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SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT  
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: TOM KOHLER  
DIRECTOR/CAMERA: ERIC DARLING  
PRODUCER: MICKEY YOUMANS

SUBJECT: OTIS JOHNSON



Otis Johnson

16:11:06:06 [Eric Darling]: Thank you. Perfect. Okay.

16:11:19:16 [Mickey Youmans]: Alright, almost ready.

16:11:23:16 [Eric Darling]: And of course you can ignore the cameras completely. Just have a conversation with Tom.

16:11:28:08 [Otis Johnson]: Right.

16:11:29:07 [Eric Darling]: Okay, great. We're set.

16:11:35:13 [Tom Kohler]: Well, Otis, it's great to have you with us. Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

16:11:39:10 [Otis Johnson]: It's my pleasure.

16:11:40:17 [Tom Kohler]: And, it's of course a pleasure for me because I had the pleasure of being in your class when I was 19 years old and teaching minority, learning minority groups, and that was, started me off on an interesting journey. Yeah. I'm gonna ask you a couple of questions that are really straightforward questions and when you answer, if you would answer in a complete sentence that would be helpful. So if you could tell us your full name and also spell your full name please.

16:12:04:12 [Otis Johnson]: My name is Otis S. Johnson, O-T-I-S-S-J-O-H-N-S-O-N. The S stands for Samuel.

16:12:17:15 [Tom Kohler]: And Dr. Johnson, do you have a preferred pronoun?

Otis Johnson

16:12:23:14 [Otis Johnson]: Whatever you call me, just be respectful.

16:12:27:03 [Tom Kohler]: That's great. Thank you.

16:12:28:18 [Mickey Youmans]: Best answer yet.

16:12:30:11 [Otis Johnson]: (laughing)

16:12:35:00 [Tom Kohler]: I would like to ask you if you would tell us a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, where you were born here in Savannah, and kind of what that looked like. And particularly if in your childhood there were moments of that involved the church and that that would connect to sort of your faith life as a, as a child, but, but just in general life as a child here in Savannah for you.

16:12:58:20 [Otis Johnson]: Okay. I was born in the Georgia Infirmary Hospital in 1942. I was the son of Otis Johnson and Lillian Brown Johnson Spencer. When I left the hospital, I came to the home of my grandparents,

16:13:31:09 Paul Lawrence Brown and Lillian Brown. They were my mother's parents. My grandmother on my father's side lived at 1220 Love Street in the West Savannah area. I lived at 823 Rockefeller Street on the east side. When I

16:14:00:20 was a year and seven months old, my father died of tuberculosis and my brother Paul Lawrence Johnson was three days old when my father died. So my mother was living with her parents and I grew up in that household. It was a real church-going household. My grandfather was the chairman of the

16:14:29:20 deacon board and he taught the bible class in Sunday school. He was the president of the Baptist Training Union. So we were in Sunday school in the morning and the BTU in the evening, because in those days you had two services a day. You had the morning service and then you had the evening service. You had morning Sunday school, the morning church service, 11

16:15:02:10 o'clock. Then you had the Evening Baptist Training Union at seven o'clock. And then service after the BTU. My grandmother was the treasurer of the Senior Mission. She was the director of the Junior Mission. So you can

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- 16:15:31:21 imagine I was in church a lot. My grandfather, as the chairman of the deacon board, had been instrumental in calling the pastor of the Central, now Missionary Baptist Church in what is now the view at Oglethorpe, which was before then the Hitch Village. And
- 16:16:03:04 before then it was a part of the old fort. We walked from Rockefeller Street where we lived down Wheaton Street until we got to Randolph, then Randolph down to what became Hitch Drive. And the brown, red brick church is right there. It's being restored now because they had a fire last summer
- 16:16:33:02 and it destroyed the building, but it's being renovated and and restored.
- 16:16:40:11 [Otis Johnson]: My grandfather, as the chairman of the deacon board, had the opportunity to select a new pastor and he selected the Reverend William Daniels, who then not only was the pastor of the church we attended, he became my godfather. So I was wrapped, I was really wrapped
- 16:17:13:13 into, into the church. So we had Easter programs where you learn your little Easter speech, you know, you, you had a new outfit and you walked up and salute and say your speech. And for almost a month we had practice in the afternoons after school to, to make sure we had that speech memorized
- 16:17:43:05 and we could deliver it with vim and vigor. Oh man. Then we had church picnics and other activities. So that, that, that is my early beginnings in the church. And so I am still a member of the Central Missionary Baptist Church. I can't say that I'm a very active member, but I keep my membership because there's no need for me to be dancing all over the city, joining
- 16:18:13:21 church to church like some people do. So, you know, I go when I feel the spirit.
- 16:18:23:05 [Tom Kohler]: You go with vibrations. Well, help me then. So you are a young man here in Savannah. Yeah. And you're going through school. And again, I'm just gonna kind of use my own experience with you. So I meet you when you're at Armstrong College. Right. But help me a little bit with how you got from being in church all the time to being in that classroom at Armstrong, if you would?
- 16:18:51:04 [Otis Johnson]: I attended the Paulson Street Elementary School, started at age six. And we had elementary school from grades one through seven, junior high, eight and nine, and high school 10 through 12. After attending Paulson. The next school I could attend, because all of the schools were segregated, was the Cuyler Junior High School, which was

