

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Joseph Curtis

Interviewed by Alma Jordon

February 18, 2024

At the USCT Interpretive Center in Lexington Park

Transcribed by REV.com on November 29, 2024

Edited by Bob Lewis on November 29, 2024

[this interview is not logged]

Original format is MP3 from digital recorder

31 minutes, 54 seconds

Alma Jordon ([00:01](#)):

Good afternoon. My name is Alma Jordon, and today is February 18th, 2024. And we are at the Lexington Park Interpretive Center, the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions Center, the Interpretive Center. And we are in Lexington Park, Maryland. And I think I mentioned my name is Alma Jordon. And we also have with us, say your name.

Nathaniel Lawrence ([00:34](#)):

Nathaniel Lawrence, President.

Emily Lewis ([00:34](#)):

Mrs. Emily Lewis.

Alma Jordon ([00:40](#)):

Okay, thank you. And today, we have a gentleman here to interview. Please give me your name and where you live.

Joseph Curtis ([00:52](#)):

My name is Joseph Curtis. And I live in Prince Frederick on Macs Hollow Road.

Alma Jordon ([01:02](#)):

Okay. Can you tell me about your people and where you were raised?

Joseph Curtis ([01:09](#)):

Well, my dad was Joseph Mason Curtis and my mom was Betty Lorraine Curtis, and I was born in Dameron, Maryland.

Alma Jordon ([01:22](#)):

Okay. And that's in St. Mary's county, is that correct?

Joseph Curtis ([01:23](#)):

That's in St. Mary's county.

Alma Jordon ([01:26](#)):

Okay. Can you tell me, and I know this might be a little bit difficult, your earliest memory of anything?

Joseph Curtis ([01:36](#)):

Well, my earliest memory of anything, I, let's see, started at Ridge Elementary and then we went to Carver Heights, and then we went to Great Mills High School, and then we went on to Washington D.C. and graduated from Lincoln Tech for automotive technology.

Alma Jordon ([02:05](#)):

Okay, great. Well that's very interesting. What did you dream of becoming as an adult?

Joseph Curtis ([02:17](#)):

Well, I dreamed that I would be in the automotive field, and maybe one day being able to take care of my own place and run my own business.

Alma Jordon ([02:33](#)):

Okay. So that was basically your advanced education at the high school then?

Joseph Curtis ([02:40](#)):

Yes, ma'am.

Alma Jordon ([02:40](#)):

Okay. And tell me about your business.

Joseph Curtis ([02:49](#)):

Well, the business that I had now was handed down to me from my dad and as he passed, I decided to come from the city as I was working at Sears on Alabama Avenue, up there, working on cars and everything there. And then, from there I came down to establish his business and then I took from there to make a larger business. And from there, we are today and we've been there now for, I'd say, 38, 39 years of being established. With my dad, we've been there for 62 years.

Alma Jordon ([03:36](#)):

Oh my goodness. That is quite a history.

Joseph Curtis ([03:39](#)):

Yeah.

Alma Jordon ([03:40](#)):

So what type of business is this?

Joseph Curtis ([03:43](#)):

Well, we would move from just a tire business, doing that and doing the exhaust to now doing check engine lights, and motors, and transmissions, and diagnostics, and a little bit of everything that you do on a car. And we go to school rapidly to improve ourselves and to stay up with the modern technology that's going on now.

Alma Jordon ([04:12](#)):

Okay. So basically who are your customers?

Joseph Curtis ([04:16](#)):

Well, some of them came from basically when my dad was still here, the ones that were there, and then some of them came because they heard of the business and they heard of the things that we were doing. And that's what kept us here for the time that we are here now, the 30-some years that we are, because we expanded and built a new building, so we can do larger and bigger things, and working on trucks and bigger items that's there.

Alma Jordon ([04:50](#)):

Okay, that's interesting. Do you actually have your own business plan or are you utilizing a business plan that your dad established?

