



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER  
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA  
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



# Oral History Interview

with

## Michael Johnson

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**Interviewer:** *Kerry James Reed*

**Narrator:** *Michael Johnson*

**Location of Interview:**

*Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314*

**Date of Interview:** *7/14/2023*

**Transcriber:** *Kerry James Reed*

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### **Summary:**

*Michael Johnson reflects on his experiences growing up in Uptown/Parker-Gray, the community of Parker-Gray, his time spent in the Marine Corps, his concern regarding the history of African-Americans in Alexandria, and his work with the City of Alexandria*

### **Notes:**

*This recording is part of a special project about the history of historical preservation in Alexandria. Kerry James Reed served as an Oral History Intern in the summer of 2023 and worked on this special project.*

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<b>General</b>	Childhood; Parker-Gray; Racial Discrimination; Marine Corps; History of Alexandria; Community Engagement
<b>People</b>	Michael Johnson & Family of Michael Johnson
<b>Places</b>	City of Alexandria; Uptown/Parker-Gray

**Michael Johnson:** [00:00:02] Hello. My name is Michael Johnson. I'm 66 years of age. Today is July the 14th, 2023. And the location of this interview is the Lloyd house in Alexandria, Virginia. [00:00:15][12.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:00:17] My name is Kerry James Reed. I am 26 years of age. It is July 14th, 2023, and we are at the Lloyd House. So thank you so much for being here with us today, Mike. I really appreciate it. We'll start with some simple stuff. Where were you born? [00:00:33][16.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:00:33] I was born in the old Alexandria Hospital here in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1956. November the 13th. [00:00:41][8.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:00:44] What were your parents names? [00:00:45][0.7]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:00:46] My father name was Warner Johnson. My mother name was Bernice Johnson. My father family members date back in the state of Virginia to 1790, my mother came out of a very rural area. The name of the little town was called Bondsville, Georgia. [00:01:05][18.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:01:08] Where did you grow up? [00:01:08][0.7]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:01:09] I grew up here in Alexandria, Virginia. First, I lived on Queen Street, on the corner of Queen and West. And then around 1965, we moved to 720 North Patrick Street, where we currently still own my childhood home. [00:01:28][18.5]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:01:31] So growing up on North Patrick Street, can you describe any childhood memories you have growing up there? [00:01:37][6.1]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:01:37] Sure. It was a one lane road when we first moved up there, believe it or not, had a lot of truck traffic. But it was a very unique, unified community. Everybody knew everyone. Everybody played together. Everybody families know one another in that area. So it was a very close knit community, or neighborhood. [00:02:06][28.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:02:08] Do you remember any significant community leaders from when you were growing up? Anybody that sticks out? [00:02:12][3.7]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:02:13] Yes, several of them. One was Mr. Bernard Hunter. The next person would be Miss Dorothy, Peaches Turner. Another person that I remembered was Mr. Ferdinand Day. I also remember a school teacher, Mr. Hollis Williams. [00:02:35][22.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:02:37] And in what capacity were they community leaders? [00:02:40][3.1]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:02:41] Well, they were advocates for us for housing, better housing, jobs, education. And they wanted to see, they started programs to help those African-Americans that was in their neighborhood. Well, really throughout the city. We had about four African-American neighborhoods at the time in the city, but they would go from neighborhood to neighborhood to neighborhood to make sure everybody was included in some of the programs that they were pushing. Some of the concerns, at the time was the neighborhood. Of African-Americans that was