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- 16:19:26:04 located where the EOA office and complex is now on Ogeechee Road. And, and Anderson Street... Cuyler used to run into that. So I went to the Cuyler Junior high school and after one year there, they shifted back to Paulson because they had built, by the time I got to Cuyler, they were building the
- 16:19:58:16 Robert W. Spencer Elementary School to replace my old elementary school. So my ninth grade year, I attended junior high at the Paulson Street School. Then I went to Beach for 10th and 11th and 12th grade. And I
- 16:20:22:12 graduated from Beach in 1960. I then went into the Navy after joining the Naval Reserve in my 11th grade year, because I couldn't wait to get into the military. In those days, Black folks, Black boys, had a choice. The first choice was to go to college. That was out because of financial reasons. The second was to get a job. And at that time, with just a high
- 16:20:56:05 school education, and I was skinny. I wasn't muscular, so I wasn't going to get a any kind of decent job. So the, the third option was the military. Either you go in the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force, because my father had been in the Air For... I mean, in, in the Navy.
- 16:21:16:11 [Otis Johnson]: And I'd heard so much about him. And then I had an uncle that was in the Navy and he took a lot of time with us. And he would come by on the weekends and pick Paul and I up and ride us around. And he would, you know, tell, you know, those, you know, those Navy stories. And so I said, well, this is it for me. Because in my mind at that time, thinking about a career, I could spend 20 years in the Navy. 'cause I
- 16:21:48:08 was gonna be 18 when I graduated. I'd be 38 years old, I'd be old enough to retire. I could get another job. And then, you know, when my retirement came around, I would be financially stable. A long time ago in my youth, I had made a vow that I wasn't going to be in poverty. I was going to do something where I wouldn't have to be poor,
- 16:22:18:22 because it was a struggle for my grandparents who were up in age and they were trying to raise two boys. And we had to work with no question. And, and, and work in those days wasn't seen as something that you should avoid. It was something you wanted to do because you knew you needed money to do things that other people were doing. So I, my first job was at a shoe
- 16:22:50:09 store, not a shoe store, but a shoe repair shop, which was on Gwinnett Street between Harmon and Paulson. And it was our job in the afternoon after school to go to the shop. And on the weekends people would call the shoe repair shop and say, I got a pair of shoes.

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- 16:23:13:07 [Otis Johnson]: I need a half sole, I need a heel. I need, the stitching is broken. We'd go to the house, pick up the shoes, take them back. Shoe repair man would repair the shoes. We would take it back, we would collect the money, and then they would give us a nickel, a dime or whatever. But man, and nickel and dime. And we, when we got a quarter, oh man, that was great because a quarter was a trip to the East Side Theater
- 16:23:43:22 on the weekends because we could spend, I think it was either 10 or 15 cents for admission. And a pop, a bag of popcorn was five and a drink was five. That was 50, that was 25 cents. So, you know, we didn't have to ask grandmamma or granddaddy for any money because we were getting enough to have some fun on the weekends. (Tom: Yeah. I mean, money was freedom). My, Hey man, you better believe it. So that was my first job, walking to
- 16:24:18:02 the homes in, in the, in the area, picking up shoes, bringing them back. Then the next job was an evening paper route or route, whichever went correct. We had to deliver the papers in the neighborhood. And that was the first time I worked for a White person, for a White man. And he was a nice
- 16:24:49:14 man. He was just a good human being. And he treated us with respect. And in those days, any adult got respect because our grandparents didn't play that stuff about sassing grown folk, you know, so, so anyway, his name was Patrick, I can't think of his first name now, but he was a good guy. So
- 16:25:18:08 that was the second job, the third job. And all of this was helping underwrite the cost of living. The third job was at the Crumbley's Rexall Drugstore on the corner of Waters and 31st Street, the pharmacist and the manager of the, the, the, the, the drugstore was Charles Waldrop. He was
- 16:25:49:20 another guy that was a human, a good human being. You know, you, I, I've run into some people who weren't so, so human, so, especially when I was in the Navy. Anyway, I won't get into that. But that was the third job that
- 16:26:09:16 took me through high school. We able to get a bicycle.
- 16:26:18:04 [Otis Johnson]: And in those days, our grandparents could buy things on time, you know, on credit, really credit. Either you laid things away like our Easter clothes and Christmas stuff, and you paid a little every week or every month until you paid it off. Then you could bring it home. Or if you had, and I don't know if they had credit agencies in those days or not, but if you had credit, a good credit ref, and you, if you had
- 16:26:51:16 a reference, especially by a White person, you know, if they would vouch for you, then you could get credit and not lay away because you took the stuff home if you could get credit. So we had the bicycles that we used on the press route and on the

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delivery for the drugstore. At the drugstore. Again, in the day, there were some physicians that were still making house

16:27:23:12 calls or people went to the physician's office and came home with prescriptions. So it was our job to go and pick up the prescription, bring it back to the pharmacy. They would fill the prescription. They would also, any, any goods in the store, you could put them in there. Or either people called the store and said, I need a pint of ice cream and I want two

16:27:52:15 Hershey bars and I want, you know, a bottle of of aspirin, whatever it was in the store, they could order, we would take. And so that was a good job. That guy was really nice. And I think both Paul and I enjoyed working for him. After I came back from the Navy, I would see

16:28:20:00 him from time to time and he would always ask me, you know, how are you doing? And my reply was, you know, I'm doing all right. After I went to, started at Savannah State, the college, and then went on to Armstrong, I would see him and he would ask me, you know, how are you doing anywhere we met, he would always ask me, how am I doing? And I was able to respond to

16:28:48:13 him. I'm doing all right. That's great. And it seemed to please him because he knew he had played a role.

16:28:57:23 [Tom Kohler]: Absolutely, yes.

16:28:58:17 [Otis Johnson]: In my life. That's right. By, by having me have that little job, I think we were earning, I think I, I can't remember whether it was 29 or 35 cent an hour or something like that. And so we would work, we would go to work at five o'clock and, oh, maybe six o'clock. And the, the store closed, I believe, at 10. So those little hours accumulated. And at the end of the week, we had a little money, you know, I

16:29:35:04 could go downtown, which was basically Broughton Street or either West Broad Street where they had apparel stores and stuff like that. I could buy, you know, little pants and shoes and stuff like that. That really took a load off of my grandparents. And they could, they could still, with their

16:29:59:01 little income, buy us food and then we could buy food. And we, we just had, we were more than a big liability. We were a small asset in helping them do what they chose to do. Because after my father died and my mother got married again and moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, there was no third income

16:30:36:11 coming in because my grandmother did not work. And it was just on my grandfather and what we could provide. And they did the best they could.

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16:30:48:03 [Tom Kohler]: Let me, let me ask, I know a little bit about your story. 'cause you were, you loved at Beach, you played in the band?

16:30:58:08 [Otis Johnson]: Oh man, that was heaven. (laughs)

16:31:00:18 [Tom Kohler]: And the band, the band was heaven.

