

Mike O'Neal

- 14:49:50:06 [Eric Darling]: Good. Got it. Thank you sir. And give Mickey just a minute to settle your time. Put my headphones on. Ready? Would you look right at Tom for me? Michael, please. And yeah, actually let me see your other glasses real
- 14:50:12:03 [Mike O'Neal]: Quick. Mm. Okay.
- 14:50:15:23 [Eric Darling]: I want to see if the glare is a little better. Look right at Tom and yeah. Six and one. I think your other ones were actually better.
- 14:50:32:10 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay. Smaller lens. Yeah. Less glaring. Got the, should have seen the other ones I didn't wear. Big round ones touch
- 14:50:40:14 [Eric Darling]: Here. Need some help? I got it. I think that, got it. Hang on, I'm coming around here. Don't let it fall. Good. That's a good idea. There you go. That's good. Now coming up north, that might help a touch.
- 14:51:01:15 [Mike O'Neal]: You said tenants. I, okay. You know, I, I, I go over these things like, oh, once a decade, but
- 14:51:07:18 [Eric Darling]: Then
- 14:51:08:14 [Mike O'Neal]: There are some tenets I can...
- 14:51:13:02 [Eric Darling]: Look right at Tom. One more time.
- 14:51:15:13 [Tom Kohler]: That's better.
- 14:51:16:12 [Mike O'Neal]: That better?
- 14:51:17:17 [Eric Darling]: Yeah. Seems like it's okay. It might help to kick him back up off your ears. Just a little like, like, so, yeah. Okay. We're good.
- 14:51:27:08 [Mike O'Neal]: I'm gonna have to hire you guys. You know, I have a TV show, you know, or Yeah, yeah,
- 14:51:30:17 [Eric Darling]: Yeah.
- 14:51:32:02 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay.
- 14:51:33:03 [Eric Darling]: Alright Tom, we're good to, we're good to go. Alright.
- 14:51:36:19 [Tom Kohler]: All right... Michael, if you wouldn't mind, if you would (phone notification)...
- 14:51:39:22 [Eric Darling]: Turn off your ring,

Mike O'Neal

- 14:51:44:16 [Tom Kohler]: If you wouldn't mind, would you tell me your full name and also spell it?
- 14:51:49:03 [Mike O'Neal]: Michael O'Neal is my full name and I spell it. M-I-C-H-A-E-L O apostrophe, N-E-A-L. That's, capital N.
- 14:51:59:21 [Tom Kohler]: And then Michael O'Neal. What is your preferred pronoun?
- 14:52:03:18 [Mike O'Neal]: He
- 14:52:04:12 [Tom Kohler]: Great, thank you. And would you mind telling us where you were born, if not in Savannah, and also if you were not born in Savannah, how did you kinda wind up here?
- 14:52:14:21 [Mike O'Neal]: Ah, well, I am a proud son of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and I was born and raised in that city and came to Savannah sometime ago in the, in the mid seventies, 1975 to be exact. I was matriculating through post-secondary experiences. And I had an uncle who
- 14:52:45:21 was teaching at Savannah State College who convinced me to come here and continue my education. And that was, as I say, 1975. And I've been here ever since.
- 14:52:58:15 [Tom Kohler]: Gotcha. Well, I know that you are part of the Bahai faith here in Savannah. Yes. And that is not a faith that many of us know much about. Would you mind spending just a little time and just giving us kind of the, the core, you know, kind of the, of the framework for the faith and kind of some of the core tenets?
- 14:53:20:19 [Mike O'Neal]: Yeah, sure. Tom, I, I, I found the Bahai faith in Savannah, by the way. And I found it while at Savannah State University, one of my, I'll say colleagues or was a member of the Bahai faith. Like you and, and, and many others, I had never heard of it. And, and so I began investigating it, not thinking that it was going to be much of a thing in
- 14:53:54:05 my life, but because I thought it, it, it merited investigation since my colleague was a, a member of it. And the more I studied it, the more I became attracted to it, primarily because of the way it encouraged study of it. And also I found that the major tenets of it really resonated with me, primarily the tenant regarding unity. And that part probably has, has been
- 14:54:30:04 the, the major factor in, in my, in my journey as a Bahai is, is how much unity is the, the core belief and the, and what everything else is built on is that we are one human family regardless of our variety and differences of thought and all that. Our challenge is to find out how much our creator
- 14:54:55:13 desires for us to realize that we are only really one. And and as a result I've been a Bahai for quite a few years now.

Mike O'Neal

- 14:55:05:06 [Tom Kohler]: And then do you have a physical place that you, you worship and, and what does that feel and look like?
- 14:55:12:04 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, my, in Savannah certainly we have what we would call, we would call it a center. Bahai Faith Center. And it's, yes, it's only located on Waters Avenue 2416 Waters Avenue. And we've been there for some years. Of course there are Bahais many places that don't necessarily have a center. And on the other end of the spectrum, there are very notable temples around the world where Bahais worship and, but it's
- 14:55:46:15 important to understand that it's not of the place where that's as important as it is the people and their sense of, as I've said before, unity and their effort to bring community together and demonstrate God's love to everyone.
- 14:56:03:11 [Tom Kohler]: Now I've tried to, I've tried to engage you in a couple of political campaigns over the past few years, and you've been polite, but clear that as a Bahai that's a choice you choose not to make.
- 14:56:15:15 [Mike O'Neal]: That is true.
- 14:56:16:16 [Tom Kohler]: Would you explain...
- 14:56:18:15 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, oh, absolutely. Absolutely. In the Bahai faith, we have elections. In those elections, there is no campaigning, there is no campaigning for, there is no degradation of your an opponent because there is no opponent in the Bahai faith elections are, believe it or not, a spiritual matter in which you make your choice in private, you put your choice down and then an election happens and the, the, the leading
- 14:56:51:07 candidates are chosen. Now, sometimes you have to vote again because, but now you're voting for a smaller pool of people. And believe it or not, it happens all over the world from locally in the Bahai community to universally in, in Israel at the Universal House of Justice where Bahais from all over the world vote for the Universal House of Justice members. Once again, no campaigning, no division, which, which frankly one could say
- 14:57:23:10 our political process here is quite dividing to the point where a person says, I'm one and then I'm the other. And you automatically, before you know that person, you have set up some divide between you just because of that process. So the process in my mind becomes a skewed and divisive and works against unity.
- 14:57:46:01 [Tom Kohler]: So, just so I can be clear, so this is not a caution about being active in the larger world. This is a very specific sort of little point of, of a point within the, the faith. This is not suggesting that the Bahai should not be active communally or socially, et cetera. Is that correct?