Joseph Curtis ([05:02](#)):

I utilize the business that he established, I just made it a larger growth in the business, and staying there and just making it grow.

Alma Jordon ([05:18](#)):

Right. So you're basically locally?

Joseph Curtis ([05:21](#)):

Yes.

Alma Jordon ([05:21](#)):

Is that right?

Joseph Curtis ([05:22](#)):

Still locally and still in the same footprint of what he had.

Alma Jordon ([05:27](#)):

Okay. Can you tell me where your business is located and the name of your business?

Joseph Curtis ([05:32](#)):

The name of it is Curtis Tire Center, Incorporated. And we are located at 21290 Great Mills Road in Lexington Park.

Alma Jordon ([05:46](#)):

Okay. Do you have a business motto that you've shared about your business?

Joseph Curtis ([05:53](#)):

I think the motto was the same thing that my dad had and it was always real welcoming anyone that wants to come in.

Alma Jordon ([06:07](#)):

So you've mentioned a little bit about growing your business after your dad passed it on to you. Can you elaborate on this, basically about your employees and that type of thing?

Joseph Curtis ([06:24](#)):

Well, it's hard to get a good employee, but it's just hard to get one that's faithful. We were blessed. I was blessed with two faithful employees that started out with my business, and they were in line with the idea and the dream that we had. And those two had been with me now for 30 years and they hung in with me through the rain, through the building of my new building, until we structured it into the one we have now. And then you get the other ones to come and go, but there's at least two of them that solid that keep me going the way I was. If not, I couldn't make it. So I depend on them and lean on their shoulders to help me get where I need to be today.

Alma Jordon ([07:20](#)):

Well that's absolutely amazing. So totally, how many employees do you have now?

Joseph Curtis ([07:28](#)):

I have five. I have five employees here. I have the technicians and then I have the tire changes. And then a good strong front counter, a greeter, is very important. That was one of the things that my dad taught me, if you don't speak right, they don't come in right. So you have to greet your customers and treat them the way you want to be treated.

Alma Jordon ([07:57](#)):

Well, you had certainly a smile on your face when you mentioned that was something your dad taught you. Can you elaborate on anything else that your dad has passed down to you that has helped you with your business?

Joseph Curtis ([08:14](#)):

Well, one of the things he taught me to do is, whether it is right or wrong, make sure you tell a customer, This is what's wrong with your car. Whether they take it somewhere else or not, at least tell them what's happening, and treat them right, and just smile whether they say no or yes, but at least tell them the right thing, what's wrong with your car.

Alma Jordon ([08:44](#)):

Great. As a minority business, have you faced any challenges?

Joseph Curtis ([08:49](#)):

Well, a lot of challenges [laughs] in these times today because every day is not going to be a sunshiny day. So you have to take the good with the bad and always remember that what comes in the door is not yours, it belongs to the company. Whether you're the boss or not, you have to take care of the

company. And so that's what he taught me and I learned, sometime the hard way but the right way, if you don't put it away, you'll never have it when a rainy day comes around.

Alma Jordon ([09:28](#)):

That's very interesting. So what is a typical business day like for you?

Joseph Curtis ([09:37](#)):

A typical day is just being steady, stay on the path, stay on the course. And just do what you can do today, and call them back and let them know that it's not going to make it. So that's what we do.

Alma Jordon ([09:57](#)):

Do you feel that you have a responsibility to the community as a business owner?

Joseph Curtis ([10:05](#)):

Well, the responsibility is sometimes, of the people that you know, you try to take care of them, but these times they don't come back to take care of you. Because they can promise you, I'll be on Friday but didn't tell you what Friday they're coming back to. And so you got to be careful and you got to walk very careful with the people that you have. And so you take care of those who you think you will and the other ones, you just had to tell them no.

Alma Jordon ([10:53](#)):

Right, okay. When I asked you about challenges as a minority business, would you like to elaborate on any of them?

