



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



Oral History Interview

with

Michael Johnson

Interviewer: Devon Murtha and Sarah Vonesh

Narrator: Michael Johnson

Location of Interview: 3600 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA, 22304

Date of Interview: 02/26/2024

Transcriber: Unknown

Summary:

Michael Elvin Johnson reflects on his experiences growing up in Alexandria, Virginia, particularly in the Samuel Madden Homes and surrounding Uptown neighborhood. He describes a close-knit Black community where neighbors supported each other despite systemic challenges and restrictive housing policies. Johnson highlights the legacy of the area's prominent residents, including athletes, educators, and community leaders. He expresses concern over the impact of gentrification, redevelopment, and the erasure of community history, emphasizing the need for more inclusive preservation efforts and opportunities for current residents.

Notes:

This recording is part of the Samuel Madden Homes Community History Initiative. This project took place between 2023 and 2026. This interview was completed under the City of Alexandria's Section 106 process. The interviewers, Devon Murtha and Sarah Vonesh, were hired as third-party consultants to complete this oral history.

Table of Contents and Keywords

Minute	Page	Topic
01:00	3	Family History and Childhood
05:00	5	History of Uptown and Neighborhood Life
15:03	8	Family History with Housing Discrimination
22:13	10	Parents background and the history of the Berg
27:00	11	More history about the Uptown neighborhood
43:42	16	Crack Epidemic and the Untouchables
54:54	20	Urban Renewal, Gentrification, and Mixed-Income Redevelopment

General	Community Engagement; Urban Renewal; Family; Neighborhood Life; History of Public Housing; Gentrification; Housing Policies; Community Support Networks; Black-Owned Businesses;
People	Lloyd, Earl
Places	Samuel Madden Homes; Uptown Neighborhood; Alexandria, Virginia; Park-Gray Historic District; Charles Houston Recreation Center;

[00:00:09.830] – Michael Johnson

My name is Michael Elvin Johnson, and we're located at the police headquarters here on Wheeler Avenue.

[00:00:17.090] - Devon Murtha

And my name is Devon Murtha, and the time is 10:35. And I'm also at the police headquarters. How would you like to be referred to?

[00:00:33.650] - Michael Johnson

Most of my friends call me Jay or Michael Jay, so either one doesn't matter.

[00:00:38.140] - Devon Murtha

Okay, Michael Jay? Yeah. That's a good one. Okay, so we'll just start with some basic information. Could you tell me about where you were born?

[00:00:47.400] - Michael Johnson

I was born in Alexandria, Virginia, 1956. I lived on Queen and West Street in Alexandria, prior to us moving up to the... what we call the uptown Parker-Gray area.

[00:01:05.360] - Devon Murtha

Can you tell me about the house and the block you grew up on?

[00:01:08.420] - Michael Johnson

The block I grew up on was a single family house. Right across the street was housing projects and I had a lot of my family members that actually lived in those housing projects.

[00:01:22.980] - Devon Murtha

Which housing projects were across the street?

[00:01:25.090] - Michael Johnson

Bland and Samuel Madden. Okay.

[00:01:28.420] - Devon Murtha

Can you tell me a little bit about your neighbors growing up?

[00:01:32.040] - Michael Johnson

My neighbors were very attentive. Everybody knew everybody. There were some that had large families living in those housing units. My aunt was one. I think she had about 11 kids. My grandmother lived in those housing units. I think right after they tore down the shacks that was actually sitting on Montgomery Street, she moved to 1020... No, wait a minute. 1016 Montgomery Street. My aunt lived at 813 Wythe, which was the Bland, and the Samuel Madden was a block away. So it was very opening, very warm. Like I said, everybody knew everyone, and we had a great time growing up.

[00:02:29.920] - Devon Murtha

You touched on it a little bit, but could you talk about your relationship to the Samuel Madden Homes? On what occasions did you have to go there? How often? Why?

[00:02:41.110] - Michael Johnson

I went there every day. I had family members. My grandmother, like I said, she moved there until her death. We had just a lot of friends that lived in those housing units. So every day was spent in Samuel Madden, really. Every day, playing in the field or, you know, just hanging out.

[00:03:05.580] - Devon Murtha

So you went every day. Could you describe what your grandmother's apartment looked like?

[00:03:11.280] - Michael Johnson

It was two bedrooms, very small. The kitchen was small. The living area was small. Had this weird smell to it. I just can't equate it to anything, But it was a very small unit. Very small.

[00:03:35.910] - Devon Murtha

Was it just your grandma living in the unit?

[00:03:37.680] - Michael Johnson

It was just my grandmother. My grandfather had already passed, and she moved there. I think they gave her public housing, and that's where she ended up at.

[00:03:47.980] - Devon Murtha

How did you refer to the area when you were growing up? Did you call it the Samuel Madden's Homes?

[00:03:52.930] - Michael Johnson

No, we call it Uptown.

[00:03:54.880] - Devon Murtha

Uptown. And the broader area you would call Uptown as well?

[00:04:00.260] - Michael Johnson

Yes. Everything up there in that area to us was Uptown. Then they changed it to the Parker-Gray district now, but it was called Uptown. Okay.

[00:04:08.680] - Sarah Vonesh

Can I ask? The Samuel Madden Homes, it didn't really have a name. You just called it Uptown.

[00:04:15.600] - Michael Johnson

Uptown. A lot of people don't even know that that name even exists. A lot of residents that were living there at that time didn't even know that was a proper name for their housing unit. We called it Uptown. Everything was Uptown to us.

[00:04:29.400] - Sarah Vonesh

Yeah. So the different housing units, like the Ramsey Homes, Madden Homes, and then there was another section of Madden Homes. They were all kind of.. Uptown. Just Uptown. No distinctions. Okay. Good to know.

[00:04:44.850] - Devon Murtha

Can you talk a little bit about what kinds of support networks there were in this community?

[00:04:50.410] - Michael Johnson

We had a lot of our school teachers, the doctors, lived about a block or two away. We had a black-owned businesses in that area, drug stores, florists, a lot of pastors, churches, you know, preachers. We saw them on a regular basis, especially the school teachers. Some of them live like literally right across the street from the housing projects. So we saw everybody. Everybody saw everybody on a regular basis, put it that way.

[00:05:31.430] - Devon Murtha

It's a very close knit.

[00:05:32.180] - Michael Johnson

Very close knit.

[00:05:33.450] - Devon Murtha

Do you see that legacy of the community being very close knit as true today still? No. No.

[00:05:41.100] - Michael Johnson

The disparity in them tearing down those units. And the start of gentrification has impacted that area who knows how long. But the history of that area has been impacted very, very strongly. I know that much.

[00:06:02.610] - Devon Murtha

What do you see as the effects of the community being uprooted a little bit?

[00:06:07.900] - Michael Johnson

The gentrification and then the people that move into these new units haven't really blended in with the people that's been there. So you're losing history. You're losing sense of family because as those families move out, so does their history go with it. So the people that live here now, because I'm still engaged in their community, they don't really have a relationship with one another.

[00:06:40.000] - Speaker 3

Can I ask you? The former residents that have lived there for a long time, do you know where they're going?

[00:06:46.530] - Michael Johnson

They're spreading them all over. I know when they first did the first project of their building, you know, the new homes, new apartments or what have you, they gave people vouchers so they could go wherever they wanted to go as long as their voucher was good. Would they go further south... I know a lot of them went into Fairfax County, a lot of them went down near Stafford. Some of them just returned to where they had roots, like in North Carolina, South Carolina. So, a lot of people just moved away.

[00:07:50.480] - Devon Murtha

What stories had you heard about the Samuel Madden Homes growing up? How was that history passed down to you?

[00:08:15.940] - Michael Johnson

Like I said, hanging out on the corner, listening to some of the elders talk, speak. Mr. Earl Lloyd, who a lot of people know about, first African American to play in the NBA, came out of that area. His family and my family were very close. And speaking with him, my recollection of him coming to my house to have libations and dinner with my family, he never said that he was a professional athlete. We have Miss Sheryl Lee. She was the first African American certified scuba diver in the country. She come out of that area. You have the Taylors, who has a very strong family network, come out of those housing units. You have Judge Nolan Dawkins, who lived in those housing units. I can go on and on. It's an abundance of people that came out of that neighborhood that made local, national, and state impact. You have... I'm trying to think of her whole name, Thea James. Thea James, she hasn't retired. She came out of those housing units, and I think she's still working for Boston Hospital, and she's in charge of the pediatric trauma unit for them. So we have a lot of prominent people that came out of those housing units.

[00:09:58.110] - Michael Johnson

We didn't have as much as the violence that I'm seeing there now back then because everybody would put you in check. You couldn't be selling drugs openly. You couldn't be out there causing havoc in the neighborhood openly because the older elders would say something to you, and there was nothing you could do because they either knew your parents or they would just go ahead and just tell you to buck up to make you straighten up. But yeah, a lot of people came out of that. Out of that project area that I know, a lot of them have died off recently, but it was a lot of good people.

[00:10:38.170] - Devon Murtha

Yeah, that's a really impressive legacy of people that came out of there. Were there any landmarks or gathering spaces? I know you just mentioned speaking on the corner. Within the Samuel Madden Homes area or around that you would frequent often or that would help you navigate the community?

