

Oral History Collection

Wright L. Lassiter Jr.

Interviewer: W. Marvin Dulaney and Alfred L. Roberts

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Place of Interview: Dallas, TX

Dr. Roberts: Today is September 30, 2011. We're here at the Dallas County Community College District headquarters in the office of Chancellor Dr. Wright Lassiter Jr. Dr. Lassiter, we would like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about where you were born, a little bit about your parents. And I know you are very proud of your brothers and sisters. We would like you to tell us a little about your family. Mention the names of your parents and just a little background on those items.

Dr. Lassiter: From a historical perspective I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi a few years after the Depression. I'm the oldest of nine children.

My father, Reverend Dr. Wright Lassiter Sr., and my mother, Mrs. Ethel Franklin Lassiter, both dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade and started a family. A few months after they dropped out of school I came along. A year later a brother came along. Then there was a seven year hiatus with no children. And on Christmas day in 1941 my mother and father were fortunate to have twin boys born. The cycle of siblings proceeded from there until there was a total of nine of us. Of those nine siblings eight are still alive. My brother who was closest to me is deceased. Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Attended public schools in Vicksburg... Was the first person in my family to attend college. Landed at Alcorn State College and received by baccalaureate degree from Alcorn four years later in business. Prior to graduation the business manager at Alcorn came to my desk in the president's office where I worked as a student to tell me about a new training program that had been established to prepare young African-American men to become

business managers. He suggested that I should apply for that program. It was a twelve month internship program at Tuskegee. I applied. I was accepted. Graduated in May 1955. First member of the family to have a college degree. My parents were there with my other brothers and sisters celebrating my graduation. As they were preparing to place all my belongings and trunks into the car and the truck to go back to Pittsburg the chairman of the business department stopped me and asked if I had a job for the summer. I told him that I always had a job because my father was a contractor and whenever I was not in school I was working with him. And although I was going to graduate school that September he was rather clear that I would be working with him until I went away to graduate school. Then I asked, "Well, why do you ask?" He says, "Well, if your father won't object we would like for you to stay here and join the faculty at Alcorn College." I asked him to repeat the question. He did. My response was, "If you have enough confidence to think that a wet behind the ears college

graduate can step into the classroom I have enough courage and risk taking to say, yes." I said, "Yes". My parents were delighted to move my belonging from the regular dormitory that I was going to vacate down to the bachelor men's dormitory for the summer. The next day I went to see Mr. Jimmie King, the head of the business department, to get my teaching assignment for the summer. He gave me four courses--no, three courses. I knew nothing about faculty loads. So, I signed up to teach accounting, business communication, and short hand--all subjects that I had made as in. So, I gathered up my books and proceeded to leave his office and he stopped me. He says, "By the way, there's been a new development. My mother lives in Dallas and she is quite ill. I have to spend the entire summer with her. So, since you are the only instructor you have to be the acting department head. And your task will be to work with the dean and prepare the class schedule for the fall and teach your classes. Don't worry. If you have any problems just go see Dr. White. He can help you." I said,

"Thank you". Went to my room and began to work on my lesson plans for the next day. My first class was accounting and I went to the classroom, laid my materials out on my desk to teach my class. I looked up and who was seated in front of me but my favorite high school teacher Mrs. Rosa [unclear] who taught me typing in high school. So here I am a rookie teacher teaching my first college course before an individual who was unquestionably in my mind an outstanding teacher. But we had a good experience and when the term ended she said, "Mr. Lassiter, I want you to know that you are the best college teacher that I've ever had." Well, whether that was true or not the affirmation proved one thing to me. If you are a risk taker and you are prepared there is very little that you cannot accomplish. And that had guided me on my path. So, that's a little bit about my upbringing. Again, I have now five brothers and three sisters. We're all college graduates. Five of the eight have doctoral degrees. My youngest brother almost integrated Mississippi University where he

earned his baccalaureate degree. One of my brothers-one of the twins was involved in sit-ins in Jackson, Mississippi. He attended Tougaloo College. And during the sit-in era [of] lunch room counters and so forth--he was a part of that group and even got arrested and he got bailed out of jail. So all of us listened to what our parents said-that if you want to get ahead get something in your head. Well, that's my early life. Went to Tuskegee, finished the training program. Took my first real job at Hampton Institute. I was the investment accountant for Hampton Institute. That was not a long experience because six months after going to Hampton I was drafted into the Army and spent two years in the Army as an enlisted member. Eighteen months of that tour was in Korea. Upon completing my military service I returned to Tuskegee. There my current wife and I got married and we started our family. I served in a number of rolls at Tuskegee over a period of seventeen-and-a-half years. During that time I earned both of my advanced degrees. An advance from being a

student bookkeeper to senior accountant to business manager to head of the auxiliary enterprise. Those seventeen-and-a-half years were extremely helpful in developing me and in my career. But in Tuskegee because it was something of an oasis in the segregated south in Macon County, Alabama I had a number of civil rights experiences. For one, I personally witnessed the Montgomery Bus Boycott and all that transpired there. When my wife and I went on our honeymoon we went to the now non-existing Sir John Hotel in Miami, Florida. There we made friends with Dr. Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King who were also there vacationing. Had that experience. During the Civil Rights era Tuskegee was an oasis in Alabama. Because it was a private institution persons could come there and speak freely. H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Julius Bond just to name three. All of the notable individuals of the Civil Rights Movement came to Tuskegee. We gave them a platform for them to express themselves. One of my notable experiences as relates to civil