living in Alexandria, they were the ones that I remember that was in the forefront of a push for equality for African-Americans here. [00:03:30][49.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:03:31] So how was equality in Alexandria then, when you were growing up? [00:03:36][5.2]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:03:37] Oh, what I remember is that even though a lot of the other parts of Alexandria had like running water and the sewage or the trash was being picked up, in our neighborhood we were pretty much shortchanged in a lot of those governmental resources that they had throughout the city. In the black neighborhoods, we had a lack of resources. Matter of fact, I do remember that one of the houses of an elderly lady that lived on my block, she still had an outhouse in the back in her yard, you know, before they came through redid Patrick St., you know, they dug it up and widened it and so forth. And our front steps used to extend to the street, and with the eminent domain, I remember them coming through and not paying my parents for a half of our front porch that they took off, all the steps that they took off to widen the street. It was pretty much they came through and told them. "hey it's just what we going to do." But a lot of the resources wasn't there. You know, you had people struggling to just survive back then. And then I remember as I got older, you know, you might have very large families back then. It wasn't unusual to go to one house to find ten people in that house and then go to another house and another eight or nine. That's how it was back then. [00:05:14][96.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:05:17] Do you have any siblings? [00:05:18][0.4]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:05:18] Yes, I have five brothers. One is deceased and I have three sisters. My dad had a daughter named Latricia before he married my mother, who had a son and a daughter. Warren, also Sandra. And then I have my sister, Stephanie. Her twin, Steve. My baby brother Jeffrey. My older brother Andre. And a brother, Greg. [00:05:55][36.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:05:58] Do you have any really particularly fond memories of growing up with your siblings here in Alexandria? [00:06:02][3.7]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:06:02] Oh, yeah, we used to. [laughs] My brother Andre wanted to be a eagle Scout. He always talked about that. At the time, we really didn't have any scout troops in our neighborhood. So, Andre, pretty much; A guy named Timmy Mass who lived on our block, who was white. He was the only white family on the block. Andre went to a scout meeting with him, and first day turned him away. And then probably a year or two later, we had our own scout troop in the Parker-Gray area. And the I can't remember the scoutmaster name, but I know he was white. But I know as my brother Andre progressed through, they would not allow him to obtain his Eagle Scout badge. And he was very disappointed in that. Andre is also my brother that went into the Marine Corps, and I follow him later on into the Marine Corps. And one of the things that drove him to the military setting was that he can become the Eagle Scout. He always spoke about their pride til his death. [00:07:19][76.5]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:07:21] So from that story, it clear that your brother faced some racial discrimination here. [00:07:25][4.2]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:07:25] Right, well we all did. Yeah. [00:07:26][1.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:07:27] Do you have any memories of incidents? [00:07:29][1.9]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:07:29] Oh, yeah. I have several incidents. I remember coming past the Lloyd house here with my sister and my cousins, we was going to see my mother at Old Alexandra Hospital. And back then, around about like 6:30, it was like off limits to us, Washington street was. And I had a white guy, you know, calling me the N-word, pointed a gun in my face. And I told my sister, my cousin, to run, because at that time I didn't know, you know, what may happen. And then growing up, also in the Parker-Gray area, I remember some of the law enforcement officers used to come past, throw the finger up at us and call us the N-word, you know? And this was ongoing. I've also had where, growing up we had racial fights, riots. And one particular incident, I remember a guy named Robin Gibson when he got killed and they had about a week or two of unrest here in the city with racial riots, burning, brick throwing, bottles and all that. Those are some of the things that I truly remember about myself, you know, being engaged in and running into from racial discrimination here in the city. [00:08:49][79.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:08:52] So how would you describe the temperament in Parker-Gray as opposed to the rest of the city when you're growing, up from a community standpoint? [00:08:59][7.7]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:09:00] Well, one thing I would say about the Parker-Gray area growing up. They were very unified and together. And we always had a saying, they called us the Uptown boys. If one of us fought, we all fought. If one of us decided to do something wrong, then you were corrected by most, majority of people that came out of that area. One of the things that really, truly stand out about that area and that community is that nothing went on without families and everybody in the neighborhood knowing what was going on, whether it was good or bad, you know. We did have businesses. I remember UPS having a warehouse on North Fayette Street and then the Eskimo Ice Cream Company had a business there, and I remember a couple of guys in the neighborhood broke into both of those establishments. And what they did was they came to the neighborhood, said "hey, got free clothing at U.P.S., and the ice cream truck is wide open, you can get ice cream." You know, so things like that. You know, we always shared information, you know, whether it was good or bad. [00:10:17][77.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:10:18] Right. Where did you go to school in the city? [00:10:21][3.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:10:23] I first attended Charles Houston Elementary School, which is located at 901 West Street, which was also Parker-Gray High School at one time. Prior, of course, prior to me coming in and them changing the name to Charles Houston. We went there, and then we went to what we call the new Parker-Gray on Madison Street for middle school. And us transitioning from Charles Houston, where we had all black teachers, over to Parker-Gray on Madison Street, the new Parker-Gray, we had never experienced a white teacher. We had never experienced really being around whites except for that one family that lived on our block. But they didn't know they was white. They act just like we did, you know. But other than that, I had never seen a white teacher and it was some real discomfort there. And then from there I went to GW and then from GW I went up to, which was T.C. Williams at the time and now is Alexandria City High School. [00:11:40][77.9]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:11:42] What sort of discomfort came from experiencing a white teacher for the first time? [00:11:48][5.4]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:11:48] Well, I'll go back to Charles Houston elementary school, because the books that we received from the school, Alexandria City public school book suppository, they had like words like monkey written in them, nigger. Some of the pages will be missing. So, that was the image that we knew that was coming from the white schools that was being passed down to us. The material that we received, well, we're always second or third hand. I always tell my children about how all of our teachers always wrote our assignments on the board. And I remember those chalkboards being cracked because those chalkboards were pretty much the original chalkboard that was placed when it was Parker-Gray Elementary School before it became Parker-Gray high school, which was built in like 1920, '22, something like that. So, I went to school in 19, I went to Charles Houston in 1963. I remember Kennedy got killed. Had to be in the first grade. So, me looking back at that, and then you got to understand that Charles Houston had been closed for another 3 to 4 years. So, everything that we had was outdated. So we went over to Parker-Gray, the new Parker-Gray on Madison Street, we had these thoughts that was given to us by adults, that whites didn't really care for us. So we were on guard once we went there. And then once we started interacting with the teachers, we could sense the tension between them teaching us and us learning from them. And I think that's where a lot of the African-American kids in this community became disenchanted with education because we didn't have any behavior problems at Charles Houston from the all black staff and teachers. Once we got over to the new Parker-Gray middle school that we started having these behavior issues, you know, that we were started to be sent out of class, that we were not allowed to be tardy no more than three times in one week. Because if you was tardy coming to class, three times in that one week, they would suspend you for a week. These are the type of things that were imposed on us, and I think that's what was the downfall of a lot of guys I know that I hung out with, went to school with, that didn't understand the value of an education. My mom and dad pushed that on us. My father could only go to the sixth grade here in Alexandria. My mother could only go to the ninth grade in Georgia. So they really didn't know what it was like to actually attend a graduation ceremony. They didn't even know how it was to get past certain basic skills that people need to survive. What I found out about my father was that each one of his sons, he gave us this specific job to do within that household. I have a brother that speaks four or five different languages, and Greg handled all the bills. He would also watch my father fan through the newspaper, but my father would never read the newspaper. He was just looking at the pictures. It wasn't until I got older that he would sometimes put the paper down and tell me, you know, "Boy, read what's in that paper right there." I didn't know at the time that he really couldn't read. But to me, he was the most intelligent person you'd want to meet because he could do manly chores, you know, like plumbing and things like that. And he always wanted us to be a little bit different from when he grew up. And I remember him spanking me because I was left handed and he was left handed, but there was no left handed desk in the school. So I had to basically flip my paper around to write. And then in the first grade, I definitely remember this because we had to print our name on these big charts. And he would say, "write your name." And I kept mispronouncing "M," in the beginning of my name, which was Michael, you know, and I could only get to this M-I-C, I couldn't repeat H-A-E-L. So he worked with me even though he couldn't read. And I found that, as I got older to be like, "Wow, he didn't know what I was saying, but he knew the concept of what that letter was," you know? So, it was things like that. And then when we got over to Parker-Gray, we saw white kids and you know, white kids saw us. Someone would share with us what their parents was thinking about us, you know. So I've always been outspoken. I used to always share what I've thought about them, you know. But my mother would always, and I would go home, you know, when my mother was at home, and discuss what we went through that day in school. And she really set the basis for us, or the foundation, saying that, "hey, you know, there's good people and bad