[00:10:59.450] - Michael Johnson

Right. Well, everybody showed up at the Charles Houston Rec Center. Prior to becoming a rec center, it was a school, elementary school. That's where most of us went. And then it was Parker-Gray High School, prior to being Charles Houston Elementary School. So everybody hung out right there because we had a playground even before the rec came. It was just a school. We'd go out there and play basketball. So if you wanted to see somebody from the neighborhood, everybody congregated right there in the playground, you know, to play basketball. We had a very short football and baseball field, but we made the best of it. You know, baseball, you can hit the ball and knock it over to the basketball court. The older guys would get mad. Football-wise, we would have to go 10 yards up, 10 yards back, and 10 yards up again just to make it worthwhile. But that's where everybody congregated that.

[00:11:54.510] – Sarah Vonesh

What about the green spaces in the community?

[00:11:58.380] - Michael Johnson

We didn't have that much green space. No. I know over in Samuel Madden, in front of the houses, we had a little green space, but back then they had trees, but we would still played right there. We played stickball or what we call Daddy Pick it Up. It's a form of tackle football with all the equipment on. So we call it Daddy Pick it Up. In other words, you pick the ball up, you might have 10 people piling in on it. But that's how we entertain ourselves.

[00:12:31.090] - Devon Murtha

Who came up with the term Daddy Pick It Up?

[00:12:34.320] - Michael Johnson

I don't know. It was just instilled in us learning from the older people that it was passed down. And once they initiate you to that game, because my thought pattern, and if I can reflect correctly, when I first heard about Daddy Pick It Up, I said, What's that? And they "throw the ball down." I said, Well, pick the ball up. And when I went to pick it up, all these guys just tackled me. So I was like, Oh, okay. So, yeah, it's probably an old tradition that came about in the neighborhood.

[00:13:10.270] - Devon Murtha

I've never heard of that anywhere else. That's quite funny. Were there any other neighborhood traditions or social events that you were a part of?

[00:13:22.520] - Michael Johnson

We would do the parade. We had a family called the Deans and all of them were musicians. The father, the sons. Never met the mother. I think the mother died when I was rather young. So they would perform in the Samuel Madden. Even though they lived on the same block as I did, we only had one block with what we call privately-owned homes. They would perform and just walk down through the units just playing the music. And we have 20 or 30 kids behind and running. So that was some of our entertainment. We didn't have a lot of things like you see now in neighborhoods, like neighborhood parties or neighborhood gatherings. We didn't have them outdoors. It was either individual families that would have those things or it would be a special occasion for us to have that in our neighborhood.

[00:14:25.960] - Devon Murtha

What music did the Deans play?

[00:14:29.100] - Michael Johnson

Back then, it was up to date music, R&B, whatever was out that was a hit. They could play it.

[00:14:35.770] - Devon Murtha

And they were just walking around?

[00:14:37.510] - Michael Johnson

They were just walking around. The guy, I think his name was Kenny, big guy. He would start beating on the drums. And then we knew it was time to huddle up because they were ready to come out. And that's what they would do. They just walk through the neighborhood playing music.

[00:14:53.760] - Devon Murtha

On any special occasions or just any random day?

[00:14:57.120] - Michael Johnson

No. Random days, most Fridays in the summer.

[00:15:00.020] - Devon Murtha

Oh, wow. That's really fun.

[00:15:03.400] – Sarah Vonesh

I guess we should have asked what time period were you growing up in the area?

[00:15:09.930] - Michael Johnson

Oh, well, I was born in 1956. So when we moved from where I used to live up closer to my grandmother and my aunt then. I had to be around nine years old. So we're talking about 1964-ish, because I know Kennedy, President Kennedy was killed. They let us out of school early. I wasn't living up there then. We came the following year. So about 1964. And my parents tried to get a housing unit, but my parents were told that the only way they could get a unit for the six kids that they had was that my father leave the house and not return. And I remember my father almost literally turning the table over because he had his young kids there, even though we couldn't interpret it at the time. He was so outraged that he said, "I'd rather live in a house of men until it fall down on us before I do that." You know. And I think that was broke up a lot of the families was that they would give the units out, but the father couldn't live there. My aunt had 11 kids. She had maybe three different fathers for those kids.

[00:16:31.140] - Michael Johnson

One of them definitely wanted to marry her and move in, but they said if that happened, she had to move out. And at the time, back then, you're talking about the early '60s, mid '60s, late early '70s. They just couldn't afford it. So whenever her man, her boyfriend, whatever you want to call him, got together, he had to be away from the property, and he couldn't stay the night. He could not stay the night.

[00:16:59.370] – Sarah Vonesh

Do you know if there was a reason, was that a policy?

[00:17:03.270] - Michael Johnson

That was a policy. Was it? That was a policy that, I don't know if it was written, but it was a policy and rumors that would spread like wildfire. So what I did see was a lot of single mothers raising kids. And I think my aunt might have been one of the top ones with the number of kids that were raised in those units.

[00:17:27.200] - Devon Murtha

You said your aunt had 11 children. How many bedrooms were in the unit? Three?

[00:17:34.280] - Michael Johnson

One for her, one for the boys. Five boys slept in bunk beds in the middle room, and the girls slept in the back room in the bed. And I know it was two beds, and it was two girls in each bed back

there in the bunk bed. It was my two cousins, then they had a little cart in the corner. But we used to go there, hang out. And I tell people the best experience I ever got was from growing up in that area, even though my mother was very... and my parents were very strict. The whole thing with them was, you're going to get an education. You're going to graduate from high school. I don't care what you do after that. You couldn't go to jail because you were going to stay there. And this was something that was read throughout those housing units. My aunt had eleven kids. The ironic thing is that out of the boys she had, four of them went to jail. One of them became a cop, and he kept that secret for five years until I exposed him at a family gathering that he was a Secret Service agent, which was a great achievement, seeing that his mother didn't finish high school and his father didn't finish high school.

[00:19:00.450] - Michael Johnson

Those are the type of things that you would see in the neighborhood. Guys that could achieve or women that could achieve, but just wasn't given the opportunity to achieve some of the things.

[00:19:15.550] - Devon Murtha

If the fathers were prohibited from living in the units, did they often live nearby?

[00:19:23.100] - Michael Johnson

Well, you would see them occasionally. I know for my experience with my... We call them my uncle, even though they wasn't really legally married, but they had been together so long. So it was like, I think they call it common law. You would see them occasionally, and you would see men walking that you knew had kids in the neighborhood, bringing food on payday, like Friday. Everybody was happy on Friday because you would see so many of the fathers coming through or those that had kids by people in those units. Now, some of the people living in those units did have the full family intact. And that was something that we couldn't understand because of the situation that my father and mother had to go through trying to get a unit and was told if he leaved, then she could get a unit a lot quicker. I know one of them was the Hughes. They were married, living in the projects. The other one were the Thomson's, and that lady had about eight kids herself. The Mountains lived on Montgomery. Alfred and Montgomery. I think their father was there until he died. So some places you had that, and we didn't understand that makeup, how some did and some didn't.

[00:20:48.490] - Devon Murtha

You said you were there when your parents were denied or told. Who was telling them that they...

[00:20:56.350] - Michael Johnson

It was a white lady, and it was a gentleman that came in. And I guess... they didn't call it public housing. They called it projects, right? And it wasn't known until later years that they called it ARHA, but it was somebody from their staff that actually said, "no, we can give you a unit. You got six kids, but your husband can't be there." And then I think it was almost like because my mother and father work, that they made too much money. But looking back now, growing up, I remember they would work a whole week and may bring \$150 on, \$125. And out of that, you had to buy food. And some months, near the end, you had to pay rent. And I think that rent had to be around \$2-300. It was reasonable back then, I guess. But that kept them from getting a unit. My father was a groundman. He grew up in those projects where he grew up in the Berg and, on Pitt Street, in another housing project unit, well it was a shack, then they got in the project, and he could only go to the sixth grade.

[00:22:13.760] - Michael Johnson

And that's how it was set back then. If you wanted to further your education, you were going to Washington, D.C., if you had the "money" to catch a trolley or ride over to Washington, D.C. So he didn't have that opportunity bestowed upon him. My mother came out of Georgia with her older sister who ended up in the project. That's the one that had the 11 kids.

[00:22:38.270] - Devon Murtha

Can you just describe what the Berg is?

[00:22:41.070] - Michael Johnson

Oh, the Berg is housing projects that's right close to the water in Old Town. And I had an aunt that lived in the Berg. And also my great uncle, Henry Johnson, is the one that gave them the oral history for the Berg to the city. He died at 104 years old, but he was there when it wasn't the Berg, it was just shacks, and they were scattered. You know...where he said you could actually look up and see the moon the night. And when it was cold, they would have to take blankets all they could and wrap up and heat an iron up and stick it between the legs so they could try to get some warmth. So, yeah, the name comes from Petersburg. And I think it was some of the contraband slaves that came through that came out of Petersburg. And then they named certain parts of the city after them. They called it Haytie, the Berg, the Hill, the Hump. You know, these are names that we were accustomed to hearing growing up. It wasn't Atkins, it wasn't Samuel Maddon, it wasn't Bland. It was just Uptown.

[00:23:55.110] - Devon Murtha

So the Berg is part of the Uptown neighborhood?

[00:23:58.900] - Michael Johnson

Right. Yeah, it always has been, even though people try to cut it off. But it's always been part of Uptown. So you could be in the Berg, which is down on the waterfront, and you were still Uptown to people.

[00:24:10.990] - Sarah Vonesh

But it was its own neighborhood. Right. Since your dad grew up in the area, did he ever tell you any stories about the Berg or Uptown, this area, around Samuel Madden?

