

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS
The Great Mills High School
Oral History Project

Theodore Newkirk

Interviewed by Merideth Taylor

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(unknown location)

Transcribed by Michelle Marsich on January 21, 2010

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(a log is not available)

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49 minutes, 16 seconds

[Begin disc, beginning of interview]

Aaron Brussat (videographer): Can I get you to speak real quick? Just say anything you want.

Theodore Newkirk: Hello.

Merideth Taylor: What kind of fish (laughs)?

TN: Oh, spot (laughs).

MT: That's good. Could we start with just your name, just to be sure that if someone finds this tape in the future they (laughs) –

TN: Mhm.

MT: -- this strange artifact from the past, they will know who you are. And if you could, you know as we -- if you remember from the interviewing, if you kind of work the questions into your answers – like instead of just saying “Ted Newkirk, my name” -- you start with “My name is Ted Newkirk ...” or Theodore, whichever you would like to be ...

TN: I prefer Ted.

MT: Ok, so let's just start with –

TN: Ready?

MT: Yeah.

TN: My name -- Ted Newkirk, I live in Lexington Park, on good old Hermanville Road. I've been here for ... I'd say approximately forty-some years. And -- beautiful place to live, I'm happy.

MT: Wonderful (laughs). That's great. Ok, so I thought -- I'd like to start with talking a little bit about just what St. Mary's County was like, you know, when you first arrived here, and during those years when you were a part of the desegregation process. But just a little background info, your impressions of what St. Mary's County was like in those days.

TN: Well when I -- when my wife and I moved here, 1954, everything was segregated. Signs were up, water signs were up ... colored signs if you're wanting this to be more specific, "White only." We had this type of thing to deal with. But the most important thing that I found was that where we found to live was in Carver Heights.

I came down, -- friend of mine, Alfonso Hodges and I came down for a fishing weekend. And we decided to drop off an application for employment because we knew that where we were employed at that time, the [Signal?] Corps, was going to move to [Tappahanna?], Pennsylvania. And we wasn't too enthused about moving to [Tappahanna?], Pennsylvania. But we were fortunate enough to get a job that interviewed the two of us. Now we decided whether or not we want to move to St. Mary's County, now that we have a job.

So after looking into Carver Heights, we really wasn't that sold on the situation, but we were somewhat forced into it, ok? Then we had a problem within. My wife said, "I know I'm not gonna live here." I said, "Well, let's give it a try." So we decide to do that. I personally feel that one of the best decisions that we've ever made, moving into Carver Heights was a -- I thought, a wonderful place to live. We had everybody -- it was a tight atmosphere that I was raised up with. If your children was doing something wrong, you didn't have to worry

[5:00] about your neighbor not taking care of him -- your neighbor would, ok, correct them and there was not arguing, fussing, or fighting as a result of your neighbor interceding for you. And that was the type of atmosphere that I was raised up with and I learned to behave. This is just about as close to home again as I probably will ever get. And it turned out a beautiful place as far as I'm concerned.

Now when you went beyond Carver Heights and up to Lexington Park, you had one little A&P store. You had the -- there was a -- on the corner of Great Mills [Road] and [Route] 235, you had a lunchroom which was segregated. Beautiful sign, white only, which was no big thing. I'd been exposed to that for a long time, so that was nothing new.

But the most important thing was that little niche, or that little community togetherness we had in Carver Heights, where the parents were parents. Respect for one another, its nothing in regards to what we have today. It was the old-time home and that I can always say -- (clears throat) pardon me, that moving to St. Mary's County was a plus. And going to the school with your [?] --

MT: You mentioned --

TN: -- for an example, after living in Baltimore before my children -- or before our children, I'm sorry, was eligible for school, we lived in the city of Baltimore. That was not a pleasant place to live as far as I'm concerned. You lived next door to someone, you never knew them. We had our friends in Baltimore and we still communicate with them, but they're still [in] Baltimore City. And I did not want my children raised up in Baltimore City, to be completely frank with you. And I'm happy I made -- we made that decision.