Mike O'Neal

- 14:58:06:04 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes. Yeah. I, I don't think I've missed an election since you and I have known each other. I don't think I've ever missed an election. I vote my conscious, however, I tried to minimize my, and I'm quite socially active, as you well know. I try to minimize my participation in that aspect of our election that divides us. And currently, in my opinion, in the opinion of of of the institutions, of the
- 14:58:33:05 faith, elections currently do more dividing than they do uniting.
- 14:58:38:01 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I do know that you're socially active and Yes. And let's talk about that a little bit. You are well known in Savannah for organizing something called Parent University. Do you mind describing how that that started and what that, where you've gotten to?
- 14:58:57:08 [Mike O'Neal]: Wow. Yeah, I remember talking to you some 27 years ago, I, when I had the thoughts of doing this, as you well know, I worked for International Paper a long time, or was Union Camp at the time, as an electrician. And of course, you know, I'm the father of four well, and now the grandfather of many, many, many. And one of the tenets of the Bahai Faith is individual investigation of the truth, independent investigation
- 14:59:32:10 of the truth. And as an electrician at International Paper, I also had to study my craft before I would, it, it it, it behooves an electrician to study a little something about what they're doing if they want to have a long career. And way back then we were having some challenges. We were having some challenges in the community and it was becoming divisive. And
- 14:59:56:14 Floyd Adams was the mayor, if you recall.
- 14:59:59:12 [Mike O'Neal]: And I sat on a board that he had put together called the Human Relations Commission. And he came and asked us, 'cause people were talking about all kind of things like boycotting and things of that nature. He says, what can we do to do that? So my background as an electrician and as a Bahai and believing that independent investigation of the truth is really important. You can't just go by what people say, said, well, why don't we come together and kind of study the issue instead of
- 15:00:31:23 just reacting to it? And that seemed ridiculous because there's a thought that there are people who, who are in the know and people who need to be told what the know is. I'd say, well, let's bring all them together and let's really figure out what the know is. And so I began to invite people in small groups who would listen to me, to let's form cadres of people who come together for the sake of learning, for the sake of understanding what
- 15:01:04:07 things really are. And of course, it didn't seem like it was possible. I've talked to you about it, it seemed like kind of like a, I don't know, pipe dream, maybe that you could get people to come in just to learn without having some kind of al

Mike O'Neal

alternative motive for doing so. But what we found is that when people are respected in a learning process, that that's something we all

- 15:01:30:02 love to do. And 25 years later, Tom, after that first initial learning session at Garrison Elementary in 19, in, in 2000, we have now, you know, we do this literally all over the country in some places internationally. And what it simply is, is pursuing knowledge independently. So parents create the topics, they attend... So we may have a lot of topics and
- 15:02:01:23 parents come in and they attend the topic that they want. And as a result, and to make that possible, we provide childcare for them, we provide refreshments, and all we want from them is their feedback. What do you want Parent University to look like next time or down the line? That creates a sense of ownership in the community. So it's not the teacher and the student so much, it's that it's protagonist. Everybody is doing their part
- 15:02:34:01 to make this thing successful. And as I said, we celebrated our 25th anniversary earlier this year. So it's, it's been quite a journey. Parent University. And, and once again, it started in the living room of a par... Of a Savannahian and now it's across the country. And even going international,
- 15:02:53:17 [Tom Kohler]: Would you be able to...
- 15:02:55:07 [Eric Darling]: Sorry, real quick, Mike, would you mind putting your phone down? I see it a lot in the shot when you're moving.
- 15:02:59:01 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay.
- 15:02:59:18 [Eric Darling]: Sorry.
- 15:03:00:20 [Tom Kohler]: Would you be able to guess roughly how many people in let's say Chatham County have participated over the 25 years?
- 15:03:07:20 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, it's, well, more than 10,000, they're probably closing in on more than that. But in Chatham County, and I'm, I'm talking I'm talking independent people, not people who have participated multiple times. 'cause some people come and they want one, they want one class on macrame or something. But then some people come. And this experience of being in a learning environment that is not judgemental, people fall in
- 15:03:38:14 love with it. And we have Parent University folks who have participated in the activity since 2000, still attending. Now of course, they're probably sitting in there with their children and grandchildren now. We, we, we have Parent University sessions that have four generations of participants in them. Yes, this is true. I can give you names. And because the environment is so conducive and joyful about around learning that it becomes a, a

Mike O'Neal

- 15:04:12:23 joyous, something you're looking forward to as opposed to something you're required to do by law or because you're expected to do it for a job or some motive like that.
- 15:04:24:11 [Tom Kohler]: So this is a, this is an idea that in many ways grew out of a core Bahai tenent... Principle.
- 15:04:32:19 [Mike O'Neal]: Absolutely.
- 15:04:33:02 [Tom Kohler]: And, and over 25 years, you've carried it forward to be in this community of, I got a major force, if you will, for particularly parents who use the public schools to learn more about their children, learn more about themselves, learn more about their community, learn more about the school system, learn more about how to relate to the school system, et cetera, et cetera. And you've now branched into other
- 15:05:04:06 cities and towns?
- 15:05:05:22 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, absolutely. We are, we're in, we're we're everywhere from Florida to Illinois, north and south, and everywhere from the east coast, the Atlantic to California to the on the Pacific, we are literally endeavoring across the nation. Now, not everywhere is as robust as Savannah, yet we have, you know, we have projects at, at very level of various levels of development. But they're all Parent Universities and
- 15:05:38:08 they're all working off of this model, which, which is most important is that we understand that parents are the primary consideration. They're not secondary, they're the primary consideration. We understand how important children are. As a matter of fact, we're doing it for the children. But we realize that if children are being guided every day by parents who are less than their maximum effectiveness, that the odds of those children realizing
- 15:06:07:08 their full potential are pretty small. And so we have since simply shifted the focus to the element of the family that the children are most exposed to with our premise is if that element is sound, that the children have a better chance of being sound themselves. And there's, there's lots of evidence to prove that.
- 15:06:31:21 [Tom Kohler]: Are there other people in your congregation that are doing things probably not as dramatic as this, but that are clearly doing things for the greater good, either in our community or maybe outside of our community?
- 15:06:49:02 [Mike O'Neal]: That's a great question. And I'm going to, I'm gonna approach this question carefully because everyone has their role. And so you see something like Parent University, you go, wow, that's the way to go. But then there, there may be a one neighbor that you may need to do a service for, and that's your thing. And that is important in the community. It's something like Parent University over 25