[00:24:24.700] - Michael Johnson

Yeah, he used to tell me about the stores that they had up there. Sitting on the corner of Patrick and Madison. And then it was... They call them juke joints, which is just a place they would go to drink beer. A beer garden. Put it that way. We call them beer gardens in there. They call them juke joints because you could play music and you could go there and drink. And that set on also on the corner of Patrick and Madison. It was a very thriving neighborhood for what I gather, reminiscing about what he told us. Again, like the drug store, the florist and everything was right there. They were right there together.

[00:25:06.890] - Sarah Vonesh

Do you think that was before? Because these housing units were built during World War II. Do you think that was pre-these being...

[00:25:11.720] - Michael Johnson

It was. My father turned 100 years old had he lived last year. So he was born in 1923. So the things they saw was totally different from the things I see or I saw growing up. And it's like, now, if my grandkids was to come through that area, they wouldn't even know what, what it was at one time. It was a lot of...I remember my father telling me about the trailers that they brought in when they started building Samuel Madden and Bland and all those units. They had to put some of the people in little trailers to live for a while. His mother lived in one of those trailers, prior to her getting her unit on Montgomery Street.

[00:26:04.410] - Devon Murtha

What was his mother's name?

[00:26:06.510] - Michael Johnson

Kari Butler Johnson. She was the first African-American custodian to work at the Pentagon. And the funny story is, when I graduated, somehow I had a job at the Pentagon, and they told me I was a mature handler. So I thought I was going to be handling the top secrets. Well, that was a fancy name for a custodian, and I didn't know it, right? But it was a good job to have over the summer, coming out of high school.

[00:26:37.800] - Devon Murtha

That's so funny. You guys got to have the same job.

[00:26:41.660] - Michael Johnson

I know. And I say it was just different, different terminology. My family go back in Northern Virginia to 1790. My great great grandfather was named Peyton Johnson. He's one of the... oh, he was one of the top cattlemen on the whole Eastern Seaboard. I have several cousins that are historians, Ph.D.s from Howard University, Coppin State, Lincoln University, UCLA, places like that, and my family. So that inspired me to get into history myself. And I'm trying to, at this moment, piece together some of the same questions that you're asking me to make sure that they are embedded in that neighborhood as we go forth, because there's a lot of history there. A lot of history.

[00:27:39.660] - Devon Murtha

How did your family end up specifically in the Berg?

[00:27:44.890] - Michael Johnson

Well, they lived in, like I said, little shack houses that was made out of tin and wood. And I've seen only two pictures of the actual housing units that they lived in. And I think when they came through with the redevelopment or whatever it was back in urban development here in the city, urban renewal or something like that, they built those units because those units got to be about 80 years old now, I guess. And I think they got into those units. My aunt didn't have any kids. My father's sister, she didn't have any kids. It was just her. But she worked for a very prominent white family. And I think they might have helped her get into one of those units because that guy at the time was a judge or something like that. I know it was something similar to that, how she got in.

[00:28:36.280] – Sarah Vonesh

When you say one of the units in the Berg, I know there's the other section of Samuel Madden Homes and some other. Do you know what, specifically, what units or what buildings?

[00:28:49.240] - Michael Johnson

Uh. Not really, because all of them should have just...We couldn't tell them apart.

[00:28:56.650] – Sarah Vonesh

Or like a street corner, I guess.

[00:28:58.040] - Michael Johnson

Right. What was that one? Columbus and First Street. Okay. Around that, yeah. Okay. There was a lot around that area there, too. Yeah. All right. Yeah. Columbus and First.

[00:29:13.740] - Devon Murtha

Could you talk a little about... Oh, actually, are there any important nearby restaurants or businesses that you frequented or spent a lot of time when you were growing up?

[00:29:29.710] - Michael Johnson

There was a place called Tom Allens that sat on the corner of Madison and Henry. And then Blue & White, when I was growing up, I always been there on the corner. And we had the Icehouse, up where the McDonald's sits at now. And we had Johnson Pool. But those are the only restaurants that I visited as a young kid in that area that I knew that was Black owned, you know.

[00:29:58.010] - Devon Murtha

What was the Icehouse?

[00:30:02.070] - Michael Johnson

The Icehouse was... They had blocks of ice, and they would chip them, and the guy would come past, and they had those old-fashioned refrigerator where you put the block ice in. Some people still had those when I was growing up. And that's how you refrigerated your refrigerator, with blocks of ice. And the icehouse had a big old... It was a big old icehouse that set right across where the McDonald's, that area right there by Samuel Madden, right on Henry and I guess First where it crosses at. And yeah, it was a big old icehouse right there. It was a lot of hobos. We call them homeless now. We call them hobos back then. They would hang around and just pick up any work they could.

[00:30:51.300] - Devon Murtha

Could you speak a little bit, I know you touched on it already, about how your family and your neighbors were impacted by housing policies?

[00:31:00.350] - Michael Johnson

I think it gave the people that lived there little hope, little hope. The maintenance was shabby. I remember going to my aunt's house and, she had a broken screen door, no air conditioning in none of the units, unless you bought your own little portable fan or... Later on, you could buy a little air conditioning unit. But it took months to get the screen door fixed. Plumbing. If you had a sewage back up, you didn't know how long it would take for that to get fixed. I'm just...

[00:31:46.050] - Devon Murtha

No. Yeah, we can take it...No problem.

[00:31:48.000] - Michael Johnson

I'm good. But yeah, so the maintenance was a big issue with a lot of them. Some of the houses didn't have any screen doors on it, but just the brackets worn, where the kids probably went in and out, the doors fall off, eventually you just take them off yourself. I know the one right there on Alfred Street. They had a maintenance unit right there, but the guys would never really do their job, as we see it.

[00:32:22.280] - Devon Murtha

If no one was maintaining the property very well, were people trying to maintain their own properties?

[00:32:29.340] - Michael Johnson

Oh, yeah. You had some beautiful gardens. You had a little six, seven-inch picket fence where people would put around the yard, plant the flowers, tell you don't get in the garden. I mean, it was like real serious. You know, like they were living in a suburb somewhere with a big old house with a big old picket fence. That's how it was. You know. Yeah, they maintained their own. A lot of them did. They maintained their own, little ornaments, decorations, and all that.

[00:32:59.460] - Devon Murtha

Did anyone you grow food or anything in those little gardens?

[00:33:02.500] - Michael Johnson

Very few. You might have one or two that would grow greens or tomatoes. And you know what they were growing because those are the people that had the little, the net. I'm trying to think what they called it. To keep people out, it was made out of a little tin wire, chicken wire.

[00:33:24.370] - Devon Murtha

To keep animals and stuff out...

[00:33:26.860] - Michael Johnson

Animals and people. Yeah.

[00:33:29.620] - Speaker 3

Do you know when they took down those personalizations? Was it at a certain time or did it happen slowly?

[00:33:37.270] - Michael Johnson

No. It happened slowly. Yeah. It depends on who was living in the unit. There was a lady named Ms. Joan that if you were in her house, you wouldn't even think he was in a housing unit because she kept it so immaculate. Excuse me. And we used to go there, to go to the store for it because she also gave us some money to run to the store. But I'm talking about her furniture was covered with plastic. I believe, if I remember correctly, it was like a cherry red look to her furniture. But her house smelt good. It was always clean. And she had two girls and two boys. And her husband left because

he made too much money. Well, his father owned a barbershop here locally, and I think they counted daddy in as his income. But yeah.

[00:34:31.300] – Sarah Vonesh
Okay. What was the name?

[00:34:34.480] - Michael Johnson
Jones. Ms. Jones. Dancy, her last name was Dancy. Very beautiful lady. She's still alive, too, I think.

[00:34:42.250] - Devon Murtha
Her name is Nancy Jones?.

[00:34:44.750] - Michael Johnson
No, no, no. Dancy. Joan Dancy.

[00:34:48.570] - Devon Murtha
Joan Dancy.

[00:34:49.940] - Michael Johnson
Yeah. Then you had Ms. Della Mae. You had Ms. Leppie. You had Ms. Irene Dixon. And across, you had a lady Ms. Janie. You had my aunt. You had the Boxdales. And then on the corner, you had a guy that was a big-time heroin dealer, that came later. And the police always raid his house. And we just sit there and watch. He wasn't even supposed to be in the house. He was...they said he was married. I don't know if he got married before or after, but he had two kids. And the wife ended up becoming a nurse. They lived there, but it was always the police going in their house, and we said, "what they doin in there, right?" He was a heroin dealer. No shootings. Very, very, very few times you heard somebody got shot. Very few times would you had heard that somebody in that area got stabbed, unlike now. But that was the days back then.

[00:36:10.260] - Devon Murtha
It sounds like you were welcome in a lot of the homes.

[00:36:13.320] - Michael Johnson
Oh, yeah. Everybody was family, you know, especially if they knew your parents. I would travel around everywhere. Everybody up there to this day... Well, not to this day, but back then, we all knew each other. So we could be in...this did happen to me. I was in the Marine Corps, and I went to an army base for some training, and I ran into a guy from my neighborhood, you know, and it was like, wow, you know. But, yeah, everybody knew everybody. Everybody welcomed me in. Ms. Della Mae had... You know, her husband stayed with her, too. Now that I think about it, Ms. Della Mae had all boys, but she had two bedrooms, five boys, and just her and her husband's bedroom. And I think either her or her husband, somebody slept under her. One of her when her son slept down on the couch. And she was a neighborhood babysitter. She babysitted everybody. If they was born in them projects, in Samuel Madden, or Bland, or even the Berg or wherever in the city, that's who kept the kids, was Ms. Della Mae.