Moving to St. Mary's County, it was an ordeal, I'll put it that way. Confronted with segregation, confronted with a segregated school system. But don't forget, that worked in two ways. One way it forced us to be together as one another in a black community. On the other side, it was segregated, but yet we knew that being in a segregated situation, how will our children ever be confronted with whom they are going to be competing against? How are they going to interact with the other part of St. Mary's County which would be the white segment of St. Mary's County? And we come to the conclusion that a segregated system has one advantage; a segregated system has a disadvantage.

When you go out here to get a job, we felt that our children are going to be confronted with an integrated system.

[10:00] They're going to need employment, and they're not going to get employment just from a segregated system. So that's when we said, hey we're going to send our children to a school that's going to be an integrated school. It was a problem, the way they were treated. And it was the way I expected them to be, but also I felt that they would be strong enough to deal with it. And I think they did quite well. I'm sure it wasn't easy. But then it started them with a life that they had to deal with. And that's why I'm happy and proud that we sent them to that type of environment, so they can live with it. That's life.

MT: Ok, you're doing great, great. Just -- I mean that's beautifully clear, and answers a lot of questions that I had here. I guess could you tell us a little bit about your involvement with the NAACP during, you know during the time that this was all being desegregated or prior to that time?

TN: Prior to that -- well, permit me to start at the beginning. Mr. Lawrence E. Henderson was the president of the NAACP at that time. And under his leadership, we got the Mitchell family, Juanita and Jackson Mitchell was our attorney. We started out with Juanita and then as a result of Juanita giving us the leadership of what to do, when to do them, up to getting involved with the Board of Education, we got two attorneys out of Baltimore to file suit against the local Board of Education.

At that time, we had -- well let's say a couple of young ladies, they (pause) one of the ladies was a pres -- oh my goodness. This is --

MT: Are you talking about the, the -- May Russell, or ... ?

TN: May Russell.

MT: Ok if you can start again “At that time, we had ...”

TN: Yeah, May Russell was on the board [Lydian Dent?] was the superintendent of education for the county. As a result of that was the beginning of forced integration. And if I remember correctly, I believe that took somewhere around twelve years before they made their decision as to how they would go about integrating the public school system. Now, to make it more personal, my wife and I

[15:00] interceded to have our children that was in elementary school to go to Lexington Park – Lexington Park, it was called Lexington Park Elementary, but was really the place on the right here, which is now the government’s, owned by the Federal Government [exchanged?]. But it was called Lexington Park Elementary School at that time. So as a result of that they had them to come to this little segregated Carver Heights, with their private bus, sponsored by the Board of Education, pick them up, take them back to their school each and every day, all by themselves -- this great big bus (laughs).

So my wife said, “You know, this is ridiculous.” I said, “No its not. Eventually maybe they will see how to do it.” So eventually one, two, three, four would join in, “Hey, we’re gonna be a part of this.”

So that’s how we started with the elementary, with the girls, with the younger girls, ok? With Charles and Stuart, Ted – Ted Junior, Gary, they went into Great Mills [High School]. Now, they had a much worse time at Great Mills as far as segregation is concerned. I think it left them bitter pills in their mouths as to what they were exposed to. How they can live with it -- sure they can live with it; I think they’ve done quite well. For example, segregation is here to stay – now how you’re gonna live with that’s gonna be your problem. Its not [a matter of ...?]. Look where we came from. Look how far we have gone in respect as to what segregation is really about, and where are we now? You have no other choice but to live, and that does not mean you agree with it, but you still have to live as an individual. So (pause) with the results of that I – I still feel that St. Mary’s County is a-ok, I have no problem.

MT: That’s interesting what you say about what segregation was really about. Can you talk more about what you mean? Did you –

TN: Everyday living, when I say what’s segregation was about. I felt that they needed that exposure. See – see my children had a certain amount of protection in Carver Heights. They – they didn’t know what that cruel world was on that base. To have a job and keep a job – even to get a job, they knew nothing about that. But for them not to be exposed to what its like to work with Tom, Dick, and Harry, May, Jean, and Sue and what -- and what its like to be confronted with how you can be maneuvered simply because you’re black, but yet you’re working with a group – they didn’t know anything about that.

