Joplin & Batestown - Prince William Forest Park (U.S. National Park Service)." 2022. Nps.gov. 2022. https://www.nps.gov/prwi/learn/historyculture/hickory-ridge-joplin-and-batestown.htm.

[2] John Wilmer Porter "became the first black person voted onto a municipal governing body in Virginia since Reconstruction. "John Wilmer Porter Historical Marker." 2024. Hmdb.org. May 16, 2024. Historical Marker Database: John Wilmer Porter.

[3] Saint Francis of Assisi school is a private Catholic school for children grades K-8th located in Triangle Virginia, near Quantico. "School History." 2025. St. Francis of Assisi School. 2025. https://www.stfas.org/history.

CP: My parents were very active. They're very active civil rights, you know, leaders being engaged in the NAACP. So they were always for, for social justice they, were very big in that. And actually, when I became president of the Prince William County NAACP in the late 80s, early 90s. I must say that I had some nepotism, it happens all the time, my mother who was retired teacher was my education committee chairperson, my dad who had retired he was our, my membership chairperson so-

MP: It works out-

CP: Yeah, yeah it works out. So they've been, you know, very you know engaged in in human civil rights. I know in Virginia at the time, the law was separate but equal. My dad always argued that there was no such thing as, you know, separate but equal, he was equal to anybody else. My mom as a, as a, as a young person I shared that she came up from King George County 1948 in, in the 40s the that was the law separately equal, but the NAACP was really pushing, the state NAACP was pushing for equal schools in the, in the- across the Commonwealth, so as a teacher you know my mom was engaged in King George County. King George County NAACP threatened to integrate the school in King George if they didn't get a new high school built so they built that, that high school. And she always shared with me too that she would test, encouraged by the NAACP, to test Interstate travel, segregated Interstate travel. And there were many times that she would travel from Virginia to North Carolina, and ride the front of the bus you know, and of course buses were segregated at that time, and she was in the back. And she often talked about, you know, white people of goodwill being supportive of her, when people tell her you know, you have to move and some people stand up and say "no she doesn't, she can sit right here". So yeah. So we've been involved in, hopefully he's been involved in civil rights for generations, which is why I guess I am too.

MP: Yes that makes sense. That's very powerful. Do you have any specific stories you would like to share about them or family members, other family members that you haven't already touched on?

CP: Well you know, you know the only stories that they, that they were, you know, very, very loving parents. I know my, my dad passed away 10, would be 10 years, this year. You really never saw one without the other, we were you know, we were very close. My mom passed a couple of years before him due to, you know, Alzheimer's. But they were great you know, they supported me, they supported community and well you know well respected in the community, and we have a big extended family and, and we're very fortunate in that.

MP: That sounds like an amazing family. When did you move to Manassas, you said you were born in Fredericksburg?

CP: Yeah well that's a good, that's a very good question. As I shared earlier, at that time in Prince William County, a midwife assisted with the birth, or you were born in Fredericksburg, Alexandria, or Washington DC. But actually I'm from Dumfries, and lived in the Batestown community 'til I was about 6 years old, and that's when my parents moved us to Manassas. And back then Manassas

was obviously the county seat, but it was just a town in Prince William County, so it was a part of Prince William County. So I was about, yeah, 6 years old we moved to the city of Manassas and moved on to Douglas Street.

MP: Okay. How was it growing up in Manassas?

Education

CP: It was great growing up in Manassas, I will tell you then. We always used to say, those of us who grew up on Douglas Street, and say you know, you didn't grow on Douglas Street you never, you never grew up. Growing up in that town was a very good experience, and as I reflect back in growing up in in Manassas you know I think about the '60s, and the '60s you know were very charged with civil rights issues and stuff like that. I don't recall those issues in Manassas, and I remember that we played in the greater Manassas Baseball League you know Little League baseball, and this was in the 60s, and we, you know, we were all integrated at, at that, at that time. The schools were segregated in Prince William County until I think 1966 when it formally integrated. However, I'm just going to digress a little bit and say that Garfield High School, which is now the Plaza Administration Building, they actually integrated in 1964, because Reverend Russell who was president of the NAACP and pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Woodbridge sent his daughter there[4] so you know technically integrated in '64, officially the county integrated in 1966. And in growing up in Manassas at that time I attended Saint Francis of Assisi School first and second grade, that's where my mom- that's where my dad worked at the time. So I was there and probably the first African American student to attend that school, I'm pretty sure I was. Then in 3rd grade the schools integrated, in that it was a choice in the county you could go to, that first year, you could stay at the segregated school, which was Jennie Dean at that time, or you can go to Bennett which was the, the white school at my age. There's a middle school at that time and I'll just kind of wander a little bit more and tell you- if you're familiar with where the courthouse is there's an old building there. That was 3rd, that's where I had my 3rd grade at Bennett School, that was the school there, so I was in that old building as a school. So we integrated then so that was 3rd grade, and, and we continued to, you know, you know to move on and you know, matriculate from, from that point on. But you know go back to your question, growing up in Manassas was great, on my street there were a lot of-

MP: Yeah.