people of all colors." So she really wouldn't allow us to get really deep into any racial issues. You know, she was a very Christian woman. And then my father was the type of guy that, I remember him coming to school with me one day, I got suspended for being tardy, he just sat there. And even though he was older than the person, the teacher, that was sitting across from him, about your age, teacher about 26 years old, he was saying, "yes, sir, no, sir." And I'm looking like, why are you saying that to him? Well, that's how they was brought up. But to me, I'm like he should be saying "yes, sir, no, sir, to you," you know. So it was things like that that we had to adjust to. And then the teachers, some of the teachers really were like total assholes, you know, really, I just can't put it any plainer than that. But I did have two teachers that really stood out. And both of them were female teachers, both of them white. One was a miss Rebecca Bugbee. She was my English teacher. Very pretty. She looked like, oh, what's the lady name that was married to, Bullock, Sandra Bullock, that's who she reminds me of. And then other one, Miss Laura Dunn. And I think she's still alive. And even though we would coming to class and act up, you know, they would see some innocence. Say, "Michael," you know, "show us who you are, not who other people think you are." Right? Because we all had a reputation back then. You know, we want to have a special name or nickname, you know. So I used to show out and they would always pull me to the side saying, you know, "you're better than this. You're better than this." So it was people like that. Oh, and Mr. John Porter. You know, when he first got out of college, he was one of my teachers, and he took a liking to all of us, you know, and he would always say, "don't let your skin tone determine where you're going to go in life," you know? So we did have a couple of them, but the majority of them was like very standoffish, you know. And they wouldn't talk, you couldn't get any help, like if you need help for homework, things like this. So, we were pretty much over there on our own, you know. And as we went to GW, the race riots broke out, you know, because they said they didn't want us there. The white parents of little Marvin Avenue say they didn't any "Ns", you know, going to school with them. So they armed their kids with like knives and little baseball bats and rocks. And, you know, so we went through that phase as well. Yeah, in Alexandria. But overall the education, it just was no push for us to really succeed educationally. You had to have that foundation within your household, and a lot of people didn't have that foundation. You know, I did because my parents wanted us to do better than them. [00:20:22][514.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:20:23] So you would say that your parents pushed for all their children to get a base level high school education. Would you say that was rare in the uptown community? [00:20:32][9.5]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:20:33] Yes. Very rare, because you got to look around the corner where my mother's sister had 11 kids and they wasn't pushed to go to school. They went on their own. And my parents told us, "you don't do anything else. You're going to get a high school diploma." My aunt had so many kids that she was working two jobs. She really couldn't keep a tab on 'em. So my cousin, who's only three months older than I am, we was hanging together, he dropped out of school in eighth grade. I, too, wanted to drop out, and I did skip school. But it was him and a couple of other guys in the neighborhood kept telling me "you're different." You know, "stay in school." They would actually, what we call snitching, they would tell my mother that, "he skipped school today." I'd say "he skipped too," you know what I mean? But that's how it was. You know, it just was no real big push, that I saw, in a lot of families. And I think that contributed to some of the things we see today with the crime and drugs and so forth. [00:21:36][63.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:21:38] What did you do after high school? [00:21:39][1.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:21:39] After high school, I went to college for a year and then my high school girlfriend told me she was pregnant. So, I joined the Marine Corps. [00:21:48][8.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:21:50] Where did you go to college for a year? [00:21:51][1.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:21:51] I went to the University of Nevada, Reno. Under the guidance of one of my cousins who had a friend that was in the Air Force where her husband, at the time, was an Air Force, black Air Force officer, matter of fact. And he had a white friend that got me in and I went there for about a year, I was doing well. And then, well, told my dad my girlfriend was pregnant. He told I needed to get a job. And I said, "Dad, but I'm doing alright in school." He said, "well, you made that baby. You got to take care of it." So those kind of things ran through my mind and it sort of derailed me from finishing. But right now, I should be graduating in, I will graduate this December from Coppin State University with a bachelor's degree in history. My sons and daughters have attended college and my daughter has a Ph.D. and my two sons have bachelor's degree in their field of study. So that was something that I was proud of because I knew that my parents didn't achieve the educational level that I had. And I know that that's something that they really pushed in us, to better ourselves. [00:23:06][75.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:23:09] What drew you to studying history? [00:23:11][2.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:23:12] I've always loved history. It was a guy named Mr. George Weber. He was a teacher. And, you know, sometimes I didn't know he was lying to me or telling me the truth. Because he was talking about Baptist preachers. And I used skip his class. So he would send a student to get me, because he would say, "where's Johnson?" Or he would ask the class, "Where's Mike Johnson?" And they'd say, "we saw him earlier." He said, "Go get him. I know he out there sitting in the bleachers somewhere," right? And one of my classmates would come and get me and say, "Mr. Weber wants you in the class, he knows your here." I said "A'ight," so I would go. So anyway, this day he was talking about Baptist preachers, Baptist minister, and he said, "these ministers get people so riled up," He said. "This Baptist minister in New Orleans opened up his windows and he said, using this word called please, please, he pointed to window and then the people start jumping out the window." So, I was fascinated by that, right? Not knowing that he was pulling my leg, but that's how he drew me in. And then we had Black History Month in February. And somehow I was chosen to be the speaker for the ceremony. And we had an assembly in the auditorium. And, you know, back then we was wearing Levi's jacket and jeans, wearing the Black Panther patches and all that because I wanted to be a Black Panther back then. But he broke down the history to me. And he not only broke down the history that I'm learning still to this day, but he told me that blacks had contributed in a major way to the history of the United States, and it wasn't just through them being slaves. And it fascinated me because when I had my U.S. history with my white history teacher, that's all he would talk about. George Washington, Robert E. Lee, who else he would talk about back then? Jefferson Davis, you know. And I really didn't see, like, where the black people were at. One time, I saw a picture of a black, he was either carrying something or milling, and he was depicted in the role of a slave not knowing that some of those enslaved people were craftsmen and craftswomen. You know, they they were blacksmiths and seamstress and all that. But this was never told. So Mr. George Webber is the one that really drove me to really pursue, and like history. But I used to do history and read away from my friends and family because I didn't want them to know that I really was intrigued by history. Because back then, being black, if you were smart or quote unquote intelligent, they'd say he was acting white. So I didn't want to be acting



