

# ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**Marcus McCants**

Recorded December 14, 2018

- Steve [Spina]: Marcus, tell me where you were born and your early childhood years were spent.
- Marcus: My name is Marcus McCants. I was born in Pontiac, Michigan. I moved to Zephyrhills when I was six years old.
- Steve: Tell us a little bit about your early years in Michigan and why your family moved to Zephyrhills.
- Marcus: In Michigan in the late seventies, my mom owned a beauty shop when she and my dad separated. My dad moved back to Florida. That was before I was even conscious. I was maybe a year old. Everything was fine for me as a kid because that's all I knew, but, you know, as we got older, it was rough. It was rough in Pontiac, near the Detroit area, in the seventies. People were breaking into our houses. I remember coming home and seeing people run out of our backdoor with our TVs. She was a single mom in the 1970s and 80s, and she would try to protect her kids. All of her family was in Zephyrhills. That's where she was originally from. So, we moved back so she could get some support.
- Steve: Tell me about your first trip back. Tell me how you left Pontiac in your mother's car and that experience.
- Marcus: The day before we left Pontiac, my mom went and bought my brother and I two puppies. Of course, we didn't know what was going on. She bought us two puppies to entertain us. I think at the time she was probably 38 [years old]. She piled up two kids and we hit the road—straight [Interstate 75]. We drove straight through. I remember, in the middle of the night, we woke up to her screaming, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!” She had fallen asleep while driving down the road, so she pulled into a rest area. Then we went to a hotel and got up really early—I don't think we stayed there long—and got back on the road. I remember pulling into Zephyrhills. Once we crossed the railroad tracks—you turn right, which is Airport Road now. It was a dirt road then—she got so excited: “I'm home! I'm home!” But to us, it was just a long trip. You know, you're six years old, six and nine, so we were just ready to stop. The puppy's going crazy in the car. It was a Delta 88 Oldsmobile long car, and we pulled into my grandma's house and the family met us outside. There were no cell phones to let them know we were there, so I'm sure, in the middle of the night, a car pulling up, they knew we were home. Everybody ran outside. And that's my first recollection of Zephyrhills: the day we moved down.
- Steve: Okay. Was it summertime or school year? Or do you remember?
- Marcus: I'm pretty sure it was the summertime. I remember I finished school at Robert Frost [Elementary School in Pontiac] and moved down here. I think I started school early because I was seventeen in college. I was always the youngest one in my class. I don't know how it worked back then, but I guess it was because I started school up north—maybe they started

school earlier. We came down. We were used to playing baseball. We played a lot of baseball up north. We lived a block away from the Silver Dome, which is where the [Detroit Lions] played, so we were into football, but we played baseball. That's what we were used to playing. My aunt Frankie [McKenzie] was like, "Well, here y'all play football. We play football in Florida, so we're going to sign you guys up for football." So she signed us up. We really didn't know right away what we were going to do, but because we had good strong arms from throwing a baseball so much, they made us quarterbacks. We both became quarterbacks in Zephyrhills. That's how it started.

Steve: What was school like? How did your fellow students react to you when you started school?

Marcus: Mixed reaction. It's funny you say that. When I first started school—you know, kids up north, they pronounced all their syllables. When we moved to Zephyrhills, we lived on the other side of the railroad tracks, an all-black neighborhood. My buddies, when I first met them, they said, "You guys talk like white boys." That was always a fight. It was a fight every day when they would say that. My mom used to be like, "Listen: you can't keep fighting your friends just because they say that stuff. They don't mean anything by it. It's just...you call it soda, we call it pop, you know? So it's different for them." You've got to think that if someone from down south would have moved up north, we would have thought they spoke different also. We were the victim to that point. So, a mixed reaction. We'd fight a lot at first. Then we realized just to embrace the difference. I remember the first class. All of this stuff...now it falls into focus as I get older, why we were doing what we were doing. I never had classes with the kids that I was in the neighborhood with. It seems like I was in one class, my best friend was in another, my other best friend was in another. We went to West Zephyrhills Elementary, and it wasn't until middle school that we started taking classes together. My buddy—he was a classmate of mine, Sam Smith—says, "Yeah, we got us a black kid in the class now!" It didn't dawn on me that there was only one black kid in each class. When I got to middle school, it was more integrated. You mix up your classes, so we had a lot more diversity in the classrooms then. I was actually there the year they changed the school name to Stewart [Middle School]. It was Zephyrhills Middle School, then, the year I was there, they changed it to Stewart Middle School. I think a year or two before they had sixth, seventh and eighth [grades]. It was just seventh and eighth then. You'll probably hear me say, looking back on things, I realized what was happening, but as a kid, if that's all you know, you don't think anything different about it. The initial shock was, you know, "I don't like it here! Where's the snow? The ants bite!" We didn't appreciate this beautiful weather. At first it was hot—it was really hot—so how can y'all wear this 30 pounds of equipment every time we play football? This is hot! But then you realize that kids out here can run around year-round. Kids up north are in the house three months out of the year. That's the secret.