CP: -a lot of kids, you know, my age, and we just, we just had a ball. And as also as a little tidbit, across most they had the, the apartments in the current Sherriff for Prince William County sheriff

[4] Joyce Russell, Reverent Russell's daughter, was the one to integrate Gar-Field, and has talked about the experience in a book titled, *A Blues Song of My Own*, as well as through a radio show."Eyes on the Prize-Joyce Russell," WHUT, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA and Washington, DC, accessed July 9, 2025, http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-293-tq5r786524.

Hill lived in the apartments across the street from where I grew up. And he was obviously the first African American police officer in Manassas.[5]

MP: Wow that sounds awesome! So you kind of already touched on some of the questions I'm going to go into, but where do you go to elementary school?

CP: Okay, so elementary school would have been 2 years at Saint Francis of Assisi in Triangle. And you're living here at that time and then 3rd grade I went to Bennett, that was the year that the state you know allowed you to have choice in the schools. And then when schools finally integrated, I was assigned to go to Baldwin elementary in, in Manassas.

MP: Okay. Where did you go to middle school?

CP: I'm glad you asked. So now I'll tell you some more stories, and this this will lean back on my civil rights work. Middle school I went to Jennie Dean. At that time Jennie Dean used to be the, you know, the African American high school, and of course the integrated turned into a county middle school, so I went to Jennie Dean middle school. Now when Jennie Dean was a high school, African American high school, they, their mascot is the Bulldogs, they were the Jennie Dean Bulldogs, and when I got there as a 6th grader, they had changed the name of the mascot to the Jennie Dean rebels. I found that offensive as a 6th grader. So I asked my parents, I told them about it, and they said, "what are you gonna do?" I said, "well I'm going to organize a protest." So as a 6th grader, with the permission of Mister Dale who's the principal, and Mister Fincher who's African American, who's the assistant principal, we actually ended up having a name changing contest. So we know what happened in, in 2020 after George Floyd 's murder, a lot of names and changes went out, well this would have been, this would have been in the 60s when we actually changed the name of the mascot. And we had a naming contest, and we ended up being the Jennie Dean Blazers. And actually a friend of mine had submitted that name, and, and that was the one that won the vote. But I give a lot of credit to Mister Dale and Mister Fincher, the administration in that school for allowing us to do that. And I actually told that story a number of years ago when I was asked to speak at black history program at the school, and the principal of the school actually gave me the original banner.

MP: Oh wow.

CP: They had it in the safe so yeah at the original banner from way back in the, in the late 60s-

MP: Wow, that's extremely cool.

CP: So yeah, Jennie Dean, Jennie Dean Middle School was where I went.

MP: Wow that's a very interesting story. Where did you go to high school then?

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[5] In November 2003, Sheriff Hill was elected as the Sheriff of Prince William County, becoming the first Black sheriff in Prince William County as well as the first Black person elected to a county position. "Sheriff Glendell Hill," Oral History Interview, May 2, 2023. https://www.pwcva.gov/assets/2023-11/Sheriff%20Hill%20Transcript.pdf

CP: I went to high school- and this is another I'm just going to take all kinds of, you know, turns.

MP: Go right ahead.

CP: I graduated from Osbourn High School.

MP: Mm-hmm.

CP: Not Osborn City High school, it's Osbourn Park now. So I will tell you the story of that. Are you familiar with the story of that?

MP: I am not. My brother goes to the high school there.

CP: Okay, well I can, I can tell you the story. Prince William County was rapidly growing in the 70s as we still continue to grow, Prince William County School board decided they need to build four new schools. They were going to build the brand new Woodbridge, which is the existing Woodbridge now, brand new Gar-Field, which is the existing Gar-Field now, the brand new Stonewall, which is now Unity Reed, and brand new Osbourn High School, which is now Osbourn Park. Well out of the four high school, all we had in the county at that time, out of the four high schools, we were the only one that had to change our name. And the students, we protested that, and the reason we had to change our name, was because Manassas and Manassas Park were towns in Prince William County-

MP: Yes.

CP: -the kids in Manassas Park went to Stonewall High School, they were going to be redistricted back to Osbourn High School. So Manassas Park put up a big fight that they wanted to add park to the end of that school. So that's how that school became Osbourn Park. Now, fast forward after they did that and changed the name, Manassas City you know, became a city, independent city Manassas Park became an independent city, and-

MP: Yes.