They had their little Carver Heights Paradise. They had their black teachers -- everybody knew the teachers, everybody knew their principal. If everything didn’t go right the teacher would come to the house, you know. “Hey, Stuart didn’t do this right,” you know? They had that protection.

In a different situation, where

[20:00] now, you're now in an integrated system -- you don't get that protection. You better have something being taught at home where you're going to have -- you're going to have to do something for yourself. My children were too protected, that's what I say, I could be wrong, but they were too protected. And what I have seen in the public school system, children are not taught at home. And my wife and I made it our responsibility to make sure that our children were taught at home because we knew what they were going to be involved with when time come to go get a job, it's gonna be a whole new world. And to be segregated against, they're gonna have to be exposed to that. And by shoving them out of the nest into say, the local school system, I think was the best thing for them.

MT: What about that -- you said that that "cruel world" sort of on base? You know I know that you have quite a story too --

TN: (laughs)

MT: (laughs) -- with -- with what happened with you and the yeah ... what the -- when you were fighting that discrimination --

TN: Oh gee whiz.

MT: -- on the base. Would you talk a little bit about that? I know that's a whole ...

TN: Oh my goodness, that was hell. I was president of the NAACP at that time. I started out as [Labor?] Chairman for the NAACP and then eventually I was elected President of the NAACP. And I asked the local chapter if they would back me, I'm willing to file a case of discrimination because where I'm working, I'm being discriminated against. So as a result, again I'm going back to Mrs. Mitchell, Juanita Mitchell which was our attorney at that time -- this is separate from the school system. She says, "Now Stuart," so she said, "give me a background on what you're being confronted with, working condition, your surroundings ..." things of this nature, so that's what happened. We filed the case of discrimination. Now the most important thing to understand, we had at that time before we filed a case of discrimination with the federal government involved, we only had what you call the government employee manual or [Civil Service?] Manual instruction or something like that.

We didn't have anything in reference to what you can refer to now as a complaint. Your complaint then was ... how did this thing go? I even forgot the name of it ... Personnel would conduct the hearing and this representative that would hear your complaint was appointed by some governmental official with his appointment thing.

Now I won that case under those conditions, ok? He in return stated that I was discriminated against and I should be promoted. Now the
[25:00] beauty of this he made it quite clear that the base would have to do something about their method of discriminating. Now that was a beautiful thing for one man to say and the base now, they decided, enforced them -- he forced them to say, to do -- appoint a committee to hear these complaints from the employee. So they appointed a committee, I don't know how many they -- but I remember Reverend [Grimes?] was one of the

employees that was a member of a committee so that you could hear discrimination complaints, ok? That was the beauty of the whole thing.

But now let's make a jump – now this, this was during the time that I was a Labor Chairman. Now I was promoted to the NAACP President (pause) (laughs) this is where -- well I won't say all hell broke loose, but things were really different. As president I was concerned with the entire base, how they was discriminating against black people. Now, I am now confronted with black people speaking out and filing complaints, ok? I did not know at that time that black people, not – no I shouldn't put it that way. I didn't know at that time the type of fear was involved from the black community that when you force yourself into that white establishment, making a [?] – I wasn't aware that, you know, there's a penalty you're gonna pay. I never thought of that. There's a penalty you pay when you upset that white community. But and what they've been doing all their lives and they never thought of it. And I just thought that I could just push my little self in there, try to make a change, blacks and whites would accept it. I was just as wrong as wrong could be. I was wrong. I even had black people to tell me that I was a troublemaker, "Ted Newkirk, you ain't nothing but a troublemaker." My wife was already telling me, ok, so (laughs). No, and I expected him to tell me (laughs), but I -- for blacks to tell me that – no, I don't believe this. So I tell my wife and she, you know, knowing her she says, "Well, what are you going to do? You gonna quit?" No, no, no, not gonna quit, not gonna go through with that. But we continued to go through that. And later on down the road, time going forward down, we got the federal government to come in in the late sixties. Now that's when we really --

(Microphone falls off, is put back on, long pause)

TN: Ok.