[00:37:23.130] - Devon Murtha
In her house?

[00:37:24.880] - Michael Johnson
In her house.

[00:37:26.280] - Devon Murtha
How many kids would be in her house?

[00:37:28.900] - Michael Johnson
Sometimes about 10 or 12. She wouldn't charge much that's why she had so many kids. But she fed them, cleaned them. She didn't do much as far as educationally, but she would have things for them to play with because it depends on what time of day it was. When we was outside playing, she would call one or several of us to go to the store to get stuff just for those kids to eat. And the store was right on the corner of... We had another store on Columbus and Wythe, you know. So we could run there and get Mr. Vic, Daddy Vic, we used to call him. You could run there and grab something and come back. And, uh, the thing I liked about him was that he was a white... well, I guess he was from Pakistan. But if he knew your family, you didn't have to bring money or you could bring a note and say, "Hey, I'm going to pay you on Friday." And he would go by the list until you get the stuff on the list. And you come back Friday, you pay for it. So you did have that in the community as well, that he trusted some of the families to pay them.

[00:38:36.180] - Michael Johnson
I don't know how much money he ever lost, but we used to work there for free just for a cupcake and a soda. But he was a great guy. Very good guy.

[00:38:47.790] - Devon Murtha
Is that still open?

[00:38:49.510] - Michael Johnson
No. Everything up there is pretty much closed.

[00:38:52.880] - Devon Murtha
I guess that would go into my next question is, can you talk... You've touched on it already, but how the neighborhood has changed since you've been growing up.

[00:39:02.600] - Michael Johnson
The neighborhood has changed tremendously, and we have people from all over, but they don't have the same values that was instilled in us growing up. Because of my job, I'm in that area a lot. I run the Safe Place for kids in crisis, but I'm also CIT instructor, Crisis Intervention Instructor, here for the Alexandria Police Department. That's one of the reasons why they brought me over here, too, because of the work I was doing in the community. My full-time job was engaging the community and bringing resources to the underserved communities. And they said, "Who best to do this?" Michael Johnson, because I knew the ins and out of the daily struggles of the people there. I, again, got lucky and became one of the guys that could go to college, that could further his education, and then come back to this community and give back to the community I grew up in, even though it's changed. But I'm still trying to stabilize some of the people that live there to understand that your mindset doesn't have to be lower than an average, or put it this way, you

shouldn't let the situation that you're in dictate who you are and what you are, and making it a temporary condition in living in those units.

[00:40:38.460] - Michael Johnson

I hope that going forward, that a lot of them try to do something else, because what I also know is some of the families that's in those housing units are generational. Some of their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents grew up in those housing units. Again, my whole philosophy was that we didn't integrate that area correctly. We didn't let the neighbors know, like, we call it the Christopher Columbus syndrome. You can't discover a place that people already exist. And I think that's where the city has fallen short. And I speak facts to power because the Mayor and the City Manager and all, they know I am. I'm not going to tell you, sugarcoat anything, but that's one of the biggest issues that they were never given or a lot of them never saw a way out. And that condition has really hampered a lot of progress for a lot of those families. You still find a lot of uneducated people in those projects. And I mean like, borderline illiterate that you might run across. And then you'll find those overachievers that been there, left out, doing great things, you know, college degrees and all that. So it's a mixed bowl.

[00:42:09.330] - Michael Johnson

It's a mixed bowl up there.

[00:42:14.110] – Sarah Vonesh

Can you tell us about when the area was integrated and in desegregation in the city? Or the housing units?

[00:42:22.860] - Michael Johnson

The housing units started changing over in the late '80s. Because you had another unit called John Roberts. I don't know if you are...John Roberts is down there, Braddock Road Metro. That's the first housing project that they cleared out. That was predominantly made for low-income whites. And then when the whites start moving out, they move more Blacks in, and then they got to the point where they just get away with that. But to answer your question, it had to be around the late '80s when it started changing over. Because at one time, you might see one poor white family living in the project. And then it came, we started seeing a lot of Hispanics and Latinos moving in. Now you have Latinos, African-Americans, Ethiopians. I mean, people from all over the world living in those projects up there now. So I said, '80s. '80s, you can really see everything changing.

[00:43:37.470] – Sarah Vonesh

Was there any tension or what was the community like at that point? Or was it smooth?

[00:43:42.550] - Michael Johnson

At that point in the '80s, We were hit with the crack epidemic in Alexandria. So you had low-income people somehow getting... It was an open-air drug market, Samuel Madden and Bland, Alfred Street side. So once the drugs set in, everything started deteriorating a lot quicker. You know, people would use. I'm not going up there because you got this and that up there. But nobody really looked at the fact that even this police department never moved on the drugs that came up in that community until somebody called because somebody got shot. You know, and once in a while, just to make things look good, they ride through and they may bust a guy or two. Right, but you're talking about the overall impact. The overall impact in that neighborhood started deteriorating in

the '80s. It really did. And services started being cut out. You know, police would come infrequently, and police would frequently. Then they came up with their... putting officers in the unit, you know, which helped a bit, but it was too big of a problem. I had just came out of the Marine Corps. My mother was my main concern. You know, so I gathered with some other guys in that area, and we started a group called the Untouchables.

[00:45:16.010] - Michael Johnson

And it was for the guys that was in those housing units, the younger guys, that we wanted to make sure that we instill in them a little something different. And that's how I got involved in the unit I'm in now, which is the community engagement. It was the Alexandria City Police Department. But it was really my experience growing up in that neighborhood, knowing that somebody like me could have been a drug dealer in jail or dead. But yet I had my parents telling me, no, this is what you're going to do. And they stuck by that. So I had a great support system. Like some in the housing units didn't. And then we came with some of the fathers that had kids in that area because they were caught with drugs or they were drug users. They were barred from the property. So that gave us another dynamic to look at, which is now you got kids...fathers want to be in the kid's life, but the system is keeping those fathers away. So now you got young men...where women raising men, but a woman can't raise a man. You can guide them, but you can't raise them.

[00:46:21.920] - Michael Johnson

Like I always tell my daughter, I could never raise a woman because I don't know the different moods. And I say it's bad for women. I know we have highs and lows. Men do too. But I just couldn't see how we could, that I can raise a woman. And I think when I look back at some of those fathers that wanted to be in their kid's life, but that wall was put up, it tore their family apart. And that's the only place I know that I've seen so many fatherless children being brought up. That sets the stage for what we see happening out here now with a lot of the kids with no guidance at a young age, no discipline. They won't suspend them from school now. They do in-school suspension. I got suspended because I came to school... I went to a class, in one week I think I was tardy two times by a minute or two. But there was an adjustment because that area, we had all Black teachers. And then when we left Charles Houston Elementary School, I went to Parker-Gray and saw my first White teacher, and I could tell by the body language that we weren't going to connect, right?

[00:47:41.160] - Michael Johnson

Well, all of us could tell because we would talk about it, walking home. Man, this teacher, don't get her. But once we got to know a couple of them, they broke the ice. Mr. John Porter became principal. We broke him in at Parker-Gray as a teacher coming out of college. And he was fearful, and you could tell because of the way our attitudes were. We were very aggressive. We don't want to be here. We don't want you teaching us. But yet when we left Charles Houston, there was no disciplinary problems or very few. Teachers would pop up at your door, knock on your door. It was all Black teachers. They would show up at dinner time. So we had a real, going back to your question, we had a very concrete system in place that if you messed up, somebody was going to show up at your house. Once we got to Park Gray, it was like, boom, it wasn't there. And then out of the guys that I hung with, it was about six or seven of us, three of us are still alive. And I might be the only one that overachieve.

[00:48:56.660] - Michael Johnson

When we have these little gatherings, they always talk about... because I tried to skip school. I tried to drop out with my cousin who was living in the projects, who didn't have any supervision. He dropped out in eighth grade. And I remember being on the corner of Madison and Patrick. And he told me, I was hanging out. I had to skip school. And those guys said, Hey, you can't do this. I said, Why not? I'm just hanging with you. No, no, you can't. So they pretty much forced me to go back to school under the I'm going to threat that they were going to whip my butt if I didn't. So that's how I got here. And I applaud these guys because they saw something in me I didn't see in myself. So that's what I'm trying to get back to that community is I'm trying to handpick those that I think if we give them a little bit more attention, they can be very successful and break that cycle of poverty. Because a lot of them, like I said, again, it's generational, and it's been generational. And I think it's one family... You all might have you heard this name, the Talbert's and the Farmers.

[00:50:03.480] - Michael Johnson

Have you all heard them names?

[00:50:05.290] – Sarah Vonesh

I think we've heard of the Talbert's, but not the Farmers.

[00:50:07.790] - Michael Johnson

Okay. You talk about the Hatfields and the McCoys? No, they were all over the units, and all of them were always... They would have been branded as troublemakers. But if you fought one, you had to fight all of them. I'm talking about like, it might have been 30 cousins. No, in a one block radius, seriously. That's how deep they were. We call deep, meaning that's how many. And then you had some of them in the Berg area. You know, so they would spread it all out through the public housing.

[00:50:39.240] – Sarah Vonesh

One of the names we had was Charlene Talbert. Do you know her? Yeah. Okay. I don't know if we've made contact with her, but if you know, maybe we can.