rights occurred in 1970 when I was appointed to the Board of Commissioners of the Tuskegee Housing Authority. In that role my first task was to implement all of the tenets of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 which mandated the integration of all public housing laws to include the housing units themselves and the staff. It was our good fortune during my tenure as Chair of the Board to introduce into Tuskegee, Alabama the first home ownership program in public accommodations in the country in Tuskegee where individuals no longer could be just renters, but they could make plans to purchase. That was a noble experience [unclear]. An also noble experience during that time occurred in 1968. 1968, that was the time when we were experiencing the tide of relevance in higher education when in loco parentis was being vacated from college and university arenas. Students were vying for voices. And we had a situation in Tuskegee where a number of students took issue with an engineering professor and wanted him to be fired. They protested and they protested and

nothing happened. Our board was a national board. The board was in session one weekend and the students decided to take their case to the board. They could not get into the board room, but they elected to do something else. They chose to bring out chains and chain all of the doors to the Dorothy Hall Guest House where the board was in session and would not let anyone out until their demands were recognized and acceded to. Macon County at that time had the first Africa-American sheriff in Alabama, a mister Lucius Amerson. The president came down and talked to the students, "Please, we'll talk to you, but take those chains off the door. That's a safety factor." They ignored the president. Chairman of the Board came down. He made an appeal. They ignored him. Finally the president indicated to the students that if they did not remove those chains he would have to call the sheriff. The sheriff came, made his plea and informed the students that their chaining those doors was a severe safety violation. And as the sheriff of Macon County, if they did

not remove the chains his only recourse was to call the National Guard and speak to the [unclear] General and ask the [unclear] General to send troops to Tuskegee, Alabama to rescue those persons who were locked up the Dorothy Hall Guest House. The students did not believe him. But, about an hour-and-a-half later you could hear tanks coming down the main street of Tuskegee Institute's campus coming toward the Dorothy Hall Guest House led by a two-star general and armed troops coming to rescue us. Well, when the students saw the tanks and the military forces coming out the chain disappeared. They went over the hill to escape and we were rescued. But the story didn't end there. For those who remember what transpired during that period at Kent State, at Jackson State, you name it, many universities were closed for a period of time and action was taken against those student demonstrators. That took place at Tuskegee. It was closed for a period of time and the board and the president elected to take action against the student leaders. Because I was

responsible for the Dorothy Hall Guest House and happened to have been in that facility for the entire period I became the chief witness for the prosecution and had my first encounter with the American Civil Liberties Union that came to defend the students. Our attorney was Fred D. Gray, the legendary attorney for all of the Civil Rights era. So, that was one of those anecdotes in my early career that was of some importance as relates to civil rights. I did obtain my doctorate at Auburn University. Could not get an advancement at Tuskegee. I elected to move elsewhere and was invited to come to Morgan State University in Baltimore, [Maryland] as their Chief Financial Officer and Planning Officer. Went there. [unclear] that role for four-and-a-half years and then decided that if I could manage what I was doing at Morgan perhaps, just perhaps, I might be able to function effective as a college president and received an invitation to come to Schenectady, New York to become president of Schenectady County Community College. When I was appointed to that position I learned

something that I was not aware of-that being that I became the first African-American president in one of the sixty-four colleges in the state university New York system. I became the president of a predominantly white college-94% white, 6% others, in a predominantly white community-94% white, 6% others. It was a very successful experience in large measure because of my experiences at historically black colleges, and having gone through the Civil Rights era, and also going through all of the experiences associated with what we were calling then "developing institutions"-institutions that were somewhat underdeveloped. Spent almost four years there and was enticed to leave upstate New York and come to Dallas to serve as president of Bishop College. Because I was and still am an African-American Baptist minister I felt that that was my calling to come down south and rescue Bishop. It was a three year experience, a three year sojourn that was not successful. I had the good fortune of being invited to leave Bishop and join the Dallas County Community

College District as President of El Centro College. Served there for twenty years. The longest serving president at that college and the second-longest serving president in our district. Was preparing to retire when I was drafted once again and asked to take on this role as Chancellor for the Dallas County Community College District. I'm now into my sixth year as Chancellor. It has been an enjoyable experience. I've been able to utilize all of the talents and skill that I've picked up along the way-many of them from the historical black college. A major achievement is that we have completed a \$450 million capital improvement bond program. We have built thirty-one new facilities at our seven colleges. And consistent with the mission of the historically black college we've also built five community campuses that are strategically located in underserved or unrepresented populations such that we can provide services to that population of students.

Roberts: Where are some of these?

Lassiter: We have a community campus in Garland that is operated by Richland College. We have a community campus in Pleasant Grove, [Dallas, Texas] operated by Eastfield College. We have a community campus in west Dallas operated by El Centro College. We have a fourth community campus in south Irving operated by North Lake College. And the fifth community campus is in Coppell also operated by North Lake College. We have a satellite also at the DFW [Dallas/Fort Worth] Airport that is a unique external facility in that it serves the construction industry. The community campus in Garland operated by Richland is unique in that it also houses the Garland Chamber of Commerce. One of the first entities of that type in Texas at a community college--where you have a major Chamber of Commerce co-located with a college. Through that combination we have formed the Dallas County Manufacturers Association that serves the manufacturing community in the Garland area. To my surprise, I did not know that Garland was the seventh largest manufacturing area in

Texas. I thought that Garland was only known for producing hats, but they produce much more than hats. That's a somewhat elongated journey through my career. What did I leave out that you need to know about?