Mike O'Neal

years gets a lot of light, a lot of press and something like that. But the very core of the Bahai faith

15:07:19:23 is that you, through all religion, is to serve others. So this is not just pontificating, this is not just talking, which unfortunately happens quite a bit. This is action. You're... there, there is a, a thing that Bahais talk about very often called social action endeavors. And your measure should really be what you, your deed and not your words.

15:07:47:07 [Mike O'Neal]: My, one of the quotes that Bahai use often is "let deeds, not words be your adorning." And so we have lots of people that can talk really well and recite things, but might walk right by somebody in need and not give it a second thought. So to answer your question, there are lots of endeavors happening around the world. As a matter of fact, my stage I consider to be worldwide. We, I happen to be here because of circumstances where I live. This is where, you know, layers of onion kind

15:08:17:19 of thing. You have to put as much energy here as you put out here on the periphery. But there are, to your, to answer your question, there are lots of Bahais who do lots of things. Most of it won't be as visible because we're not doing it for press and we're not doing it for, to impress. We're doing it for the service because we believe that that's where it really counts.

15:08:47:11 [Tom Kohler]: I do know another Bahai, Ray Rudolph, Dr. Rudolph, has, has he been involved outside of faith in medical mission work or other things that you would know of?

15:09:03:05 [Mike O'Neal]: Dr. Rudolph, his wife, many other colleagues. Once again, he, he's helped with Parent University. He's helped, while he was active in the medical field with the, the American Cancer Society. He, he, we, we think it is just as important to clean up the trash where it was needed to do something very illustrious and well known. And it really, and,

15:09:36:05 and, and with Ray, with Barbara, with, with Dr. Zaer, with, so with all the Bahais, if I start naming people, then I'm gonna not name somebody. And then that's, but service is a key aspect. Service is worship. As a matter of fact, in the Bahai faith,

15:09:57:08 [Mike O'Neal]: You know, we, you can be praying, you can be, you can be pious and all that kind of stuff. And all that's good and all that's encouraged. But service is even more important. And, and while you're serving, if you say a prayer or you're mindful of our creator, and God, that's wonderful. But that service part is so important. As a matter of fact, one of the key figures in the faith gentlemen that came to be known as Abdul Baha would be so busy trying to run the faith as, as during,

15:10:28:11 during the time that he was like, like incarcerated would take the time to go and sit by someone's bedside and just serve them. And every since that period, Bahais

Mike O'Neal

have been encouraged to serve others regardless of what other, what other circumstances you have.

- 15:10:49:13 [Tom Kohler]: Does the faith is, is the faith interested in the experience of interfaith involvement in a community? Or does the faith tend to maintain itself outside of that experience? Or how does, how does the faith or the local Bahai community think about its relationship to other parts of the religious community here?
- 15:11:15:01 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh my, well, you know, see the mankind is one, religion is one. So now that, that's the tenet, okay, now we have divided into so many pieces that, that seems like a kind of a bizarre statement when it should be actually just, can only be like one God if you think about it. But we are so many distinct pieces right now that we don't
- 15:11:47:00 realize we're only part of one concoction. So to answer your question, Bahais, wherever possible long to be a part of anything that, let's call it interfaith. If, if, if that's what we wanna call it to be a part of that, to be an active part of that. And, and in more than just words.
- 15:12:10:12 [Mike O'Neal]: But we will, we will do that as far as the other participants want to go with that. 'cause the fact of the matter is we should do everything together. The division in and of itself is a challenge to realizing that we're only one. So we, Bahais once again, here I am sitting talking to you in Savannah, we have a certain set of circumstances, but there are Bahais in Uganda or South America or, or, or, or places where they don't even allow the discussion of religion. So we want to be a part
- 15:12:41:20 of mankind. And in some places that where like even where religion is not allowed to talk to, to be talked about, for instance, well then we try and be good citizens. But with regard to interfaith, I, I think I've served many times with, with many people here as in interfaith activities. And we will continue and, and and nationally and internationally at the UN and
- 15:13:11:07 other places, Bahai is very prominent, even though the religion may seem relatively small in some circles, in fact the Bahai faith is like the second most widespread religion in the world. Which seems like a bizarre statement because we're only a few million people internationally. But we've spread all over the world so that we can bring the messages that religion should be one.
- 15:13:36:15 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I know if you're on Waters Avenue, that neighborhood, some people would say would be a neighborhood that's, you know, economically depressed. In terms of homelessness or maybe food insecurity. Does, does, do you have a connection and relationship to those kind of issues in the neighborhood or in the larger city?

