

**Interview with Ted Curtis**  
**November 7, 2003, Springfield, Illinois**  
**Interviewer: Jackie Wilkes**

Wilkes: [This] interview is with Ted Curtis at his office. The date is Friday, the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> –

Curtis: 7<sup>th</sup>.

Wilkes: 7<sup>th</sup> of November, and this is an oral history that we are discussing, the oral history of Ted Curtis for the bank that will be prepared for a black culture store and museum, as it develops. Being thought through by the group that's trying to get the Lincoln Colored Home started. Now, Mr. Curtis?

Curtis: Good morning, Miss Wilkes.

Wilkes: Ted, tell me about your young years. Where did you live?

Curtis: Well, I was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Was one of eight children. Typically born – I was born right in the house in which I lived for so many years, 919 South 17<sup>th</sup> Street. My parents were Roy and Dorothy Curtis, my mother's maiden name was Gatewood. And I guess I'd have to say that they probably were getting a little bit older.

Wilkes: Did you say you were the last?

Curtis: No, I got one – one more brother.

Wilkes: Uh-huh. You were the seventh, huh?

Curtis: The seventh, yes. And born premature, but I survived. My dad was 14 years older than my mom, and so I was born when my dad was 48 or 49 years old. There were three girls and five boys, and we all went to Lincoln Grade School. After Lincoln Grade School, we went to Feitshans High School, and then various places from there on. And I'll probably get back to the education part. You want to prompt me on what part of my... ?

Wilkes: Sure. Just tell me a little bit about when Roy came to Springfield.

Curtis: Oh, OK.

Wilkes: Did he come from another state, or did he... ?

Curtis: My dad was born in Springfield in 1890. And he was born to Frank and Rosa Curtis. His mother was from the St. Louis area, and his dad was from

Hamilton, Virginia. His dad was on a plantation during slavery. And in 1865, when they were freed, I think there were nine boys, and they each took off in different directions. And probably my grandfather ended up here because it was Lincoln's home, as did many black folks. And he ended up staying here, and marrying my – I don't know how he met my grandmother. I never knew – my grandmother Curtis and grandfather Curtis were dead before I was born, so I never met any of them. And on the other side, my mother's side –

Wilkes: Hang on a minute.

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: Did you hear anything through the family about why your great-grandfather was interested in –

Curtis: Grandfather.

Wilkes: – grandfather was interested in Lincoln's home?

Curtis: Well, back during that time, many black people ended up in Springfield because it was Abraham Lincoln's home.

Wilkes: An admiration of Lincoln.

Curtis: Right, right. Thinking if was from here, it probably wasn't a bad place. And – I'll digress a little bit – that's probably what led to the 1908 riots, particularly.

Wilkes: Yes. Because there was a big population.

Curtis: The population of blacks in Springfield during this period was higher than it was everywhere else. It was probably 14-15%, and increasing. And because of the allure of Lincoln's home. But, so at any rate, my grandfather ended up here. I don't know what he did for a living, but –

Wilkes: That's OK. You started to talk about your grandmother.

Curtis: Now, on my mother's side, she was born to Steve and Jenny Gatewood. My maternal grandfather was from the Mexico, Missouri area. He was on a farm, I guess you wouldn't call it a plantation, and he had a brother, and I guess they were in some sort of servitude. And his brother was crippled. And when his brother got 11 and 12, guy on the farm, figured, he wasn't going to take care of somebody that couldn't produce for him. And so the story goes that – I can't verify it – that one night they grabbed him and threw [him down] the well to drown him. But my uncle was real strong, and – so my – supposedly my grandfather knew that if he could have survived, he would have been – he would survive, even though, they threw him down in the afternoon, we knew

my uncle would be there if he possibly could, and so, supposedly my grandfather snuck out about 2:00 in the morning, went down to the well, and there was my uncle, he was holding – he had his feet up against the thing, and he was still holding on.

Wilkes: What a wonderful story.

Curtis: And so he got him up. He got him out, and they hit the tracks. They hit the tracks and ended up in Springfield.

Wilkes: Wow.

Curtis: And I guess at some point he met my grandmother.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: I'm not certain where my grandmother was really from. I believe my grandmother was born here in 1879, I believe. But if she wasn't, then her folks were from a little town in Kentucky, and then they came up through – a town in southeastern Illinois, and they stopped there, and then, somehow, they ended up here. So that's basically that on that side.