white. I want to always, you know, keep my black card in the neighborhood. And then it came to this guy named Mr. Robert Dawkins. They'd call him Mr. Robert "old folks" Dawkins, and he started sharing bits and pieces of history with me, even though I was working on other projects with him. Like this program called A Hoop Academy, where we was dealing with athletes and making sure that they could take the S.A.T. and pass the S.A.T. tests, you know. And then it transformed into him continually talking about the history of blacks here in Alexandria, which I knew nothing about. I knew like nothing at all about the impact that a lot of blacks in Alexandria had on a national, state and local level. I didn't know that until I was about 45 years old. [00:27:04][231.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:27:04] So the first time you were introduced to the Black History of Alexandria came through the community, you would say? [00:27:10][5.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:27:10] Yeah. Yeah. Mr. Robert Dawkins, Yeah. And Mr. George Webber, who was a teacher. Yeah. [00:27:15][5.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:27:17] So now, in Parker-Gray especially, we see a big focus on the, you know, the history of the black community in that area. So how do you feel about the, I guess, new focus on that? [00:27:30][13.6]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:27:31] Well, this. I have mixed feelings. Because I think from a universal perspective, what I mean by that is that we all are in the same pot, regardless of your skin tone or your color. But the one thing I hate that I am seeing is that the lack of uncovering and really allowing black history in the city to be written or rewritten in a positive light. Not as a slave, but as contributors to the making of the city, which it was a Confederate city. Still is the same way, and in this Confederate state. And then me coming to, joining commissions, you know, like I'm a member of the Alexandria Archeological commission. I met Francisco [Francesco], who's doing oral history, you know, in the city. And those are things that captivated me, you know, that somebody is going to tell our story and we have the opportunity to guide and narrate our story as opposed to somebody knowing the history but not uncovering it or not telling you the story of your true history. And I think that's one of the better things that I'm seeing right now. The other part of it is that the Parker-Gray district is a very historical district, and I think that a lot of that history is lost. I think a lot of the history hasn't been told. I think that the people that migrated in to that community through gentrification, they didn't do it the right way. So I think that even though we have a lot of whites and a lot of other people moving into that community, they don't know the true history of that community. And we're trying to right now write some of that, you know. And I can criticize those that are in charge of preserving and presenting that history. But I also have to be very aware that I'm a part of those that can correct those mistakes that were made with the history of Parker-Gray. Parker-Gray, when you start developing and building homes that the people that was born and raised here can't afford, you lose their history. You know what I tell people that have been transitioning out of Alexandria had to go as far away as North Carolina or South Carolina or even Fairfax County or Prince William County. You know, their history is lost. You know, their family history is lost. What I want to do and what I like to see is that we recapture and tell the story. And I think that where you come in, Francisco come in, and the offices of Historic Alexandria can really play a major role if they are open to the truth, you know, And it doesn't mean that to diminish anyone else. But what I have ran into as a historian and a researcher is that in this city, some people that have sat in those chairs before, those who sit in those chairs now, they don't want to. They don't want to shine a bad light of their predecessors that came before them. And I think that's