Mike O'Neal

- 15:14:01:13 [Mike O'Neal]: Well, absolutely all the things. And once again, I use, we, we've had the, we've had these examples at, throughout the development of the Bahai faith through 18, since 1844, we've had these development through the, the, through the leaders of the faith to always serve, always serve mankind, both physically and spiritually. And one of the reasons, it, we've been at that location for 30 years and, and you think what? You, you look at it now, you have thought about it. Imagine
- 15:14:33:21 what it was when we got there 30 years ago. So we are to the, to the credit of the friends in Savannah, we, we, we consulted and we talked ourselves into coming to that building when it was a little bit dangerous, I'm gonna use the word okay. And we have been there that whole time. Now, now the community is changing, you see. But we get to regard ourselves as an anchor
- 15:15:03:05 in that community because you go where you're needed, you just, you can't just go where it's convenient. You, we, so we go where we were needed and we've been there, and by the way, we've served scores and scores and scores of young people in that area, which I'm not sure that there are services that you could do that are much more important in the development in Savannah than serving young
- 15:15:33:02 people in that particular location than what, than what we've been able to do over the last few decades. Now, once again, it's quiet. It's not to draw attention, it's not to get camera shots. It's 'cause it's what's needed. And, and by the way, and as a result, we've seen lots of tragedy in that particular area, but we put ourselves on the front line and we expected that to happen. But, and, but to your, we, we do kind of go where we're
- 15:16:02:17 needed.
- 15:16:03:21 [Tom Kohler]: So you made a conscious decision as a congregation?
- 15:16:06:23 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh yes.
- 15:16:07:14 [Tom Kohler]: To pick a spot.
- 15:16:09:03 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh yes.
- 15:16:09:09 [Tom Kohler]: That was in a tough place.
- 15:16:13:23 [Mike O'Neal]: Well said.
- 15:16:14:20 [Tom Kohler]: And just, we're gonna be here. It's gonna come to us, we're gonna go to it.
- 15:16:20:02 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes.
- 15:16:20:10 [Tom Kohler]: We'll see what happens.

Mike O'Neal

- 15:16:21:14 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes. Yes. Not that we move forward without fear, like any human might, not that we haven't been a little, or some of the friends might be a little intrepid, you know, a little, a bit afraid about what's happening outside while we were in saying some prayers or cooking some food and there's shots or something like that. Not that we have not been without fear. Okay. But we rely on faith that we're doing the right
- 15:16:54:06 thing. And if even it's just something and things have happened, and if even something should happen that we will know that we were here trying to do the right thing.
- 15:17:04:13 [Tom Kohler]: This, this is a little more a personal question. I'm just curious, you mentioned you have four children, five?
- 15:17:09:19 [Mike O'Neal]: Three sons and a daughter.
- 15:17:11:13 [Tom Kohler]: And a bunch of grandchildren
- 15:17:13:18 [Mike O'Neal]: We're, I'm calling 'em 13, I'm saying 13 grandkids. There's a story there
- 15:17:19:08 [Tom Kohler]: And is everybody of the faith?
- 15:17:21:13 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh yeah, yeah. I'm lucky. And that doesn't happen in every Bahai family, but I, I've been very fortunate. I've, at this point, I was the first one in my family who, in my nuclear family who became a Bahai. And now of all my brothers and sisters, all but one are Bahais and it's, I I consider that a great blessing. And all of my children are, are Bahais as well.
- 15:17:50:04 [Tom Kohler]: And would some of your children have the same commitment to both faith but also to service larger service?
- 15:17:59:02 [Mike O'Neal]: That's a great question. And the way I'll answer that, I would say everybody has a unique connection with God. Now, they can be somewhat similar to me in the way that they express it, or they could be very different. But what I can tell you is that each one considers themselves a Bahai and, and try not to be too daddy bias. I've seen each of my children serve and I've, I've, I've, I've, I have felt the sincerity when they pray, and I've seen, I've seen them, you know, one, you know,
- 15:18:32:18 you're praying, you're listening to what's happening with your child. And, and I I I know they have a close relationship with God. I know they do. And they call themselves Bahais and we have served together. However, each color in the crayon box is a little different. And it, and that's okay. Or even encouraged.
- 15:18:55:17 [Tom Kohler]: Gotcha. How, how would your, how would you say that your faith helped you become just the person you are today?

Mike O'Neal

- 15:19:11:01 [Mike O'Neal]: Whew. It was a journey. Even after I declared myself a Bahai. I certainly had a lot of work to do and as I do today, but I even had more to do at that time. And it, it has, it has, it is the, it is the aspiration. It is the point of adoration for me. If I can become a good Bahai, then my life was worth it. As a result, I have embraced service
- 15:19:45:18 and embraced integrity and embraced so many things that I probably would have been a little less attached to. So it, it is, it, I I, I got married because I was Bahai and, and, and I, and I found a young lady who, who, who was willing, and I got married and at 20, 20 years old, and it has, and
- 15:20:15:15 we've had children and we've taught them all be Bahais. Once again, there's action and there's words. And so all of my actions have not always been fully Bahai, but we try every day and I'm trying again tomorrow.
- 15:20:31:23 [Tom Kohler]: That's great. So if I were to summarize what I've heard from you today, central tenet of the faith is unity.
- 15:20:43:05 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, yes.
- 15:20:44:11 [Tom Kohler]: And service is woven into every aspect of it. It's central for you. That has meant noticing when in our community, there was a moment in time when, if I remember this right, a teacher at East Broad Elementary
- 15:21:08:16 [Mike O'Neal]: Mmm. Yes.
- 15:21:09:04 [Tom Kohler]: Was being scapegoated. As a racist.
- 15:21:13:05 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes.
- 15:21:13:13 [Tom Kohler]: And it turned out that people that knew her knew that there were, could be many racists in Savannah, but that this was not one.
- 15:21:22:01 [Mike O'Neal]: Mm, mmm.
- 15:21:22:16 [Tom Kohler]: And there was a lot of hostility toward her from primarily African American parents. And if I remember right, that's in some ways that's the genesis of Parent University.
- 15:21:37:20 [Mike O'Neal]: That is, that is very much We, we, the lotus blossom emerged from the mire.
- 15:21:43:09 [Mickey Youmans]: Excuse me, Tom. Don't crunch that paper around. Sorry about that, sir.
- 15:21:50:21 [Mike O'Neal]: As in many cases, the lotus blossom emerges from the mire. And so what happened was, those unfortunate circumstances gave me personally the opportunity to bring people together, to talk about it as a matter and to learn how

Mike O'Neal

to rise above this, or even what we thought rising above it would look like through learning, through continuous learning