Steve: Why do you think there was only one [black] kid in each class in elementary school? That's kind of weird. [Do you think they were] just kind of afraid of problems?

Marcus: No, I think it's the ratio. It's just that there weren't that many black kids. The only blacks at that time in Zephyrhills either lived in [Krusen Quarters], which is where I grew up—and as I got older I realized it was short for "slave quarters." We didn't know that as kids—and in Lumberton, but the kids in Lumberton went to Woodland [Elementary School]. The kids in the Quarters went to West [Zephyrhills Elementary School]. So that was it. It was like that: if you lived across the tracks and you were black, you would go to West Zephyrhills Elementary, and then the [black] kids in Lumberton would go to Woodland. So it was just a numbers thing. There just wasn't a lot of [them], you know.

Steve: I think, back then, it was only about four or five percent black in the whole area.

Marcus: Right.

Steve: What was high school like for you when you were a quarterback?

Marcus: Looking back, high school was great. When I was there, I hated it. When you got old enough, you started driving and dating, and we would date a lot of girls from Dade City, mostly, girls who looked like us. We realized that there's a lot more blacks in Dade City than Zephyrhills. And then as soon as we started dating them, my mom started saying, "Hey, what's your mom's name? What's your dad's name?" And I didn't understand at that time the dynamic of: all the parents went to school in Dade City when things were segregated, so my mom knew all of the people in Dade City. But, again, we didn't realize that until we started dating and started going out there. We'd see them on the football and baseball field. At that point, when I first hit high school, I just wondered what it would be like to be around more black people, you know? I didn't realize that I didn't even know a professional black man throughout high school. Not one! My cousin Edward [Holt] was a military guy, but he wasn't around. A lot of times, he was traveling. As a kid looking up, we didn't realize that that was a profession. You look at your options, what is it that you can do, realistically. It's one thing to tell your kid, "You can be anything you want to be. You can do anything you want to do," but until you really see it, you don't really believe it. It's kind of like talking to a kid who had never seen anything. We would see shows like *The Cosby Show* and didn't think it was realistic. It's just acting. I had the best older brother in the world. He didn't always do the things that he was supposed to do, but he made sure I did. I think that was because of not having a dad in the house. We would come home from school and my mom would have to work. She was a single mom, and she would work all the time, and she would work her schedule just so she could be off for our games. We played football, and she would pick up shifts to work overnight just so she could be there to watch us play games. We would get home from school and he'd be like, "Go do your homework." I'm thinking, did you do your homework? "No, I didn't do my homework, but did you do *your* homework?" to the point where he would beat me up! So he made sure I did the right thing, got good grades. He was more of a father figure than a brother figure. Again, as a kid I didn't like that. I didn't like him. I didn't. I changed my position on the football field because I didn't want to be compared to him. I wanted to play running back, and as soon as I got to high school, the coach was like, "No, you're going to play quarterback like your brother." I was a freshman and he was a senior, so he was ready to go out of school. He was a blue chip All-American coming out of school. He could have gone to any school in the country. He excelled in football. He did everything right on the field, and it's kind of hard to live up to that. I don't think I would have tried, except people kept comparing me to him. You go to get your jersey, and they give you number 12 because your brother wore twelve. "I don't want to wear 12. I want to wear 21." "No, you're gonna wear 12." I can say, looking back, high school was great, but when I was there, I hated it, and I couldn't wait to get out of Zephyrhills and thought, I'm never coming back.

Steve: You mentioned [off camera] that you were a tutor. What did you tutor?

Marcus: I tutored math in high school. Math always came pretty easy to me, so that was a way to make money in school. They'd sign you up on the tutor list and some of the kids would come to you: "Would you be able to tutor me?" I had a car, so that was a good way [to make money]. During a season in which you played football, baseball, basketball, it's kind of hard to work, but you can tutor an hour and make ten bucks or five bucks, and that was pretty good. Me having a car,

I could pick people up. I could go to their house and do it. I had one classmate who had younger siblings, and her mom was okay with her coming back with me. I'd take her to the library, we would study and do whatever, and I remember one time, I picked her up to go to a tutoring session, and we actually went back to the high school—they left the high school open—and I was taking her home, we got pulled over. The police didn't say anything to me. They were asking her, "Do your parents know who you're with? Where you're at?" I could hear these things, and, to a 16 year old kid, it's degrading. It's one of those things. But again, that's all we knew then. I mean, you knew it wasn't right. But again, there's no dad in the house: who's going to stand up for you? My mom, she was everything. She didn't bite her tongue. She would say whatever. But I was really frustrated with my dad for not being there, you know? That caused a lot of tension: he should be saying these things. Same thing in Little League: you have dads coaching Little League so their kids can play, and you know that this kid shouldn't be playing that position, but his dad is a coach, so what do you say?