16:31:02:12 [Otis Johnson]: Oh man.

16:31:03:10 [Tom Kohler]: You went to Armstrong, to Savannah State. (Otis: Yeah.) And had imagined yourself as a band director. (Otis: Yeah.) And the civil rights movement move forward, came in you, if you will.

16:31:12:16 [Otis Johnson]: That's it.

16:31:13:11 [Tom Kohler]: And all of a sudden you're on a, on a different racetrack.

16:31:17:06 [Otis Johnson]: No doubt about it. Changed my life completely. But I still love the music.

16:31:22:17 [Tom Kohler]: Yes, yes sir.

16:31:23:00 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah, buddy.

16:31:24:02 [Tom Kohler]: That. Yes, sir. And I know that you have a wonderful jazz collection. (Otis: Yeah.) Yeah. And, and your brother Paul, great musician. Very musical.

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- 16:31:31:08 [Otis Johnson]: Yes. He graduated from Savannah State with a major in music education.
- 16:31:38:14 [Tom Kohler]: I didn't know that. But yeah. Let me, let me, I'm just curious. Your involvement in the Civil Rights movement here is, I don't think it's inappropriate to say legendary. And, and it is legendary. I'm curious, as you look back at that era, how, how do you remember like, the role of the church in the Civil Rights movement, particularly locally? I mean, we could certainly talk about Dr. King at that level. Let's start, if we could, like locally, what, what was all that? How Civil Rights
- 16:32:09:14 Movement, faith-based community here, take us back there.
- 16:32:15:00 [Otis Johnson]: In 1939, if I'm right, it was either 38 or 39. The Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert was called to pastor the first African Baptist Church in Savannah. The Black community was one of the early chapters, branches they're called,
- 16:32:48:07 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, I don't recall right now what year that was. But over the time between the founding of that branch and around 1938, 39, the branch had
- 16:33:16:10 lost its charter because of under-population in term, because it's a membership organization. And, and I believe that you had to have so many members to maintain your, your charter and maintain your branch. When Dr. Dr. Gilbert came to town, he found a defunct NAACP and he set out to
- 16:33:47:09 rejuvenate it. And he did. He went, he was charismatic, as I understand. And he was able to go out and recruit people to join, because being a member of the NAACP in the forties was not a cup of tea. There were risk involved if you were identified as being a member of the NAACP, according
- 16:34:17:11 to whether the employer was, was a racist or was he a, a different kind of human being would be determined whether or not he, if, if they found out that you were a member of the, the na the NAACP in those days was seen as
- 16:34:44:16 some subversive communist group. (laughs)
- 16:34:51:10 [Otis Johnson]: But anyway, it wasn't, it never was. And it still isn't. And so he was able to expand dramatically the, the, the membership. He also created what

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became the largest NAACP youth council in the country. That is where WW Law comes on the scene as a youth member of the NAACP

- 16:35:23:22 Youth Council. Dr. Gilbert then and his wife start traveling all over the state, organizing branches of the NAACP, eventually having a enough branches to create the Georgia NAACP chapter. Law continues to be a, a
- 16:35:58:03 mentee of, of, of, of Dr. Gilbert. And then he goes off to the military in World War ii. He comes back, he earns a degree in biology at Savannah State, which was Georgia State College at that time, and becomes the
- 16:36:25:10 president of the branch after Dr. Gilbert leaves. And he stays there for 26 years as the president of the Savannah branch of the NAACP. In all of that time, the NAACP and the Tribune were the advocates to right
- 16:36:57:05 many of the wrongs that people identified during that period. Fighting for decent schools, fighting for equal pay for teachers, fighting to be able to register and vote. All of those things were on the agenda for the NAACP.
- 16:37:23:13 And being a minister, he was able to recruit other ministers because the Black church has a long tradition of having leadership on secular issues from the clergy. One thing that helps that occur is the fact that many of these ministers were totally supported by their congregations. They didn't
- 16:37:56:03 work for any White folks. So they couldn't be threatened with that kind of sanction for their activity. So there was a big network of churches that were connected to the NAACP and supported their efforts and helped them to recruit members for membership in the, in the NAACP. In 1960, the Savannah
- 16:38:31:01 branch decides that they're going to join other youth councils around the south.
- 16:38:39:22 [Otis Johnson]: And so they begin planning the initial sit-ins and other direct actions that started on March the 16th, 1960, with the sit-in, at the Azalea Room of the Levy's department store on Broughton Street. And the arrest of three members of the NAACP, two of which were
- 16:39:12:03 members of my homeroom class, Carolyn Quilloin and Joan Tyson. So, you know, we had, we, we had the, we had the spirit, man, you know, we were all around, I was not a member of the NAACP because they met all the way on the other side of town. And my grandparents didn't want us traveling across town like that, especially at night, because it wasn't safe. (Tom: Right.)
- 16:39:41:03 Especially once the sit-ins started and people started acting out all kind of crazy ways. So there was one student from Savannah State and two from Beach that were arrested. And we decided that we would go down to the police court

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hearings, which was held at the police barracks, which is still located on Habersham and Oglethorpe. And we left school to support

16:40:17:02 our colleagues. And we went to the hearing. They, of course, they were convicted. (laughs) And then we came back to school and we were met with the principal, Arthur Douglas, who told us that we were expelled because we had left

16:40:41:06 school without permission. And we had to bring our parent... If we were going to be readmitted. And this is my senior year, man, you know, I'm getting ready to graduate and I'm getting ready to go to the Navy. You know, I'm on, I'm, I'm on my, on my way. So, Lord, I had to go home and tell my granddaddy that I had been suspended from school and that he would have to come with me. And so we rode the city bus because we didn't have a

16:41:13:07 car. We rode the city bus. And at that time, the bus stopped on 45th and West Broad, which is now ML King. And we had to walk all the way down to Hopkins Street, where Beach High School was.