Roberts: I think you've been [unclear]. I want to go back to your wife. You didn't give her equal credit.

Lassiter: Oh, my wife. [Laughter]

Roberts: And children if you will.

Lassiter: I will. When I was in Tuskegee about to end my twelve month internship experience I was working registration in the summer of 1956. The African-American postmaster was working beside me. We both were cashiers. His name was Larry Robinson. He came to me and put a piece of paper in front of me and started writing on it and then says, "See that lady in that next line? She wants to know who you are." I said, "Oh, she does? Okay." [Laughs] So, I went over there and introduced myself. She told me who she was. I said, "Thank you very much. It was nice meeting you." and went back to my work. But, we began to exchange telephone calls. And eventually decided that we'd perhaps made a

match. So we got engaged and when I came back from the military we got married. My wife is from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, so we both are native Mississippians. My wife is now a retired Registered Nurse. She was trained as a psychiatric nurse. We have two children. The oldest is our daughter, Michelle. The youngest is my son, Wright Lassiter III. My daughter is a graduate of Morgan State University. She is a banker with Chase Bank and has been with Chase Bank for seventeen years. She's married and they have a daughter. So that daughter was our first grandchild. Their daughter is a sophomore at Bishop Dunne High School. My son is also married. He and his wife have a daughter and they live in Castro Valley, California. He is the Chief Executive Officer of the Alameda County hospital system in Oakland, California. I'm very proud of both my children.

Roberts: And did you mention your wife's name?

Lassiter: Bessy Ryan Lassiter is her name.

Roberts: Okay. I have just two questions. I don't want to hog the interview. Would you talk about your

community involvement and then would you talk about the authorships aspect of your life-your books and so forth?

Lassiter: My father sort of caused an expression to be emblazoned in my consciousness when I was quite young. That message was, "Service is a rent that you pay for the space that you occupy here on Earth." And I took that to heart. When I became older he gave me the post script for that. He said, "Junior, service is a rent that you pay for the space that you occupy here on Earth. And I want you to always live in high rent district." It's consequence. Because of my upbringing with my father and mother and also being a product of the black church, service has been a part of my life. My service began when I was a young person [by] being the secretary of my Sunday school and doing other things in the community that you could as an elementary school, middle school, high school student. But as I finished college and began to work at Tuskegee as unusual opportunity presented itself to me by my boss, Mr. H.K. Logan, the business manager.

He called me in one day and says, "Lassiter, let me tell you something about the nature and the history of Tuskegee Institute. We have two institutions in Tuskegee. We have the university, Tuskegee Institute and we have the VA [Veterans Affairs] Hospital. Those are two black institutions. And from the days of Booker T. Washington we have made a practice of searching out those individuals that appear to have potential and promise. When we see them we encourage them to become involved in the community--because that is the way that the university supports the community." So he says, "I want you to look around and see where you can be of service. Come back and discuss it with me and if that service requires you to spend some of your normal work time engaged in it that's okay so long as your work doesn't suffer." My first [unclear] of service was with the Tuskegee Federal Credit Union. I served in a number of roles with the credit union until I left Tuskegee. During the two or three years before I was to leave Tuskegee I chaired the Building Committee of the Tuskegee

Federal Credit Union. We built a new facility for the credit union that we moved into debt free--a first for that community. So that's a major area of service for me. I told you about the Housing Authority. That was a major area of service. So, everywhere that I have worked I have become heavily involved in the community. I was called "Mr. Community" in Tuskegee. I'm called by some "Mr. Community" down here in Dallas, Texas.

Roberts: Could you speak to Dallas? I know you are involved with Urban League and United Way, but where else?

Lassiter: Sure. Well, the Urban League--that was my first board appointment. Still am on the board. I've served two stints as Board Chair. And that is one that is very special to me. The United Way is also special because while serving on the board of United Way I was serving as treasurer. And I got a call from Jan LaCroix who wanted to come and visit with me one evening after work at El Centro. So, we had an appointment and he marches in with two other people and proceeded to tell me that the

individual who was scheduled to become chairman of the board of United Way, who worked for Southwest Bell, was being called to go to San Antonio and could not serve as chairman of the board. Therefore, they were sent to catch me and convince me to become chairman of the board for United Way. This was in 1988. So I became the first African-American chairman of the board of the United Way-Metropolitan Dallas. And following my service as chairman of the board I had the opportunity to put in place, in Dallas, a national program called "The Blueprint for Leadership". Blueprint for Leadership was a special training program designed to prepare individuals in the community-African-Americans for service on boards and commissions. The program became known as The Dallas Blueprint for Leadership. So I authored that activity. Served as chair for six, seven years. Then turned it over to my son who followed me as chair. The activity still exists today, but now it is with the Center for Community Cooperation headed by Cynthia Dunn as opposed

to with the United Way. Another area of major service for me was the Salvation Army. I was on that board for a long time. And then you can go down the list. The Dallas Opera, the Science Place, and the list goes on and on. I've always sought to offer my service in areas of either religion, business, or community service. And those are the areas where I have served. I've been on about twenty-five or thirty boards over the course of my tenure here. Most recently, I have been serving and still serve on the board of Dallas Baptist University. I'm now in my final months as chairman of the board of Dallas Baptist Board of Trustees. I also serve on the Board of Trustees for Parkland College of Chiropractic Medicine here in Dallas. But, my service extends beyond Dallas. I was fortunate to have received seven gubernatorial appointments for service in Texas--two notable areas being the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation and the second area of major service was the Texas Council for the Humanities. My service with the Texas

Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation came about rather interestingly. One of my close friends is Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson. She approached the then governor Bill Clements and said to him, "You are not doing an appropriate job in appointing African-Americans to boards and commissions here in Texas." And his reply was, "I don't know any African-American republicans. So if you know one you send his name in." So she sent my name in with the recommendation that I serve on the Texas Finance Committee. That was clearly out of the question. The next best thing from Governor Clements was service on the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation. My service on the Texas Council for the Humanities proved to be pivotal in that because of it the President George W. Bush appointed me to the National Endowment for the Humanities board. So that was a national board. But before he appointed me to a board, in 1990-and again all this came about because I happen to have been a republican. I should tell you how that came about. When I served as the President of

Schenectady County Community College everybody there was a republican. And if you had your wits about you, you also became a member of the Republican Party. So I came to Dallas with my republican connection. Well, because of that, President George Herbert Walker Bush appointed me to the White House Commission on Minority Business Development. Our charge was to go around the country and find evidences of aspiring African-American businesses and come back to him with a major report on things that could be done to enhance the involvement of African-Americans in the free enterprise system. And we did that. During our service something happened that many people are not aware of. There is a term that is used now quite frequently in the annals of business life within the minority community called "hubs". Hubs. Hubs being historically underutilized businesses. We were conducting a hearing in Cincinnati, Ohio and as these individuals came before us with their testimony somebody said, "We need to stop using the term disadvantaged businesses and

more accurately describe African-American businesses because what they actually are is historically underutilized businesses." So we put that in our report. Lo and behold that is one of the first major items that came out of the report that the Small Business Administration embraced. Is that enough about my service? [Laughs]

Roberts: Yes. That's great.

Lassiter: More than enough.

Dr. Dulaney: I've got a question. When you were at Bishop, what happened there? You said that is one of the places you failed to--.

Lassiter: Well, I was sitting in my office at Schenectady enjoying my tenure there as college president. The phone rang and this lady from Dallas called, said, "Dr. Lassiter, your name has come up as an individual that we might want to talk to about becoming president of Bishop College." I said, "Oh, that's interesting. Well, you know, if you have that interest invite me and I'll come down and I'll talk to you." So, I received the invitation. I had been to Bishop a couple of times because they

were having financial difficulty and I was doing some consulting with them. So I knew a little bit about the college. Because I was an African-American Baptist preacher I had this feeling inside that this could be a calling for me if everything worked out. So I came down. Interviewed. They immediately embraced me. Lo and behold I became the President of Bishop College--with the objective of saving a financially troubled institution. They hired me almost on the spot because of what I had done in New York at Schnectedy County Community College which was also a developing institution that needed to be totally, shall we say, remade. And I did that quite successfully. So, I came down and moved to the task of reshaping Bishop [unclear]. My third day at the college as president I received my first surprise. The business manager called me and said, "Dr. Lassiter, we don't have enough money to make the payroll that's due on Friday." I said, "Now, wait a minute. When I came down for the interview and left I saw your bank statement. There was a \$500,000 in

the bank. This is just ten days later. What happened?" [He said], "We spent it all and the payroll is due Friday." Well, I had to call a member of the board—a prominent African-American preacher who was the president of the National Baptist Convention USA incorporated and cry on his shoulder saying to him that I needed prevail on him for a loan. So here I am not a week in the job and I'm beginning to feel the financial pinch. In order to try to get our way out of that I then began to look at the college to see where there was waste. The Dallas Morning News and The Dallas Times Herald—I mean they covered Bishop. Every day there was a story about Bishop and what I was doing to bring it back to life. The college had tremendous debt to the Federal Government because they [unclear] and built all these buildings. Got loans for them. Enrollment wasn't where it was supposed to be. Couldn't meet the debt, so I had to marshal all of my resources and we made endless trips back and forth to Washington [D.C.] trying to negotiate with the Federal Government on this debt

Bishop had. Finally got an agreement after a year. The former mayor of Dallas was a congressman.

Roberts: Bartlett.

Lassiter: Yes, Bartlett. He was a congressman. On one of my trips up there I was leaving this House office building and he saw me. He says, "Where you going?" I said, "I'm headed to the airport." He says, "Do you mind riding in my little small car?" He had a Volkswagen. [Unclear] Well, Steve Bartlett and I became friends. And again, this was because of the republican connection. We had a republican president. So, I began to call on all of my republican sources [laughter] and we were able to craft an agreement where the government agreed to forgive so much of the debt if we made certain payments. Everyone had sympathy for Bishop, but nobody contributed money to help. I was spending all my time going this church, that convention, and all kinds trying to raise money just to make payroll. Just to make payroll. It was rewarding, but extremely taxing. But, the tipping point in all of this