Wilkes: Very interesting. Did you hear stories about the values and concerns of your parents' folks as you were growing up?

Curtis: Probably mainly about my folks on the other side, on my mother's side. Very little about my folks on my dad's side.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: My dad didn't talk much. My dad had two brothers, both of them were dead before they reached adulthood. And he had three sisters; they all reached a ripe old age. You might know his sisters, Cassie Young was one; I don't know if you remember Lyman White. His mother was my dad's sister. And Willa Baker, which is Gene Woodson – his mom was my dad's sister. And Arsilia (sp?) Martin, which is Bob Martin – you probably remember Bob.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: His mother was my dad's sister.

Wilkes: And so the ladies lived and shared with you about the family?

Curtis: Oh, all of them lived for some time. But I must say we wouldn't see them that often. Some aunts and uncles want to be bothered with you, and some don't. But, mothers sort of guide things, and I think – she – my mother probably

came from a pretty – pretty religious family, and my dad came from kind of a – a good-time family, until he sort of found religion. And, I mean, my mother’s family didn’t believe in playing cards, and drinking, and that kind of stuff. My dad’s family did. And so – and my dad did that until he – he met my mom. Well, until he – until probably about the fourth or fifth child, and then he got religion. But he – my dad was a –

Wilkes: What church were they in?

Curtis: St. John AME Church. My grandmother – we’ve been there for more than a hundred years. Before he found religion, my dad was a professional gambler.

Wilkes: Was he?

Curtis: Yes. He was a pool shark.

Wilkes: Pool...

Curtis: A pool shark, a legitimate one, though. I mean, I’m talking about some guy that thought he could shoot. He had a – kind of a nationwide reputation as a pool shark.

Wilkes: Is that right? Nationwide.

Curtis: Yes, people would come through here just to look him up, and –

Wilkes: Is that right?

Curtis: – and shoot pool, yes. His most famous competitor was Bojangles Robinson, the dancer.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: Yes. My sister has a picture of him and Bojangles shooting pool.

Wilkes: Wow!

Curtis: Yes, and Bojangles would come through here dancing –

Wilkes: And tell me where they stayed.

Curtis: I can’t tell you that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Wilkes: Well I heard a lot about famous (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) –

Curtis: Probably Leon Stewart’s.

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Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: But Bojangles would come through with Shirley Temple and them, dancing at the Orpheum Theater. And it's said – I wasn't around, but – in between shows he'd run down the alley between Washington and Jefferson, and my dad would be waiting on him, just to play pool, that's how much he liked it. And – but I think in 1934, or 1935, my dad entered the church and – and got a legitimate job. And he was a janitor, and he kept it for the rest of his life.

Wilkes: Where?

Curtis: He was a janitor of the YWCA.

Wilkes: Is that right?

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: Oh.

Curtis: For 39 years, I think, something like that. Until he retired, and so – maybe you better prompt me a little more.

Wilkes: No, I just have to tell you that the fact that he worked for the YWCA makes him a peer of mine, because I'm enriched today because I worked for the YWCA, and have –

Curtis: Oh.

Wilkes: – and have retirement supplements from them.

Curtis: My dad worked for the YWCA, he was like the utility man, but he had limited education. My dad went through the eighth grade I think, and my mother went to the tenth grade. They both completed those, I think. But my dad had limited education. He figured out all the steam fixtures and things for the pool, and the heat, and all that, and he knew how to do all of that.

Wilkes: Isn't that wonderful?

Curtis: Yes. He knew how to do all of that, and so – I mean, they were...

Wilkes: Well, tell me about the church, as you remember it, your earliest years. They were both active by the time you were born.

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: So, were they active in particular parts of the church, or ... ?

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Curtis: My dad was always, like, the janitor of the church, and would volunteer his services, and to some extent, with the lay organizations. But my dad didn't – didn't join organizations like that. I mean, he just, like, "I'll do good, and that's it." I mean, my mom was always very active in the lay organization of the church, and the Sunday School, she was superintendent of the Sunday School.

Wilkes: Is that right?

Curtis: Yes. And –

Wilkes: So there you are, you began your interest in education way back with your mom.