wrong because as Michael Johnson go, if I write something is wrong, incorrect, I want to be corrected because I know that somebody somewhere down the road is going to look at that and read that, you know, and I want it to be accurate as possible. At least 99.9. [00:31:27][236.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:31:31] What was your M.O.S in the Marines? [00:31:32][1.2]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:31:33] My M.O.S, first I was what they call a FDC man. I was a fire direction controlmen. And I sat in the tent with all the officers. And what I would do there would be to tell. Well, what we call a forward observer would call into that tent the radius and deflection of where we should fire down range one of those field artillery bombs. And then I found out that, and that was because I scored high on my MA entrance exam. [00:32:08][35.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:32:09] ASVAB. Yeah. [00:32:09][0.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:32:10] ASVAB. So that's how I got into that. And then I had a captain in there because when I found out that during the time, if you're trying to knock their command center out, you know, they're trying to knock yours out. So I was basically in the command center, you know. So I'm like, "Whoa." So I spoke to one of my captains. He was being transferred out to Camp Pendleton. He said, "Mike, if I can get you out the window would you come?" I said "oh, hell yeah. I'll go." So I'm one of them. And this one, my brother that was in the Marine Corps before me was very proud of me. It was like I was a little brother. But every time I went to visit him at Camp Lejeune, he would parade me around. And that's because I ended up being in recon. And recon is like the Army's Green Beret, Navy SEALs. We do pretty much the same training, you know, and there's only 12 of us. And each one of us in that recon platoon but you would have a certain assignment. And I think because of my athleticism at the time when I was young and wild and, you know, courageous and didn't have any anxiety disorders at the time to build up, I fit right in because I was I would climb the tallest tower, the highest tree or swim in the ocean. You know, things like that didn't bother me back then. And he brought me in and I learned a lot, but I also learned what put me on a course the way I am today was the discipline that I learned and that I am mission oriented. And even though somebody may say no, I know that's a temporary circumstance is the word no, but I'm very mission driven. And that I learned that in the Marine Corps and that what has helped me become the man that I am today and what I'm doing today. [00:34:01][111.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:34:04] When did you leave the Marine Corps? [00:34:05][0.9]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:34:05] I left the Marine Corps in 1979. And then they put me in, because of my training, they gave me an extra four years on reserve duty. [00:34:24][18.6]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:34:24] Hmm. [00:34:24][0.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:34:25] Because they invested this money and what they taught me I couldn't bring out to the street anyway. So, yeah, it was right around 3 1/2, 4 year, right at the four year mark when I got out. I wasn't going to get out, to be honest. I wanted to do 20 years in here, like my older brother did. What happened to me was that I didn't know I could have came in as an officer candidate, the recruiter didn't never tell me that, you know, he just put me in and gave me the test. And most of the blacks that went in, the Marines became what we call grunts. You know, very few

of them ever got the chance to achieve what I achieved. But that that's something that sticks with me every day is. What I went through in the marins and where I'm at now. [00:35:13][47.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:35:18] Do you have any experiences from the Corps, anything that really stands out to you today? [00:35:21][3.8]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:35:22] I guess just the, what we call the esprit de corps, the friends I met, you know, the places we went, the fights we got into on the army base, you know, and fights we got into it afterwards, after our place. But right now, it's just the friendships that I made, and some of the guys we still keep in touch to this day, you know. So, I think that's that's the main thing about what I got out of that is friendship. I mean, people from, you know, different parts and walks of life. You know, because in the Marine Corps, you know, at one time the black Marines trained at, the name eludes me, a weird name down in North Carolina, it'll come to me, but they train different. When I went in in the seventies, you couldn't use the word black and white, either a light green Marine or dark green Marine. There was no in between, you know. So, they taught me things like that. But it fit, again, my universal thought, you know. Muffler point is where black marines trained back then, and I'll take my hat off to those guys because I know they went through hell. I went through hell, at Paris island, so I can just imagine how it was for them, you know, coming through back then when they first integrated. Matter of fact, the Marine Corps was the last military unit to integrate. The Marine Corps was. So, yeah. [00:36:56][94.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:36:59] What was it like coming home to Alexandria after leaving the Marine Corps? [00:37:03][3.5]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:37:04] I really came back because of my family and my daughter. But coming back here, I just saw. Oh. [00:37:10][6.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:37:11] Were they still living in the same house? [00:37:13][1.5]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:37:14] Yes. Yes. Yeah, we're still in the same house. Still is to this day. Oh. I didn't know much about this drug thing, you know, because when I was growing up, the most I ever seen somebody do was smoke marijuana. I saw a couple of guys that used heroin, you know. But when I came back, like, this crack thing was just getting started, you know? And I saw like 125 people. regularly stand on the corner looking for crack. And I didn't know what it was. So I, you know, asked one of my cousins. They told me what it was and I still didn't understand totally what it was. And then I became fearful for my mother. Some of the things I was hearing that Addicts was doing, because my mother walked to the store a lot and I wouldn't allow her to go to the 7-Eleven that was located on Columbus Street anymore. I would always go for her, even though she wanted to walk. You know, the neighborhoods became very unstable. You had a lot of different faces in and out of the neighborhood and a lot of drug deals was going on the Alfred street side. Thats Parker-Gray area, Charles Houston Rec Center. I mean, it was an abundance of drug dealers. I mean, like, you could walk out there, you might see thirty drug dealers, you know, in 100 people. And you got to choose who to go buy drugs from, you know? So that was eye-opening. And then there was, I worked for the power company. It was Vepco at the time, now it's Dominion Power. I was there for ten years, but I was always volunteering. And then I got the opportunity to join up with this group called The Untouchables. So I quit my job. Everybody thought I was crazy, but it was something pulling me to help those young folks that was coming behind me, you know? And