occurred in January of 1986. I had approached the chairman of the board to tell him that an enterprising African-American businessman by the name Bob Brown from up in the Carolinas had made arrangements to take a number of African-American black college presidents to South Africa to meet with officials there because South Africa still in the bonds of apartheid wanted to send black students from South Africa to the United States to go to college. And they are willing to pay the freight for them completely-tuition, room and board. But they wanted them to be at a historically black college, so they could have that community. They could live on campus. So they asked me to be a part of the entourage to go to South Africa. I told Chairman of the Board about this and I asked if we could bring it to the board and he said, "Yes". On the day of the board meeting to my surprise he began to waiver and say, "Well, I'm not so sure about that." Well, I presented to the board. And if you think DISD [Dallas Independent School District] board meetings are tough you

have never seen one till you have seen a board meeting that is populated almost exclusively by African-American preachers. [Laughter] The vice chairman of the board said, "Under no circumstances I want the president of Bishop College going South Africa. I don't care if Bishop Tutu [unclear] signed the paper. I don't want the president of Bishop College anywhere in South Africa." So, they went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And we had an attorney on board from California and he offered this compromise. He said, "Let's ask the president to poll the board and if the majority of the board says he can go he should go." I went home that night and said, "There is no way under the sun am I going to poll the board to get permission to go overseas." I said, "I shouldn't have to do that." And that was when I decided that I was going to leave Bishop College and go elsewhere and begin again because I had developed friends in the Anglo community that came to my rescue. And the Dallas Community College was an opportunity. There's another small piece

in-between. In addition to the board not giving me official permission to go to South Africa to bring students here where their bills would be totally paid--they would represent money coming to us--they wanted to sue an individual. His name was Alex Bickley. You know that name.

Dulaney: Newspaper reporter, right?

Lassiter: No, He was head of the Citizens Council.

Dulaney: Wrong Bickley

Lassiter: Wrong Bickley. The board--some members of the board accused Bickley of having coned Bishop out of some important property in the Keller Springs area. They said they were going to sue-sue the Citizens Council. Sue the Citizens--. [Laughter] Well, could I stay around for things like that? No. [Laughter] From that fateful board meeting I began to make plans to leave and the opportunity through J.D. All [?] was presented to me to join the Dallas County Community Colleges.

Dulaney: In your service you didn't mention your work with the African-American Museum. How did you get involved at the museum?

Lassiter: First of all, Harry Robinson and I came to know one another when I was at Tuskegee and he was at Alabama State-Alabama State College, now Alabama State University. One of my responsibilities was to be in charge of all the finances for the Tuskegee [vs.] Alabama State Thanksgiving game every year. It was a big classic. And I met Harry at one of those classic meetings and our friendship began to form. So, when I came to Bishop here he was and being president of the college obviously I had to become attached to the African-American Museum that was in the basement of the Zale Library. Harry convinced me join the board. I had no choice. And I've been on the board ever since. [Laughter] One supporting him. Secondly to support the other initiative of the museum. But that's a little small anecdote from the Bishop College days that I'm sure you're not aware of. Bishop College also housed the fledgling Dallas Black Dance Theater. Ann Williams came to me my first week or so as president of Bishop asking for permission to continue to have rehearsals and other things

at Bishop College, so we made the facilities of Bishop available to her to develop the Dallas Black Dance Theater. And as Paul Harvey would say, "You know the rest of that story." She's forever indebted to me she says because if we had not provided the venue for her small troop to begin to rehearse and begin to perform she would not be where she is today.

Dulaney: Dr. Lassiter, listening to you it's like the community embraced you, but they didn't embrace Bishop College. Why was that?

Lassiter: Well, from what you hear from the annals of history the community did not favor Bishop leaving Marshall [and] coming to Dallas because the white community brought Bishop to Dallas for the specific purpose of having a venue for blacks, so they would not go to SMU [Southern Methodist University].

Dulaney: Yes. That was the story.

Lassiter: That was the story. And unfortunately for Bishop they came in 1961. In 1965 you had the formation of the Dallas County Junior College District. So here you have a fledgling historical black college that did not come,

essentially, well endowed. They were not on death's doorstep. In fact, they were doing fairly well. But here they had immediate competition-the junior college. Low tuition. But Dr. Curry was a visionary and he wanted Bishop to be this bastion of opportunity with all these fine facilities. Against the advice of the whites who were on his board at the time [he] just overextended himself. There was no way that you could pay the debt. So, when I came I could not get enough support from the church community because I felt very keenly that Bishop could be saved if the churches would just give some real money instead of \$100 here, \$50 there. But that never came forth. So yes, the community embraced me. They saw me as this white knight almost [laughter] coming in to rescue this institution. And when they saw evidence that the board was not fully behind me they began to draw back. When the word got out that they were going to sue the Citizens Council doors closed up immediately.

[Laughter]

Dulaney: Ida, do you have a question?

Ida: Yes, I have one question. I was wondering if you could enlighten us on the story about when you were involved in integration at the hotel.

Lassiter: Oh, that story. [Laughs] Yes. My family and I-- this was in 1964. Yes, 1964. We had been visiting friends in Baltimore and we were returning from Baltimore. And as you know you travel by car. So we were returning from Baltimore and driving-me, my wife, and our two children. We were approaching a city called Rome, Georgia. I told my wife that I was just totally beat and could not go any further. I did not want to do what I would have done had I been alone. And that would be to go to a service station, park my car under a light, and go to sleep there. There was no way that I was going to have my family under a street light. So I saw this Rome Georgia Hotel. White, stately Georgian building. I told my wife, I said, "Look, the president just signed this civil rights bill that makes it possible for public accommodations to be available to all people." I said, "This is a good time for me to test whether that law actually works."