Curtis: Well, my mom – yes, I'd have to say probably with my mom, yes. And she was superintendent, and for us, for our family, our children Sunday was a – you go to church three times. Every Sunday, without fail, we had to Sunday School, church, and come back at night. Actually, come back at night and go to youth church, and then stay for regular church.

Wilkes: Ok, what happened on Wednesday?

Curtis: (phone rings) Excuse me. (break in tape)... and often believe me. So where were we at?

Wilkes: We were talking about your mom's interest in leading the church, and in the superintendent of Sunday School.

Curtis: Yes, and the fact that we – had to attend church three times.

Wilkes: And I was beginning to ask, did you have to go on Wednesday, too?

Curtis: No. No, not at all.

Wilkes: Just Sunday.

Curtis: She went on Wednesday, prayer meeting, but no, we didn't have to go. And in our upbringing, you could not go to movies on Sunday, you couldn't do anything like that. The only time we ever were allowed to go to movies on Sunday was to see a religious movie. It had to be a religious based movie like "Quo Vadis" or something like that.

Wilkes: Tell me about the leaders that you remember in the community. I, of course, think first of St. John's, but there might be black leaders in school, too, or –

Curtis: Well, to be truthful with you –

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Wilkes: – after all, the NAACP was around, too.

Curtis: In my experience, there just – as you understand, the system around here kind of relegated things to one black professional, or black person in each profession. We were only allowed to have one doctor, and that kind of stuff. And so truthfully – as a child, we didn't really go to health professionals and things like that, like my children do today. I mean, you went when you absolutely had to. But other than that, parents just didn't have any money for you to be going. But the truth of the matter is, your parents knew how to fix up most things. You know what I mean? More so – this is digressing, I used to tell my wife, when we got married, she is running to the doctor with the kids all the time. And I used to tell her, it makes no sense. You ought to just call – let my mom tell you what to do.

Wilkes: Yes, that's your (inaudible).

Curtis: Well, being kind of insensitive, that infuriates a young lady. I can take care of my kids. But I remember one day, my wife came in and said, "You have doctors just making a damn fool out of me." I said, "What's the matter?" Said, "All I do when I take these kids and say, give them a couple of pills, say, come back in ten days." I said, "Why, I tried to tell you." I said, "My mom could tell you quicker than the damn doctor." But she learned that, and she would she'd go, my mom said do this, and generally it turned out all right.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: But anyway –

Wilkes: Were there any leaders that you looked up to?

Curtis: Oh, any leaders? If I were to tell the truth, I'd have to say not many. The black leadership that – there were positive people, yes, and I'm not trying to say there weren't. It's just that they didn't stick out that well, in my mind. The ones that did stick out were probably associated with our church. And from our church that would have been Leon Stewart and a guy called, well, his name was George Taylor, but they called him Stogie. Stogie Taylor. Those were probably the two. But really positive symbols in my life, that stuck out, community leaders and things, didn't happen for me until I was forced to leave to [go to] Chicago. And that's when I became aware that there were broader things that could be done, and that type of stuff.

Wilkes: Right, right. Well, tell me about your early school years. You were at Lincoln?

Curtis: Yes. I was in Lincoln grade school, and the schools back then went from K through 8.

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Wilkes: Was there anything that you particularly liked about school then?

Curtis: Well, truthfully, in grade school I was a very good student. Very, very good student. Always tops in my class, and –

Wilkes: Did that happen in high school too? Because sometimes –

Curtis: No, no. In high school I kept slowing myself. And I really got off on the wrong track with just – I didn't get off on the wrong track initially. I did well my freshman year, but after that it was downhill, and I began to drink, and tried to chase girls, and things like that. And really, really got off on the wrong track. That's how I ended up in Chicago.

Wilkes: OK, tell me about Chicago.