[00:50:48.320] - Michael Johnson

I don't know where she had now, but yeah, there's still some Talbert's around. I do know that. Like Marshall Talbert, that's a young man that we mentored. He lives in the, I think it's the 800 block of Samuel Madden. If he still lived there, facing where the Belle Pre Apartments are. Yeah. Across the city. If he still lived there, because it looks like some of those units might be abandoned now. People moving out.

[00:51:17.030] - Devon Murtha

So you said that there was more police came in the '80s. What did policing look like when you were growing up? Did you have a lot of interaction or not as much at all?

[00:51:28.630] - Michael Johnson

Well, we had a... This is strange. We had a black cop. Well, let me go back a little bit. But a guy named Alfred Washington. He was out of those housing projects, then became a cop. Where the young man named Steve Martin, he was the first Alexandria guy to become a law enforcement officer. But we had a guy named Herman Springs from Norfolk, Virginia, came up, became a cop.

But these guys were hand-on. They see you doing something wrong, they wouldn't necessarily lock you up, but they would give you a warning. And if it didn't straighten up, they'd come to your house, and they knock on your door. And they tell your parents, Hey, I gave them a chance. Now, if I catch them out here again, this is what I'm going to do. So we had that. But then we also had the cops that ride through the neighborhood, call you the N-word, throw the finger up, "get your Black ass out off the street", things like that. We did have that. And we were just looking and saying, "we haven't done anything". Every time it was... If a Black person did something, they would lined us up.

[00:52:48.760] - Michael Johnson

Thank God for me, I was a little lighter than a lot of them because every time somebody did something, they would say, "well, they was darker. And I'm like, Well, good. That lets me go off the hook. But we had...they would stop us and you had no rights. That's how I saw it. We didn't have any rights because they could harass us anytime they wanted. And I think that, again, that's something that we try to overcome here in the last 15 years with the Alexandria Police Department is how you engage that community. You know. You can't do that and then get the respect from the community that you think you should have if you engage them like it. So that's been my job here is to help them, train them how to engage people. They're short of manpower right now, but that's something that I still, with the chief, I insist that every human being, until they give you the reason not to like them, you have to like them or love them when you come in. I can actually say, I don't have anybody that hates me. Some people may not understand me because I have a...my thought is human.

[00:54:05.830] - Michael Johnson

I'm pro-human, but I'm pro-Black. If that makes sense, right? But I'm pro-human, too. And that was something that, again, some of the elders in that neighborhood would give you. They would sit down and lecture you on your manners and what you should be doing. Open the doors for women, not calling women the B-words. So we had that. You did have that nurturing in those houses I don't want to make it paint it like it was all a blur because it wasn't. There were some good things that came out of there, and there's some good things that would come out of there. I think that, again, is just how we insert those that have with those that have not. That's been the problem.

[00:54:54.040] – Sarah Vonesh

Sorry. So is that...I know a lot of these housing units are being redeveloped with more mixed income, mixed communities. So is that what you're speaking to?

[00:55:05.960] - Michael Johnson

Well, yeah, but I saw something in one of those mixed units that didn't really appeal to me because it's almost like, I don't know the name of it...the one's right by Charles Houston. I think that's Bland.

[00:55:19.390] – Sarah Vonesh

The newer one? Yeah, where the townhomes are? Right. Okay.

[00:55:23.450] - Michael Johnson

But the ones that are on fixed income, the low income can't interact with the people on the other side. I think there's a divider or garage is divided or something like that, where they're not really... They come in one door and the ones that own those units come in a whole different door. You know, I know I did get a couple of calls from this gentleman, this white gentleman, a matter of fact,

that had bought a condo over there. And his call was that it was all these kids stand out playing on the playground late at night. I'm like, well, what the hell else they going to do? They ain't nothing else to do. They're rec close at a certain time, or they can't go in at a certain time. You know, I just wish that these developers that come in, that they put something into our social programs so that we can have the people that can attack the problem, attack those problems, those issues.

[00:56:17.020] – Sarah Vonesh

Yeah. And that was another question I had. So I know you're very interested in history and somehow expressing or continuing the community with all this redevelopment. So are there ways that this has been done that have been successful or things that you think would help moving forward?

[00:56:37.920] - Michael Johnson

And this is just hearsay. I don't know how true this is, but anytime somebody can walk into your unit, unexpectedly to inspect or whatever, I think that's an invasion of privacy. And I think some of those people that they are placing in those units have been... Well, the previous AHA administration, I know, told them just that. We can pop up and do an unannounced inspection whenever we want. And I think that has to be taken off the table because you're going to somebody home. And I think everybody deserves their own privacy. Now, you're doing something wrong, then you call the police. We got a way we can handle that. Right, but I think going forward, the barriers should be dropped. And if I want to live there and I'm making \$140,000 a year with somebody that's getting a check once a month for \$2,000 or \$3,000, that should be my choice. But I want to know who I'm living around and amongst. Take the Berg, for instance, once they do the development down in the Berg and they built those million dollar townhomes, I was assigned to go down there because the people that bought those million dollar homes couldn't put up with people across the street that had their Friday night cookouts and had friends and family gather, you know, just to hang out.

[00:58:04.680] - Michael Johnson

And then I had to also be a double-edged sword because I had to tell those same people, you can't go to somebody million dollar property, sit there and drink beer and smoke a cigarette. Duh, where they do that at? I'm going to be mad also. That's why I'm saying we didn't integrate the communities right. And I think that going forward, they need to make sure that debt is done and that the history of Bland or Samuel Madden or any other housing unit, that it was people there before they got there, they have to respect that history and the people that's there. How many people are going to be left? I don't know. All I know is you're talking about history being erased.

[00:58:46.130] – Sarah Vonesh

So with a lot of these redevelopment projects, they've done a lot with historic signage.

[00:58:59.840] - Michael Johnson

A sign only tells you what was there. Alexandria might be the only place I've been that everything that was Black was torn down. That disturbs me very much, because, I am going to make a confession to you all. I am friends with two of the daughters of the Confederate. We are very close friends. Okay? By me sitting down with them, understanding, even though I don't agree with their plight, but they understand my people's thought about the Confederate. They didn't do it. Their ancestors did. My ancestors were enslaved, captured, okay? But I can't hold that against them. They

didn't do it, but, yeah, they benefited from it. So, when you torn down all these historical sites, you're taking people's history. You're taking memories. You're taking things that impact people psychologically. That's still trauma. We have to break that cycle of trauma that we, our system, imposes on people in their lives. We can't move them from A to B because we haven't dealt with the trauma. If you're a woman that's been abused or a man has been abused, and you go into a relationship with somebody that's very loving and caring, your antennas go up because that ain't what you're used to.

[01:00:32.520] - Michael Johnson

Same thing is happening in Samuel Madden area. They're not used to so many whites and people coming in with money, and here they are still have nothing because we didn't allow the developers or we didn't ask the developers to put anything in. And the first ones that were built on Patrick, Madison, and Montgomery, I went to the EYA, when they had their unveiling of what they had there for the future. So they had a talk on the table outside, and they gave the people cake, sodas, Everybody thought, Yeah, we're going to redevelop this unit, this whole area. And the people that was living there at the time came out. Free soda, free cake, free activities, and we're coming out. There was this one drunk gentleman that had more sense than everybody there. Seriously. And there was about 30 city officials there...one drunk gentleman. He pointed to their tarp. He said, Hey, what's up under there? And the guy, had a British accent, he pulled the tarp back. He said, "Oh, this is how we're going to develop the unit in a couple of years in this area. The guy said, I don't see us living here.

[01:02:00.040] - Michael Johnson

And the guy had no answer for him. And I looked and said, Wow, that burnt a hole in me. It's like, he's right. And then it's come back, we're going to have mixed units. But when you take, I'm not the great math person either. I know the basic. I don't get into trig and all that, but algebra, I can work it out quickly in my head. But when you take 3,000 units and you come back with 100, But the 3,000 had low-income families. But we're going to give you 100 back. It doesn't add up. And then you're choosing who can live in those units, and you're dictating how they should live. That's the problem that I've had with all public housing around the country is that you're dictating how people should live. And that's the business we have to get out of. You know. Again, I go back to, if they're developing these areas and you're tearing down historical places and building, put something back that equates to the people being comfortable with what they see and what they have and make sure that these businesses economically support those areas, support the educational process. Give the people that have no job in those areas, if you're going to develop them, jobs, because that's something else I hold against them, AHA, because they told me at a meeting that they would hire some of the people from the neighborhood to work those jobs.

[01:03:44.000] - Michael Johnson

They didn't do that. They didn't do that. That right there gave a man or a woman the opportunity. I could work, save my money, make a good wage. I could move out here. So all you did was just kept them right back where they were at because you didn't give them that opportunity. You know. And again, somebody gave me an opportunity. I try to give others opportunity, and I want others what we call playing it forward, to give someone an opportunity. And it really doesn't matter what color you are, because I've been in neighborhoods where there were poor whites. I've been in neighborhood where there are poor Latinos. I've been in neighborhood where there are poor African or Ethiopian people. I've been in those neighborhoods. And the one thing that's consistent

is what we're not doing for those neighborhoods. But yet we shine a very negative light on those neighborhoods because I watch our people walk through those neighborhoods down that are not Black, and some of them are very uncomfortable. But the un-comfortability comes from you're not knowing that person that's in front of you. You know, I come in this police station, there's still some racist cops in here, 1%.