16:41:27:17 [Otis Johnson]: So we, we made the trek, we went into Mr. Douglas's office and we had this little ritual we had to go through. So I was first, Mr. Douglas, I apologize for leaving school without permission, and I promise if I get readmitted that I would never do anything like that again. And then my grandfather said, you know, he had his little role. So he said, Mr. Douglas, and I don't know if it's either his exact words, but

16:42:03:06 it's the essence of it. You don't have to worry about Otis ever doing anything like that. 'cause he's not gonna do anything like that. 'cause he's gonna graduate and go on about his business. So then of course, the ritual was complete and well, it was complete after Mr. Douglas said, well, Otis, you, you know better and, and you shouldn't do anything like this again. You can come back to school. Whew. Oh man. So then my grandfather

16:42:33:22 makes his way on back home. And I didn't get a whipping. That said something to me because to violate any rule of the school or to disrespect any adult, earned a whipping. So I was very, I was pretty good because I, I

16:43:00:13 only got a few because my grandmother did what I would call the spanking. But if you did something really bad, whoa, it was granddaddy's belt that came off and you got a whipping.

16:43:15:05 [Tom Kohler]: Was your granddaddy connected ministerially? Was he connected to the NAACP?

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- 16:43:20:20 [Otis Johnson]: No, I can't remember him being a member of the NAACP. But our pastor was, and once the Sunday meetings got underway, church to church, every Sunday we had the NAACP come to our church, you know, and, and it was, you know, they had a, a list of churches. And every Sunday beginning or after that initial sit-in on the 16th of March, 1960,
- 16:43:53:14 they would hold Sunday mass meetings and the community would come and the host church would have their choir there, and they would sing. And then you would get the news of the week, primarily from WW. He, he would tell you what happened. And then you had other people like Eugene Gaston, attorney Eugene Gaston would be there, Curtis Cooper would be there, Mercedes. And
- 16:44:25:04 we call 'em Mercedes, not Mercedes. Mercedes Wright would be there. Esther Garrison, who was the secretary of the branch would be there. All of these people would be there and they'd have a little role. And that would be the report for the, for the week.
- 16:44:43:17 [Tom Kohler]: So really this is hand in glove.
- 16:44:45:21 [Otis Johnson]: Oh, yeah.
- 16:44:46:20 [Tom Kohler]: Church movement. Church movement. Oh yeah. I mean that, it was a, it was a hand in glove thing over a period of years. It sounds like?
- 16:44:54:03 [Otis Johnson]: A period of years. Because much of the finance for the work of the branch was coming from these churches. Every Sunday they took up a, a collection at the mass meeting, all of that money would go to the branch to support their work.
- 16:45:13:22 [Tom Kohler]: Were there sympathetic White churches? Or were there sym Well, I'll leave it at that. Yeah. Were there sympathetic White churches?
- 16:45:22:14 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah.

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- 16:45:23:21 [Tom Kohler]: How'd that, how how'd that work?
- 16:45:24:11 [Otis Johnson]: There were sympathetic Episcopalian... It was interesting. Never had any Baptist church. Never a White Baptist... We had a, a few sympathetic Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches. And of course, the uni, Unitarian Universalists were right in there and, and provided
- 16:45:59:05 support both financially and, and, and I, I, I guess I, I'm not, I'm gonna search for the right word, but spiritually, I mean, they, they, they allowed you to know that they were in support of what was going down.
- 16:46:19:00 [Tom Kohler]: They were allies.
- 16:46:19:21 [Otis Johnson]: Allies, yes.
- 16:46:20:15 [Tom Kohler]: They were allies. They made it clear we were with you here.
- 16:46:22:20 [Otis Johnson]: That's right.
- 16:46:23:16 [Tom Kohler]: We had your back. Whatever that might mean.
- 16:46:24:23 [Otis Johnson]: That's right. Okay. Now, that wasn't everybody, but there were certain, I called them courageous ministers and, and lay leaders who found ways to let it be known that they supported the movement. (Tom: I think that...) And, and, and eventually the local Catholic diocese
- 16:46:57:07 through their leader, and I can't think of his name, but he played a very important role in trying to pull the White and Black community together to resolve the issue of the boycott. The boy, the economic boycott, which started in March, I believe, or either April of 1960, went on for almost
- 16:47:28:12 three years. And it was breaking the back of the businesses downtown because we were just refusing to participate. Where you could not work as a clerk or cashier

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where you couldn't get a, a, a credit card, or in some instances you couldn't even try on clothes. And so the word was, Hey, you

16:48:00:08 know, Easter's coming, you know, and we ain't going to buy anything new for Easter.

16:48:06:12 [Otis Johnson]: (Tom: Easter's coming, but we're not.) We are not. That's right. And then a, a a kind of, it's, it is interesting. It is interesting that there was a kind of spillover to West Broad Street where you had Yoachims and Yoachims and Robbins Department Store on Park Avenue. And, and, and ML King. Yoachims burned down suspiciously. But

16:48:45:04 because, and then they wanted to blame the, the protestors on burning that. I don't believe it for a minute, because the Firestone place on, on Broughton, where Broughton runs into ML King, that burned down mysteriously. And I don't believe that was burned by Black people. But anyway, Yoachims just went on and didn't build back. Firestone built back,

16:49:13:23 I like to say Yoachims took the money and ran. They said, we, you know, things are changing. We are not changing. We, we, we going to get this money. And I don't know what, what happened to that family, because there were a lot of Jewish businesses that catered to blacks. And I, I just don't

16:49:36:21 know the, the, the, the end story to, to what happened there. Yeah. But yeah,

16:49:42:19 [Tom Kohler]: Let me ask about, you mentioned Jewish, I think about Aaron Buschbaum.

16:49:47:20 [Otis Johnson]: Oh man.

16:49:51:09 [Tom Kohler]: Let's talk about the role that he played.