MT: So do you remember in the sixties, you were saying ...

TN: Yeah, we had

[30:00] the federal government, that's where we – how did we start in on that? Personnel itself at that time become more involved as to what they would do, what they were instructed to do really. That's what it was all about. And we got personnel [?] to bring in speakers, what they call facilitators to come in to speak, bringing people together, question what problems you had you know, on your job, things of this nature. Which I thought was a remarkable improvement over what we'd ever had before. But basically we still had a problem when I left there and I'm sure they still have the same problem. And that was what, twenty years ago? As I – the statement I made early – it's not going away (laughs). I'm glad I got my kids exposed to it early because discrimination is not going away. You fight it, you fight it, fight it, fight it, fight it. But just don't sit back in a corner and say this is the best I can do. No, the best you can do is fight it everyday. That's where I'm at today.

MT: Oh ok. I'm wondering if Stuart has to get in here. You think he has a time he has to leave?

TN: Yeah, ok.

MT: Maybe I should find out. No, I can keep going but if he has to – he has a ... If we can go back just a moment to – wait a minute, before we do that, I don't think we ever said where your job was. I mean in terms of where you've worked, on the tape. So could you just say where you applied and where your job was?

TN: Before here?

MT: No when you were talking about at the base.

TN: Oh, at the base. I was an electronic engineer and technician. I was in [telemetry?], then I went into vibration analysis. So I basically was in that field.

MT: Ok so ...

TN: I'm trying to get the two attorneys. Well you have the attorneys.

MT: Yeah I think that's ok. Just for the record now, tell us where you worked.

TN: I worked at Patuxent Naval Air Test Center, Maryland. Patuxent Naval Air Test Center, Maryland. I was in the electrical evaluation center as electronic engineer and technician. From there is where I retired. So I spent – I think I spent pretty close to 30 years there before my retirement.

MT: Ok that's perfect, thanks. So going back to the school board and the desegregation process, tell us about those meetings, something about those meetings with May Russell and [?], I guess.

TN: Oh we was trying to – this was way back before the board of education would even consider integrating a public school system. We had a meeting ... now I'll go back to Lawrence Henderson who was the president of the NAACP at that time. And our attorneys. They called at a meeting with the board of education and they wanted – we wanted to know why they refused or refusing to even consider

[35:00] integrating the public school system. Mrs. Dent at that time was president of the board, May Russell was a member of the board, or whatever position it was or what have you, but after asking the question, one of them asked why would you even consider asking to integrate the public school system because most of you are not paying any taxes. So that answer went to attorneys. And the next one, next statement from that board was "I can't see what you're complaining about."

Carver Heights, see, at that time we had the government had turned over the little Carver Heights building there, sort of speak which was Carver Heights School, elementary school, Carver Heights School, ok. We, well the children moved into that as – now it's a public school, ok, its no longer what the government had. But the government

left these little small toilets for the children to use. Now it's a public school system, and believe it or not they use that statement as clear as one, two, three. They don't know what we are complaining about because our children have the little small toilets in they're the only one in the county. And we're supposed to be happy because our children have little small toilets. Now that was said, just as clear as one, two, three. So now at that time, I was the chairman of the committee that met with the board of education. So when they made that statement, the best I could do was just shake my head and say "Well, we're up against a rough one." And sure enough, I believe it was 12 years, there or about before the board finally dropped all resistances, we were integrated.

But you know, I'd like to add to that, you know one thing – you'd be surprised how many black families did not want to change. They wanted to just stay put here, "I'm not concerned with integrating those schools." That's why Ted Newkirk was called troublemaker. They couldn't see the advantage in integrating our system. Being in there, knowing what's taking place, that was why we went as far as we did, let alone. And that's what we did, that's exactly what we did. Let it about around 12 years, let it alone, everything's ok.