Steve: Right. And your mother just had sisters, so you didn't have an uncle father figure either.

Marcus: Right. That's it.

Steve: What made you pick Morehouse College? It's kind of the [gold standard] of historically black colleges. How did that come about?

Marcus: I chose to go to Morehouse coming out of high school, because I was looking for that diversity. I had an opportunity because football allowed me to pick and choose what schools I wanted to go to. They were offering me scholarships. I got to see my brother do this three years before I did. He went off to school strictly just to play football. So, again—I always say this—he was the best big brother in the world, because it was trial and error: no one in our family had gone to school before. When you get an opportunity to go to school for free to play a sport that you love, [based on] the criteria that he [came up with], his decision was [University of Tennessee], who had more people go to the pros the year before than any other school. "I'm going to Tennessee. I'm only going to look at a school that had a black quarterback," because he played quarterback. At that time, it was West Virginia, Clemson, Syracuse, Tennessee, so that's a decision that he was making based on that. And when I saw him get hurt, it hurt him so bad. Pride wouldn't let him stay in school. His scholarship was still good; they don't really offer that kind of scholarship now. Like now, they run it as a business. If you get hurt, you're probably going to lose your scholarship. Well, back then, they thought it was a good business move to continue to let a kid go to school, because how can they go back to Zephyrhills and recruit again [if they don't]? I remember when Orion [McCants, Marcus's brother] went to school, then he got hurt, and if they take his scholarship, they'll never be able to recruit Central Florida again. That was the thought. So I watched this, and I when he got hurt and I was like, "Well, why aren't you going to go back to school?" He was like, "Why would I be in Tennessee if I can't play football?" And so it kind of changed my thought process: if I can take advantage of this opportunity and go to any school I want to, within reason—schools that were offering me scholarships—then what kind of environment would I be in, if I could change the environment, if I could change the things that I didn't like about the Zephyrhills experience that I had growing up, you know? So I started looking at historically black colleges where we weren't the minority. If I can escape reality for four years, then that's what I wanted to do, because I needed to see somebody who could help me be the best I can be. And I thought, what other way to get that than having someone who looks like me teach me on these things?

Steve: So you realized that to go to college, you wanted to look at academics *and* sports just in case, because you don't know what will happen.

Marcus: I saw what happened to my brother, and he would even tell me things like, "Go where you want to go outside of football. You got to get that degree"—You know, how important that is. These are the lessons that come full circle. Part of the reason that made me come back home is because Zephyrhills is not a bad place to live in, but I think people need to get exposure. They need to live outside of Zephyrhills to appreciate it. And you know, throughout my life journey, I realized that, looking back on things, things are never as bad as it seems here in the middle of it. Once you get out, you look back and you kind of separate things. You take it for what it is, and you have to learn from it. The things that I wanted people in Zephyrhills to see a was: I've got a bunch of little cousins around here, and I want them to see something different than what they see in the neighborhood, as far as what they deem to be successful. You know, school's a good opportunity to get ahead. It gives you options, but you don't have to go to college to be successful. You pick up a trade, go to trade school, go to the military, all these things give you options when you get out, when you finish. And I think that's what success is. Success is being able to do something you enjoy doing. So many people don't get a chance to do things they enjoy. You work—that's over half your life. I think of how different my life would have been if my dad would've been in the household, you know, but I do know that / can't be a great husband, I can't be a great brother, I can't be a great dad if I'm miserable eight hours out the day. Coming home...it's going to spill over into your house. I think that was one of the things when I went off and I started visiting schools and started looking: it was totally different when I went to Atlanta. It was like we're the majority. Everywhere I went it was nothing but people who look like me, and it wasn't negative, you know? I know when I was a kid we would go hang out at parties and clubs, and especially in rough areas, it was pretty much guaranteed that somebody was gonna get shot. They were going to be shooting at the end of the night. There was going to be fighting. I didn't see that when I went there. So I definitely thought, man, this is different. I definitely want this right here.

Steve: So Atlanta exposed you to not only a more diverse community, but, at Morehouse, you had male instructors or mentors or counselors that gave you some of that guidance that you were looking for as well.

Marcus: Yes, definitely. That's what Morehouse provides, and I think most historically black institutions do the same. A lot of times people ask why they are still in existence, you know, what's the point of it? And you just look back, and it's like, it's not to try to segregate, you know what I'm saying? It's just to give you a different perspective. We used to do a lot of case studies, case studies that I'm sure I wouldn't have got to do if I'd have gone to a major university, and it makes you look at things a lot differently.