then I started helping, looking at the community as a whole, me and some other guys, you know. So my whole purpose coming back, I guess, I'm here to serve the Alexandria community. And that's the job role that I'm in now as community outreach. [00:39:22][128.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:39:24] So from the time you were growing up in Uptown until just about the turn of the eighties. So when you came back from the Corps, how would you describe the community life? Because before you mentioned, you know, Bernard Hunter and other people like that. So, were there community leaders in the same sense when you came back from the Marine Corps? [00:39:43][18.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:39:43] No, because Mr. Bernard Hunter had passed away. Miss Dorothy Peaches Turner was still activist. She was still an activist. But she was older as well. So, some of the people that they identified, and I won't call their name, but one of them ended up being the mayor, one of them ended up working for public housing, as a big wig with public housing. Another person ended up being a justice of the peace. But what I found out later is that even though people push them out as being their heroes and activists, they really wasn't. They compromised black communities. And that's something that I'm finding out and I'm really pissed about because I'm never going to compromise who I am and where I came from for nobody. I think that even though they thought they were doing the right thing at the time, that what they really did was more harmful today than what they could imagine. You know, with the lack of housing and education and how some of our buildings that was historic buildings have been torn down. All we have is markers telling you what was there and not really what should be still there, like Parker-Gray high school. You know, that should be still standing. You know, they tore it down. They built Charles Houston Rec Center, you know, and that Center shouldn't be named after Charles Hamlin Houston, you know. I understand what he did with Thurgood Marshall, but my personal opinion, it should be named still Parker-Gray because Sara Parker and Mr. Gray, one ran Snowden school, the other ran the Howard school for boys. Miss Gray taught for girls. That image should always be ingrained in that community because they put in a lot of work. You know, you had the Secret Seven, you know, all them, they were pretty much activists. But like I say, they compromise. And that's why you have so much hostility to this day, because the people who live in low income housing, what I found out is that they are put there and it's almost like a plantation to me, because you're being controlled by a system that was supposed to help them move forward. And yet we have generation after generations that are still stuck there. And some people thought that it's coming in now, like some of the immigrants. Well, it's the best thing since sliced bread, but really is not. Unless you are motivated to get out of there, use it as a stepping stone. And I think that our government and the city government hasn't done their due diligence in making sure that those people, generation after generation, were not stuck in those houses with really no way out. You know, that's how I see it, as a mouse trap. [00:42:56][193.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:43:04] I'm sorry. That was just pretty powerful. Excuse me. So when they first began discussing the historic district designation of Uptown into what became Parker-Gray, what was your personal reaction to that? [00:43:18][14.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:43:19] Well, first we thought, I really didn't have a reaction to it until later on. Because when they tagged it as being historical district I said, "oh, OK." You know, I think that came about, hmm, Mr. Earl Lloyd came in. They had a program for him. He spoke about Parker-Gray. But at that time, it wasn't the Parker-Gray district, it was just Uptown, you know? And I think

that name came about a little later when we started to integrate that neighborhood. But give me that one more time and question one more time, because I think you look for some specific do I need to tell you on that area because my mind traveled. But can you repeat it again? [00:44:09][49.5]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:44:09] Yeah, of course. Nothing specific, just how you felt personally about the discussion about changing Uptown into a Historical District called Parker-Gray. [00:44:16][6.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:44:17] I think that was, personally, it was something that took away from that community because they used that Parker-Gray historical district to sell and up the prices of the homes that are in that area. Homes that were bought by hard working people for around \$10,000, \$12,000. Some of the homes, some were just renters. But by attaching that tag, I think it took out, took away from the value of their community and it made it less affordable for the people that grew up there. Like I say, every time they build something, tear something down or somebody move out, the value goes up for those that move in. But the people that actually started there never saw those types of, you know, financial gain, what I want to say, from your property. So, it's a bittersweet. It's bittersweet. I want to see it preserved. But I want also make sure that you don't tear building down and put a plaque up. Something that was historical. And this ain't just for Parker-Gray. I might be one of the only blacks that's totally against them changing some of these street names that was named after a Confederates. Because I think when you do that, you erase that history. What's been done in the Parker-Gray is the erasure of African-American history, because putting the plaque up doesn't really dignify the people that came out of those areas. So for me, it's mixed feelings. And I say that because it's good and bad. I want people to know about that area, but I want them to know the truth about that area. I want them to know how that area really was prior to what they see today. That's what I want to see. Our kids aren't being taught local history in the city. Matter of fact, I just joined in a program in Northern Virginia, Dr. Elizabeth Clarke Lewis in our heart resonance to do a program that was done in the early seventies to teach the residents, all the residents of the history in that area. [00:46:55][158.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:47:00] So during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a lot of tourism emphasis in the city. Did that emphasis extend into Parker-Gray? [00:47:09][8.9]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:47:10] Its extended there now. I see it more and more. I see it more and more. We were pretty much a community that was isolated in our own world and a lot of us didn't go outside of it. Believe it or not, you had kids that grew up with me they never been to Washington, D.C., or Maryland. [00:47:29][19.4]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:47:30] Hmm. [00:47:30][0.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:47:30] You have kids today have never been outside this box. You have kids today, as in our school system, that knows nothing about the history of the Parker-Gray area or the Burg or the Hill or Haiti, how they got their name. We're not teaching them. So, by you're not teaching them, they're just like the lion who seizes prey, he devours its prey, and the only thing standing is that lion because their prey is now gone. It no longer exists. One of the awards that I received a couple of months back. Thank you, Mr. Francisco. I wrote a speech about history's not yours, nor mine to erase, its here for all of us. We have to also understand and look at the people that supported us and backed us and nurtured us to the place where some of us are here today, you know what I mean? That was a strong community and you had people that in that area of Parker-