[01:05:00.170] - Michael Johnson

And they'll tell you every morning, I speak to people. Hey, how are you doing? Good morning. And if they don't speak back, it triggers. That's how a lot of those people are. If you don't engage me, you don't care for me. And I think we have to break that barrier down. Yeah, I believe in change. Yeah, I do. But you have to allow the people to change with the neighborhood, and they haven't done it.

[01:05:32] - Devon Murtha

I think just to summarize what you're saying, what values and spaces need to be preserved in order for that community legacy to continue?

[01:05:47] - Michael Johnson

That's a great question. If we made it more accessible for the people that live in there and people that lived there in the past to come back and just be...have a voice in what they want. You know. I know an issue popped up where they want to name Samuel Maddon after the architect. Why the hell are you going to put him up there? He never lived in those projects. We can't identify with him. You know. So why would you put a mark up saying that this guy, quote, unquote, is the greatest architect because he designed public housing? Shit.

[01:06:33.110] - Michael Johnson

Excuse me. Put that away, go back. If he's from Arkansas, put a plaque up in Arkansas and say, Hey, so-and-so was a great architect that developed housing units across the country. But not in that neighborhood. We have enough of our own heroes that we can put monuments up for. I could name five people right off the bat. Mr. Robert "Old Folks" Dawkins, Mr. Arthur Dawkins, Nolan Dawkins, Dorothy "Peaches" Turner. You know. These are people that impacted other people's lives while living in those projects. Nolan Dawkins became a judge. His brother Arthur Dawkins became, and started a program at Howard University, Jazz Ensemble. The other brother, Robert "Old Folks" Dawkins, is the one that preserved the history to have the Hall of Fame in Charles Houston. We need a place where we can come back and say, Okay, it's changed, but this is how it was. If they take one unit, make it a museum, or just have artifacts from the area and the people that live there and the ones that made it out, that's inspiring. But you can't keep showing me people from that neighborhood that went to jail, got killed, or were arrested for drugs. That plays on my psyche.

[01:08:05.840] - Michael Johnson

Because when I go to New York or D.C., like Southeast, and they say, Well, you know Southeast used to be... I'm like, Yeah, okay. So my antennas go up. I don't need to hear those stories. I want to know the history of the places. I don't need to know that because drugs are rampant. And like I always told these young men that I had to counsel on the drug use, the difference between you selling drugs and a guy, a white guy selling drugs in the affluent neighborhood is that you're on the corner and he's in his private dwelling. They can see you and they can't see him, but he might be the supplier, but you're on the corner. That's why they see you. It ain't that they're really picking on you, is that you're out here in what we call an open-air drug market, so I can see you. But you can't take it

in your unit because you get popped in there, you lose your unit or your parents may lose your unit, which is understandable if I sign that contract. No drug use, no drug selling. Boom. But I just think, back to your question is that, what can we leave there to tell people outside of a marker?

[01:09:19.620] - Michael Johnson

Because that's the same thing you do when somebody dies, right? Put a headstone up. Here lies, da, da, da, da. That ain't my interest. How did he live? How did she live? That's what I want to know. How was it? You know. I don't need to know about. Well, this was here, but now this is here, and we lose all sense of our identity. You know. I think they have to do more to incorporate the historical aspect of that area, to me, personally. Yes, I am "a history person", but history is what we go by. And once you open that door in history, there's another door to open, then there's another door, then there's another door. But how do you still solidify the people's being that came out of those areas? How do you put that on display? You know. That out of this desolate place came all these different types of people that were Black, very versatile, you know, well-educated, not so well-educated, and not educated at all. But we all did the same... In other words, we couldn't point fingers because we was all in the same boat. And I think that's what we have to do to improve that area when they do do the development, when they do bring the new development in.

[01:10:55.320] - Michael Johnson

Besides putting just a marker up, it tells nothing. It's a headstone to me. This was here. I want to see something from the past that tells me, Yeah, this is the neighborhood I grew up in. This is what brought us together. And we didn't have all this crime and all these drugs. It was very spotty back then. Now it's like, do your thing. But we blame the young men and the young ladies and the mothers and the fathers who should be held accountable for their actions. But the conditions set that whole thing in motion. If you said that public housing was put there as a stepping stone so you can go to bigger and better things, why didn't we ever put the other block down or walkway down so that person could walk across that? We haven't done that. We put one block, say, Hey, you're good. We're going to give you another one later. And as far as hoping a false hope and false dreams. So whatever development they do up there, there is going to be a pushback from a lot of people because it depends on what you put there. They say, Hey, I was here.

[01:12:16.120] - Michael Johnson

Take this country, for instance, Native American. You know, really. Look at what we're going through right now, Ukraine and Russia. It's aggression. I want to take what you got. You come under my control. I look at that the same way. It's the same thing. It's just a different flavor, but it's the same result at the end. And we have to make sure that whatever development goes back up there at Samuel Maddon tells people the story of Samuel Maddon and the people that came out of there. That's what we really have to do. It's not far-fetched. And people say, I want to save one person. I said, No, if I walk in the room and there's 10 people in need, I'm trying to save all 10. I'm not going to put numbers on who I'm saving, who I'm not. And then because of the lack of education that some of the people have these days, I think they're not in tune to coming to meetings. So if I say, I got a meeting, you don't show up, you don't care. You don't care. Our all has to do a better of that. They do. And I'll tell them, all of them know me down there, the former directors, because I would be hard on them.

[01:13:38.090] - Michael Johnson

I've gone to some of those units, and you can go to some of the units right now, I guarantee you, and they take you back to 1960, the way they look inside, the old cabinets, the smell, the roaches. Who did want to live like that? That ain't no way for people to live. So then, we tend to buy into, I'm nothing. So don't nobody care, so I'll do my own thing. You know. That's what I see and hear on a regular basis. And again, I didn't live in the projects, but I am a part of that environment because of where I live. And everybody thought that because my dad and my mom had a house that we were rich, and we was poor and just didn't know it because prior to us moving there, me and my five brothers slept in the same bed, and my sister slept in the corner. And my one brother always, I won't call his name out because he'll kill me. He used to pee in the bed. He used to wet the bed. So that means all five of us was soaked in his urine growing up.

[01:14:51.820] - Michael Johnson

But that's how it was. We wore the same clothes. We had to wear the same underwear. You know. And, uh. But we didn't know we was poor. I was rich. I just didn't have any money. That's how I looked at it. You know. And a lot of them up there looked at it the same way. But I hope that we can preserve that house that Earl Lloyd. Actually, they put a wayside marker up now. But that area is very historical, and not just because of Earl Lloyd, but because my grandmother lived up there. And I know what she went through to get where she was at because they lived in a house that had no heat. And running water ran. Well, they say it ran when they wanted, but in the wintertime, you could forget it. So they had a pump. You used to have to go out, you had to go pump. So that's what they moved out of into those units. They had actual pumps on certain corners where you could go get your water in a bucket. So it come a long way, but we got a long way to go. Mighty long way.

[01:15:59.510] - Devon Murtha

I liked what you said about the markers being headstones because the community sounds like it's still alive. And so to commemorate something that's still alive and growing is maybe not the most appropriate way. Is that...

[01:16:17.060] - Michael Johnson

Yeah, I would put something... Now, have you ever seen these little rainbow things that say, I've seen them in Kansas City, I've seen them in Nashville, and then you come into the neighborhood. They say "Home of Country Music", something like that. And they identify what took place there way before I came. You know. I can identify with that because it stands out. But to have a little marker that if you're walking on one side of the street, you don't know what that marker is over there. You know. And it's not significant. And then the people that's moving in, what do they know about the history? Are they going to be given a pamphlet on 1940 or '37? These units were built, and this is the history of the unit, or this is the history of the land. This is how many people live there. Until it impacts you, we don't care. We don't care. You know. But there's a lot that needs to be done. And I'm trying to make sure that before I retire and go do my thing that I stand up for those that have no voice. My mother said it was going to get me in trouble one day, but that's just how I am.

[01:17:42.340] - Michael Johnson

I owe that community so much because of the people that lived there didn't allow me to step out of bounds too often. That was a community that everybody knew everybody. And if Michael was

doing something wrong, by the time I got home, the neighbor been called or went down and said, Hey, your son doing X, Y, and Z? Or your mother over here calling because she saw somebody kids doing something. You know. That was community. We don't have that up there anymore. I don't even know all the people up there. I used to know the grandmothers, the mothers. Now it's like, I go up there and some people know me, some people don't. So I had to share my story here. I grew up here. This is me. I'm giving back. I think there's a lot of people that like to give back, but I just think we need to set those...And I think the question you're asking me what needs to be in the neighborhood is unfair now that I think about it because It's not impacting me anymore that way. But I can't keep going without looking back to help them if I can. And I think that's what we need to do.

[01:19:00.050] - Michael Johnson

We need We need to talk to some of the people that actually live there on a daily basis. How's your day? And you have three or four days of just conversation with them because each day brings a different challenge. So you're talking about people that has to adapt quickly to everyday life in that area. And I think we need to leave something to honor those people that have to do those things. Like I said, change is change. And money talks and everything else walks. Now we're looking at the arena. So that brings another dynamic in...into that area. How important is this area now? We can build and we can sell. We can build, we can sell. But what about the people that's there? Where they're going to go? What they're going to do? What are we going to do for them? I think somebody said they were going to do... I was at a meeting, I think they said maybe they'll come up with a scholarship. Well, \$1,000 ain't no scholarship. Well, no, they were going to put up \$20,000 for a scholarship. Now, I could tell her how much one semester costs, and that ain't going to work.