Steve: Yeah. If you're in the minority at a larger university, you're going to get swallowed up.

Marcus: Right.

Steve: Where there [at Morehouse], you're able to culturally and educationally have experiences that define your culture.

Marcus: And one thing is, after going to school, seeing all the diversity gave me a better appreciation for Zephyrhills. I remember the first time I came back home with some of my teammates, we went over to the Walmart off of [U.S. Highway] 301. I was walking through Walmart, and I saw a

bunch of people that I knew: “Hey Marcus! Hey Marcus!” And my buddy was like, “You know everybody in town!” They didn't realize that it was such a small town that we knew each other. That's what gave me the appreciation for the class of '92, the kids I graduated with. You know, if I could tell them all how much I appreciate them...because in some way or another, things that happened, the relationships that we had, the bond that we built, those were genuine friendships. It wasn't built on anything artificial. It was like, I go to school with you because we live in the same zip code, and for no other reason, we built a bond. To this day, when I do things, I try to use contractors from Zephyrhills. I want to use the gutter people from Zephyrhills. I only use landscapers from Zephyrhills. I just try to give back, because it's still a small enough community where I think your business is more appreciated with them as opposed to a major company in a bigger city. I didn't appreciate it then, though. As a kid. I thought I would never move back to Zephyrhills. I moved away, and I thought I'll never come back home. I was gone for 11 years.

Steve: Right. So after you graduated from Morehouse, you went to Dallas. You majored in finance?

Marcus: I majored in finance at Morehouse. I majored in finance and management. When I first got out of school I moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma for a year. I was a financial analyst for American Airlines. Tulsa was different. Leaving Atlanta, moving to Tulsa...that was different. I would love it now. Clean city. Tulsa has a lot of history. People need to look up Black Wall Street—happened in Tulsa. I moved to Tulsa. Tulsa was okay. I took a promotion and moved to Dallas. I was trying to get to Dallas because we were based out of Dallas, which was, I think, three hours south of Tulsa. Once I got to Dallas, that's where I wanted to be with American [Airlines]. I was doing really well. I took a couple of promotions real quick and left—started making more money. I went and started working for an investment firm and there was no gratification, other than making more money. I used to think about that rat on a wheel, where you're just running, you're chasing, you're chasing the carrot. So you make a lot of money—or what I deemed to be a lot of money then—but you have no life. There's no gratification. What you do is just working tons of hours, and I got burned out. I burned out.

Steve: Is that when you left to go into business? Because you've had a couple businesses—you still do—but you were a barber. You had a barber shop. What was your first venture on your own?

Marcus: Yes. Growing up in Zephyrhills, we didn't have a barbershop that could cut our hair. If my mom would take us a barbershop, they were honest: “We really don't know how to cut your hair.” My mom, having a background in doing hair, she knew how to cut hair, but she had another job, so she really didn't want to cut hair. When the kids found out she could cut hair, she was the local barber. She would cut hair, but she didn't want to do it. So she's like, “Listen, you learn how to cut hair,” so she taught me at a young age how to cut hair. Of course I would practice on my friends and my brother, so that was one thing I always had a passion for. When I was in college during the summertime, I would go to barber school in Zephyrhills. I'd come home over the summer and go to barber school. During the second summer, that's how I ended up getting my barber's license. When football season was over in Atlanta, in college, I would go work at a local barbershop. That was the thing that I always kept my back pocket. I could always cut hair. A gentleman told me one day in barber school in Zephyrhills, he says, “Listen: the way you get ahead in life is you find a career or a job and then you find hustle.” And a hustle's going to kind of break up the day-to-day from your career and your job. It just gives you something different, even if you do it two or three days a week, and you set a budget based on that. And that's basically what I did. When I was in Dallas working for Bear Stearns [Companies, Inc.], I was working at a barbershop Thursday, Friday, Saturday. I would go Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and

