

# ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Charles Davis & Celia Dobson-Paul

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Charles: My name is Charles Davis.

Celia: My name is Celia Dobson Paul.

Steve [Spina]: Charles, tell me a little bit about your childhood. I know that you were born in Georgia. How old were you when you came to Zephyrhills, and what were the early years like?

Charles: Our childhood in Zephyrhills was, I guess, a unique childhood for everybody coming up in Zephyrhills at the time. At my arrival here, I was probably three years old, if I'm not mistaken—pretty close to that time frame. Basically, we came here in the late forties or early fifties, somewhere within that time. We had a unique childhood living in Hercules. It would have been Hercules Quarters at the time. Now Zephyrhills High School is there on that property. The places literally had knit-wire fences around it and a road in—only one. It was segregated. If you entered from [County Road] 54, there were blacks on the left and whites on the right, and in the center would be something called a “commissary,” a place of distribution and sale of goods and foods for that environment.

Steve: Celia, do you remember any of those days? You were younger: do you remember living in Hercules?

Celia: Oh, yes. I do remember living in Hercules. [Those days were,] for me, enjoyable. We all lived in the three room houses, and all of the kids grew up together. We were able to be outside, you know? We just played outside all the time. We made up our games, like hopscotch and jump rope. We went down and played in the trees. What's that street right near the bowling alley? What is that? Twelfth Avenue. So Twelfth Avenue right there, on the other side, we used to call that “the pond” because it had this big oak tree. You could swing on the oak tree. I remember that my brother and some of his friends used to gig frogs. Those were the good things that we were able to do. There was no fighting. Like Mama talked about, we didn't fight. We just didn't. We just had fun. We had an enjoyable time. The neighborhood was surrounded with a fence that we had to climb over, but there was a step. So we climbed over, and [there was a store] called Mr. All's Store. We would go over there and get the little penny candy and penny cookies. Those are memorable times that we just enjoyed each other and enjoyed being around.

Steve: Where did you go to school when you started going to school?

Charles: The first school that we went to would have been what was called “Rural Pasco County School.” That school was close to Gall Boulevard, if I can remember. It moved from this area to what would have been the Krusen [Quarters] in a field, and then finally over to where the Macedonia [Missionary Baptist] Church is now. That would have been its final place. Schools were unique, I think, for rural environments in Florida, and central Florida in particular. Hurricanes could come

—they aren't as severe as they were then—and school could be closed. In essence, they would group up one group of people from where they were and just establish a new school environment. We got basically the final teachers in that environment because of a storm somewhere else in the county. The area was flooded for a long time. I can remember not going to school for months, [especially during] Hurricane Donna, which came in the sixties. It was a segregated environment, and actually the school was the church and your church was a school —pretty much using the same building for a while.

Steve: Celia, where did you go to school?

Celia: I went to school at Moore Elementary in Dade City, Florida. First grade through fifth grade was at Moore Elementary, and then integration. We were integrated to Zephyrhills. The schooling was great at Moore Elementary and Mickens High School. I remember my first grade teacher, Miss Bessie Bearfield. Just to think back on the memories from back then: we were taught writing—cursive writing. So, I think about all the things that I learned as a child in elementary school, the things that they don't teach the children now. That's where I went to school.

Steve: What school did you integrate: the middle school or junior high school?

Celia: No it was 1965, so more middle school.

Steve: And the high school was where the middle school is now.

Celia: Right. Yeah.

Steve: You went to where Stewart [Middle School] is.

Celia: Yes, Stewart. Yeah.

Steve: Yeah. What was it like? How did you get to school? Was their busing, or did you walk?

Celia: We walked every day. And you think about, you know, how did I do it? I have never missed a day of school. Never. I mean, we had to get up and walk, and I know this sounds like, oh, how cliché. But we did! Mama got us up. We had breakfast, and off to school we went. We all walked together to school, to where Stewart Middle School is now. We walked there and we walked back, and there was never a day missed. When we got to school, the blacks were on one side of the school and the whites were on the other side, so that segregation kind of remained for some time before we all started coming together.

Steve: So it was a mix in those days. What was it like in town? Could you socialize or go to the bowling alley or different things like that?

Charles: No, it stayed segregated. Basically the school system only attempted integration because of the federal funding. Schools receive money for the attendance level of the people being there. That was the only reason. In the early beginnings of 1965 when this happened here, there wasn't great concern about the education that you received. The matter of fact was that you needed to be there for the count, for population levels of the school itself. It maintained itself as far as segregation type thing was concerned [because of that]. They didn't want you to drink at certain water fountains within the hall. That kind of thing.