[01:20:10.010] - Michael Johnson

It just isn't going to work. So we need more money generated in there so that when we touch those young kids or the young people in there that has talent, we can cultivate their talent. We can give more than one person. I don't even know how you would split \$20,000. Now that I'm looking at it, I I just don't. I heard that, and I think that's what it... We got to make sure that the developer put a little bit more in than that because they're going to get a lot out of it. And I think that's another way, going back to your question, that we could help them out. Giving out six \$20,000 scholarship, but not just \$20,000 for 500 people. That ain't going to work. That ain't going to work. And because I work for the City, they invite me to certain meetings, and in certain meetings, they say Mikey, and I'm like, nope. Because if you ask me a question, I'm going to tell the truth. And that's just always been me. That's how I was raised. Because my mother said, You get one time to tell that lie. You got to tell another lie, and then another lie.

[01:21:20.210] - Michael Johnson

Then that lie, then that lie, the last one, gets you in real big trouble. So whenever I got in trouble, I would just admit it because I know if I told another one, the back that up, you're just going to be off the rail, the punishment. But I think them raising that fund up a little bit more, they was offering, putting some up more wide-eyed that you could see to depict the neighborhood that you're actually come in. This is a very historical district. Now, the Parker-Gray district came about to be historic in the last 20 years because prior to that, it was just the Parker-Gray/Uptown. That's all we called it, Uptown. You know, Uptown went from Queen Street, the Berg, all the way back up to First Street. That was Uptown. At ten, seven, eight, ten block radius, whatever it was. Yeah. So.

[01:22:18.090] – Sarah Vonesh

Do you think that designation has done anything? I know it recognizes the community. Do you think it's helped in any way? (Repeat that, please.) Do you think the designation of Parker-Gray has helped the community in any way?

[01:22:36.820] - Michael Johnson

It didn't help the people that was there before they got there, no. Not at all. It helped those moving in that can afford to live there. It hasn't helped the people that been there that can't afford to move where they're living at. It hasn't helped at all in that sense. Okay. Nope.

[01:22:57.600] – Sarah Vonesh

Do you have any Is there anything we didn't ask you about growing up in that neighborhood that you would like to talk about?

[01:23:08.880] - Michael Johnson

Yeah. It was one thing that comes to mind, it was a unit on Montgomery Street, and they used to have, I think the lady was Joyce Rollins. And she would have some things for the kids to do after school to keep them out of trouble. They did plant gardens in her unit. Well, I think she might have worked for AHA. She just opened it. They had a radio station that they were trying to kick off the ground. That fizzled out. I thought that was a good avenue for the residents. But those things, programs like that, even though people don't see the long-term effect, I think those programs had an impact on the people that actually went in there on a daily basis, you know, the kids. Because those kids, if I remember, maybe after they cut their program out, they might have wandered a little bit. But with those programs intact there... No, every day, they had something to do. She fed them out her own pocket. But yeah, programs like that, If there's anybody left, again, they're going to have to have programs that people want to come to. I'm trying to get more people involved with oral history, young folks.

[01:24:28.770] - Michael Johnson

I'm trying to get more of them involved with learning their history. I'm trying to get more of them involved with understanding the value of an education. And that's something that leaving you all with is a footprint, what we call a footprint, because anything else outside of a footprint ain't going to work. If you don't leave a footprint, I can't walk in your shoes, but I can walk, follow your steps. And the people in that neighborhood need steps to follow. And we only gave them one. And that was you got a house, subsidized unit. You might be paying... I don't know what they pay now. I know My mom was paying \$125. No, \$75. Then it went to \$125. So that was affordable back then. She had all those kids. Now, I don't know I've heard some of them paying \$1,000. I don't live in that place for \$1,000 because really a lot of them look like shells, to be honest. Just be upfront because I go in and out of them with some of these kids that's getting in trouble. And then walking in there is like, whoa. I've seen it, but as an adult, it impacts me more than it did when I was a kid because a kid is like, oh, everybody living like this.

[01:25:59.260] - Devon Murtha

But, what area was the radio station?

[01:26:02.490] - Michael Johnson

It was right across the street, right next to my grandmother, 1016, Montgomery. It's right there on the... Well, you Where you used to walk through, and that was other thing, they put barriers up so people couldn't even walk straight through. They put those iron gates up and all that. So then we talk about prison mentality. Oh, yeah, we're already in prison. We're locked down. You know. Barriers have to come down. All barriers have to come down. And those that screw up, there's no consequences. You have to have consequences, because if you don't, it takes us to a place where we are now with our youth and our families in this city. I'm not against having consequences. It's just how you employ those consequences. Yeah.

[01:27:05.220] - Devon Murtha

That's a lot to think about for the future. Do you have another question?

[01:27:11.380] – Sarah Vonesh

I don't. Do you?

[01:27:13.400] - Devon Murtha

Well, I have lots of questions, but I think we would be here all day.

[01:27:18.400] - Michael Johnson

There ain't no problem. Whatever question you have, you want to ask.

[01:27:22.580] – Sarah Vonesh

So do you know if you have any photographs from when you were growing up of the area or any imagery that could help?

[01:27:31.950] - Michael Johnson

Yes. I think we got pictures. My sister has a picture of us actually in front of my aunt's house. And then I do have photographs where they made a dedication of Earl Lloyd, the state marker in his honor.

[01:27:50.070] - Speaker 3

That was more recently, right? That was a year or two ago?

[01:27:52.940] - Michael Johnson

Yeah, about a year, two ago. For him, yeah. But I would say my sister has older pictures because she's a collector of the pictures. And I had to pull a teeth to get some of them. But I have another way to get around. But there's some old pictures of that area. Matter of fact, if you're going to Charles Houston Rec Center, and as you walk in the lobby area when you first come through, is a picture of how Samuel Madden looked, proud to be becoming Samuel Madden, with this little dirt road, the Shacks, and this guy with a little... Matter of fact, the guy's name is Boli Winfrey. I got his number. His name is Mr. Winfrey. Yeah, Winfrey. He has a lot of pictures up there because he lived up there. But then he lived right in the smack by the...library.

[01:28:47.430] – Sarah Vonesh

Andrew Winfrey? Andrew Winfrey. Okay, he's on our list.

[01:28:50.180] - Michael Johnson

Yeah, that's a good guy to talk to. Tell him Mike Johnson sent you.

[01:28:53.890] – Sarah Vonesh

Have you gotten in touch with?

[01:28:56.000] - Devon Murtha

I did.

[01:28:56.840] - Michael Johnson

We'll talk about that. He's a little military. Okay. Right? Very standoffish. You got to almost pull his teeth. You know? That's okay. And he's still traumatized by his experience growing up. A lot of what you find on a lot of the older Blacks are, they're traumatized, and they won't tell you that they're traumatized. You know. Because in those units also came out, a father might be the same father here, this family, and have some kids around here in another family. So you're talking about siblings by the same person. But these people may not find out that they're siblings until later on in life. Mr. Winfrey, for him to be a former military guy, I mean he has a very high rank as an enlisted person. He's bitter. So you got to catch him at the right time. He's bitter.

[01:30:08.080] - Devon Murtha

Well, yeah, we'll speak about how to get in touch with Mr. Winfrey when we stop recording. Yeah. Okay. I guess my last question was just about, you talked about some of the social services that you guys set up for yourselves in the community. So the radio station. Was there anything else?

[01:30:28.880] - Michael Johnson

We did the Untouchables. That was for the young men. We did... What was the name of that thing? We started boxing. My brother, my youngest brother right now still runs that program.

[01:30:45.260] - Devon Murtha

Where's the boxing ring? Charles Houston. Okay.

[01:30:47.670] - Michael Johnson

Charles Houston Rec. But it serves as kids in the neighborhood. I know I called a couple of them. They're Untouchables. Ms. Joyce Rollins program. She helped with garden...they did gardening. The radio station. That was about it. It wasn't a whole lot.

[01:31:15.570] - Devon Murtha

What was the radio station called? Do you remember?

[01:31:18.610] - Michael Johnson

No, I don't know the name. It was something W, something. But they only broadcast once a week. But it was serving the community because people could listen in on what some of their issues were. And, I thought it was very good. I thought it was very good. But they cut it out, but they kept people informed. But those types of things that we need to build that community in ways it's open, especially now because you got a diversity in the community. I don't really look at the gentrification because, like I said, that ship already done sail. But how do we bring in the fold the old with the new? How do we blend them? How do we have them where they're respecting each other's privacy

and each other's way of life? Because in Alexandria, whoever make the most calls, get heard. A lot of them is like, Every day, I don't care. They don't care about it. And they just cut it off. They don't take that next step. So we got to empower the people a lot more than we have. Make sure that there is an educational process for the parents and for the kids, and that fathers should be able to come and visit their kids.

[01:32:44.920] - Michael Johnson

Because we have too many kids running around where the fathers can't interact with them because of barriers put up by ARHA. Whether it's barman list, we deal with people here. We got a barman list that goes back 15 years. Now, you caught a young man at 18 years old with a joint of reefer, and he's now 31, still paying for that one day that he had that one joint of reefer. He became a young father. So then you have that parent that's missing that income because he can't get a job. So then you have a kid that's impacted by the mother and the father, and that when the relationship breaks up with the mother, the father thinks that that breaks him up, the relationship with the kid. Those are the type of program we got to have for them, to get them to move on, to get them to feel as though they're worthy of being, quote, unquote, and it's just a quote, good citizens. You know, that's our responsibility. Our, our system is broke. Our system been broke. But again, when you're talking about being pro-human, then everything that's negative in your life impacts me in a way.