Curtis: Well, I was not going to graduate. I had completed my junior year, and I was lacking credits. And my family would always come home for Mother's and Father's Day, all the kids. And so we were all sitting in the living room one time, and my older brother said, "Well, how's he doing in school?" And my mom, "He ain't doing much of nothing. You better ask him." And so my brother said, "How about him coming to Chicago? We can take care of him; put him in school there." That's my brother and my sister, see. And they said, "Between the two of us, we can take care of him." And my mom said, "Do you want to go to Chicago?" and I said, "Yes." And not knowing what's confronting me, I had no idea what I was going into. But so I went, and that was the end of my junior year, so I had to repeat the junior year over up there, and it actually was the best thing that happened in my life. The most positive thing I always say, kind of saying to myself, it kind of saved my life, because I was put in a situation where I didn't know anybody, so that meant you had to do your schoolwork. I got up there, and I got a part-time job, and stuff like that. And I ran into some friends, one whose father was a lawyer; that never ceased to amaze me. I used to ask him, over and over, until he'd get mad, "Are you sure your father's a lawyer?" "Yes, yes." And you'd go over to his house, and drink up his whiskey. And you'd come back, and next month, or something, then there'd be more whiskey. And his father wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't say anything while you guys drinking up all the whiskey. And I couldn't it was kind of hard, but I started seeing some self-symbols, which made me think I could do a few things. And then from there I graduated and went into the Air Force.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: I was working, I had a job. Well, I was, staying with my sister, and by then she had gotten a divorce, and I'm like, I can't lay on my sister, here. My job is part-time, and so two of my older brothers had gone in the Air Force, so I went in the Air Force.



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Wilkes: What did you do in the Air Force?

Curtis: I was a supply clerk. I was in what's called organizational supply. By that, you're a supply man that's always attached to some other unit. Like up in Alaska – I got sent to Fairbanks, Alaska, my first station, my first trip. And up there I was attached to an aircraft squadron. And then after Alaska I was sent to Tachikawa, Japan, and I was attached to a hospital squadron. It's called organizational supply; you're always in some unit. It's actually a very good position, because when it comes to promotions and stuff, it all comes down separately. In other words, if I were at supply squadron, I had to compete against all the supply people. But when you're in organizational supply, if a stripe comes down for supply, there's only two or three of you, so you always get it. Today the military is different. It's like you compete worldwide. But then, you had to compete per base, stuff like that. So it was a pretty good deal.

Wilkes: Where were you?

Curtis: Where was I stationed?

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: I was at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska. I was there for 18 months. And Tachikawa, Japan, which is really Tokyo. I was there two years. And –

Wilkes: Well, what years were those?

Curtis: I went to Alaska February of 1959, and left there end of August of 1960. And then Japan, and then left Japan in September of 1962, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1962.

Wilkes: And when you left the service, what did you do?

Curtis: Went back to school, stayed with my sister and enrolled in Wilson Junior College.

Wilkes: Wilson, ok.

Curtis: Yes. And that was a forerunner to Kennedy-King.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And actually did pretty well there, with my studies. It's kind of interesting. My high school in Chicago was all colored, all black. And you know how naïve I was, I didn't realize that. Coming from here, I wasn't used to all at church or something, I wasn't used to all-black and all-colored situations. And I'd actually been in school about two and a half, three months, when my sister

asked me how I liked it, and I said, “Well, it’s all right, except,” I said, “something’s different about it. I just can’t put my hands on it.” She said, “Well, you know it’s all colored, don’t you?” I said, “Well, that’s what it is.” Well, we’ve always had black people that look like you, look like they’re light. And so I assumed some of them were. But we called them redbone, they always had these redbones. But that was really my first experience. So anyway, when I get out of the service and go to Wilson, I sign up, and the funny thing happened. They see you graduated from Englewood, I didn’t know the school was supposedly inferior. And so you graduated from Englewood, and the man was putting me in remedial English. Well, I have a strong English background from grade school here.

Wilkes: Without testing, they did that?

Curtis: Oh yes.

Wilkes: They have an assumption.

Curtis: Oh, sure they don’t care. But the grade school I went through, Lincoln, was really noted for teaching kids English and that kind of stuff. We had teachers that really, I must say – that, to me, none of them never showed prejudice at me – they were always, like – you could do as well as any other kid could do. Particularly the English teacher, who was the first Catholic allowed to teach at a public school. Her name was Miss Gallagher, and she would be on your case, to make sure you got these things. So anyway, they put me in this remedial English class, and then, about a week there’s a test. And I aced the test, and I never heard a teacher call me up and saying, “You don’t belong in this class. Here, you better take this (inaudible).” It just taught me something about how people just had these perceptions –

Wilkes: Right, right.

Curtis: – and would just stick you in somewhere. But anyway, I stayed there for one year, or half a year.

Wilkes: At Wilson?