Steve: So it was basically just Jim Crow society for quite a while.

Celia: Yeah. I also remember in town, where the Village Inn is now—I don't know why this sticks out in my mind, but it does—the water fountain there had “for coloreds only.” I just remember that, you know, and it's just something, I guess, that will always stay with me. It's just how real it really was back then.

Steve: When did things start to change?

Production: Before we get onto the change, I guess I'd like to go into little more detail on that whole society. Because I'm 26, I don't know. I can't even imagine what that was like.

Charles: You can't, yeah. Well...

Steve: It's something you just read in a book or saw in a movie.

Production: Right. So I'd be interested to hear your perspective.

Charles: Okay. You look at the basic overall economy of this area then: the big thing was logging, pulp wooding, and what have you. Not only that, but many whites who came here were immigrants from other southern environments, to come in and work in a logging environment. The actual railroad components that were put here were just put here to help move the timber through. And parallel to Gall Boulevard was a train system—I think Seaboard Coastline and Atlantic Coastline. Those are dominant, named train systems that don't exist anymore. The economy was based upon these places that were isolated from highways, but the train system was the thing that gave movement to goods and services to come in and also to go out. Well, I do remember, at some point in time, the last cross burned in this area, which would have been right there on the end of Sixth Avenue. I can still remember that experience. So we were on a very, very rigid, segregated system for the longest time here. So, burning crosses, and also you didn't have any recourse through law enforcement, you know, which was still very rigidly into that process also. You yourself mentioned about Hercules and its system. They thought that they would try and do “separate but equal.” That's why they had the housing on one end and everything, both white and black, in the housing configuration. It was out of doing that. That's why we lived that way. But, as I said, the whole environment was such. Even then, when “integration” would come, it would be the “the law of the land,” but it did not mean everybody had to acquiesce and concede to the law. So, even though there were people, say in the school systems, who wanted to be “equal”—and I think Stewart [Middle] is named after [Raymond] Stewart, who was the principal then: he tried, I mean to great levels, I thought, to do that—you were standing up against a school system and a superintendent who have their mind set on a focus and a direction and the politics of the time to be able to be voted in, so they had to hold a strict, rigid line to maintain the status quo of separation.

Steve: And in Zephyrhills, the black community *literally* was on the other side of the tracks.

Charles: It was. Definitely.

Steve: And that's where the city limits end.

Charles: Exactly. Precisely.

Steve: So, no choice. When Hercules shut down, the families had to move to that area. They weren't given the choice.

Charles: No. It was no choice. Anything. Hercules shut down, and, in essence, the land was donated over to the board of education, and the board took possession of it, so the people there had to move. So we wound up with the Moody property over there, moving over to that area. Yeah, that's what happened in that regard.

Steve: I'm wondering, too, when you talked about the [commissary] at Hercules, did you get chips? Or did you actually get paid?

Charles: Oh, no. They got physically got paid, but it was still...Well, you know, Tennessee Ernie Ford: "I owe my soul to the company store" Well, that was the system: whatever money you made would stay in the system, because they provided that store there and you would go only to it. But it didn't maintain itself with full supplies for long, and as it began to look down, the economy sort of went to the outside sources surrounding [Hercules]. So eventually it sort of imploded in on itself because it wasn't able to maintain itself and keep going there, but for the longest time, early on when they started, that was the company store, and you're spending it there.

Steve: So you graduated from Zephyrhills High School?

Charles: That is correct. In 1966. I went there in 1965 in my senior year, and that's where I graduated.

Production: Celia looked like she had something she wanted to add to what Charles was saying just a minute ago.

Celia: Oh boy. I get so caught up in my brother's speaking. I do. I was just trying to think about when we were in school, the integration part, and we were taught not to fight, even when names were called. We'd go home and, "Mama and Daddy, we were called this name!" And the first thing out of my mom's mouth is, "What is your name? Do you know your name?" "...Yes." "Well, just because they call you that name, that doesn't mean you have to be that person." And then I remember—and I'm sure you guys have heard this before—sticks and stones may break your bones, but talking never hurt you." So just to sit here and talk about the past...because this is something that I don't think I've even talked about with my children before, you know? So this is...this is good. Yeah. I'm glad we were able to do this.

Steve: Your mother told me one time that she got active in the community when her children got to school and had some problems. She told me—and this was a direct quote—she said, "My mama didn't name me scared." She said she had to step up. Your mother was a force that went in to protect you, and I think that changed the whole town.