did that enough to where I was like, okay, I'm gonna see if I can pay my bills out of my barbershop money. I bought a house as soon as I moved to Dallas, so I had a plan. I just didn't know what I was going to do. When I got kind of burned out from working for an investment firm, I came up with a plan to come back home and open up a franchise. At that time, Wingstop was the number four new franchise in the country. They were really big in Dallas and they hadn't had any in Tampa. Tallahassee was the first city in Florida to open one. [Wingstop in] Miami was doing pretty well at the time. I think they had three in Miami. When I first told my mom, "Hey mom: I'm gonna move home and I'm opening up a restaurant," she about lost it. She was thinking, "You have a great job, and you're going to leave your job, and you're going to come home and serve fried chicken?" I'm like, "Ma, you've got to try it." I was so excited. I flew my brother out and I took him out to a Wingstop, like, "What do you think?" He didn't really care for wings. He was like, "...It's okay." So he made me a little nervous at first. I'm like, oh man, maybe it's not as good as I thought it was. So, my two year plan: I took my lunch to work every day—stopped going out to eat for lunch. I put myself on a budget. That's when I met my wife, while I was budgeting to open up this Wingstop, and I thought she was going to ditch me as soon as I told her, "Listen, I'm not really going out too much. I'm trying to budget," but she hung in there. I sold my house. I put everything into this. I moved home in '03 to open up my Wingstop, and it took a lot longer than I anticipated. I moved home in March [2003]. We didn't open up until November '03, and you I can just remember the look on my mom's face. She thought that I had made it: "My baby's got a restaurant!" It wasn't doing what they were doing in Dallas. In Dallas, you couldn't walk into a Wingstop without the hinges staying off the door. I mean, they were busy non-stop. You couldn't call them on fight night. I opened up in Tampa in a great location [near the corner of Fowler Avenue and Bruce B. Downs Boulevard] and no one knew what it was. I'd have people come in and ask if I was selling shoes. I'm thinking, what? Shoes? But then I thought about the logo. There was like a Red Wing Shoes logo that was similar to our Wingstop logo. So, you name it, I did it. I stayed on U.S.F.'s [University of South Florida's] campus always, trying to pass out fliers. I did everything but get on Fowler [Avenue] in a chicken costume. Other than that, I was doing it. I got in touch with this radio show. They would let me come on if I would bring them food and whatever. I was trying to do whatever I can, and I left my wife—she was in Dallas and we were engaged—but I left her in Dallas because things weren't going that well at first. Every night when I would leave—I worked open to close. I would walk out of there at 1:00 in the morning—I would call her on my way home and she would keep talking to me because I was tired. The next morning, I'm doing the same thing, seven days a week. But I used to think to myself, if I could do this for somebody else, then I've got to be able to do it for myself. My mom was so irritated at first because she was like, "Baby, you've been gone for 11 years. You're finally home, and you're not doing anything but working." She would have to come up through the restaurant and see me. I was just so afraid. I didn't have the backing. I used to think back—when I was in school, they would say that 80 percent of businesses close down because they don't have the working capital to sustain being open when things are slow. That's what I used to think. I'd just keep that in my back pocket. Like, okay, I'm nervous, and I don't want to max out credit cards. I don't want to. I sold my house. I put the money up and I was working every day to try to reduce my overhead. It took awhile for it to take off, but it did eventually take off. After working in the shop every day, open to close, I got a little burned out. I was thinking, I need some male interaction. I need some grown men interaction. You don't realize how much you miss that until you're working with a bunch of 18-year-olds every day. I opened up the barbershop in Zephyrhills because I would talk to my buddies: "Hey, man. Why don't you come by [the restaurant?]" "Oh, it's too far." I'm like, it's 20 minutes up the road. So then I opened up the barbershop in Zephyrhills and figured that would help me to get a little male interaction, things like that and I needed it. I did. It gave me a break at that point. We had two young kids. I would work at the barbershop, you

Thursday, Friday, Saturday, the busier days, and I would work at Wingstop on the slower days. We were able to pay our bills. We were breaking even, and for about three years we stayed steady with ourselves. We didn't go up, so I knew I had to get back into the [restaurant]. There was a young man who opened up after I did in Tampa, and he closed his store down. I wanted to buy his store. My accountant was like, "What are you going to do different to his store?" And I'm like, "I'm going to get back into working in the store!" And he said, "Why don't you go back and work in your store?" Something as simple as that made all the difference in the world. I got back and started working at my store, and sales took off. We do have a second location now, a little bit closer to Zephyrhills and Wesley Chapel [near the corner of Bruce B. Downs Boulevard and County Line Road].

Steve: You had mentioned that when you moved here, you knew you were in a different place, and you told the story about the differences between Detroit and Zephyrhills and North-South and some of those issues. You told a story about your mother taking a break. I guess she was at [Zephyrhills] Correctional Institute.