Gray that, whether they knew you or not, they saw you doing something wrong they could correct you, you know, we don't have that today. You know, had a unity that we that I spoke about earlier, that's what's missing. And basically, to keep it real as the young folks say, keep it 100, blacks, I'm just making a general statement with this, blacks are leery of whites and those in their community because everything has always been taken out of their community. We've always giving. Our schools are the first to go. Our homes are the first to go. Our history is the first to go. And that's what drives me to the point where I hope I can make a change in that area. You know, the Parker-Gray district is a place that, if it is receiving tourism, why aren't the people in their community benefiting from the tourism? Why isn't there some type of program put in place, a history program or oral history program that Francisco and myself have been talking about, what you're doing now, to work with the young folks to teach them, let them learn this. You know, that's how you keep it going. Again, like the lion, once the prey is devoured, you're done, you know. And I think America as a whole has a problem that I can't solve, But I hope that I can be a force of having people reckon with some of the trauma and the tragedy that is taking place here in the city. [00:50:28][177.8]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:50:32] So what would you say were some of the main contributing factors that you saw to the dissolution of the community unity as you put it, after the historic designation? [00:50:43][11.4]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:50:45] Yeah. Once that came about, everything changed. I mean, it started with what used to be John Roberts. I remember that it was low income housing right by Braddock Road Metro. That housing was built for all whites that was working in government. Later on, it became a mixed unit where blacks moved in. But that was the first sign that major changes was coming. Now you had Colored Rosemont that used to be right there. That no longer exists because of development. One of the bigger issues also is that the developers come in and they don't want to retain any of the history. You know, there's a, "well, you'll keep the name, but we're going to put this in there." But the people that live in it, they don't benefit from it. You know, and I think that's a tragedy within itself. Once they put a tab on the historic district, again, everything went up and everybody went out and everything started disappearing. You know, just for the sake of being attached to Old Town, because when I grew up, Old Town was not that far. Old Town was down here by the river, and it went about three blocks. That was it. Now you go old town, and they talking about, "are we up to Diagonal Road or past the Masonic Temple or past Duke Street?" You know, out there. That wasn't Old Town. Down here was Old Town, you know. [00:52:22][97.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:52:27] Did you witness any changes in the commercial landscape of Parker Gray once it was given historic designation? [00:52:33][5.9]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:52:34] Yes. We saw more businesses pop up. We saw some businesses disappear, but more popped up again. Prices went up. We have our million dollar condos being built right behind my house that I grew up in what used to be just Alexandria lighting company, you know. So we see that. But again, I go back to another theory, Christopher Columbus theory. How are you going to discover some people are already there? How can you say that you discover something when these people are already there? And I think that commercially, what they're doing is just like Christopher Columbus. Well, I see you, but I don't see you, you know. But that's driving up the prices. Well, people that have history in this city, the history is now gone. And that's what I've been talking about, you know? [00:53:36][61.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:53:41] Do you remember any particular businesses in Uptown or Parker-Gray? [00:53:45][3.8]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:53:46] Oh, yes. Tom Allen Restaurant was located on Henry Street. Blue and White, which is still there, was owned by a guy named Mr. Tapscott. Then we had a Blueberry restaurant. You had the Elks Home, that's still there. You had the pool hall, you had King Palace on Queen Street, that was the movie theater. You had a Little Jim's Carry-Out, which was white owned but mainly blacks work there. You had Sunshine Market. You had a Mr. Vicks market. It was a lot of businesses there. I'm talking about businesses that, and I remember this very vaguely, my father and them would get paid on a Friday. And it was a market. It was a market called Santullo's Market where you could go and you could give the owner a note, and the owner knew your family members and knew your parents. And my parents would send us in there with a note that say, "can we get some baloney, bread." My father and mother would come past and pay it on Friday. My brother, who I talk about, spoke about, earlier, was writing those notes on behalf of my father to get the food that we needed, you know, to sustain us. And my father and mother would go there and pay at the end of the week. So it was people like that was pretty much it. Nobody ever defaulted on their payments because that was the lifeline to those families. And I've been trying to locate the guy that owned that Maret, at least one of his relatives, because I know what they did for the people in that community by allowing them to pay when they had money, because most of us didn't have any money. You know, you're talking about somebody bringing home \$150 every two weeks, you know, after taxes, but you got six kids to take care of. So most of them work two jobs, you know. So, yeah. [00:56:13][147.4]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:56:18] When did you start seeing all these million dollar condos, as you describe it, started popping up? Was that almost an immediate effect or did that start occurring over time? [00:56:28][9.5]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:56:28] It wasn't an immediate effect. It was gradual. Start seeing the lady, was a black lady name of Ms. Mabel Johnson. She wasn't related to me. She had the biggest house on my block. This white person boarded, bumped it back. That house went from \$150,000 to, by the time they got through with it, was about \$800,000 or \$900,000. Now its 1.7 million. Then right over here on Columbia Street on a backside of the library, that whole block was black. The developer came in and gave them like \$29,000 per house. One lady held out, she got \$49,000, but the guy sold them homes for almost, put it his way, he made about \$2 million on 6 houses that he only paid maybe \$150,000 to buy the whole block, you know. [00:57:32][63.7]