Joseph Curtis ([11:06](#)):

Well, sometimes they don't quite say the things that they are going to like to tell you, but they tell you things that you just want to hear. And so when they come in, it's a challenge to try to make sure that you have the best price and the best job that you can do because there is a lot of competition out here, and you have to make sure you do your homework to make sure that you're within the challenge of the field that goes on around you, because it's a lot of competition. And for the minority, you only get one shot at it and if you don't make it right, they're not going to come back again.

Alma Jordon ([11:56](#)):

Right. As far as in the county and in the community, have there been any changes that affected your business that you've noted?

Joseph Curtis ([12:13](#)):

In the community, I would just say it's a challenge trying to keep people happy, just a challenge to try to do what you can do and if you say no, then you have to say no because it's not the same way it used to be. People are not the same. So it's a challenge to try to make them happy the first time around. If not, they just won't come back. And you can't take it the wrong way, you just have to say, I take it another day, and try another day. Another day, another way.

Alma Jordon ([12:57](#)):

Well, do you think that in the area there've been a lot of changes as far as the community being open to minority businesses?

Joseph Curtis ([13:16](#)):

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I've had a lot of challenges as trying to get bids, and I won bids, and openly at discussion tables and sitting down when the bids were open and won the bid, and then there was a controversy and you lose the bid. And even though you came up and you said what happened? There is still a racial divide in this county and there is a separation where they will get what they want. And even though you win the bid, they still will not come to you. And unfortunately, there's nothing you can do. You can holler, scream, jump, it's not going to make a change. They just won't come to you. And unfortunately it's a divided separation in this county that will not allow you to get so much, but that's what you have to put up with and just keep on going if you want to make that challenge to keep on staying in business.

Alma Jordon ([14:50](#)):

You mentioned the challenges. Do you think it's worse now than in the past, maybe when your dad was in business?

Joseph Curtis ([14:59](#)):

Well, I think because he didn't do so much in the county, he didn't do finding out the diagnostic, find out what's wrong with the car and all that, he did the tire, the basic. Because I have expanded my business to a larger field of the county, now you're in competition with the other people and now they don't want to really see you there. And now, what is he doing? You're taking some of my bread and butter, so they don't want to see you there. So that becomes a challenge that they don't like.

Alma Jordon ([15:46](#)):

Yeah, that's very interesting. So in your 30-some years of business, you've seen that difference too as well as comparison from your father's business, is that correct?

Joseph Curtis ([16:01](#)):

Yes. I have seen the difference, and even though I went to the classes and I go to the classes to learn about the diagnostics, and to learn about the things that's going on with the new cars, I might sit in the class, and out of the class there's only three of us, and there's 45 of them, it's only three of us. And you learn and you pass the class, they are watching you, they're keeping their eye on you because they don't want you to go so far and so fast. And it's unfortunate, but that is the truth. And there's nothing you can do, but you got to keep your head up, and you got to keep trying, and trying to make it.

Alma Jordon ([17:03](#)):

So you mentioned your classes. Where do you go for these classes? Are they online?

Joseph Curtis ([17:09](#)):

No. We go up to, I think it's Mechanicsville, and it's a firehouse. And they send out a thing where in order to participate in this class you have to pay \$150 per class. And then you go to these classes and I invite my employees to go, some go, some don't. And when you get to the class, you sit down, and they will bring you your dinner because it's in the afternoon, and you'll go there and you stay there until 9:00

at night, and then you have to go home afterwards. But you sit there and they give you a book, and you look and you study about the new cars that's coming out, and the new ways they're going to do them, and the new changes they're going to have.

(18:05):

And in order to get this diagnostic tool in order to find out what's wrong with that, that diagnostic tool will cost you 4, 5, 6, 7, maybe \$1,000 just to plug into a car to find out what's wrong with it. And if you don't stay up with what's going on, your business is not going to stay up either. So you have to stay in what the courses that goes on in today's society. I've had people come in and I'll diagnose their car. They would take it somewhere else and try to get it fixed. But nowadays you can't. Without the tool, without the thing on it, you can't do it. So the consumer is at the mercy of running back to the dealer because they don't have nowhere else to go.