CP: So when Manassas City decided that they were going to build their own school, they kept the name Osbourn. So in essence I, I'm conflicted; I really don't feel like I have an alma mater. But of the four new county schools, we were the only ones that have changed our name and put the park on there because of objections from the city of Manassas Park where their students were gonna have to go there instead of going to Stonewall. I have the- when I graduated the school is delayed in being built, when I graduated I had the option of having old Osbourn class ring or the new Osbourn Park ring. I chose Osbourn Park ring, because I actually literally thought I was going to graduate out of that school. But it was delayed so I actually graduated out of out of Osbourn. The County school not the city school.

MP: Do you know then when, like? The city of Manassas and Manassas Park got independence? Or got their own stuff-

CP: Yeah, yeah. It was about 1974, was around that time.

MP: Okay, yeah.

CP: Because I graduated high school 1975, so both of them I think were cities before I graduated. So it would-

MP: Oh wow, so like right in the middle.

CP: It would have been- yeah right in the middle, it would have been about 1974 yes.

MP: Okay. Thank you. Do you have any stories besides the ones that you shared that you would like to share from your time in school, across any of the schools?

CP: Not really, I can't, I can't think of, you know, any except for you know making some you know very good friends along the way, and you know being engaged in the, in the sports and stuff like that at the, at the schools. I will tell you that my favorite teacher to this day in, in, in high school or middle school or, you know, before I got to college would certainly be miss Susan Shaw. She was my 6th grade teacher, she was absolutely my, my favorite teacher, and she was from Greensboro North Carolina and had a strong North Carolina accent, and she was a heavyset lady, and she loved all of her kids. Yeah regardless of their race or ethnicity and she was just that, you know, that just the kind of person. She'd go to hug Curtis, "how you doing today" and just put that heavier arm around your shoulder. But she was definitely a good you know good experience in, in, in school with her, yeah.

MP: That's awesome. Okay. What do you remember- and you've touched on this some in your answers, but what do you remember specifically about desegregation?

CP: Yeah well. Prince William County was a lot different than a lot of the stories that you hear, you know, across the country. First of all I think there are a couple things, Prince William County at that time was you know maybe about 50,000 people and we're a half 1,000,000 people you know, to this day. There was no diversity in, in, in Prince William County. You know, very few people of other ethnicities, you know, Hispanic, Asian very few, you know it's pretty much white or black. And for the African Americans we made-up maybe about 10% of the, you know, of the county. I will say that you know- and I don't know if it's so prevalent today as well as back then, but there's an East/West divide. East End being very much more progressive, and the reason I say that is because it had more diverse people come from everywhere. Because you had military bases, you had Quantico here-

MP: Oh yes.

CP: -and you had Fort Belvoir. So you had students who, people who moved into the area that really we're not used to segregation for one so. Integration was very easy and in Prince William County. Now from my cousins I think they had a little more difficulty at Garfield high school at the time when things integrated, but other than that- I mean we had had no problems, you know, going through any of my school days after that. And as I shared, the civil rights movement, you know, we're all aware of it was a lot easier in particular in the eastern part of the county where Dumfries is- black, white- we knew each other. You know, and it wasn't a big, big deal; and as a matter of fact, in my professional career, one of the jobs I had, that was assistant director of the statewide nonprofit. And I actually had the opportunity to visit the church in Spotsylvania County. Uh. And you know, I spoke, and after that the pastor of that church- who happened to be a white pastor, he came to me and said, "are you akin to the Porter brothers up in Dumfries" I said, "yes Sir" I said, "that's my dad, my uncles and all that-" he said, "Daniel Porter?" I said, "yeah that's my uncle" he gave me a big hug. He said, "I'm an Able from Dumfries". You know you know. That's kind of-

MP: Uh-huh.

CP: -relationships that that people, you know, had, had around here. So it wasn't difficult at all, not like these stories you see on, on TV. And I mean the mere fact that my uncle was elected to the town council in 1963 in Dumfries- and actually I think he was the one that secured the loan for the Old Town hall that's there, you know, and his business was very prosperous which was Porter Brothers Auto Body, which is right at the corner of Batestown road. Then of course Route One was the main, you know, the main thoroughfare; you know, Maine to Florida- no such thing as 95. But his, his body shop and service station was right off there- you know, you go down Route One, go fill up this city service. The other thing I think was, the way it was important to know my dad told this story. You know back in the 40s, a gentleman by the name of Harvard Watson you know from, from this area on the service station on 95. And Harvard didn't care whether you were black, white or green, you know or blue, he just cared about the green. So in the 40s, my dad was the night manager of the service station, which is unheard of! You know and again that's the only thoroughfare. You talked about many times people would drive in, and the white guy would be pumping the gas, and they want to give him the money, said no I can't take the money and give it to Porter. Yeah so this is a different, it's a different area. And as I shared a little earlier, we had some business from the University of Pennsylvania at Little Union on Sunday to interview my aunt and her cousin, and they asked a similar question about integration and segregation, and my cousin was sitting there he said, "nothing kept us apart but the law". And that's very important, because the black and white community work you know very close together- we had no, no issues you know, but the law. The law segregated us, you know, as far as being able to do things and go places; go to school and stuff like that was the law that did that, not the people themselves in, in the community. So I think that's, you know, that's that's what I recall that-

MP: So you mentioned that your parents were involved with the civil rights movement, how did they encourage you to be involved? Both like in, in your life or- and as a child?