Curtis: Yes, I stayed there for a year. And I come home to get a job, so I could then go back. I’ll get a job for the summer. And the truth of the matter is I was 24, 25, and I was at the point where I kind of wanted a permanent relationship with some young lady. And even though I had lived in Chicago for seven years now, I probably felt more comfortable in Springfield, when it comes to that kind of stuff. And so I came back here, and met my wife, and I got a job at Allis-Chalmers.

Wilkes: Oh. You met your wife. And her name?

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Curtis: Audrey – it was Audrey Harvey. And – so I ended up getting married, and then I just stayed here. Which wasn't bad for me.

Wilkes: What did you do at Allis-Chalmers?

Curtis: I basically went there, I was a burner, and that's a person that burns holes in the metal. They – Allis-Chalmers built Crawler tractors – we burnt holes in the metal, like from a pattern. And, they sort of come and file it down, and all that stuff. I did that for about six months, and I was working like heck to make probation, so I made it, and then I worked there about six months, and you carry your time cards. So I take my time card with me one time, and here's this guy, this white guy, I went to high school with. I said, "Len, how you got a damn job like this?" "It's not that (inaudible) you just take a test and you can do it." I said, "I want to take the test." (inaudible) on probation, I don't want to get dirty and stinking out here.

Wilkes: Yes, you're right. (inaudible)

Curtis: Little did I know that there was no blacks in that, and so I got the application, filled it out, to this day, I think they might have thought – in retrospect, I think they might have thought I was a tester or something. I don't know what they thought. But they gave me an exam, and I passed it, and one of them asked me why I wanted to do this. I said, "It's an easier job than being out here, what do you think?" And so then I became a timekeeper – well, they call it production clerks, technically. A guy that works in the office and hands out the cards and the time sheets, and tallies up the time and everything for the guys who are working hard out in the shop And so, I did that until I left Allis-Chalmers. When I left, I was renting houses that I felt was below, beneath. I wanted my family in something better, and –

Wilkes: Nothing better –

Curtis: Yes, we're renting these (inaudible) and things, and so a friend of mine, Jerome Shipp, was selling – selling real estate, and he used to bug me. And he was a friend of the family; he's actually my older brother's friend. And, why don't you sell real estate for me, I said, "Yes." I was telling my wife, "Well," first I told Jerome to get lost because I knew him; I said, "Get out of here" but, I was telling my wife one night in bed, I said, "If I was selling real estate, we probably could get us a house for you." So I said, "Yes." I studied, took the test, and passed that, started selling real estate. And the second house I sold to myself.

Wilkes: Sure. Very good.

Curtis: So it was really big – it was important to me because –

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Wilkes: Did you notice then that you were passing all these tests and that maybe you should get – consider more education?

Curtis: Yes, well a lot of my friends were going back, because we had the GI Bill and stuff. But I had these kids and things. That's kind of interesting, you would (inaudible) say that because, when I wanted to go for – at Allis-Chalmers, when I wanted to go from factory to being a production clerk, I was home, and I told my mom, my mom and dad, I said, "I think I'm going to take this test to work in the office out there at Allis-Chalmers." And instinctively my dad said, "Boy, you've got a good job, you better not mess it up." What he was telling me is you're a black man, don't fool around and get messed up. And so as you know, being around us for a while, black people speak in code sometimes, you know.

Wilkes: Sure.

Curtis: And so, he was telling me "don't mess up". But my mom said, "Don't you tell that boy that; if that boy wants to get a better job..."

Wilkes: He can do it.

Curtis: – she said, "you let him go. You let him try." And so I guess my mom had more insight when it comes to that. And so then I did take the test and pass, and everything. I'm certain it made – my mom probably said, "See?" to my dad. But no matter what, my dad would just try to protect me, and I understood that. But – so where I'm at now, I kind of got off on the –

Wilkes: Well, you – the question was, noticing that you're taking all these tests, and passing them well –

Curtis: Oh, I understand.

Wilkes: – did you think about further education?

Curtis: Yes, I did, I did, but I must say I thought about it only in terms of how I could extract this extra \$300 from the government. Because I had the GI Bill –

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: – and I think it was \$342, because I had a wife and these kids.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And so I went back – I started going to Lincoln Land, because it was just starting.

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Wilkes: It was Lincoln Land.