Marcus: Yeah. When we first moved here in 1980, the first thing my mom did was she found a job to help support her kids. She worked at the local prison on 301. She would work the graveyard shifts. She would work 12:00 midnight to 8:00 in the morning. I remember—I'm just a kid—we lived with my grandmother and our mom was at work. She would sit on the back of the truck and the Ku Klux Klan was walking by, next to the fence, and she radios in, and she says, "Hey, the Ku Klux Klan is out here." And someone got on the radio and told her, "It's okay. You know, there's probably some of your coworkers with them." I just remember as a kid, six years old, your mom coming home, and she's got to put up a tough face. You have to do that, but she just started crying, and she told me that story, and I'm like, "Let's go back to Michigan! Let's go back to Michigan!" Because I was terrified as a kid. You hear about the Bogeyman, but when your mom actually *saw* the Bogeyman, it's like, "Let's go!" It's all the same thing in middle school. We were going to a game one day—it was a basketball game down [State Road] 54. I'm not sure which school—and the Klan was burning crosses in the field. I knew we were in a different place down here. The way things were, people were so casual about race issues that it just makes you feel uncomfortable. We were in school, and as a junior or senior, you know, we asked not to read *Huckleberry Finn*. It's an innocent book, but the fact that they say the word "nigger" in the book...to a kid, you've got to picture yourself, if you're the only [black] one in class, and kids are not mature enough to not see that and look at you. When I tell you that all thirty heads would turn around and look at you when they mentioned slavery and things like that, these were the kinds of things that unbeknownst to me, made me feel uncomfortable or almost shamed when they talk about slavery. You feel shame about it. When they showed pictures of Africa, you'll be shamed about it because your perception of Africa was *poor, dark, ignorant*, things like that, because that's what we saw, and it kind of perpetuated that feeling. In hindsight, you look at the [U.S. presidential] election back when [Barack] Obama ran: there were so many people that I knew who thought that every black person in the world was voting for Obama, because he looked like them and he's going to make their life better or something. And that wasn't the case at all. The real reason why most black people voted for Obama is because you need to really be able to tell your kid, to look your kid in the eye and say, "You really can be anything you want to be." It's one thing to say it, but to actually see it was something different, you know? It wasn't that we thought he was going to come let all of the black people out of prison, things like that. I've got a good friend and we talk about this all the time. It's all about perception. If it doesn't affect you, if you don't see it every day, then you have no clue about it. I can't tell you what it's like to be a female, because I'm not a female. Your whole goal in life is to put your kids in a situation that's better than yours. Two years ago in

Wesley Chapel, we're going to an all-star game. It's me and my two daughters, and they were both playing the same all-star game in Sanford. They were on different teams, and it was a caravan of coaches driving out. They were trying to make a little trip out of it. We went down to St. Leo [University] first, then left from St. Leo. We're going to go out to Webster and eat lunch, and then we're going to go to Sanford. So we're leaving and we're going through Dade City once we left St. Leo. As soon as we turn onto 301 heading north—I was behind the head coach. There were six cars behind me. This is in 2016—we're riding and there was a cop who passed all these cars and got right behind me and lit me up, and I'm thinking, you've got to be kidding me! I've got my kids in the car! So I kind of flashed [my headlights at] the coach in front of me. He pulled over and I pulled over. When the cop pulled over, all of the other six cars pulled over behind me and he started snickering. He says, "I'm assuming these people are with you." I said, "Yeah, they're with me." By this point, one of the parents is hanging out the window. She is giving it to him: "What the fuck did you pull us over for? What are you doing?" She's really giving it to him and I'm like, calm down! I've got my kids in the car! And she's screaming and yelling and he says, "Oh, I just...I'm gonna let you go on your way in just a minute. It was just kind of hard for me to see your license plate from behind. Where are you guys going?" And the only thing I'm thinking is, I understand that conversation I'm about to have in two minutes when I get back on the road with my kids. I've got daughters. But what I want to know is: what are you guys going to tell your daughters? That's the most important thing to me, because, the thing is, it's never going to end when we ignore it and act like it doesn't happen, you know? Now, did I get belligerent and ask for his captain's [phone] number and all that? No, because, the truth is, I've been black my whole life, so there's always been these kind of things that happened. You have to talk to your kids and explain to your kids, "Listen: this is how you handle it." I tell my kids all the time, "Get it out of your head that things aren't fair. Okay? Because you have things that somebody else doesn't have, and they'll look at you and say that's unfair. You live a little bit better than the next person, and somebody would say that's not fair. Here are the cards you're dealt. Let's deal with them. Let's keep it moving." When we went out to lunch, not one parent didn't come up to me and some were in tears. Some were crying. "I hear people say this all the time but I've never seen it. I didn't know it was real." One guy was like, "So this is what the Colin Kaepernick thing is about."

Steve: [I think that a lot of people believe that] we're post racial, that electing President Obama proved that we're not a racist country and things don't happen, but even at work, I see examples all the time. We talked with a former police officer, [Daniel Hill], that had incidents that other police officers didn't have. There are types of experiences still. You said you wanted to come home. Are you glad you came home?