CP: Just said this example. And then, you know, thing is; they were involved- I came about in a period when everything on TV, it was either the Vietnam War or civil rights protest. So I, I you

know, their involvement and realizing what was going on in, in the country at that time, you know, as a as a youngster growing up. You know, made me determined that I was gonna fight for human civil rights as well. So yeah, I think that, you know, coming up in in that era- and I must say, it was really funny that this is you know. As a younger person I had a more militant perspective, because I, I really didn't understand, you know, Dr King and the, and the marches, and the marching and the beatings that they took, you know. But I did understand, you know, the Black Power movement, you know, with, you know, Black Panthers and stuff with Carmichael in that group but it's that I matured and got older that I understood the philosophy of King, and then yeah. So you understand that, but as a young person you're saying, you know, "why are they taking all that stuff, I can't take that stuff" you know. But you understand that ,and you know realizing that the non-violence movement was, was, was the way that, you know, you know, to make change. You know, and, and broaden the, the support of people that you have, you know, across the country to change these laws. So, yeah. But as a young person I can say as, you know, young person it just didn't make sense to me.

MP: Mm-hm. Where did you go to college?

CP: I went to college at Virginia State University, in Petersburg, Virginia. And my mother was a graduate of North Carolina A&T, so I didn't want to go to A&T- and it goes back to some of our conversation prior to, prior to starting this interview- didn't want to go to A&T because it was about 25 miles away from my grandmother, so I didn't feel like I was, you know, close enough, you know, you know, too close. And Virginia State, on the Porter side of the family, a lot of my cousins were alums of, of Virginia State, including my aunt Mary G Porter. Which is a school named after her, she's one of the Courageous Four[6], which I'm sure you heard about it as well. Virginia State alum, so, so yeah I, I went to, to Virginia State, and absolutely enjoyed it. I was a social work, you know, sociology major down at Virginia, Virginia State; and when I graduated there, I went on to Virginia Tech and did some studies in urban affairs, and, and did some work at Virginia Tech as well. But you know one of the things that's really significant; we talk about, you know, integration. You know my mother was a teacher, but I never had an African American teacher all the way through school until I got to Virginia State. And I shared that Susan Shaw was my favorite teacher in out of all the ones I've had from high school, middle school, with my favorite professor with Dr Oscar Williams, he was a history professor at Virginia State University. So he's my favorite professor, Susan Shaw was my favorite teacher from high school on there.

MP: Okay. So did you get, like, a masters from Virginia Tech?

CP: I worked on the masters. I worked on, I've never, I've never completed the, the work-

MP: Okay.

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[6] The Courageous Four were 4 African American teachers who began the process of integration in Prince William County by being placed at all White schools."The Courageous Four." 2025. Pwcva.gov. 2025. https://www.pwcva.gov/department/historic-preservation/the-courageous-four-exhibit.

CP: -and to be quite honest, I shouldn't have gone directly from undergrad. Because by the time I was tired, I was burned out. I was tired so I didn't, I never, I never finished that program.

MP: Yes.

CP: Unfortunately.

MP: I understand.

CP: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MP: Were you part of any organizations, or is there anything you would like to expand upon with your college experience?

CP: Oh yeah! As a matter of fact, in my college experience; yeah, this is, this is another thing too. I shared with you my daughter graduated ODU, and she came out, you know, cum laude, and we were, we were joking- my, my wife and I were kind of joking with her one day, and she said, "Don't judge about it, my GPA was higher than you guys". And I said, "okay, all right. You're, you're right about that". I came out cum laude too, but I, I came up with 3.3 I think, she had like a 3.5 it- and I can tell everybody, my wife came out thank you Lorde. But anyway, so that's, that's what- that, that's what, that's what. But no, I had a, I had a great time at Virginia State. I have met lifetime friends. I'm a member of Phi Beta Sigma fraternity incorporated, and if you know it's part of the divine 9, the historic, you know, African American fraternities and sororities, and for us it's a lifetime commitment. It's just not, you know, partying in school, but we are a service organizations. So I continue to be involved in the service, you know, in the service organization, and a member of the Omicron Zeta Sigma chapter of Phi Beta Sigma here in Prince William County. I actually had the opportunity to charter the undergrad chapter of Phi Beta Sigma at Virginia Tech while I was there, and chartered the Northern Virginia chapter of- Theta Tau Sigma chapter in Northern Virginia time, because when I came back home, the only Phi Beta Sigma alumni chapter- grad chapter, was Alpha Sigma Washington DC, or Iota Sigma in Richmond. So there's nothing in between. So I charted that chapter and then, you know, 10-15 years ago, some guys chartered this local chapter in Prince William County which I'm, which I'm part of now. And building those relationships and friendships that go off- again, and again, you can edit this as, as need be. But as I came in I shared with you that I was driving my Corvette today-

MP: Mm-hmm.