16:49:53:06 [Otis Johnson]: Oh, he was the counselor behind the scenes and sometimes not so behind the scenes, because he was, he was friends with Eugene Gastin, who was an African American attorney. And I think he got a lot of good advice from Aaron Buschbam, who I considered in, in, as I grew

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- 16:50:27:05 older, a friend, he and Robert Patterson. I, I, I lift them up along with not as close and not as intimate, but I, you know, I lift them up with, with Patrick and, and Waldrop in my early days of working with White people who were decent.
- 16:50:52:18 [Tom Kohler]: And, and, and Bob would've been connected to the Unitarian church?
- 16:50:56:03 [Otis Johnson]: That's correct.
- 16:50:56:23 [Tom Kohler]: And then, and Aaron, obviously in the Jewish
- 16:50:58:20 [Otis Johnson]: Community. That's correct. And I should have included the Jewish community. When I was listing the Episcopalians in the, in the, in the rest of them, the Catholics played a, a, an interesting role. The Arch Bishop played a role in bringing a resolution to the boycotts and the picketing and stuff like that. But
- 16:51:34:11 rather than desegregate their schools, they closed all of the Black parish schools, including St. Mary's, St. Benedict's, St. Anthony's, and the Pious High school that served the Catholic community, Black Catholic community,
- 16:51:59:05 all of those were closed rather than desegregated. That's an interesting thing that I don't hear a lot of folk raise, but they made that choice. And so then the Blacks who were matriculating in Catholic schools then went to the White schools by just, I, since I'm talking about faith and all like
- 16:52:28:00 that, I had, I had to add that in because it's a fact.
- 16:52:31:20 [Tom Kohler]: Is is the group that you were talking about, the, if our, and I, when I say I remember this, I'm remembering hearing this. There was Mayor McLean set up a, called the committee of 100?
- 16:52:46:01 [Otis Johnson]: I believe it was called the Committee of 100.

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- 16:52:48:03 [Tom Kohler]: And the idea was 50 people from one side of the race divide 50 people from the other side.
- 16:52:54:01 [Otis Johnson]: I don't know how divided it was, but I think that was the title given to the group with the intent, I think to have a equal representation. And the, the archbishop sort of acted as a chair Yes. The neutral chair of, of that group. And did a fine job of, I, I call him, I guess I call him a, a moderator or, or some other good term, you know, to
- 16:53:24:17 describe him. But he did a, he did a good job.
- 16:53:28:01 [Tom Kohler]: And the idea, if I, if again, just by memory, which is based on story, was they would decide, they would say, now we're gonna talk to the theater owners.
- 16:53:37:10 [Otis Johnson]: That's, that's where it started. Because, because they had, they had agreed to desegregate the theaters, and because of the White backlash, they renege on that. And so the boycotts and the picketing resumed and, and, and, and the, the, the economic boycott was still on. And, and the, the White community said, Hey, now, you know, this is hurting us in the pocketbook. And, and I, if we are smart, we, we will just go
- 16:54:14:00 ahead and end this stuff because you could feel it in the country.
- 16:54:21:18 [Tom Kohler]: Things were changing,
- 16:54:22:14 [Otis Johnson]: Things were changing. 63 was the march on Washington. The agreement was made in, if I'm, if my memory is right after the march on Wash... they could feel it. Plus they were losing those dollars, man. And, you know, green talks and it, it trumps Blacks and Whites. So they said, well, we gonna go ahead and just because in the end, we gonna still be in control. That's why segregation and racism was so dumb
- 16:55:01:00 to begin with because they, they were still, they didn't lose any control of anything. But it was, it was just the thing about, hey, this is the law, you know, before the 64 Civil Rights Act, and Savannah ended that kind of craziness before the 64 Civil Rights Act was passed, we could vote before the 65

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- 16:55:29:02 Voting Rights Act was passed. Now, it took us a little longer to deal with the housing issue, but Savannah can look with pride on the fact that, look, we did the, the, the community did the same thing when Sherman was coming. They went out there and said, Hey, Sherman, you, you can have Savannah just
- 16:55:55:02 don't burn us down. And Sherman didn't burn us down. (laughs) So, so we, so the leadership in Savannah has been smart for a long time in terms of how it finagles this thing around race and other kinds of things. They said, well, no, we, we, we, we, we won't fight you overtly, but we got a plan
- 16:56:24:05 that, that we not giving up anything, but we just not gonna be like Bull Conner in those nuts. In Birmingham or in Montgomery, or in St. Augustine or in Albany. No, Savannah's leadership was smarter than that. And I attribute Malcolm McLean, Don Mendonza, Blackburn, what's Blackburn's first name?
- 16:56:51:13 [Tom Kohler]: Hmm. James,
- 16:56:52:08 [Otis Johnson]: Jimmy. Jimmy, Jimmy Blackburn. All of those people were instrumental in holding the crazy folk down in line and not letting them get outta hand.
- 16:57:05:21 [Tom Kohler]: So if I sort of plays us backwards a little bit, as you've talked to, talked about it, it, the, the boycott really put the pressure on the business community.
- 16:57:17:15 [Otis Johnson]: Absolutely.
- 16:57:17:23 [Tom Kohler]: And then the business community, if you will, that pressure then opened up the opportunity for legitimate negotiation.
- 16:57:25:07 [Otis Johnson]: That's right.
- 16:57:26:00 [Tom Kohler]: Okay. But if you dropped back a step, you wouldn't have gotten to the boycott without the NAACP.

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16:57:31:14 [Otis Johnson]: That's correct.

16:57:32:09 [Tom Kohler]: And you wouldn't have gotten to NAACP without the churches.

16:57:35:16 [Otis Johnson]: Without the churches. Plus you can't leave out the crusade for the Chatham County crusade for voters because Jose Williams was a part of the NAACP. He had been designated the chair of a voter registration movement, and his job was to go out and register voters and, and to build the political arm of the movement. But in my opinion, and I

16:58:09:14 believe it's in, in the opinion of a lot of people who study this period, that he and Mr. Law had a clash of personalities. And so the opportunity for Jose to affiliate with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who was what was founded by Dr. King and Joseph Lowry and the others, he spun off and created a different organization called the Chatham County

16:58:37:23 Crusade for Voters as a separate group under the SCLC umbrella, while the NAACP remained under that umbrella.

16:58:51:22 [Tom Kohler]: Let me ask this, if Ralph Mark Gilbert had not come to Savannah, would Savannah be a significantly different town?

16:59:00:12 [Otis Johnson]: I believe it would because somebody would've emerged, because we, when you look at that period, they had several organizations that were advocating for what we would under umbrella called Civil Rights. But there were several organizations, and out of those groups, someone would've emerged. But it was fortuitous that it was a

16:59:35:18 minister, I think.