[01:34:16.220] - Michael Johnson

But we never looked at their life and said, Hey, you know, we got a lot of trauma over here that we haven't dealt with. Because those kids, see, you got to have a... I think they still do it at charge of, like an NA program. You know. So much drinking and drugging that people head ain't clear. So I get drunk, I might say, "F"-it and stay in that fold. You know, so they need those types of services right there. Especially if they're developing and they're putting all these little fancy restaurants and businesses up, put something up for the community where they can have, the haves and the have not can function together. We do what we call a community cookout, and we go to 13 different locations here in the city. We'll start it back up in April. That's something I started 18 years ago. At one time, we was charging agencies to donate to take part in it. The City Manager and the Mayor saw it as being so successful that this year, they're going to give us the \$10,000, so I ain't got to go out and hustle up \$10,000. And like I tell them, all this development, you tell me you can't get five from each one of these developers for programs like this?

[01:35:32.440] - Michael Johnson

Come on. You don't ask. If you don't ask a question, you're not going to get the answer. You know. But these programs, when we do these cookouts, we might cover 5,000 residents throughout the city, not just low-income housing. I think we got four or five of their units that will actually pop up, do the pop-up cookout with the Police Department, Mental Health. First was just the Rec Department. Then I brought the Police Department in. Then I brought the Sherriff's Department. Then I brought Fire Department. And then other agencies said, Can we get in? I said, Yeah, give me \$500 for the food because they're everywhere. You're the host. So, hey, this is what it's going to cost. So that released some stress because now we have the money set aside that we can go into this community and provide services. You know. I don't tell too many people about that. I let other people claim it, but they know who originated it. You know. And I originated it because I saw what was needed in those communities that people were not really coming in contact with on a regular basis. If you don't get people hope, I have no hope.

[01:36:43.850] - Michael Johnson

But up by us bringing all these services. And some of the people that you all should interview, they're gone. Some of them dead now. They could tell you stories about up there when it was dirt roads. Mr. Boli could do that. I might have to put some lube on. I get him. He'll talk freely. Like, because I'm doing this with Francesco. I don't know if you all know Francesco.

[01:37:09.470] - Devon Murtha

Yeah, we rented the equipment from them. Right.

[01:37:12.100] - Michael Johnson

That's where you all got this from?

[01:37:13.320] - Devon Murtha

Yeah.

[01:37:13.690] - Michael Johnson

So I've been setting them up with some elders, you know, that are still living, 95, 85, 96, before they go. Because my dear friend, Mr. Robert "Old Folks" Dawkins, who did the African-American Museum, he died. He passed away back in November. And if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't know about that area. We wouldn't know that everybody on that wall came out of those housing units. You know? He talked about doctors and lawyers and politicians. And I'm like, whoa, we never was taught that in school. Never was taught that. So I think people learning their history. And, again, with the new people that's coming in, learning that history, communicating, it puts you at comfort. It puts you more at ease when you communicate. I'm not a racist. I'm pro-Black. And I tell people that. I told this one guy that I was pro-Black. No, I'm not. I'm not a racist. I can't be racist. I said, But I'm pro-Black. That means I care who I am and my people, but I'm also pro-human. Meaning I care about you. I don't want to see anything happen to you. Those are the dialogues we got to have with the new people coming in and not let somebody that sits in this glass tower, Oh, do this, do that.

[01:38:43.290] - Michael Johnson

They'll go for this. You can't do that. People don't know what I like unless you ask me. You don't know what I dislike unless you ask me. And I tell you, you know. What kind of food do you like? Well, what kind of drinks do you like? Well, here's a drink. I mean, I like it. I mean, it's just that simple. So I'm trying to get more people to think rationally. I can't even get my kids to think rationally. Sometimes they don't think about it. But anyway, that's my purpose. And if I don't leave this Earth with anything else, that I tried. And that's all that matters. That's all that matters. But the ones that you run into that's difficult, as I know, Yeah, they're still traumatized, and they still... A lot of them are still according to how they were treated growing up. And they can't let it go because it's burnt in them. And they know that something that was done over here impacted their family in more ways than one. That's what people got to realize. I look at my own family. Like I said, my aunt with those 11 kids. I was like, wow. All I'm doing right now, none of them live in public housing.

[01:40:05.970] - Michael Johnson

I think one may be what you call Section 8. It came out of those projects. Just one. Well, no. My cousin's daughter is on Section 8 because she had five kids. She had only like... I told her she got a football team, and she's probably 30 years old with five, six kids. That's what we have that was in

there. And it wasn't for them When her living in one of the places that they tore down up there on Alfred Street, she may not have got the opportunity to move out to Stafford, into a Section 8 house, where now her whole world has changed. She got more land out there than I got where I live at. She does. It's helping her. It's helping her, helping her kids. Her mother and her grandmother couldn't do or accomplish what she accomplished. And one of the reasons that my parents moved up where they moved out is because it was family and that connection there. So when one of them were working, you had somebody that could watch the kids. It may have diminished that aspect of the Samuel Madden-Bland area, I think it's gone. But we used to have people that you go to work, I'm going to leave so-and-so with you.

[01:41:24.120] - Michael Johnson

Okay, go ahead. Because they're going to return the favor. You know, I'm going to leave my kids with you. But yeah, so it's a lot. There's a lot of people have different ideas. I just think that we get them all at the table, the haves and the have nots, and work it out. We're not going to agree on everything. But to lead there saying that at least I got a chance to voice my opinion. And I think AHA has been having alot of meetings with some of the residents . But they're, they're using stormtrooper tactics. You're going to come to this meeting? See, I hear all that. I hear all that. We did a program, and I'll let you go. It was We just finished a program this summer, and we had the presentation on Saturday at Library on Queen Street. Every last one of those young ladies came out of public housing. In 1970, Dr. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis did a project with Northern Virginia Community College, where they had residents come in and could obtain college credit in order to better themselves down the road. Out of the 30 or so people that came in there, I know five of them personally that are managers at whether it's Department stores or Greyhound.

[01:43:02.050] - Michael Johnson

And this past summer, Dr. Clark-Lewis, we initiated their program again. No support. Northern Virginia started with us and then said, no, we're not doing it no more. Because they were trying to charge the residents who they know didn't have money to better themselves. So back to that \$20,000. If we can get one of these developers to take a program like this to bring those people in to educate, it's a win-win. It's a win-win. Once they understand their value, then they understand their worth. Saturday, we was only expecting 15 people. Came out of public housing to hear these young ladies present their research they had done. We had 175 in the room and another 100 on Zoom. And I was like, wow, that's what I'm talking about. How can you snatch the rug up? And I'll let you talk to a lady. I'll give you her information. She let her talk. Dr. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Professor at Howard University. You ought to see how these women lit up. We had about like 12 or 13 of them. The first week, everybody was like, eh, and then we started taking them on trips. We was taking them out and seeing this, and they were like, wow.

[01:44:32.030] - Michael Johnson

And then they said, oh, I'm going to be in the story. And their family showed up. And just seeing that enthuse... how enthusiastic they were about learning. So I'm like, wow. See, programs like this is what we need. Not those shotgun programs. They're here today, gone tomorrow. We'll throw a party. But after that party, what comes out of the party? Nothing, you know, I met a lot of girls at the party, but the party's over. The girls I met, they're gone, too. So I'm back where I started. So I know, I think different. I think from a different perspective. But that's what I'm saying people need to see. That's what they need to hear. They need to see these programs that has impacted people's lives and support them because everybody up there, for whatever reason, they didn't see education

as being important. But every day you're being educated one way or another. So they might always get in where they can fit in and stay on course because some of these young ladies, they're going to make a real big impact because they were so teed off at Northern Virginia for not wanting to pick the program back up.

[01:45:57.060] - Michael Johnson

They went up there and protested, and I was like, Whoa, But we do have a couple of councilmen and women that's going to try to get us to reestablish that. I think that'd be a win-win if whoever the developers if they can support efforts like that before Dr. Clark-Lewis retired, retired. Because she had the idea, the curriculum, and all I did was recruit. I need you. I'm going to get them. But I was like, I'm going to say how many last. But they did a wonderful job. They did a wonderful job. And those are the programs we need because those programs help you help yourself. And then you can help others. And then your kids... And think about this. Your kids, these ladies, kids saw them taking college courses. So for the kids that weren't really interested in school, I'm seeing my mother do this. That's learned behavior. All behavior is learned. Positive or negative is learned. Now, these kids got a different perspective on education, but they live in low-income housing. But you're giving them resources. You're feeding them. You're nourishing them. You're giving them opportunities. And that's what I want to see happen with this new development.

[01:47:26.840] - Michael Johnson

Because if not, you all are going to see me out there, and I'm going to I'm going to have all my stuff over protest. And I just hope that they sit down and talk to the people. Because the people are... They might give you all something different than what I'm giving you. And that's what it's I know because I was sharing with a guy on all interviews. Each day brings out a different thought. So you can't just do one interview. You want to, but if you want something that is going to be everlasting, it's hit those people two or three times and see how things change and how your question change, how your answer change, because every day brings out a different thought, a different memory.

[01:48:12.490] – Sarah Vonesh

Very true.

[01:48:16.760] - Devon Murtha

Well, thank you. I think we should... Let's turn off the recording so we can chat. Just the two of us now. Is--