CP: -so it's got the top down, I had a nice time, beautiful day to drive. But the new Corvette- and I just happened to have been at a funeral of one of my fraternity brothers actually, my roommate in college a couple of years ago, and one of the guys came up he said "oh yeah man so you, you were one of Ron Strayhorn's frat brothers". I said, "yeah", he said, "let me take a picture, and have you talked to (unintellgable)?" I said, "I have talked to-" he said, "I'm gonna take a picture and send it to them, and just give me your phone number". So I sent it to him, sent it to Ron. Ron was one of my,

my brothers; we played in spring 1977, so sent it to Ron- and I get this call, and Ron Strayhorn and I had not talked since we graduated in 1979 together. Me and him hadn't talked, but I knew he had retired as an executive from Buick, so we talked about said yeah I'm going to get the new one, I'm gonna get the C8, I've got to get it. So just now a couple of months ago, I haven't gotten it yet- couple months ago he called me, "did you ever get that C8?" I said, "No I didn't". He said, he said, "well I'll tell you what, I can get you the suppliers discount now,". And he said, "what are you looking for?". I told him what I would, the specs on the car I wanted. He called me back, he said he had deals across the country that had, had what I wanted. And I said, "you know what, I don't feel like going through that", and he told me he had a deal in Atlanta. He's in Atlanta area, that go for some man would go whoever you have in Atlanta so about 3 hours later he and the general manager called put my order in. Long story short, I have an order for a brand new one. And I have this GM discount so that that that's good-

MP: Nice.

CP: -so that goes back to building relationships in school. You know like I said, Ron and I personally have not seen each other since 1979. We were on a zoom call together because we do have an alumni association but it's through the fraternity of, of Virginia State University. One other thing about Virginia State just one other- one- you know, of course you know, it's a land grant school. Virginia Tech and Virginia State are land grants. Of course, Virginia Tech the white land grant at the time, Virginia State the black land grant. But Virginia State is the first HBCU, historically black college university, to be supported with state funds the very first Virginia State was.

MP: Oh wow, I did not know that.

CP: Yeah, yeah-

MP: Okay. Uh, so after college where did your career take you?

Career

CP: My ca- you know it's funny how decisions you make at a certain point will lead you along your, your career. So I came back from Virginia Tech I said well it's time for me to get a job; sociology, social work major. So I applied for a job with Prince William Department of Social Services and I've applied for a job with the Prince William County court system, juvenile probation. So- I was very good at interviews, I, you know, my daughter 's the same way- that girl's good, but anyway, anyway- I came out both interviews feeling like I did a good job, and I can get the job. And just before New Year's, the director of the court in Manassas called and offered me the job.

MP: Oh wow.

CP: As a juvenile probation officer starting out at $12,500 a year. Then about after New Year's the holiday is over I got a call from Prince William County public social services. They offer me a job

starting out at 15-5, I think it was $15,500.00 a year, and I had made the commitment to go to the court. So I took the job at the court and I started out as- at that time they were juvenile probation counsels that's actually called now probably juvenile probation officers, so I took the job and support. In my first day on the job my boss Jim Rankin[7], who was the first African American male to graduate from James Madison University-

MP: Oh wow.

CP: -he's very first.

MP: Mn-hm.