My wife said, "Please don't". She said, "You're going to get lynched and I'm going to be a widow with two small children."

[Laughter] I said, "Well, I don't think they'll do that." So against her advice I got out of the car, went up the steps to this hotel, and went in, and went to the registration desk and indicated that I was here with my wife and two children and I need a room. They immediately gave me the registration papers. So I signed the registration material, got my keys, told them that we had two children and could they put a crib or a cot in the room. [They said], "Fine". Went back to my car. My wife was all wide-eyed and wondering what happened. I said, "We got a room. We're set for the night." So I drove up to the front of the building, not the back, the front of the building and we unloaded our stuff. Went in. Went to sleep. Next morning my wife had a little bit of courage herself, so she called downstairs and asked the clerk if she could get an iron and an ironing board. [Snaps fingers] Five minutes

up comes the iron and the board. This white lady brought it to our room. And we got our kids together and went down to the restaurant for breakfast. Went in the front door of the restaurant. We were the only ones in the restaurant at that time. We placed our order. White waitress came and took our order. As we were waiting for our order to be filled I just looked over to my right toward the kitchen. All of the kitchen help was standing outside looking at us smiling for we were the first African-Americans to live in that hotel in a room and the first ones to take a meal in the restaurant. They just smiled and smiled. I didn't get a chance to talk to them, but that's the experience I was talking about.

[Laughter] Well you know, I can give you all kinds of little experiences like that. When I was a junior in college my dad--always worked with him in the summer. He had this habit of always boasting about his children. I was an exceptional typist. I could go about a 110 words a minute. That's fast. So he's just telling everybody about my typing ability.

Well, one day the superintendent for the Spencer Chemical Works where we were working came by where we were working and said, "Wright, you've been talking about your boy who is so good. I'm just fed-up with the lady who is in charge of my payroll. Every time it's almost time for the payroll she finds a way to be sick. And payroll is due tomorrow. You say he's so good. I need him to come down to the office and get that payroll together." My dad says, "Fine, I can take him home and he can take off his overalls." He [the superintendent] said, "Oh, no, no, no. Let him come just as he is." Well, I went down there. Black face. Totally white office. Everybody looking at me. I must have knocked that payroll out in about four hours. Small job. Nothing big. When I finished it, gave it to him. He said, "Oh, good. Thought it would take you longer than that. Well, I don't have anything else for you to do, so I guess you'd better go back and work with your dad." So, I went back and my dad says, "What's wrong? What happened? Why you back so early?" [I said], "I

finished." He said, "What they tell you to do?" I said, "I'm finished. They said, "Come back and work with you, so here I am."" Well, the next day the lady was at work. And as people will sometimes do they began to tease her that, "This black man sat at your desk [laughter] using your typewriter, and do you what, he finished that payroll in four hours. Take you two days to do it." The word spread over the whole construction site so much so that this lady and her husband quit. They quit. They quit. So, I write down in my little books that I integrated the payroll office of the Spencer Chemical Works. [Laughter]

You asked about books that I've written. When I was at Tuskegee one of my close friends and colleagues was William Harvey-Bill Harvey who currently is the president of Hampton University. We served at Tuskegee together and we're very close. Bill one day says, "Wright, you know, we going to be somebody one of these days. You and I are running around everywhere making speeches, writing papers. We ought to decide that we're

going to keep a record of every speech that we do and save the manuscript. Who know what may come from that." Well we both started practicing that. My wife got on my case and says, "Look, you're out there speaking all the time, writing all the time; why don't you write a book." I said, "Look, you don't just sit down and start writing a book. You got to have some inspiration to do that." And I just keep putting it off. My father died in 2000. I wanted to do something to memorialize him, so I decided to do a little small memoir type book that chronicled how he had shaped me. I did that and a little book came back. Everybody liked it. I sold quite a few copies. I'm down to one copy now, so I guess I'd better get a reprint. And as you know [points to Dr. Dulaney], there is something about writing. When you put your foot in the water and have a little success first time the bug stays there. My mother died a year-and-a-half later. I did a similar book-memoir book chronicling the impact that mother dear had on all her children. From those two books

I now will have produced eleven books. Got a note from my publisher this morning telling me that they are sending me my review copy of a book of eulogies that I've put together. When I was at Saint John Baptist Church as the interim pastor--it's not in your little recount up till this point in time. I was interim pastor at Saint John for almost three years. During my three years there I delivered fifty-seven eulogies. I did not kill anybody they just happened to die. [Laughter] They happened to die on my watch. People would tell me that there was something unique about my eulogies--that they were not designed to make you jump up and shout and do a lot of crying. They were comforting. So I crafted thirty-seven of those eulogies into a little self-published book some years ago. Most recently I decided to go back and rewrite them. So, the books that's going to be coming out--you may want to buy one--is entitled Words of Comfort in Evening Time. So, that's what I've done.

Dulaney: Okay. One last thing. I didn't pick up--How did you become a Baptist minister?