[40:00]

MT: What are your thoughts about where that attitude came from or how people in this area seem to feel that way?

TN: Quite simple. If you really take time to think about it, when you make someone uncomfortable and they're in power, somebody is gonna get hurt. You have the white establishment in power. You have people working by the day cleaning homes. They have no power. Their maids would tell them to keep quiet, what do you have to complain about -- You're gonna get fired. It's -- hey, the white establishment was in power. And it's just that simple. Go ahead -- you [hey, fire Vern?] and when you go in there and tell your master what you're not gonna do, you're master's gonna get rid of you and you ain't got no job.

And basically that's what we had throughout St. Mary's County. We had the white establishment in power and they did very well. Did what they wanted to do, say what they wanted to do. And that [two-bit?] board of education we had at that time, they followed it through on what -- so help me is sad, but what they thought was right. It's disgusting to see, but you know, that's what they thought was right. And a lot of black people thought it was right, too. Unfortunately, that's what we went through. (pause)

MT: It's interesting that you seem to suggest that there's a lot of fear because you know, it's like losing your job. And yet there wasn't violence in this area, correct? There was in some other areas, especially farther south. What do you -- I mean, would you characterize it as in resistance but it was pretty peaceful?

TN: I -- I thought it was relatively peaceful. The only, the closest thing we had to interruption was when the group decided that Carver Heights was gonna be sold, and they were gonna build homes. One of the builders I think was -- was it Blair? Blair, I believe, and we had a -- (clears throat) pardon me. I was president of the NAACP at that time and

we had a demonstration down Great Mills – down Great Mills, down 235 we turned down Great Mills Road. And in front of the jewelry store we had a little disturbance, it didn't really – we didn't fight, they just wanted to hoot and holler to want to say that he was out, he was a father, he was a cop, but he had nothing to do with it – he was a business man. And he made a decision in his business to be part owner of the construction group I would say, so I immediately asked them to continue on their demonstration, go ahead where you're going, but let's not hoop and holler and yell about this one establishment. We are merely demonstrating because you disagree with tearing down Carver Heights, but let's not take it out on one individual. And believe it or not, we – I contacted

[45:00] the governor for assistance. I don't know what assistance I expected (laughs). I don't know what assistance I expected him to help us with but he sent down his secretary of housing -- of human relations, secretary of human relations. Anyway she came down (laughs) and she, well you know, "Mr. Newkirk, what do you expect the government to do?" I says, "Well we're gonna be short of housing here in Carver Heights. They're going to tear Carver Heights down and we're not gonna have nowhere to go."

I hate to put this on film, but I'm gonna tell you the truth. Incidentally she was black, ok. These people ain't gonna have nowhere to go. Then she told me, just as clear as one, two, three, she said "You don't know it," she said, "but every damn one of them of will find somewhere to go and you won't have nothing to worry about." (laughs)

I swear she said it. But I didn't expect it coming out from her, she's representing the governor, right. But I have to admit, she told the truth (laughs). Everybody – everybody found somewhere to go.

MT: Well, that's amazing.

TN: (laughs)

MT: That makes me think about the issues now over the flat tops [?]. Well it's – I think you've covered a lot of it. I just thought maybe the last thing just what you thought about the recent Supreme Court action which eliminates the ability to use race as a, at all, as a way to prevent the schools from re-segregating. In other words they can't use any programs where they assign children to schools by race.

TN: I – I

MT: ... just start with –

TN: From my standpoint of view I can only see a step in the direction to go backwards. Because what we have in the Supreme Court today, and if we continue with people like Bush, his appointment – how do you expect a community like we had here, and let's say we still had that today. You expect a racist attitude community to speak up on trying to integrate our society? No. I think the Supreme Court decision of that is a step in the direction where if anything, we will go back to where we started. And I don't see where there's any growth involved in that decision at all. That's my opinion.

MT: Ok. Well thanks very much. And I guess we'll call Stuart in here.

[End of disc, end of interview]