CP: And Jim and I are excellent friends to this day, he hired- they had 2 positions open, so they hired 2 of us. Marianne Nolten was my colleague, I had no idea. So when I walked into the job he said, "look I need someone that's going to be interested in doing straight probation work, someone interested in doing special programs" because I was young at the time I said. Marianne said, "well I really want to do probation work. Okay. I said, "what's special programs?" he's asked the courts shelter home program, the courts volunteer program, and the courts community service program. I said, "well that sounds like a challenge, I'll take that". So long story short, I started that, that program. The shelter home program really was designed to serve pretty much runaway and homeless youth. You couldn't, you couldn't detain them, but they needed a short place term to be- so we, we recruited families who were in essence almost like foster families with short period of time. Then of course I built up the volunteer program, and I picked up, built up what we call the PCTS program, public community service program, so young people who have various sentences had hours to work. Well people just oftentimes just put them onto the side, but I had better ideas than that. I built relationships with county government, relationships with Northern Virginia Community College, and I would send kids to, to the county. They would, they would help clean up places. Kids that knew they'd made a crazy mistake and, you know, had a lot of potential, I sent them to Northern Virginia Community College work off the hours the Provost is good. So, so that's what I did; and the other, the big one was the shelter home program. And I just remember being in my office one day and I got a call, a guy called and said, he said, "my name is William Christian, I'm secretary director of volunteer emergency families and children in Richmond". I said, "oh that's nice". He said, "we are a faith-based organization that recruits families to open their homes and their hearts to serve runaway and homeless youth". I said "well that's good". He said, "we'd like to go up and talk to you". I said, "well that's the last thing my kids need. Somebody proselytizing and preach it to them". He said, "no, no we don't do that! You know, if somebody does that we, you know, we get rid of them". And um. I said, "okay, well come on". So long story short, we talked and found out about this- they came up and recruited 25 of the best families I ever had. Fast forward they were interviewing for Northern Virginia coordinators, they had coordinators across state. And he said, he said, "would you join me in the interview we have some people-". I said, "yeah fine". So starting with, and I worked at court about 7 years at time, and after the interview he came. He said, "you

[7] "TimelineJS Embed." 2024. Knightlab.com. 2024. Black Firsts at James Madison University.

know I really like you to come on as my assistant director". So I left the court and worked as an assistant director of this statewide organization and did that for I guess 7 to 8 years. And I was responsible for supervising people in, supervising the regional, you know, program; people in Virginia and some in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, and also handling our funds- federal, state, local funds. So fast forward- I was the head of- you know, head of our federal grant stuff. Opened, there was opening came over to the federal government where I used to get the funding for- private position here, got the job and long story short, I went up and served in a number of positions in in the Federal Services, the Bureau at U.S. Department Health and Human services where I funded the nation's runaway and home youth programs, the domestic violence programs, in LS and pregnancy prevention programs. And actually served in between the Obama and- between the Bush and Obama administrations, as the acting associate commissioner, which means I sat in the position of the politicals for 2 years until, yeah, until the Obama administration came in and had their own political person. Then I went back to being a deputy and also serving as the director of the National Runaway and Homeless Youth programs. So that's my career. That's my career, and I retired in December 2024.

MP: Congratulations.

CP: Thank you.

MP: How's retirement treating you? Like-

CP: It's great and work with, with my, my grandson, and as Lauren indicated, my, my daughter and son-in-law- I'm their daycare provider right now, so one drops off in the morning one picks him up in the evening. Then, and when the little guy goes home, I love him, he's 9 months old, when he goes home I, I grab my recliner and relax.

MP: It's another job.

CP: No it is. It's another job.

NAACP & Human Rights Commission

MP: Okay so you are also, correct me if I'm wrong, leader of the Prince William chapter of the NAACP. Correct?

CP: I will- yes that's correct. I was president of the Prince William County NAACP from I think it was like 1988 to 1992.

MP: Mm-hmm.

CP: Enjoyed that. I was a young president and I actually found out from former president Cozy Bailey who is now the president of, of the Virginia State NAACP, that I actually was the youngest

president in, in Prince William County NAACP, you know, history. At that time did some very good things as NAACP, you know, president. I'll just say that, you know, some of the things that we did many people don't know. Chinn Park is named after an African American family, and that was a result of work that we did at the NAACP and you know getting people engaged in that, doing survey, survey and doing petitions and stuff like that. Under my leadership we were very instrumental in getting first African American judge appointed to the bench in Prince William County. And that was that was a real quick political move because senator Colgan at the time had often talked about having a female on the bench. At the time there were no female judges and this like say this would have been around 1990 or so, 1990-91. And he, he- when he gave that opening and, and I would also say we had local newspapers at the time the *Potomac News* on eastern end, *Journal Messenger* on the western end, so we had local newspapers that covered articles. But when Senator Colgan made that opening, I stepped into it, I said "well it's about time to have an African American on the bench too," so we got the politics we got the politics going. There were couple of- ended up being a couple of openings. Doctor George Hampton that Hampton middle school was named after- he was an appointee of Governor Wilder. He headed up the Virginia ABC board. And a normal another former president of the NAACP US, Willie Williams, they had great connections in Richmond with the General Assembly so I called those guys and said, "look man"- I said, "we're going to be pushing to get the African American on, on the board right now, on the bench, and right now we were going for Janice Bryce". Janice was one of the few African American attorneys in the county at that time. I said, I said, "I don't have the Richmond connections you guys do, you work Richmond, I work Prince William County". Long story short we were able to, you know, the, the person that they- judge Linda Travers, they had her slated for juvenile court- they moved, kicked her up to general district and then they moved Jan Bryce into juvenile court. So that was all the work in NAACP. And I'll tell you, the same thing with, with getting Chinn Park named after an African American family, it just happened that at that time I was on the library board. And when they were building Chinn Park, it was a Chinn Library and, and, and, the park. So what they did, they asked the representatives of the library board, representatives of the park to sit on the naming committee. And that park at that time sat on Neabsco, Cole, and Occoquan districts, so 3 library board members, 3 Park Authority members we came up with the names. So I threw a name out there because I had, you know, I had my thoughts- because I knew the Chinn family owned a lot of what is Lake Ridge- land in Lake Ridge area. So I threw the name out and said as I'm putting out Chinn Park. And they were thinking about naming Maple Valley or whatever. So while we're going through that I said, "no I'm, I'm supporting you on the name, you know, Chinn Park,: said to, "my family's been in this county over 200 something years and not a part of this county is named after African American family". I said, "it doesn't have to be named after my family, but it's about time". And I'm not sure if you're familiar with Supervisor John Jenkins or not, John was a friend of mine, he was director of- director, he was the Supervisor representing the Neabsco district. It had (unintelligible) John and I said, "well John Jenkins he's a friend of mine," I said, "but he's a living individual and we are partnering with them". And said, "who's going- who's to say to John's not gonna go and kill somebody and we have to take the name of the park down you know". I was being sarcastic. So we back and forth on the naming. We didn't have the votes on the naming at first, and I will tell you that it just happened when they decided to- the park before that had the ultimate right to name the park. Yeah we were recommendations- they had the ultimate right to do that. But the first thing that they were going to name that park, it would have been named Maple Valley park- they had, they