Marcus: I am glad I came home. I am. An important thing is just...I want my little cousins, my nephews, my nieces, my family members, people of color, just to see something different. Another way to make it out. That was the point in opening up the barbershop. It is the best time you can be in a kid's ear and you can talk to him. You can catch them at a young age when they're impressionable, because that's what made me want to be a barber. I was sitting in a barbershop in Tampa one day getting my hair cut since my mom didn't feel like cutting hair. I remember like it was yesterday: there was a guy cutting my hair. He was palming my head, and I remember he had a bracelet dangling and I kept looking at his bracelet thinking like, man, look how nice that bracelet is, and then I started looking at the ambiance and I'm thinking—because as a kid, it's important to be cool. That's part of the makeup—I want to make money. I want to be cool. I want the girls, and I'm thinking, this guy is being himself, all his buddies are in here hanging out, and he's making money. I want to be a barber. I want to be a barber. So I was hoping to get the kids in there, and I would talk to them all the time about school, about things that are really

important, not how many touchdowns you scored. I mean, everyone wants to know, “Are you going to be a football player? You want to be a baseball player? You want to be a basketball player?” [I was asking,] “How are your grades? What are you interested in? What's the last book you read?” These are the kinds of things that get lost, that we don't realize that, you want to get your standardized tests up? Put a book in your kid's hand. The more these kids read, the more they can retain, the more muscle memory they have in their brain, until, when they're sitting down taking these tests, they don't get tired because they're used to reading. You know how many kids poop out when they read and they're doing standardized tests? Halfway through, they just stop looking at it. They're not used to reading. These are the kinds of things that I like to talk about in a barber shop. My barber shop didn't allow cussing. We listened to old school music. Just good vibes. Just good vibes.

Jon [West]: Generally, to what do you attribute your success?

Marcus: My family. My brother. I attribute my success to my family. All of the experiences that I've had, are through something that's happened in my life, my friends, even someone else's failures, it's a learning lesson on what not to do. Those who succeeded, it's a learning lesson on what *to* do. The biggest part is my brother. When he failed, the biggest mistake he ever made in his life, the one thing he would say: “Just make sure you get your degree.” Those are the kinds of things that I think, if a father would have been in the household, he would have gave him that. “Make sure you get a degree just so it gives you options. Just keeping options open. That's it.”

Jon: So let's go off of that. You had a lot of family members around in Zephyrhills, right? I mean, you're part of the Giles family.

Marcus: I am part the Giles family. Yes.

Jon: Yeah. So that's historic in Zephyrhills. How big was your family's presence in the community?

Marcus: My family's presence in the community is *big*. My grandmother being the oldest of the Giles siblings, because she was a female and got married and her last name changed to Willis, a lot of these things kind of got lost when growing up. You know, [grandma] had daughters. My mom, she got married and her last name changed from Willis to McCants. When we moved back to Florida, when we moved to Zephyrhills, I remember playing in an all-star game against Dade City—me being the only black on the team—and after the game, my mom says, “Hey, Marcus! Come here!” And I saw her standing with some of the kids from Dade City. She said, “This is your cousin, Dee. This is your cousin.” So Dee [Reedy] called Mike Penix and Charmalene Wilson and Isaac Johnson: “Marcus is my cousin! Marcus is my cousin!” So it was one of those things. My last name wasn't Giles, but we were Giles. We had a lot of family in the community, a lot of family, and unless you see them in the neighborhood, you see them around, and your mom would be like, “That's your cousin”—if no one was there to do that, you didn't know, and probably would end up *dating* your cousin if you weren't careful.

Jon: Did your family raise you in such a way that you sought out success, or do you think that maybe they held you to a higher standard that taught you to take a higher standard for yourself?

Marcus: No, I think with my family and success, for the most part, we deemed success as far as what we saw: to make it playing ball. And having friends that I went to school with who didn't look like me, I'd go to their house and see both parents in the household. Later in life, I realized that makes it a little easier, you know? Your perspective on things started to change. What's cool?

It's cool to be a dad, to be there. I want to be at my kids' games. I want to make sure that it's not about *if* I go to school, it's what school I go to. I had a really good friend and her dad was a principal at school, and we would talk about these things and she'd be like, "You got to get a degree. It's just a must. And then your kids [need to as well]." She would put these things in my head and we would talk about it. My cousin, Reggie [Roberts], he went to school. My brother went to school. All these guys went to school before me. When I was still in high school, I got a chance to see my brother go to school. My cousin Reggie go to school. My best friend and his brother went to school, a lot of kids went to school before us, and, for the most part, they were coming back home. I had one cousin, Reggie, who was on pace to graduate and he would tell me that the reason why they're quitting school is because they're going to school for one reason. You've got to find a school that you enjoy outside of football. So it kind of changed my perspective on what to look for when I'm thinking about going to school, you know. And then there was a kid from Dade City who actually finished school, and I remember he came back around and he had a job. This kid was like everything in basketball. Everything. His brother and I were really close, Jaime. But to me, I saw, Julius went to school. He got a nice car. He'd come back around the neighborhood, and I'm like, you can make it [in ways] other than playing ball, you know what I'm saying? Or use [ball] to get what you want out of life, you know? That kind of changed my perspective on what was cool: get a degree. Get a job. Other than that, we couldn't dream. I didn't realize that I didn't know how to dream. When I first got to school and they said, "What do you want to major in?" "Math? Because I'm good at math? I don't know." It took me three years to realize that I'm not going to major in math. I changed over. Finance was an easy transition to change over to [from] math. But again, I didn't know how to dream. I talked to kids on my team, and they are like, "My dad does so and so. My dad does this and my mother does this." I thought it was a joke! I didn't know that people made money like that or that they owned things.