16:59:37:04 [Tom Kohler]: That's what I was trying to get at. That, that it was fortuitous. It was a minister that turned out in a way to be the, the spark or the spark plug.

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- 16:59:46:08 [Otis Johnson]: Absolutely. Well be, be because of, of the nature of, of Black people and their attachment to religion. And to have people capable of talking that talk in biblical terms. Man, that's powerful stuff.
- 17:00:18:21 That, that that's the, that's the genius and the beauty of King. See, he could talk about, right, and wrong not just in a secular way, but this is sins, you know? And, and, and, and, and these are the, the, the children of, of Moses who took him outta slavery, they wrapped all of that stuff up.
- 17:00:50:00 Oh man, Black preachers? Woo hoo. You talking about people who have a gift and, and, and they can take something that would just be mundane to me. And they could find some scriptures and wrap it around and say, this is evil and Christians must fight evil. This is the devil's work. Oh man. They
- 17:01:20:23 could do it a different, a a dozen different ways because, you know, they, they, they, they preach through the Bible all the time. And a lot of times those sermons with the same scripture are very different given what is happening at the time. Giving what the history is giving what the, the minister's feeling. You know, what, what he's been dealing with. Oh, it's
- 17:01:47:13 genius, man.
- 17:01:49:04 [Tom Kohler]: Well, that, that, that, that, that carries over to, you mentioned you were a ma, you are, you consider yourself a Matthew 25 Christian?
- 17:01:57:03 [Otis Johnson]: That's right. I'm a Matthew 25 Christian.
- 17:02:00:14 [Tom Kohler]: Tell us about that.
- 17:02:02:00 [Otis Johnson]: In the chapter of, of Matthew the 25th chapter, beginning at the 31st verse and going through the 46th verse, Jesus is sitting at the time of, of, of, of, of, of reckoning. He's sitting there on his throne and he says, the, the, the, the people can be divided like sheep
- 17:02:37:14 and goats. And the sheep will be on my right side and the goats will be, see, I'm preaching now. I, I, and the goats will be on the left side. And he said, and they, you know, they going to ask him, well, what, what, what, what, what is this about the sheep and the goats? And then he goes into this business about, I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked, and you

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- 17:03:08:14 clothed me. I was without shelter, and you gave me shelter. You know? And he goes through this list of things that if you all a real follower, you will do. But he puts it in a personal way. I was hungry and you fed me, I
- 17:03:37:07 was naked. And you clothed me, you know, and, and he goes down the lists. And then they said, well, We, we haven't done all of these things to you. And then he, and then he says, well, if you have done it to the least of mine, you have done it to
- 17:04:02:07 me. And those on the left hand side who have done none of that, they ain't coming to heaven with me because they haven't done the right thing. So I don't worry about going to heaven 'cause I'm trying to work my way there, not talk and sing my way there. And my work will speak for me. And there's
- 17:04:33:18 a spiritual about let my work speak for me. So if I'm going and I don't know, because everyone is judged, but if that's the criteria, I'm gonna be on pretty good grounds.
- 17:04:52:03 [Tom Kohler]: You might get a suite.
- 17:04:53:20 [Otis Johnson]: Ooh, that would be nice. Especially with all that, that milk and honey up there and all that stuff. (laughs) Now that part I don't go to because that, that's a way, that helps people who are struggling and really suffering here on earth to really have something to look forward to. And their faith is supposed to carry them there. But if they don't do the work, they still won't get there. So that, that, that's
- 17:05:28:20 why I said I, I'm a Matthew 25 Christian. I have respect for all faiths. And I try to have a respect for all human beings, no matter what gender, what persuasion, what whatever it is that sort of divides us up. I ain't into all of that. If you are human and you do unto me as you want me to do
- 17:05:58:16 unto you, we are all right. So that's my sermon for the day.
- 17:06:04:13 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I think, I think we'll take it.
- 17:06:07:03 [Otis Johnson]: Amen. And can I get an amen? I was gonna say, say amen. Amen. Can I get an amen? But that, that, that's the core of my, my faith in my belief.

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- 17:06:20:11 [Tom Kohler]: And and to your point, expressed through your work,
- 17:06:23:12 [Otis Johnson]: That that's that
- 17:06:24:13 [Tom Kohler]: Decade by decade. (Otis: Yes, sir). By decade.
- 17:06:27:11 [Otis Johnson]: Yes sir. (Tom: By decade.) Even in my old age, I'm still trying to (Tom: Yes, you are). I'm still trying to do the work.
- 17:06:33:19 [Tom Kohler]: You come out, I mean, at 80?
- 17:06:36:13 [Otis Johnson]: 82,
- 17:06:37:08 [Tom Kohler]: 82, excuse me. You show up. (Otis: Yeah.) And you show strong. And it's for someone who's 72 is seriously, I mean, it's, it's good to look at.
- 17:06:46:03 [Otis Johnson]: Well, (Tom: It really is). Well, I, I feel that I've been blessed and there's a saying that folks say, I've been blessed and highly favored. And Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, said that service is the rent you pay for living. And I have had a good life. I've been blessed, I've had some health
- 17:07:22:07 challenges, but I got over those. There wasn't time for me yet. 'cause I had more work to do. So I'm, I'm a happy camper man.
- 17:07:30:21 [Tom Kohler]: Well, in your health challenge, you turned into Healthy Savannah. (Otis: Yeah.) And, and turn that into something that's helped a lot of other people think more about all that.
- 17:07:40:16 [Otis Johnson]: Well, see that's what you're supposed to do.