Charles: Yeah, trying to make her presence felt. Going to a [Parent Teacher Association] meeting alone...basically, for that environment as it was, that was truly being a force in its own right. Just to say you're bold enough to do so, because I knew it was a catch 22 and bitter and sweet on two sides to be in your senior year and to be in an environment like that. Number one: I knew I needed a good record in order to go to school out of state. I needed that. I could not have issues of being dismissed or expelled. So you endure a lot because there was an end goal. You just didn't want those kinds of things on your record. So you're walking a razor's edge. It's hurting your foot just the same, but you can't jump off. To get through that senior year there, I

wanted a decent grade point average, because I think I sacrificed a scholarship by going there and not staying at Mickens. And so be it. That's the cost, I guess, of living.

Steve: Where did you go to college?

Charles: I went to Florida A&M [University], but I only went after [my other options fell through]. I would have pretty much been assured, I think, of Tennessee A&I [College—now Tennessee State University]. I was quite a track star in school, and even at Zephyrhills [High School] I did the 440 in 48 seconds, which was a state record that maintained itself for quite awhile. And that made me a shoo-in almost anywhere—definitely at a black college. I always wanted to go to Tennessee A&I. It was a school that had good runners, you know. But then, when we did the integration process, there was not the push of guidance counselor support or anything, but I'm not blaming anyone. I think I probably should have been more aggressive on my end in pursuing it. So all of that wasn't there. I sort of was on my own, and the Vietnam War was raging. One day out of school, you were in trouble. Not trouble, but you were draft property immediately. So, instead of going for a draft, I just volunteered real quick, because I didn't want to take a chance on a draft. Then I did [some time in the military] and then, after I got out, I just went on to Florida and went back to school at Florida A&M.

Steve: Did you end up in Vietnam?

Charles: No, no, no. All my military time was at White Sands, New Mexico.

Steve: Well, that worked.

Charles: It did, very well.

Celia: I was thinking that, when Charles was saying how Mama went to the PTA: you know, we were probably the only—and I mean we were probably *the only*—blacks that had been in different events, like the Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts or whatever Mama could get us to be a part of so that we could be successful and learn and just be a part of everyone. She made sure we were in those things—the band—and just always get out and do something. Don't just sit back and wait for someone to come to you; you go up and you be aggressive about being successful. So Mama did that. Not to say Daddy didn't, but my mom is very outspoken, and she likes to make sure things are done and done in a way that no one is left out, especially her children.

Production: I was reading that your dad was the one who started the first integrated Boy Scouts [troop].

Charles: Yeah. He worked with that. That is correct.

Production: Were you or any of your siblings involved?

Charles: No, I was somewhat older when they started that.

Production: Do you have any memories of that?

Charles: Oh yeah. One: trying to at least get the people to assemble as such. And then, also, trying to find a place of meeting where they could come. That's one of the big things with a youth organization: a place where you don't pay rent, just to be able to consistently meet. It's hard to

do that when you need someplace to keep records and all that, and for all that to be available to you. I don't remember the time, but I remember being older. I think I was almost in school, still in the military, when I came back and they were trying to get that formed.

Steve: Robert would have been participant. Your brother was.

Charles: He should've been. That should have been during his era that they had it going for a while. I don't know what happened, why they couldn't keep it going, but it was going on, and I remember assisting once to go out and pick the youth up from one of the overnights. I can remember doing that, but it was just impromptu. One of those times when I was here and I just pitched in to do that. I was out of the military, in school, at the time, if I remember correctly,

Steve: So, did you feel like you had to move away to progress?

Charles: Yeah. I feel that. And it was interesting you say that, because I was talking to someone recently. I visited, came back on a leave military leave one time and I was here, and there was some incident here, which involved, they thought—it was reported—some black male and a white woman. I don't know if she was robbed or what. I don't think she was accosted physically. It was more of a robbery. Snatching a purse. And, I can remember, the police just rounded up people to stand in a line up. I mean, I don't know how that truly works out law enforcement-wise, but I thought, there has to be a reasonable cause, someone with records or something like that. You would group *them*. But I happened to be going home and then they asked me, "Do you want to come around and stand up?" A policeman—city police—was out there, and this was not even in the city. And I remember questioning, why would I go with you to stand up? But it was vague on that. And I somehow bumped into someone, and they were telling me the police were having people just stand up for a line up. And I said, "WHAT?"—you know, how outrageous that is. So I remember going to the police station, going, "This is telling [of your opinion of the black community.]" And it didn't dawn on me until I had left: "Oh, what have done? I'm not here [in town to deal with this]." And I think it was the chief [of police] at the time: he came to the house at 11 o'clock. I was out. I was going back to Tallahassee. to ask for whatever reason.