Jon: So think back with me for a second: maybe you've heard stories from your aunt or your mom or people who grew up in Zephyrhills in the sixties and seventies and times when [racial] things were worse or more overt. Can you compare it to when you were growing up in the eighties and nineties, and then to now? Like do a comparison. [Has there] been progress made through like the eighties and the nineties?

Marcus: When I was in school, we did a study based on the evolution of relationships, and it all kind of comes into play. When my grandfather was younger, when he was young man, the tradition was the man will go work and the female will be home being a housemaker without an education. He would develop a skill set and or a trade that he could pass down to his son if he had sons. My grandfather had daughters, so my grandmother would be the one that would say, "Listen, it's kind of unfair. Sure, he's not treating her right. She's kind of dependent on him because she has no leverage. If he treats her wrong, what is she going to do? Nothing. She can't do anything." So what is she going to teach her daughters? "Listen, don't depend on a man," and this is how the evolution of relationships started happening. "I want you to develop a skill set, a trade, where you can make your own money and you don't let people force you into doing these things." Well, what happens when a man dies? My grandfather dies and my grandmother has to get odd jobs cleaning houses, things like this. That generation was concerned with keeping a roof over your head, putting food on the table, these things, where they taught their kids—my mother's generation—to be financially independent. "Don't depend on anybody." Then that generation was more about—they call it the step-parent. You got married, then divorced because mom wasn't putting up with that because she was making her own money, and then they probably got married again and kind of figured it out because the roles are starting to change. Just like racial roles. They were starting to change. Sixties,

seventies [come around] and those parents taught their kids, "I want you to have better than I had it. Don't worry about cooking and cleaning. Worry about getting an education." That's what mom told her daughters, and when you go to any school, you'll look at the ratio: it's a lot higher, females to guys, in colleges. What do you think is going to happen twenty years from now if you have more females getting education than these guys? So the roles are steadily changing, just like the racial relationships are. The thing that I was hoping would happen is, when I was in school, if I caught myself liking a white girl and her dad didn't approve of it, that when we got older then she would make sure she would tell her kids something different. But she didn't. She's not going to, because it's a lot easier to go with the flow. It's a lot easier to not stand up when everybody's sitting down. It's a lot easier to ignore it if you're not in that situation anymore, and it takes somebody who is really passionate about those things because it doesn't affect them. How many people do you know who'll go out and protest something that doesn't have anything to do with them just because it's right or wrong? Most people won't. I'm a businessman, and you're given that fact all the time that this may not be right, but are you going to jeopardize losing money because you stand up for what's right? It takes a *strong* person to do that. So the relationship roles change over time. Racial roles change over time. I look at now in Zephyrhills: I know when I had my barbershop open, the majority of the kids that were coming in there, they were mixed [race] kids. [The separation] has to stop sooner or later, or you would hope it does. A good friend of mine, his dad, he was my buddy. I think he was my Little League coach, but as soon as he found out my cousin liked his daughter, oh, no. He drew that line in the sand *real* quick. Well, now his daughter has biracial kids, and he apologizes to me every time he sees me, and I'm like, you didn't do anything to me, but I think it's his conscience. Maybe the things that he was saying when I wasn't around, that weren't necessarily directed towards me, [referred to the fact that] I introduced my cousin to his daughter.

Jon: So I guess to kind of wrap up this thought—I think you kind of led into this nicely—what kind of change do you think needs to continue to happen? So, we're in the year 2018: what kind of changes would you like to see continue to happen in Zephyrhills in 2019 and 2020 and so on to help lift more people? To help further unite the community and help get rid of some of those issues?

Marcus: Well, I definitely don't want people to use race relations as a crutch, but I think that in order for it to dissolve, to get better, everyone has to acknowledge it. You have to acknowledge it. You can't ignore it just because it doesn't affect you right now. We can learn from kids, you know? You put kids out there in the room, they're gonna all play together. They don't realize the biases, but as they get older and through experience, they start separating themselves. I remember in elementary school, we were all there together. We got to middle school and started separating into packs. High school, you sit on this wall, you sit on this wall, and your buddy from elementary, you don't even talk anymore. Yeah. So, I mean, it has to be. You've got to acknowledge it and not ignore it. That's the truth. Racism is alive. It is. It's 2018 and it's still alive. A black president is not going to dissolve that. It's not.

**END**