- 15:22:21:17 about circumstances and not following headlines as, as a result, parents who were distant from schools because, because they thought their job was only to drop the kid off and pick the kid up. Okay. Once parents began to learn that they are an integral part of the learning process, not just for their child, but their own learning, the core energy around which Parent
- 15:22:50:22 University exists now was born. And people began to admit they like learning. Learning has been fun to them. They, they, we eat it up when it's done right. And here we are, 25, 26 years later, thousands of parents around the country. I, I must say that yes, I had a hand in starting it, but the parents are the champions. I said to you earlier, there was more than 10,000. Everybody tells me, Mike, don't say more than 10,000. Nobody
- 15:23:24:20 will believe you. We've had that many thousands of parents come through here, rain, shine for 25 years. And they have been an inspiration, not only to Savannah, but places in Chicago, places in Oswego, places in California, places in, in, in Florida. So they have, they are the real heroes of this
- 15:23:50:18 story. And I get to be amongst them.
- 15:23:54:22 [Tom Kohler]: Well, it seems like it's a perfect story about faith in action.
- 15:24:01:12 [Mike O'Neal]: Wow. Yes.
- 15:24:02:13 [Tom Kohler]: You had no idea how much action would come, but you used your faith
- 15:24:07:10 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes.
- 15:24:07:21 [Tom Kohler]: To take a step.
- 15:24:08:23 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes.
- 15:24:09:11 [Tom Kohler]: And one step has led to another.
- 15:24:10:22 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes. Yes.
- 15:24:12:10 [Tom Kohler]: And here we are today,
- 15:24:13:19 [Mike O'Neal]: And I still use the same premise, move on faith, don't be attached to what happened yesterday. Move on faith that you will be guided. If you're sincere and you ask for help from God, that that help will come. It may not look like what you thought it would look like, but I wake up every day thinking, knowing that I don't know all the answers, but

Mike O'Neal

- 15:24:43:23 he does. And so I just keep moving. And you know, as you say, here we are.
- 15:24:50:20 [Tom Kohler]: Michael O'Neal, faith in action. Thank you so much.
- 15:24:53:23 [Mike O'Neal]: Thank you, Tom.
- 15:24:56:05 [Eric Darling]: While, we still have the cameras rolling. Would you mind just a couple quick things? And Tom, if you have to run, I totally understand.
- 15:25:01:17 [Tom Kohler]: I should run, if that's all right.
- 15:25:03:16 [Eric Darling]: Mickey, would you mind taking his seat? I just want, I just want a couple of housekeeping things. Yes. Like, basically a primer for the uninformed about what...
- 15:25:11:17 [Mike O'Neal]: Thank you, Tom.
- 15:25:13:00 [Eric Darling]: is Bahai, what the, the core tenets of Bahai.
- 15:25:15:15 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes.
- 15:25:15:22 [Eric Darling]: Yes. How it, how it started and who it's about and why, why it exists.
- 15:25:20:07 [Mike O'Neal]: Yes. Yes. Sure.
- 15:25:21:20 [Eric Darling]: Maybe we'll start with that. And also, I just sort of want, I don't know that you gave it, you, you and Tom know each other so well. You kind of just jumped into Parent University. Yes. A primer on that as well. Just what that's about, what your mission is. Okay. That kind of thing. So take it one at a time, but tell Mickey if you would.
- 15:25:35:04 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay. So..
- 15:25:35:16 [Eric Darling]: And ignore me.
- 15:25:36:08 [Mike O'Neal]: I'll start with about Bahai Faith.
- 15:25:39:02 [Eric Darling]: That's great.
- 15:25:39:20 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Oh, okay. Yes.
- 15:25:43:00 [Eric Darling]: If you could take the phone and sort of pocket it if you... I'm sorry.
- 15:25:44:17 [Mike O'Neal]: Okay. Just got some...
- 15:25:47:02 [Mickey Youmans]: You do what you gotta do.

Mike O'Neal

- 15:25:48:03 [Mike O'Neal]: Some notes here. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I can say I So some of the tenats?
- 15:25:52:18 [Eric Darling]: Real general.
- 15:25:53:09 [Mike O'Neal]: Real real general,
- 15:25:54:07 [Eric Darling]: Yeah. Just to sort of, sort of get us acquainted
- 15:25:56:05 [Mike O'Neal]: With I did touch 'em, I did touch him
- 15:25:57:14 [Eric Darling]: A, a general understanding, if you will. I mean, there's a lot more to anything
- 15:26:00:20 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, my, we can do here today. Oh goodness.
- 15:26:03:08 [Eric Darling]: You know what I mean? Just sort
- 15:26:04:10 [Mike O'Neal]: Of like I understand.
- 15:26:06:09 [Eric Darling]: What's your elevator pitch about what the faith is.
- 15:26:07:04 [Mike O'Neal]: So, and Tom and I somewhat talked about the Bahai faith is essentially a religion centered around the unity of the human race. And that there's one human race and that there's one race. And that's the race that was created by our Lord. And un until we get there, we'll, we'll ne no one religion will, will ever be able to, to do what it even
- 15:26:37:09 claims to do. Bahai Faith was started in 1844. I tried to reference that one time. The Bahai Faith was started in 1844 in what we call Persia, what was called Persia at that time. And it, it's, it's, it's it initial prophet or manifestation at that time was someone called the Bab who was executed for some of the things that he taught. Some of the things that, that he
- 15:27:11:01 taught was things like men and women were equal. It sounds, doesn't sound that bad of a statement now, but it's enough to get him killed as, as well as there should be things like harmony of science and religion that, oh my
- 15:27:40:02 goodness, there are so many tenets. But what I will focus on is that
- 15:27:50:07 [Mike O'Neal]: There are so many, I'm going to take a break. Yeah, yeah, no problem. Because there, there are, there are just, there are just so many that I, I said, well, I'm gonna leave one out and I'm gonna say these things.
- 15:28:02:16 [Eric Darling]: Was the Bab also known as Bahá'u'lláh Is that right?
- 15:28:05:14 [Mike O'Neal]: So the Bab, the one I was just about to say, and the Bab said "after me, there's gonna come another" that was Bahá'u'lláh.