**Kerry James Reed:** [00:57:35] Can you describe the work that you do with the city currently? [00:57:38][3.3]

**Michael Johnson:** [00:57:39] Right. My current job is a an outreach specialist with the Department of Recreation. And my job is to engage and empower those elements of the community that have little to no resources and that are underserved. I also am the outreach/Safe Place coordinator where I deal with kids in gangs, human trafficking, sex trafficking, LGBTQ issues, bullying, runaway issues. And this is a job that I pretty much wrote my own, we call it J.A.Q, under the direction of a guy named Kurt Kincannon, who was the director of Parks & Rec back then. They wanted to have a program like Washington, D.C. had, what they called "roving leaders," and that was somebody from the community that could engage the community and go into the community when there was

problems. You know, I was lucky that I had a guy, Mr. Robert Dawkins and the mayor at the time Bill Euille, would push them to establish this position. And then about ten years ago, I was actually told, no, excuse me, I'll tell you, five years ago to write up my own JAQ. And right now I have a young lady that's coming in with me on Monday that I will be training because I'm trying to retire in the next 2 to 3 years because I want to do some more from the history background as opposed to where I sit now. But my job, brought in, like, a better relationship with the police department. That was my main objective because of what I went through. So, I brought in the police department, fire department, sheriff department and about 35 other city agencies to engage in what we do, we call them community cookouts. And first, it was just me and a lady named Sheila Whiting. It was an idea I proposed to the deputy director. He said, "great, go for it." And from there, I started looking at some key players that can help us transform these communities and to be in more harmony than, you know, being against one another. Because at one time it was a very hard. Matter of fact, when I did the first cookout, the neighbor that just moved across the street from where the first cookout took place into \$1,000,000 home called the police on us to have us shut down the cookout. And the police showed up, they went, "that's the city agency. How can you do something to them? They got the permits." And from there I said, "Wow. I need to bring the police in." And then I'm looking at the relationship with the police really didn't have with the community, you know, and it's still a work in progress because mindsets and training has to change. And that's what I'm out to do. I'm also a CRT instructor, which is crisis intervention instructor. I might be one of the only civilians trained by law enforcement that can engage with law enforcement to deal with somebody that might be mentally ill or somebody that is having a crisis, whether it be the kid or the whole entire family. I've been given that responsibility and it's responsibility that I carry wholeheartedly to make sure that I make an impact when I go out to these communities. [01:01:33][234.6]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:01:35] What are some hopes that you have for the Parker-Gray district and also for your community in the future. [01:01:40][5.2]

**Michael Johnson:** [01:01:41] Of that, one: that they live in harmony. Because again, there's a lot of friction that goes on behind the scene. Two: is that the history of that area is not only captured and encapsulated, but there is history that would be shared 400 years down the road, you know. And that we look at each other as human beings, not as somebody of a different color or different race. Oh, I can't change the world, but I know that you can start a fire with just one match or one person, and I want to be that one match, and that one person. I really can't say I have any enemies, but I will speak my mind if I see something or hear something that I don't think is going right, I'm going to speak up on it. And that's, I put principle over personality, and it's hard for a lot of blacks in this city to do that because of the way they've been treated. But you're only in, the ghetto is in your mind, you're only a slave if its captured in your mind. I am free and I'm going to make sure that others can see where freedom really looks like, you know. Yes, I'm still discriminated against because of my color. Yes, I'm still discriminated against on job promotion. Yes, I am probably the last person that somebody want to walk into the office to speak with. But I'm also that person that's going to keep pushing forward. I'm also that person is going to make sure that when my grandkids get to be my age, they can look back to be proud of where their family people came from, you know. [01:03:30][109.3]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:03:32] If you had one memory that you could hold on for the rest of your life, what would it be? [01:03:37][4.4]



**Michael Johnson:** [01:03:39] Its really two, and they ain't really good memories. One was on my 32nd birthday, I got a call from this girl that I'd been trying to date for 6-7 months. She called me to tell me that my father had been struck by a car. My father died the next day. He was hit on the corner, five doors down from where we live. The other thing was six years ago, Mother's Day, I went to my mother's house the day before Mother's Day to see, I had just got married. I was the last one of her sons to get married, so she got to see that. I got married in February. Four months later, in May, my mother passed. But on that day, I wanted to take out me and my bride. Wanted to take her out. My wife, not my partner, I wanted to take her out to dinner. And she said, "nah, we'll go Monday." I said, "Ok." And I went to Philadelphia the next day and I had just got to Philadelphia to see my mother-in-law. And I got a call from my brother saying that my mother had passed. She died in the house. And the last memory I have was her telling people how proud she was of me because I was her, I was a problem child. I was the one she thought would either be in jail, on drugs, or dead. Because I would test and push the limit on everything. She knew that. But like I said, it's not good memories. But those are the two things that stick to me the most. And then where I sit today is because of them. Yeah. So I do everything for them. You know? [01:05:43][124.1]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:05:43] Yeah. [01:05:43][0.0]

**Michael Johnson:** [01:05:45] Yeah. [01:05:45][0.0]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:05:46] All right. Well, thank you so much, Mike. This has been extremely informative. [01:05:48][2.5]

**Michael Johnson:** [01:05:50] Thank you. [01:05:50][0.2]

**Kerry James Reed:** [01:05:51] Yeah. Thank you so much.