didn't have a quorum to vote that night because a person got stuck in traffic. Gave us 30 more days to, to work and in working with 30 more days the NAACP, me as president, worked very closely with the historic African American churches. Yeah there are a lot of churches in the county now, some of them pop up when I talk about historic African American churches. Talk about little Little Union, Mount Zion, Ebenezer, Mount Olive, First Baptist Manassas, Mount Calvary- you're the historic African American churches in, in the county. We had this chance to work with them, and we didn't have social media, so there's no such thing as texting. It was the old petitions, and we gathered a lot of signatures and petitions. I called the member of the Chinn family who was a friend of mine. I said, "I can't tell your family story, you have to tell it. You have- for the next board meeting.". We went up to the Park Authority headquarters, as I was getting out of the car one of the Park Authority members said, "Curtis you've got it tonight, it's not going to, it's not going to be an issue". So the Chinn family member got up and she actually had the family Bible and told the story. And Park Authority voted unanimously to, you know, to name it Chinn Park. The other thing, you know, I shared that I chaired the county Human Rights Commission. I chaired the Human Rights Commission for 32 years, since day one, and as president of the NAACP they were creating the Commission and then study group; and I actually passed one of my NAACP members to be on the study group, so. They unanimously- same thing, you know, we got turned out at the board meeting. Board unanimously voted to establish the Prince William County Human Rights Commission in 10.21 of the ordinance. The importance of that is that; Prince William, Fairfax, Arlington, Alexandria, and Charlottesville, which is the newest one, are the only commissions in the Commonwealth of Virginia that can address discrimination directly. County Executive at that time wanted to have a human relations Commission where we can talk about things, but we have no power in doing anything. These 5 entities have power to do things. So, you know, if you're discriminating any kind of way in Prince William County, you can go to (unintelligible) and they will, you know, you know- investigated the various probable causes. If you live in other parts and- you live in the city of Manassas, you live in Wise County Virginia- which is closer to Tennessee and Kentucky than it is Richmond- you have to either go to attorney general 's office in Richmond or file an EOC at your local office, so. So those are, those are key things I'm really proud of, the accomplishments yeah, as NAACP president.

MP: I'm- you answered most of this, but was there anything else that you would like to highlight with your time at the NAACP?

CP: No I, I think those were the- those, those were the, the key things- and you know I continue to be a, a, a member of, a life member of the NAACP, and I don't make as many meetings as I as I used to, but everybody knows where I am.

MP: Understand that-

CP: Yeah, where I am. So-

MP: Yeah. Umm. So what was it like working for the Human Rights Commission in Prince William County, and how was the Commission established?