Mike O'Neal

- 15:28:13:09 [Eric Darling]: Got it. Okay.
- 15:28:14:04 [Mike O'Neal]: Was Bahá'u'lláh So the Bab came first. It's like John the Baptist, kind of in, in a, in a, and if you were looking for like a Christian equivalent, it would be like...
- 15:28:23:01 [Eric Darling]: Tell Mickey this stuff. This is great.
- 15:28:24:02 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, okay.
- 15:28:25:06 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 15:28:26:22 [Mike O'Neal]: So, so what we talked about so far was, first of all is that mankind was one. And that this was the time that for all the religions to come together and work together, that was the most important thing. And that he was bringing the message for that to happen. Well, a lot of people where he lived did not agree with that so much so that he was executed, which is a whole miracle story in and of itself. They had to do
- 15:28:57:09 it twice. But he, one of the, the other thing he said, and we'll just go right into this, is that a, is that a prophet, a manifestation was going to come shortly after him. That was gonna be the person to establish the next world religion that would, that would unite the religions. And he would bring new tenets, new teachings. And shortly after the Bab's execution, one of his adherents became known as Bahá'u'lláh which means the glory of
- 15:29:32:06 God. That's what that means. And Bahá'u'lláh said that he's the person that the Bab was speaking of. And that those people who had become, what they called Babis at that time, should now turn to him and become Bahais.
- 15:29:49:12 [Mike O'Neal]: Tens of thousands of Bahais were killed because of some of the things that Bahá'u'lláh said, that the current Orthodox and the current religion found untenable to say the least. And, and Bahá'u'lláh was put in prison for the rest of his life. Prisons that ended up sending him to places like Constantinople, Adrianople, which is
- 15:30:20:02 something else now. And he ended up in this country that some of us have heard of before, what we now call Israel was Palestine of the place. And he was put in this prison, this prison in Acca to spend the rest of his life. But of course, he was let out to live in that area. But he was always a prisoner. And over from, from like 1860s for the 1863 and later to 1890,
- 15:31:00:02 1890s, Bahá'u'lláh lived in Acca. And the Bahai faith grew to be a worldwide religion because people would come there, hear his teachings, and go and spread it. Now, among his teachings, these were, the teachings I was talking about was the equality of men and women. I keep saying that because it's, it may, it

Mike O'Neal

- 15:31:21:11 may not sound like it did then in what we now call the Middle East. But then it was, it was, it was this insane thing to say that he also said, we now will make independent investigation of the truth supersede the priesthood. 'cause before then, you had to have, you know, had to be
- 15:31:51:02 educated and taught by someone who was what we call clergy. Bahá'u'lláh said you need, you should study the holy writings for yourself.
- 15:32:00:18 [Mike O'Neal]: Thereby all people need to be educated. And if a preference in a family needs to happen about, between a children, between a child who was a boy child and a girl child, send the girl child to school. See, these things were said. These things that were said were just like such an outrageous statement to make. And then all the children need to study for themselves and learn what has been said in history and history
- 15:32:31:10 and what prophets are saying, what he's saying today. So I I, I stay on education 'cause I'm feeling real talking about the educational piece right now. He also said there should be one world language. Remember this is in the eight, mid 18 hundreds that he's saying there should be one world language and many other things that happened. And as a result of some of the things that were hap that he said, he stayed in what we call, what we would call
- 15:33:08:17 sequester prison for the rest of his life. And, and, but while this happened on Mount Carmel, you've heard guys heard of Mount Carmel in Haifa. Bahá'u'lláh established the Bahai World Center, which is there till today. And at the Bahai World Center, Bahais all over the world get
- 15:33:33:01 guidance from the Universal House of Justice, which Bahá'u'lláh told his adherents to establish. And so the Bahais all over the world are communicated with, through communications with the Universal House of Justice and institutions that have been established to make sure that the Bahai stay one faith, once again, this is important that faiths, of course,
- 15:34:02:10 you can believe whatever you wanna believe and be whatever faith.
- 15:34:04:12 [Mike O'Neal]: But however, at some point, religion has to become one if it's going to unite the planet. And, and so this is, you know, I've said things about the equality of men, women and men. I've said things about education that are important. I the economies have to become just around the world. And so many other tenets that I, I don't want to read down a list of tenets, but so many tenets that Bahá'u'lláh bought over
- 15:34:35:01 his many years of life. And at his passing, he, his oldest son, who we call Abdul Baha, and I referenced them earlier, Abdul Baha became the interpreter of his writings. Bahá'u'lláh wrote over a hundred volumes during his incarceration. Oh yes, yes. Some are still being interpreted. And that he left Abdul Baha to interpret what he could and, and, and be the

Mike O'Neal

- 15:35:10:22 exemplar of his father's teachings. And it's Abdul Baha that helped many of us understand that it's your deeds are more important than your words. We can all talk, but what are you doing for society, for your family, for the people who aren't your family? What are you doing? And Abdul Baha
- 15:35:39:09 demonstrated that very well up until like 1921. 'cause Bahá'u'lláh died in, in 1893. Hope I got that right. But Ab ab Abdul Baha died in 1921. And then Abdul Baha left his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who really built the faith up and did it all from Haifa until 1953 when the Universal House of Justice was established. And so today we have Bahais all over the world. As
- 15:36:09:21 a matter of fact, I, many years ago, I heard it was the second most widespread matter of fact, it was printed, it was the second most widespread religion in the world.
- 15:36:17:15 [Mike O'Neal]: Now does that mean most voluminous? No, it doesn't mean the most people, but it means Bahais are everywhere. And I personally myself, have been to like 15 countries in Africa and in Asia and the United States and North America. I have, I have been, every country I've ever been there have been Bahais who would, who would actually take us, take me in, and we would talk about where the faith is in their country and how we can be of service. So, and, and as of as of today, I have the good
- 15:36:55:00 fortune of my family continuing to regard the faith as their father came to regard it almost 50 over 50 years ago actually now. And we continue.
- 15:37:09:20 [Mickey Youmans]: That, that's, you know, so, and it's, it's wonderful. So I'm seeing this picture of ev people everywhere. Everywhere there's in there is there currently today. So that's the big, the oneness, right? So is there a place today on the planet that would be considered the sort of center of oneness?
- 15:37:33:04 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh yes. Yes. It's, it's, it's at the, in Israel, it's on Mount Carmel, it's in Haifa on Mount Carmel. If you were to visit Mount Carmel, you on, you would see on it some large super structures that, by the way, now Bahá'u'lláh I remember, came there as a prisoner when it was Palestine just so the miracle. Now today, the Bahai World Center is located right there in Mount Carmel. It's, it's one, if you were just to look up Baha World Center, you, you'll, you'll see, and that's, that is the
- 15:38:06:15 world center, that is the heart of, of the Bahai faith. However, everywhere where there is, every continent, there's a Bahai structure called a house of worship.
- 15:38:24:16 [Mike O'Neal]: We have in, in the United States or North America, there's a place in Wilmette, Illinois, you know, Santiago, South Carolina. South South America. In India, New Delhi, India, in on the continent of Africa and Uganda. There's one, and there's way more being built all the time. It's kind of like in organic outgrowth from Haifa. Now temples are