## **BREAK**

Production: Charles, could you go back to the part after you leave the police station?

Charles: Yeah. after I left the police station, I started thinking, "Oh my goodness, what have I done?" Because I didn't have a job to give my parents. I knew how these things work, you know, because I knew history well. I have photos of county police men kind of attacking and billy clubbing a person. I can remember that from this area. I can remember those. And it just dawned on me, what have I done? Because this is still the sixties. They were turbulent times. Things are happening, and I said, this is not going to be good for them. I wasn't so much worried about myself, but retribution is not picking so much on you, but your parents in their jobs, where they work, and all that. So I thought, well, this isn't going to be good. I should just, relax elsewhere and be done with that, because a police visit at 11:00? Come on. So after that experience, I thought, maybe things haven't changed as much as I thought they had. I just said, you know, I don't want to bring this on them. I don't have a job to give them. I'm not rich enough to support them, and I didn't want to jeopardize their livelihoods.

## **BREAK**

- Production: You were in the middle of saying something about the police visit.
- Charles: Yeah. I was saying the police chief came down at 11:00. I wasn't there. They called me and said, "The police are looking for you." I was elsewhere. I don't know if Tampa or Tallahassee, I can't remember, but I was saying, what in the world? At that hour? This is not making any sense. That's what I'm saying to myself. And I just thought then, the more I spend time away, the better, because my feelings were not so much a concern, but jeopardizing the jobs of my parents? Yeah, that's what I was concerned about there.
- Steve: When did things start to change?
- Charles: I think I was away, and I kind of kept somewhat of a pulse on the election-type thing. Newly-elected people started moving [things along at the] county level, state level, other things like that. [Raymond] Stewart himself, I remember when he ran for congress, and then, and he was a principal, and I really had a lot of respect for him. And I thought then, it seems that things were beginning to evolve and move differently. Some black teachers started at Zephyrhills [High]. I could follow that. You see the new faces of teachers, and I thought, yeah, that's definitely something of a change, and yeah, things were beginning to change. And then Walmart or one of those places—I don't know if it was your era or no—I think they brought in some black managers or something early on, and that person had to deal with some pressures, and I said, uh-oh. It's still there. But, overall, the idea of doing that showed that some things had changed, and I could follow it more on the education level, that they were able to start integrating the black teachers in. I felt that things were moving, then. They were beginning to somewhat move along, I felt.
- Steve: I think that your mother was a force in the process of change here as well.
- Charles: Oh yeah.
- Steve: You know, she was active in the street naming for Martin Luther King. Also, when Terry was hired at the Zephyrhills News, she came down and introduced him. She was a force in her church. Like you said, she went to PTA meetings by herself to make her presence known. I think that those are courageous things.
- Charles: Yeah. For this place at that time, definitely. You're really breaking out of the mold. Outside of the box. You're off the chain. You are truly off the chain.
- Steve: And, I think, Reverend [Eddie A.] Nunn.
- Charles: Yeah. Macedonia tried to have some movement and some progress, to concern themselves with community.
- Steve: He lobbied for a black police officer and changes in the city that way.
- Charles: Exactly. Yeah.

Steve: When you come home now, how do you view it? When you come home, is it a burden you bear still?

Charles: No. Now, you know, I'm amazed. I see things. I see other people just moving and going and doing. I see people in positions [doing good things]. The police chief and the city and things like that. So, no: we call it a breath of spring in winter. It's exciting to hear, and even to hear about some of your efforts like that. It's exciting. I can say it's definitely exciting.

Production: If you guys each want to take turns and maybe each give a final remark?

Charles: It has been overly amazing to see Zephyrhills [grow], knowing the history of it from the 1920s origin to see physically what we see now. I see streets and movement and the people here and the things that they're doing are truly amazing to me.

Celia: And to also see that, for as far back as I can remember, all of our family and friends that we remember that we came up with [had such an impact on the city]. Mama will be 95 in April, and out of everyone that was a part of that, she's the only one that's left. Mama was a part of a lot of the history. Mama was here when this facility [Zephyr Haven Health & Rehab] was built. She came along and made sure everything was going as it should have gone. Mama also made sure that, whoever came into town, she would go and greet them. She would find out where they live. I remember when that lady won the million dollar lottery, Mama got in her car and went up to the Publix [to congratulate her]. So, I mean, it's just so remarkable that none of this history that we still remember will be forgotten because of what you all are doing. It's really much appreciated.

Production: Okay, good. Thank you.

**END**