Curtis: Yes, it was just starting, and I went to Lincoln Land to get that, but I wasn't very serious. Later on in my life I did get serious about it, and – actually, it's kind of interesting. I went to school really 16 years, at night, just to get my bachelor's. And my wife used to say, why do you keep going to school?

Wilkes: 16 years? That's great.

Curtis: Yes, but I –

Wilkes: Did you get it – did you get it (inaudible) what is now UIS?

Curtis: Yes, well, I told my wife, I said, "Well, what I want to do in life, I've got to have a degree. I said, I won't be any smarter, but you've got to have a degree in order to get in." And it turns out one of the best things that happened to me.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And obviously –

Wilkes: Tell me when you got that degree.

Curtis: I got it May, 1986.

Wilkes: Was that the thing that led you away from insurance and real estate to working for the state?

Curtis: No, I reluctantly kind of went away from that. It was just an economic need situation. When I went to work for the state, my children – my oldest – my oldest girl was getting ready to go to Morris Brown College down in Georgia, and I had to have more money. By this time, I had a good relationship with the local Republican Party, and – for maybe four or five years – and they knew – the county chairman would always ask me, did I want to go to work at the state? And I used to say no, because I didn't want them to have that kind of control over me. I know of those that give you the job, and thinking all will take it. And so I didn't – I used to always say no. But when – I just said, this girl's going to go to college because my oldest boy went into the military – one day, Irv Smith said, I've got a job for you that's \$32,000. And I remember, I recall, I was walking out a meeting, and I said, "What did you say?" He said, "I got a job for you, I'll pay you \$32,000." And – now he's talking about a state job, but it's his job, he thinks. And I said, "Well, you just reached my price. You get me that, I'll go to work for the state." And I ended up – he knew I was a real estate broker and all of that, and I ended up – my first was assistant real estate commissioner for the state of Illinois, and I didn't get 32, but I got 30. And that was a lot of money then.

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Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: But I was very easily able to take care of my daughter going to school, and then the next kid, and then the next kid.

Wilkes: Well, actually, why don't you name the children.

Curtis: I have five children. The oldest one is named Steve.

Wilkes: Steve. And he went to the service, and what's he doing now?

Curtis: He went to the Navy. Steve is a salesperson for the lottery, Illinois State Lottery. Then Michelle, Michelle went to Morris Brown. She didn't finish, which she did go four years. She is a director of Abundant Faith Day Care Center.

Wilkes: Oh, really?

Curtis: And the next one is Teddy. He's Theodore II. He graduated from St. Leo's College in Florida. And he's with the IRS, he's the IRS auditor.

Wilkes: Really?

Curtis: And then the next one, there's Tracy, that's a lady. And she graduated from Hampton University, and got a master's out there, at UIS. And she's the principal at Laketown Elementary. Then the next child is Tyrone. He matriculated at Morehouse College in Atlanta. He graduated from there and is about to get his master's at UIS. And he is a computer person for Public Aid. Those are my children; I have ten grandchildren now.

Wilkes: But each of your children went to finish their degree.

Curtis: Yes. Three of them have –

Wilkes: I said it wrong, but they continued their education.

Curtis: Yes, almost all of them. Three of them have an undergraduate degree. The other one has an associate's degree, Michelle has an associate's degree. And then Steve doesn't have the degree. And it's kind of ironic, because Steve probably had more talent than – I wouldn't say more, but it's as much as most of them. And probably was more, but he had trouble sitting in one place for an hour. And so that's why we had a salesperson out in the street. He likes that.

Wilkes: Yes. Oh, that's good. Yes. Ted, it's about time for our tape to be flipped for the first time, but we'll continue this as soon as we turn the tape.

**END SIDE A, BEGIN SIDE B**

Wilkes: ... two of an interview with Ted Curtis. Jackie Wilkes, the interviewer. We've just listed where the children have been in education, so we're going to go back now and talk about how Ted got excited with – I was going to say, let me say, was it politics that got you in here, into the schools?