Mike O'Neal

- 15:38:55:14 coming together all over the world. And, and once again, the organic nature of it's very important because what's important is that it's not the swiftness of the growth, but organically that the Bahai faith remains unified. That's what's important, that we understand that unity is the primary reason for being here. So if, if we were to go from one from, from, from a million to a billion, and then that billion doesn't, is not unified, we would not have accomplished anything. So what we have to accomplish is
- 15:39:28:10 that the human race understands that regardless of color or sex or language or location or, God forbid, politics or anything else, that we are all one creation of one God whose desire is to see us unified. And, and, and so that was the purpose of, of the Bab ending a, an epoch and
- 15:40:00:09 Bahá'u'lláh starting a new epoch or more than that, that will last as I've heard it for 500,000 years. So we've got a little while to get it together. But, but it's, it's, it's, it has so profoundly changed my life. I I, I couldn't tell you in, in several hours how it has changed my life. And, you
- 15:40:31:19 know, there's so much more I could say about it. And what I do also wanna say about it is this, I'm glad to be here to talk about education.
- 15:40:41:17 [Mike O'Neal]: And what I said about, for instance, clergy and stuff like that, is, is, is is that the reason why you don't need clergy anymore is because every person is responsible for themselves. And what we do is really based on what we know. So everyone has to study, everyone has to be able to read, everyone has to be able to understand the holy books from, from Buddhism to Hinduism, to Zoroastrianism, to Islam, to
- 15:41:15:13 Christianity, whatever your, your thinking religion is. Study for yourself and not be told and not learn about God through the eyes of someone else, but through your own. Because he seeks to just converse with you directly, such as that happens, which is through his manifestations. So I just wanted
- 15:41:43:22 to say that and, and I can answer any question you might,
- 15:41:47:20 [Mickey Youmans]: You know, if, if from Savannah, if you could just say a, maybe a summary. I know you've talked about it, you know, but just for, you know, what, you know, sort of like what is the, what are you looking forward to here in this community and the, in the near future?
- 15:42:08:21 [Mike O'Neal]: Well, you know, as I said, long term, oh, well, well, as, as I said earlier, you know, I came to Savannah and found the Bahai faith, right? So I, I look forward to the day when Bahais have continued their service in the community and the community begins to respond in the way that it will. And that we enhance the level of unity and the level of love and service in our community as well as, and what that

Mike O'Neal

- 15:42:41:20 looks like. You see, I don't spend a lot of time thinking that I know what it will look like, but I know that you will, you will under... That the unity of our efforts, all of our efforts will be recognizable. You won't be able to not understand that this is a community whose unification is a step
- 15:43:05:15 above a significant step above what it was 50 years ago.
- 15:43:15:15 [Mike O'Neal]: And that not only is it unified, but it sees all of its citizens as people to be served. Rather, you are extremely wealthy or rather you are not so wealthy, or rather you are poor. That we will see each other as brothers and sisters, who we want to experience the best life that they can wherever they are. And so for different people, it, that looks different. And that also we are consulting, and I didn't use this in,
- 15:43:49:06 I really wanted to, I don't have to worry about knowing everything. I don't have to worry about knowing everything. In the Bahai faith, there's this thing called consultation. And what consultation does is consultation. There's a process. Whereas the only way we make a decision is that we have
- 15:44:17:22 all talked about it. Regardless how smart everybody is in the room, they're not smarter than the collective of the room if you're listening to everyone. And so right now, very few people make a lot of decisions, but I'm looking for the day when people can come together and consult about everything. And I don't mean debate, I don't mean argue, I mean consult
- 15:44:45:22 knowing that we know the answers, the answers are in us. If we come together in a loving, trusting faith-based, faith-based kind of environment, that we'll find the answers together because our creator has given it has given us that if we work together, and as long as we're not working together, we won't come up with the answers. It doesn't, it, it may look like or temporary look like we have, but to, in order, in order for us to do the next right thing, we have to all come together on a topic, make a
- 15:45:22:01 decision together, and follow it. Even if we don't all think that, that this wasn't exactly what I was thinking, but it's what we were thinking together. Because there's something divine in that, in the fact that we have faith that our consultation will yield the right answer.
- 15:45:42:16 [Mickey Youmans]: That's great.
- 15:45:44:15 [Mike O'Neal]: You know, if, if, if it's, so
- 15:45:47:10 [Eric Darling]: That's, that's good. That's good. All good. But I would like to hear the primer, if you will, on Parent University.
- 15:45:54:00 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, oh my. Okay. So the origin of it. Yes, the mission today, right? The mission today, Parent University, Parent University, as we said earlier,

Mike O'Neal

was brought, or something that was brought to the community many years ago now to help with a particular situation where parents and the community was at odds with the schools over a particular event. It was that particular event. But it could have been