(19:03):

They have to take it to a dealer and the dealer knows that, so they can raise their labor rate up to 130, 140, 150 dollars an hour. What are you going to do? My check engine light is on. I don't know what's wrong with my car, so I need you to tell me what's wrong with my car. It's jerking, it's popping, it's missing. What's wrong with my car? So you at the mercy of someone to tell you what's wrong with that car. So that's where the crossroads will cut because there's only three of us in this whole class, there is 45 of them there, so you are at their mercy. You don't have a choice. So that's where I try to be that loophole in the middle to try to help them and guide them in the right direction.

Alma Jordon (20:14):

Well, it sounds as though, with the growth that this requires not just additional diagnostic equipment, but additional tools to be able to do that type of work.

Joseph Curtis (20:30):

That's correct. You got to have a special tool and they know that. They go around in a little truck, Snap On, this, and that little truck carrier tool is as small as your hand that would cost you 40 dollars, just to take that one piece off in order to get that part. Where at a dealership they had that tool in the stockroom, they loaned it to their mechanic to fix that car. They charged the customer almost double the amount just to fix it.

Alma Jordon (21:17):

That's amazing but I imagine very true. Do you feel that our community relations has changed over the years since you've been here?

Joseph Curtis (21:35):

Community relations?

Alma Jordon (21:37):

Not just for your business, but the county community relations?

Joseph Curtis (21:44):

It's somewhat because you don't know what all is going on. Sometimes you're the last one to get the paper. You don't know what's happening. You got to keep you involved with the community relations

and you got to spread the news. You got to tap somebody on the shoulder and tell them what's happening, what's going on. And if we don't do that, we're never going to communicate with each other. You have to tap somebody on the shoulder and say, did you hear about this? Did you know about this? And if it doesn't, we're not going to communicate with each other.

(22:36):

It's sad in a sense because it used to be everybody knew everybody and everybody was friendly with everybody because they met each other either in church or somewhere locally. But now, if you just jump just one step ahead of that one person, it's like the crab in the pot that don't want you to go over so far or they think you are acting really cute. That communication gap is widening because our own race sometimes don't help each other or try to reach back and pull each other out. And I just see that. They never was like that before. Everybody knew everybody else or somebody knew somebody, they will try to help somebody. But now, if you fall, then you just fell down. It's not a pickup at all.

Alma Jordon (23:52):

So tell me, are you training anyone to follow in your footsteps? Do you have children that will take over your business, do you think?

Joseph Curtis (24:02):

No. Unfortunately no. As I grew up, just like my dad when I grew up from here, he told me, you need to get on up the road and try to get yourself an education in your field that you're in. And you will find direction when you get there because God will be with you. So I did and I went up to Washington, up that way, and I went to Lincoln Tech on Central Avenue, and I went there and I graduated from Lincoln Tech. I graduated from there and at that time, I didn't have a big toolbox, I didn't have a whole lot of things that I had to do, so one of the thing I knew was what my dad taught me, change a tire.

(25:05):

So I wanted to go out. I went to Sears on Alabama Avenue, and I stayed there and I changed tires. And if somebody had a miss in a car, I went and did that. So I extended my toolbox and craftsman's tools, and I did a little something like that, and the guy noticed that I could do more than just one thing. So that's what expanded my culture from that time until he says, I'm ready to leave, I'm ready to retire. And that's when I came back home.

Alma Jordon (25:43):

So your children aren't interested in running your business when you retire?