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- 17:07:45:00 [Tom Kohler]: Lemme check with the,
- 17:07:47:21 [Eric Darling]: I I would like to hear his take on the education question...
- 17:07:50:08 [Tom Kohler]: All right. Okay. So lemme this, this question is not intuitive to me, so I have to actually look at this one. All right. Other than that, I'm just kind of working on intuition. Okay. Would you, would you have thoughts about why working across faith traditions and faith boundaries are, are important? And then what would you tell children about that? Why it's important to work across these sorts of boundaries?
- 17:08:21:21 [Otis Johnson]: I would tell young people to realize that there is something in the universe more powerful than you. I remember the scene in Roots where Kunta Kinte's father takes him at his birth and holds him up
- 17:08:48:17 into the night sky and say, behold...
- 17:08:58:09 [Otis Johnson]: Something greater than you. And whether you are a Protestant and we got over a hundred Protestant denominations, they can't get it together... Whether you are a Catholic. And the Catholics got the Orthodox group and and they can't get it together. The Muslims got three or four different groups. They can't get it together. No matter the, the
- 17:09:30:08 Hindu, the all of 'em acknowledge a power greater than them. And they all have created this way of talking about that power in a way that is humanly understandable. Genesis, if you go to the, to, to the traditional African
- 17:10:06:18 countries and go to some of their cultural groups, they all have a creation story. All of them, the Muslims, the Hindus, all of them acknowledging this power greater than yourself. And what has happened is that in order to
- 17:10:29:00 understand this power, we have personified it. Jesus Yes. Is the Son of God who God sent down to earth to proclaim his word. I mean, now we can understand it because Jesus could look like you. He could look like these men here. But, but he's human. Not only that, the

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- 17:11:02:16 story continues that he gave his only begotten son who then gets crucified proclaiming who is the greatest. Oh man. And, and you, you get, you get the people out in the Nabid Desert in South Africa, they all got their creation
- 17:11:34:06 story, which allows them to understand it because it's a mystery. You know, the, the, when, when they get into the mysticism and all like that, you know, it's a mystery. The, the, the thing that, that I deal with with some people say, well, do you believe in Genesis or do you believe in evolution?
- 17:12:04:13 I said, ain't no struggle between the two. In, in, in God's time. The story says, you know, in, in, in a week he created everything, including, (laughs) including Adam and Eve. But in the time, in the time the universe,
- 17:12:35:01 one day could be a billion years. And so now you got the scientists saying, it takes a billion years for light, or a hundred thousand years for light to travel that in God's time....
- 17:12:51:00 [Tom Kohler]: That could be 20 minutes,
- 17:12:52:07 [Otis Johnson]: 20 minutes!
- 17:12:53:10 [Tom Kohler]: 20 minutes we're done. Yeah, I get it.
- 17:12:55:21 [Otis Johnson]: So, so humans, humans have created a, a, a way to understand the unexplainable. The, the, the, the other thing that, that, that helps me is the fact that the secular and the sacred over time and
- 17:13:36:15 time is millions of years fused. And Lord, if we don't have an example of the evangelicals and, and Trump right now fusing the secular and the sacred for the purpose of power. And if you look all the way back to the chiefs
- 17:14:05:22 and the kings and all of that, they found a way to work together. The, the Catholic church is a great example of the fusion of politics because it, it is very evident that there was collusion around the persecution of the Jews
- 17:14:28:09 during the Holocaust. So I don't want to get into that. 'cause sometimes people get all upset when you kind of speak the truth. But in my, in my understanding of the evolution of society, there was a fusion between the secular, how do we come to understand this power that has created all of this stuff? And you could imagine under the night sky looking up at the Big

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- 17:15:02:11 Dipper and seeing the moon change through the phases. Oh man, you who is responsible for all of that? God, it becomes easier to understand. Then you get these people who claim to have this knowledge, and then you got this other powerful group that claims to have that knowledge and they say, well
- 17:15:28:19 now let's get together and make sure that we can control these people. (laughs)
- 17:15:38:21 [Otis Johnson]: (Tom: And that's what you would tell young people?) Yeah. Yeah. But it would have to be over time, because I would be going up against their parents and most parents are indoctrinating their children into something, even if it's atheism. So I wouldn't spring that on them because I didn't come to that overnight. It crystallized for me when I had a professor at Brandeis and we were talking about social policy and how
- 17:16:11:02 things come to be the way they are. Man, man, woo. Oh, that was an eyeopener. And, and, and it answered so many questions that I had been wrestling with, you know, starting in my childhood. When I see, and I don't mean to be blasphemous, but when I see these people falling out in church and being possessed by the spirit and all like that, I never felt that. So
- 17:16:40:10 I, I can't relate to that. But if they do it, because I know in the African tradition of voodoo spirit possession is supposed to take place. I'm not going to talk, talk negatively about that. I just can say I never experienced it, but I see the power of it and how people use it. And then I see these charlatans with now with the prosperity gospel. You know, don't
- 17:17:13:01 worry about heaven, try to get rich on earth, get this fur coat, get this Mercedes, you know, get this mega mansion. Oh, then worry about going to heaven. No, I'm gonna worry about going to heaven first.
- 17:17:27:21 [Tom Kohler]: Matthew 25.
- 17:17:30:23 [Otis Johnson]: Oh man. Hmm. It is been a good life, man. I've come to see a lot of things and understand some things. Understand, yeah, that's right. Because I've been wrestling with, you know, this Hindu and, and Muslim thing and the Christian thing, and the Christians can't get it together because it's Catholics. And then the, then you got the, the Episcopalians now can't get it together because of their division over
- 17:18:03:00 gender issues. The, the, the Methodist church is all split up. Man, please, I don't, I don't wanna be bothered with that. There's bigger things look up. Yeah. There's bigger things to deal with

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- 17:18:17:12 [Tom Kohler]: That. That's right.
- 17:18:18:18 [Otis Johnson]: Sure. That mundane stuff. Man, you keep that away from me. I'm, I want to, I want to keep wrestling with the biggest, for example, what, what, what, why, why do we have a black hole? Why, why do we have black hole? Why do we have black holes?
- 17:18:37:02 [Tom Kohler]: It's 5:15. You can't get into black holes at 5:15. Know it didn't go. All right, here's what I'm thinking. Alright. I'm, I'm 19 and and you're doing minority groups. (Otis: Yeah.) I'm 72 and now you're teaching me theology,
- 17:18:49:02 [Otis Johnson]: Man. Oh, lord... (Tom: That's great!) Well see you. I I say the last thing I'm going to learn is how to die. Until that time I'm going to keep searching for more knowledge because I realize just, how little I do know. And when I walk in a library, I am humbled by just the fact that I see all of this knowledge. And when I go to Google and now
- 17:19:24:15 I gotta get up to AI or a what is it? Is it AI? Oh Lord. I had trouble getting to Google and now I got to go to AI? It's just so much, man.
- 17:19:39:05 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. But let's remember there's information, knowledge and wisdom.
- 17:19:45:07 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah.
- 17:19:46:14 [Tom Kohler]: Wisdom is where you are.
- 17:19:48:13 [Otis Johnson]: Well, I'm searching for it.
- 17:19:50:15 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I'm just saying if you go back to knowledge (Otis: Yeah.) Or information, you're going down the stairs. Yeah. You've already come up the

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stairs. Yeah. To wisdom in a lot of things. Thank you. That's the way I would look at it.