Lassiter: My father was a Baptist minister. I helped my father to write his first sermon in 1954 when I was still in college. My father subsequently licensed me to preach. When I was in Baltimore I went to seminary and got my seminary training and was ordained in the American Baptist Convention when I was in New York. In the American Baptist Convention you have to be ordained into a venue of service. My venue of service was in Christian education. I served as the minister of Christian education at the Friendship Baptist Church in Schenectady, New York. When I came to Dallas the chairman of the search committee for the Bishop College presidential position, Dr. Manuel Scott Sr. So I joined his staff and served as his minister of education for twelve years until he retired. Then something unusual happened. Dr. Scott and I are very close. He told me that he was thinking about retiring and I said, "Scott, you don't need to retire. You too young to retire. I can assist you. You need to

have an affiliation with the church. Don't need to leave the church. " Well, he says, "Wright, let me tell you something. If you a pastor and if you come to the conclusion that you cannot discharge all of the responsibilities-that you need somebody to help you do something that you should be doing it's time for you to leave." So, I couldn't convince him to change his mind. In March of 1995 Dr. Scott delivered his last sermon. We had agreed that after he delivered his last sermon I would take over and preside for the balance in service. One of my actions would be to present a motion to the church community that they name Dr. Scott as pastor emeritus, so that when he retired and went away he would have that title. I take the church to the motion. They vote to name him pastor emeritus. And while I'm standing there Mr. U.S. Hammond-. I don't know if you know him.

Roberts: Boy scouts.

Lassiter. Yes, boy scout. U.S. Hammond jumps up and goes to the microphone and he says, "I make a motion that we name Dr. Lassiter the acting pastor of

Saint John Baptist." Didn't ask me nothing.

[Laughter] Somebody jumped up and seconded it.

I'm standing there with my mouth almost open.

They took the motion through. So I immediately

become first acting pastor and then couple

months later they made me the interim pastor.

I served as the interim pastor for two years

eleven months and one week. Almost three

years. I served as long as interim pastor as

some individuals serve as pastor.

[Laughter]So, all that's part of my life.

Dulaney: This leads me to something else. This is absolutely  
my last question.

Lassiter: I got another thing I want to add in there though.

Because of my experiences at Alcorn, but

primarily Tuskegee and the commitment to

service, I have always worked to help others

come along. And as of today there are eleven

individuals who used to work for me or with me

who are now serving as college presidents or

chancellor. And all this came about as a

result of how I came to be a college business

officer. I went through the Tuskegee

Internship Training Program for College

Business Officers. That was how I was trained. And when I went away to Indiana to get my MBA [Masters of Business Administration] and came back to Tuskegee the program was still operating and I was tasked to be the coordinator of the Tuskegee Internship Training Program for College Business Officers. So, from an early point in my life I've always been trying to develop others. That's a very important part of my life to me. That is the way in which if you think about legacy--that should be a part of your legacy--how you endeavor to help others. I tell many people I have this long list of firsts as an African-American. I don't think it's important only that I went through the door first, but that I help anybody else go in behind me. Your question.

Dulaney: Church politics. [Laughter] Were you a member of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance--even now? And what was your relationship with Reverend S.M. Wright? [Laughter]

Lassiter: One of the things you learn is that you are very, very cautious about becoming involved in

church politics. Lesson one. Therefore, because I was trained and ordained in Christian education I always stayed in that area. So I became a certified dean and I taught for the Northwestern Baptist District in Christian education. I taught in Dr. Clark's association in Christian education. Never became affiliated with the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. I would go to the meetings, but I was never a member of anything. When you assume duties as president of Bishop College you have around you [unclear] number of friends and close associates. S.M. Wright was one who was extremely close. He wanted me to join his church as opposed to joining Saint John, but he concluded that, 'Well, Dr. Scott did chair the search committee and Dr. Scott is apolitical, so it's better that I be--

[Another person walks in the room. Interview is paused.]

[Video stops]

[Video restarts. Interview continues]

Lassiter: --affairs in south Dallas was largely through the Urban League and the Dallas Black Chamber. In

the Black Chamber we worked to enhance opportunities for African-American business persons to get a foothold. Spent quite a bit of time doing that. With the Urban League a major activity and major development, a major plus if you will, was when I was serving as chair of the board. I was able to convince Liz Minyard to convey to the Urban League one of their abandoned stores. It had been closed for years. And they agreed. The Minyard family agreed to give the land and building to the Urban League. We then mounted a fund raising campaign to raise money to convert that former grocery store into the headquarters for the Urban League of greater Dallas. Now down on Lancaster across from the VA hospital you have, in my opinion, a very impressive headquarters facility for the Urban League and also a training center. The training center is extremely important because I crafted an agreement with the Urban League that I would provide one of my top computer science and information technology professors to come to the Urban League and provide instruction in

fundamentals of computer usage to citizens of south Dallas. We worked out an arrangement and that still exists today-where citizens can come to the Urban League and sign up for the computer classes at no cost. Free. Well clearly, its things like that that empower people and equip people and enable them to be productive citizens. Those are just two examples of my involvement in activities related to economic development in south Dallas. Dallas Black Chamber and the Urban League. Now, speaking of the Urban League, we are about to launch another fundraising campaign to raise \$3 or \$4 million to build a new training center building. When we do that we will also work in collaboration with the Dallas County Community College District because the Urban League will have limited capacity in terms of what it can do in providing workforce training. But working together we can do a lot more. Does that help you with your question?

Ida: Yes, it does.

Dulaney: Another question?