CP: Yeah that's good. So, you know, the key is that, you know, I'm chairman. I'm appointed by the Board of Supervisors, I don't really work for the Commission. But as a, as a commissioner we, we set the policies and all of that- you know, working with staff and everything else. So that's been good. As I shared, it's, it's been 32 years of that, you know, served on the, on the Commission. And I'm appointed at the pleasure, you know, of the Board of Supervisors. Right now the chairperson of the Board of Supervisors, honorable Deshundra Jefferson, you know, obviously the chair. She has 2 appointees, she just appointed a new person. My term expires I think in 2026 and as of now I'm going to ask her, you know, to be reappointed to serve, you know, again as chair, the chair. The chairman 's elected by, by the Commission itself and they decided, they trusted me to serve as chair, you know, every single, every single year. So it's been, it's, it's been good. Now how it was established; I give all the credit to a gentleman- I am blanking on his name right now, Fred Allen. Fred Allen, he used to be the executive director of the Fairfax County Human Rights Commission, but he's a Prince William County resident. So he was the impetus behind getting things started. With Fairfax, and they had a Commission system since the 70s. He was the impetus behind getting things started, and getting the study group going, and- it was steady group that came to, you know, the turn in their reports, and they wanted a Commission with enforcement power. And as I shared a little earlier, the county exec did not want that. He wanted it enforced by one of the Human Relations Commission, but again it was the NAACP that flooded board chambers that night, and everybody spoke in favor of the Commission that we have now. And there's only one person who spoke against it, and the board voted unanimously to establish, you know, what we have. So it's good, we've had 1, 2, 3- 2, 3. I think we've had like, we've had 4 executive directors in 32 years. Current executive director, Ronald Torres had retired from, from Arlington County as their executive director. And actually I was surprised; in the interview process, applied to, you have, become, you know, director of, of Prince William Human Rights Commission. And again, you know, I'm really committed to human civil rights, and I shared with County Executive staff that- and this has happened in every case, that when they interviewed director, that I want to be a part of your process. That's kind of unusual for citizen participation, you know, as board members. I'm not aware of any other boards that do that. But, you know, quite honest with you, I demand that I'm there. I want to make sure that, you know, we get the right person for the position, and we have done that. So-

MP: Wow, yeah. So kind of winding down.

CP: Uh-huh.

MP: A few more- what is the achievement or moment you are most proud of in your life? If you can name it, I know it's a stumper.

CP: The achievement and moment. Well I have to talk about my, you know, my family for one- and we'll talk about this jointly. The greatest moment really was the birth of our daughter-

MP: Mm-hmm. Oh yeah.

CP: -so collectively, that's my, that's my wife and I, I both. I think the greatest achievement on a voluntary level, I think it would, you know, would definitely be the work that we put in to get, to

honor the Chinn family and have Chinn Park established. I think it's I think it's kind of the greatest achievement. Professionally, I think the greatest achievement was the leadership I've provided while I sat in the political leadership position for 2 years as the acting associate commissioner for my bureau. And the reason I say that is, that my Bureau[8] was one of the few bureaus that actually funds federal to local. And you know most government agencies, they'll fund federal, state- and state puts it, puts it down. But in funding the nation's runaway and homeless youth programs these pretty much community-based organizations that are doing good work on the ground. I always shared with them and they always trusted me, because they knew I had been there, that I may not be able to get you, you know, what you want, all the funding you will get that I will do my best to keep your doors open. And I did that, all, all, all of my years, you know, and oftentimes- and then level funding agencies, you know, and they understood. And said, "look, if I give you the increase you're asking, I'm going to put this grantee out of businesses in southern Virginia and I don't want to do that". And most of them they want to do that too. So I think, you know, that's- I think that's the greatest, you know, my, my greatest achievement professionally would be the work I did in working with these grantees nationwide. From the position of, of, of some sort of power it.

MP: Hmm, yeah. Do you have a life motto that you live by, and if so can you explain it?

CP: Yes I, I do. Yeah it goes back to Dr King. He goes back to a sermon that he preached 2 months to the day before he was assassinated. It was called the drum major instinct, and it really comes, you know, from the Bible, and comes out of, you know, Matthew, where it talks about in essence, you know, kind of paraphrase- it really talks about people wanting to be great and they want to be recognized as being great, but the greatest among you shall be your servant. And that's the motto that I live by. It's being a servant and serving people; it doesn't matter that I can take care of myself, but if I can help somebody else along the way and be a servant- And there's a song that's, that you sing- it's called, if I could help somebody through this way you know my living will not be in vain, and my wife knows this, if I perish before she does, that they have to say that in my funeral. Because that, that's, that's, that's, my, that is my life motto; to be of service. And it's not about me, it's about being where I can serve and, and that's, humbly served, that's, that's where, that's where I, you know, live towards.

MP: So last question, are there any comments or stories you would like to share before wrapping up this interview?

CP: No, I just will say that, you know, this has been a real pleasure-

MP: Yes.

CP: I have, you know, you know I guess tons of stories that I've shared a number of them with you-

MP: Yes. You've left a very eventful life I have.

[8] Family and Youth Services Bureau.

CP: So this is this is this has been, this has been great; and I hope people benefit from, from hearing, hearing this story.

MP: Yes. Yes thank you so much for coming in. Yes and I'm going to-

CP: Thank you, my pleasure.