17:20:01:03 [Otis Johnson]: Thank, thank you.

17:20:02:10 [Tom Kohler]: So, stay calm.

17:20:03:11 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah. Well, it, it, it, it is, you know, it it it's, it's learning and then knowing what to do with what you learned and how to apply it and then sharing it with others. To me, I feel driven to share because when I look at where I started and where I am now, it's a

17:20:34:02 miracle. It's a miracle.

17:20:35:13 [Tom Kohler]: Hard won.

17:20:37:08 [Otis Johnson]: Well, I I, I'll leave the other part too to something else, but I, I wasn't supposed to be here in this place, in this society. That's right. So whoever or whatever you call it, had a plan. (Tom: Yeah.) And I'm simply carrying out that plan. And at this point I'm, I'm happy with it because, 'cause I like, I like learning things, man. I'm,

17:21:11:01 I'm always trying to learn something I don't know. And more about what I think I know. Because, because you only know so little of what can be known about anything.

17:21:24:09 [Tom Kohler]: That's, I it was, it's funny you were talking about this 'cause I, and I've, I've wondered, is this part of age? Because to your point, I have in the past six months, I've just been stunned how many times I've thought I have no real idea about that.

17:21:41:13 [Otis Johnson]: Oh, man,

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- 17:21:42:11 [Tom Kohler]: I just don't, I have no real idea about that. (Otis: Yeah.) And it would, I'd have to really dive in. (Otis: Yeah.) But I just...
- 17:21:50:06 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah, well that, that's why I get intimidated when I walk into a library. Gee, I look around and I look at a little section that I think I know something about, but then there a hundred thousand other things with knowledge and, and I don't know anything about it. I'm here talking about black. I don't know anything about black holes. I'm trying to find out something because it's a, you know, it's a mystery. Right. And I would like to know, you know, what, what, what's going on?
- 17:22:20:04 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I I'm, I'm in my old age what I'm trying to learn, seriously, it's the same thing is I've decided to really try to get much better at gardening and horticulture. Oh. Once you, once you, once you open the door. Oh yeah, yeah. You think, oh this, I mean, it's unbelievable. Yeah. Unbelievable. What if you choose to
- 17:22:39:13 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah.
- 17:22:40:07 [Tom Kohler]: What there is to, to learn about that. So I mean Yes.
- 17:22:43:13 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah. Especially the way they are improving fruits and vegetables and stuff like that. Now they got different kinds of corn and wheat that can resist certain kinds of d Oh look man, you would never know everything. So you just keep on digging. (laughs)
- 17:23:02:01 [Tom Kohler]: That's easy. That's the good part, the digging part. Thank you. Thank you.
- 17:23:07:22 [Otis Johnson]: Hey man...
- 17:23:09:00 [Tom Kohler]: For your time, it's great as always.

Otis Johnson

17:23:09:16 [Otis Johnson]: It is been a pleasure, man.

17:23:11:02 [Tom Kohler]: Good, good, good. No, I, you know, yeah.

17:23:13:09 [Otis Johnson]: See the problem with me is don't ask me something if you don't want the Yeah, yeah, yeah. I can't give the the ten second we're not asking. No, never. You know, when I was a politician, you, you get these things and they want to give a sound bite. No, I got to give some context, man. Because I want you to know if I'm gonna make a decision, I want you to know how I came to make that decision.

17:23:37:20 [Mickey Youmans]: I'm sure the News Director loved that.

17:23:38:22 [Otis Johnson]: Oh, you know, they did.

17:23:42:07 [Eric Darling]: I can't get a sound bite!

17:23:43:09 [Otis Johnson]: Yeah. I that's that, that's what they would say. You got to make it shorter, you know?

17:23:49:18 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah.

17:23:50:19 [Otis Johnson]: And they, they, and they used to tease me something. Well, this is not a class. (laughs) Make it short!

17:23:58:22 [Tom Kohler]: I wanna tell one quick story about this. Dickie Mopper told me once when you, y'all running for mayor against each other. Right. One of the highest compliments he ever received. There. There was a question on a panel. He answered it. And when it came to you, he said, I agree with Mr. Mopper. He, to

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this day Yeah. He, he remembers that and considers that like (Otis: Wow.) In his political career, one of the highest moments in his politic career when, when you just defer. I agree with that. Yeah. Move on to the next guy.

17:24:27:05 [Otis Johnson]: I haven't seen him in years, man.

17:24:29:13 [Tom Kohler]: He's, well he's, you know, your age close, right? (Otis: yeah. Yeah.) And in good health, (Otis: good.) What he's done, that's just been to me beautiful. He is helped several people come into the real estate business, who other, who you might not expect to be in real estate business and become quite successful. (Otis: Good.) And, and, and I, and, and for what I can tell that's not an accident this point, this is, he feels like that's the role he can play wants

17:24:59:07 [Otis Johnson]: He wants to leave a legacy.

17:25:01:02 [Tom Kohler]: That's right. And, and Melody Rodriguez would be the person I know who, I mean, after a divorce, she was in a tough spot and got a real estate license. Come into my shop and,

17:25:11:14 [Otis Johnson]: And that's, yeah. So it's good. Well see he's working on his way in his own, he's working on his way. Man. When you, when you are helping people, you, you are earning your keep, man. All right guys, thank you. Thank you. All right, now thank with all of that, I don't know what y'all going to do with all of that. Yeah. You, but.