- 15:46:24:03 another, you know, because again, when you're sitting on a powder keg, it's always like lively to blow, right? So what we did was we created a space where people could come and talk about education, the importance of it, what it meant to them, what it meant to their children. And so to do that we had to bring groups together and consult and say, what would that space look like? What would you trust? The parents shared their thoughts, school
- 15:46:59:03 people shared their thoughts, general community citizens shared... And as a result of that, we came to together 25 years ago and formulated this thing that we now call Parent University. And what happens there is parents come there, they're treated well, they're consulted with, we ask for their feedback. They're, they're given an opportunity to attend classes that they have suggested. Very important. They have suggested these classes and they get to choose
- 15:47:30:01 one of those classes and they go and attend the class. Then we come back and we debrief, we talk to each other. What did we learn today? What would you like to learn going forward? And while this is happening or before we have this debrief, their children are fed, their children have received childcare, we have fun, we may have prizes, things of that nature to make the day look like a social event that's not just about learning, but about
- 15:47:59:20 building community. And as a result of this, we, we, we have been probably to 20 different schools in, in Savannah, several schools multiple times. And we've, you know, enlisted, I can't even begin to tell you how many classes we had because people asked for a class. We put the class in there.
- 15:48:20:09 And some people might not think it's a particularly academic exercise.
- 15:48:27:18 [Mike O'Neal]: You know, the class might be Zumba or the class might 'cause you have to be physically healthy as well as mentally as, right? The class might also be scholastic standards. What a parent needs to know, you know, it could be just, and everything in between and outside of those things. But the important thing is the parents asked for the class. So now they are in the process. They're not just being told what to do. And
- 15:49:01:07 what we found is that when people feel as though they have ownership of process, they're a whole different animal. All of us are that way. And, and, and as a result, parents have come out to Parent University for 25 years. They've come out in torrential rains. There was, it's not impossible for us to have four or almost 500 people on a Saturday at an event called

Mike O'Neal

- 15:49:26:14 Parent University to learn. So I don't know if you're familiar with most of a lot of school activities. Yeah. But more like 10 or 15 might show up. We're talking hundreds of people. We just recently did a program in another city that had 470 people. So then at the end of a period, we'll say a year, an academic year, we are careful to make sure that parents feel rewarded. So we have a graduation for our parents every year. And you can graduate every year, even if you
- 15:50:03:22 graduated a year before you can graduate the next year. Some of our parents have walked to graduation 20 times. Why? Because learning is continuous. It doesn't stop when you got your first diploma. Unfortunately, we're under this impression is my learning stopped when I finished school. But learning never stops. So what we have demonstrated parents that you can learn every
- 15:50:29:09 year, and we will reward you every year if that's what you want. Because we want your child, your neighbor, your constituents, your friends, to see that you are engaged in learning perpetually. And that's what Parent University has become, is in its 26 year a model of continuous learning.
- 15:50:50:11 [Eric Darling]: That's, that's amazing. This is all non-sectarian. It's not, it's it's not based on, I mean it's an outcropping of your faith in Bahai, but it's not a Bahai initiative per se.
- 15:51:01:20 [Mike O'Neal]: It is important. It is very important.
- 15:51:04:20 [Mickey Youmans]: Look at me when you...
- 15:51:05:11 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It is very important when you're doing service, that you're doing service for the sake of service. If you are doing service to, to enroll or to heighten the regard of your faith, your service isn't worthy in our manner, in our thinking. Service is important when you're doing it for the service of humankind. We are all brothers and sisters and we do that service for that purpose. If
- 15:51:39:14 you do that service in that vein, people may ask you questions and at that point, you, you honestly answer what you think. But we are not doing a service because you're a Bahai or because we want you to become Bahai. Now there are events where sure, that's this event is to teach, is to talk about Bahai faith if you're instant come on in. But something like a Parent University or a service that is a social action
- 15:52:08:08 that we are doing to address a need in the community. And it does not have, I, there's a word, I know there's a word that I, that people do when they go around and giveaway blankets 'cause they want people to join their church or something like that.
- 15:52:26:06 [Eric Darling]: Proselytizing?

Mike O'Neal

- 15:52:27:18 [Mike O'Neal]: Proselytizing, yeah. Proselytizing. We, it is as if we are proselytizing, we have really done a, an injustice because something we could have done that was beautiful. Now you've kind of scarred it with an underpinned motive. So no. Do we, I I have worked very hard in my own quiet moments to make sure that I'm not doing this in order to
- 15:53:01:11 persuade someone to do something that they didn't want to do. I'm doing this for the service and I believe that our creator will use this and mechanisms that our creator uses to make happen what needs to happen.
- 15:53:21:04 [Mike O'Neal]: So, no, it's, there is, there is no requirement. There's no requirement of, as a matter of fact, you don't even have to have children to participate in Parent University. What we realize is that our children are raised by more than their parents. There's the neighbors, there's the teachers, there's the merchants there, all the other adults in the community. If they realize that they, that, that they're also in charge of the development of our next generation, things would be a lot better. And so if you come to Parent University, all we ask that you're interested
- 15:53:53:07 in the success of our community and our children in our schools, that's pretty much what we ask.
- 15:53:59:09 [Mickey Youmans]: It's all about giving.
- 15:54:01:00 [Mike O'Neal]: It really is giving, you know, your heart has to be in the right place. You can spoil it so easily by having an ulterior... An ulterior motive. And we, we, we, we hope that people don't, and you know, it's not that we might not all have one at the beginning, but we hope at over time you come to realize that it's the giving that's the magic. It's, it's not the things that you may have thought initially and when nobody's perfect, but you do
- 15:54:30:13 the best you can.
- 15:54:32:07 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah. Well that's...
- 15:54:36:00 [Eric Darling]: That's beautiful stuff. Thank you Mike.
- 15:54:37:12 [Mickey Youmans]: Yeah, man, that's awesome.
- 15:54:38:15 [Mike O'Neal]: Well, thank you guys.
- 15:54:39:14 [Eric Darling]: We kept you plenty long.
- 15:54:40:22 [Mike O'Neal]: Oh my and, and Gee, I normally run out things to say you don't believe.
- 15:54:47:10 [Eric Darling]: I'm gonna cut here.

Mike O'Neal

15:54:48:03 [Mike O'Neal]: That was a joke. I don't know if I've ever run out things to say.