Joseph Curtis (25:50):

No, I did the same thing my dad did. I told them, you go on up the road. So unfortunately today, background of what I do, and getting up every morning and getting going every day, gave them that ability to get out there and do the things that they wanted to do, and don't stop until you meet your goal. So my daughter is, right now, one of the marketing directories, I'm going to say it right. She's on the board of Marriott. She's up there and thank God she didn't have to get laid off. So she's up there on the director board, she's there. And my youngest daughter went out to Baltimore and she graduated up there being a child psychologist, and now she's doing psychology, working with kids, and teaching people how to get their stuff together and things like that. And so she's working there and they're living up there. So both of them are successful and they have their own places, they have their own baby, and they're going on their own. So they're making it right.

Alma Jordon ([27:08](#)):

Right. So this is really not a business that women would probably be interested in anyway, I don't suppose.

Joseph Curtis ([27:16](#)):

No, I don't think they would be interested in doing any of this here. This here, when I leave out of here, I'm going to sell it. I'm going to sell the complete business. And my wife had a stroke, so I'm going to go home and spend some time with her so she can heal, and get herself together, and some other things that went up, cancer went in. And so those are striking blows to me, but I'm going to let God take that, and I'll just help as I can and do the things I can do. But we had a goal, me and her, because when we got in our 60s, we were going to be traveling, but things didn't happen that way. So we're going to keep on going and see what God has us for the end.

Alma Jordon ([28:17](#)):

So you're looking to sell your business and move on to-

Joseph Curtis ([28:25](#)):

Higher goals.

Alma Jordon ([28:26](#)):

Right.

Joseph Curtis ([28:27](#)):

Yeah. I won't say down, but I look up because God has a plan for everything. And so that's what I'm going to try to do.

Alma Jordon ([28:39](#)):

Good. Well, what advice would you give someone interested in starting a business?

Joseph Curtis ([28:46](#)):

I would just say try your best. You're going to hit bumps in the road, and you're going to hit curbs, and you're going to hit bumps, just keep trying. Keep holding your head up and don't stop until you get to the end. So I would just tell them just keep walking.

Alma Jordon ([29:10](#)):

Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us at this time, Mr. Curtis?

Joseph Curtis ([29:19](#)):

No, not really. I just pray that everything could turn out all right. And I keep my head up and I try to do the best that I can. And I know every day ain't going to be Sunday, so you just got to keep trying, and don't stop, and don't slow down. You slow down, you get old real fast, but you got to keep going. You got to keep trying. Every day is not going to be good.

Alma Jordon ([29:50](#)):

Yes. Well, there's something I wanted to ask you, just for my personal benefit. Do you have a singing voice like your dad?

Joseph Curtis ([30:00](#)):

I sing in the choir.

Alma Jordon ([30:00](#)):

Okay.

Joseph Curtis ([30:01](#)):

I do. I sing in the choir, when I can. Because of the stroke with my wife, I make sure I spend a little time with her more. And now that we're going through the stroke and the cancer, so I spend a lot more time with her and taking care of her as much as I can. And when I can, when the men sing on the Sunday, I'm always backing, helping, supporting. And now that they got advanced that we can see church from online, so it's a whole lot modern technology than it used to be. So yes.

Alma Jordon ([30:52](#)):

Great. Does anyone else have questions for Mr. Curtis?

Emily Lewis ([31:00](#)):

Well, I'd just like to say you've been doing a terrific job. We're just proud of you for all you've done and all you go through, and just keep up the good work.

Joseph Curtis ([31:10](#)):

Thank you. And I appreciate it.

Nathaniel Lawrence ([31:14](#)):

I've done some work with Mr. Curtis and we've always got along very well. And we always [inaudible 00:31:23]. So I say God bless.

Joseph Curtis ([31:15](#)):

Thank you.

Alma Jordon ([31:29](#)):

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Curtis. We appreciate your time, you spending with us today and sharing your business, because it's always great to have information on minority businesses to pass along to our future generation. And on behalf of UCAC, we truly thank you.

Joseph Curtis ([31:51](#)):

Thank you very much.