Ida: I wanted to ask--

Lassiter: Let me stay with that one for a moment. When you start talking you can remember things. Comer Cottrell was the first African-American we elected to serve on the board of directors of what's now Chase Bank. It started out as Texas Commerce Bank. I became the second African-American elected to the board of directors of the bank. While serving on the board I was asked to play a leading role in helping to establish a branch of Chase Bank in southern Dallas. If you were to go down Lancaster Avenue now, pass by the Urban League you'll see a couple of small buildings. And the next thing you see will be a branch of Chase Bank on Lancaster. We did that in an effort to demonstrate to the community that Chase Bank was sensitive to the needs of the minority community by having a quality bank facility in that community. So it's there now.

Ida: So I want to ask you a question about--you say you all are building a new Urban League. Compared to back during the 1960s and 1970s what's going to be different to help African-Americans to

advance compared to how it was back in that time?

Lassiter: We've had training opportunities for African-Americans time immemorial, but now with unemployment being as high as it is we have to have resources that prepare people for not only entry into the work environment but to enter and be successful. What is needed [is] we have to equip individuals with the soft social skills in addition to skills in vocational areas. What do I mean by soft social skills? We have to teach people the importance of dressing right, speaking right, being on time, being punctual, keeping commitments, being open to accepting directions and instruction. All of these are what we call soft skills that individuals in today's setting sometimes miss because of the fractured family structure that exists today. Young people in particular don't get the kind of home training that--I don't know about you [looks at Ida], but the three of us [points to Dr. Roberts, Dr. Dulaney, and himself] received. [Laughter] Also, taking the Urban

League for example, we do something there that is not done widely and that is to have specific training programs for formerly incarcerated individuals--persons who are leaving correctional institutions, coming back into society. And quite frankly, coming back into society with no skills. We have a program that the Urban League has specifically designed for formerly incarcerated individuals and how we can assist them. Other piece of that--when I was at El Centro we established a training program for inmates at Lew Sterrett Jail where we sent our instructors into the jail--with funding from the sheriff's department. It's not for free. They pay a fee to us--to provide training for individuals who are in jail. And there have been several individuals--there have been just three individuals who were inmates at Lew Sterrett, took the computer class that we offered there, and now they in business for themselves. Promising entrepreneur.

Ida: I only have two more questions. [Laughter] I'm sorry, I want to make sure I get this. As far as this

program that you have for people that have been in prison compared to now and back when south Dallas first developed what's the difference in trying to move people that have been in prison up to the next level to be able to advance?

Lassiter: First of all they have to have some skills- marketable skills. Then you have to be an advocate for them because it's not everybody that wants to hire people formerly in jail. You have to be able to take these individuals through a program that shapes them with the soft skills as well as the other employable skills that they need and then be able to be an advocate for them. And to hope and pray that they don't let you down when you got a job for them. But before we began to have such a high unemployment rate in this country and in Texas you could go to an employer and convince that employer that you have been a major positive factor in an individual's life and they would take a chance and hire them. But only if there was some evidence that they're okay.

Ida: Okay, last question. Compared to back when south Dallas first began to develop and up to now as far as racism--and you're talking about people that have been incarcerated and people that are not incarcerated--what would you say has changed from that time frame to now that you can try to develop people into [unclear] employment in dealing with racism?

Lassiter: Well, you asked a multitude of questions in one.

[Laughter]

Ida: I'm sorry.

Lassiter: Let me begin by saying that anyone who believes that racism no longer exists is living on another planet, for many of the conditions that existed twenty, twenty-five years ago still exist. Sometimes just not quite as blatant as it was then. It's more insidious now, but never the less it's still there. There are many people when they see your skin color they begin to draw up and cringe. We are, unfortunately, still victims of people who have impressions of African-Americans based on our skin color. Individuals who happen to be dark complexion still suffer from

this, what I call, insidious racism. There have been changes and some things haven't changed too much. One of the things that we are missing now is many of the African-American businesses that were somewhat more promising and populous back then no longer exist. Unfortunately, we are today, in my view, elements that contribute to the views that individuals have toward African-Americans. Largely based on the way we, as African-Americans, conduct ourselves. The black on black crime that does exist. We still unfortunately have young African-American men who hang out at the carwash on Martin Luther King [Boulevard]. Know where that is?

Ida: Yes [Laughs] I do.

Lassiter: Its things like that that don't work in our favor. Instead of those individuals hanging out I would hope that I could encourage them to come to the Urban League.

Ida: Just for the record, what are they doing at the car wash? Are they just standing around or what exactly?

Lassiter: Well-

Dulaney: Ida, how do you know that?

Lassiter: I'm not there, but I'll tell you what I believe.

Obviously, you have dope exchanges. You have dope exchanges there and you have individuals, in my opinion, who plot, scheme, and come up with schemes. And we have these unfortunate, and truly unfortunate incidents that we read about in the Dallas Morning News. Dallas Morning News this morning there was a major story about what was a promising African-American young man who was a part of the Lincoln High School basketball team that won forty straight games. National champions. Chris Bosh was one of the members of that Lincoln High School basketball team. He and others after they finished high school and went off became successful. This one young man apparently was somewhat troubled at Lincoln and just has had an up and down life. He was pictured in the Dallas Morning News because he stabbed a woman and killed her--couple weeks ago. Well, we have a lot of that that still goes on. That doesn't help us. And because I'm from the old school these young men who walk

around with their pants down by their knees,  
that doesn't help either. It just creates  
unsavory stereotypes of the African-American  
male that does not help us. It is somewhat  
distressing that the message doesn't [unclear]  
with them. That hurts.

Ida: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Dulaney: Alright.

[Video Stops]

[End of Interview]