Curtis: It really wasn't politics got me into the school. Well, I started dealing in politics, and I quickly understood that they could do something for me, but that you had to have some minimum qualifications. They could easily slide you in different positions, but you had to have a minimum. If you had a degree, it would be easy for them to put you in various places. And so – I must say, that was sort of incentive for me to be serious. It probably wasn't a major incentive. It was an incentive, and so I started going back, and then I'd stop, and then go back. But one Sunday, I'm sitting at home reading the paper on Sunday, and it's got a list of the graduates at Sangamon State University the previous day. And I see Herb Harris's name in there. I don't know if you know Herb Harris? (inaudible) But I see Herb Harris's name in there, he's an older guy, my older brother's age. And I said, Audrey, did you see where Herb graduated from college? And so we go to Eisner's down there, across from Iles Park, and going shopping that Sunday, and we run into him. And I said, "Man, I saw where you graduated from college," He said, "Yes, I'm smart enough to graduate from college." I said, "Well, I didn't mean it that way. I said, I just saw that, you know." And so after we left, I kept telling my wife, that's something, Herb graduating. So my wife said, "That's really bugging you, isn't it?" She said, "Well you know, if it's bugging you that much, why don't you get on back out there and finish, you know?" And I said, "I think I am." And then I was really motivated serious, I started taking three courses a semester. And it was like, hey, I'm going all the way this time. And I did. And Herb had become a member of this fraternity, and I wanted to do that, too, so I got my degree, and subsequently ended up in the same fraternity with Herb, everything else with Herb.

Wilkes: What fraternity?

Curtis: Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Well, Herb Harris was really – his graduation really motivated me, because he was like, 50 years old, and I'm like, if he can do it I can.

Wilkes: You can, too.

Curtis: Yes! And so – but politics probably the one that probably got me started that – in that general direction, because I could see that somebody could do things for me if I had these minimal qualifications. Because I was a black man in the Republican Party around here, which was kind of rare. But I quickly figured out that would give me more advantages than being a Democrat –

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Wilkes: In the (inaudible).

Curtis: – just from a selfish standpoint.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And even as much as – even today, I understand that when I go to a Republican Party function I don't have to know all the people, they'll know who I am, before I leave. I mean, they'll – who's that boy, or whatever they want to say, you understand? But they'll know who I am before I leave, and that's not the situation if I were to go into a Democratic situation, it's –

Wilkes: In the past – we all know who you are now.

Curtis: Yes, I mean there'd be 300 of us, and nobody would know who you are.

Wilkes: But who else – who else was –

Curtis: I don't have no deep political, philosophical belief anyway, so it doesn't matter.

Wilkes: Who else was in the party then? And who is black?

Curtis: In the Republican Party? There really were only two or three of us that were kind of reliable, and that was Candy Trees and Jerome Irvin (sp?).

Wilkes: Very good.

Curtis: And so things could accrue to you pretty easy, and...

Wilkes: Sure. Sure. Yes, I know. That's very good. Do you know, I've called myself, thinking that it might have been the politics that brought you to the school board. What brought you to the school board? And of course, you've...

Curtis: I kind of did that on my own. I wanted to be an elected public official, and I tried several times but got stomped. Because everything cuts two ways, because being a black Republican you're not accepted too fast in our community. And so I ran for county board, and I ran for convention center board. I would have made the convention center board if this other black hadn't gotten a [raise]. But before I all over – I ran for county board twice, I think, and – and so at some point I'm becoming more sophisticated in this thing called politics.

Wilkes: Sure.

Curtis: And I recognize that in order to get elected, I had to run for something that did



not say Republican and Democrat. Something nonpartisan, that I probably could make that. And this lawsuit came in to the schools about the school board being not representative of the citizenry. And they lost it, and so they had to redo the board, and have representation from the districts, as opposed to (inaudible). Well I figured, a) there wasn't no incumbent running, and b) there was quite a few in the race, there were five people in the race, and I figured I could win it because I could out-organize and do better than the others. The most prominent person in there was the Reverend Hale of Zion Baptist Church, his wife was running. And what by then – by this time, I'm pretty knowledgeable about what's going on and how to go about it. Ironically, I did not have the support of Irv Smith and the Republican Party. He basically was backing Mrs. Hale on it. I could tell you why, but you could probably figure out why. But I had also learned these lessons about how to get elected. And so I knew I would get certain Republican support, lower level Republican support. And so my challenge was to go to the Democrats to get elected. And so I actually did that. I got elected to the school board by Democrats. I mean, Republicans too, but – basically, by Democrats, by going to them and saying, "Hey, you know, you didn't pick this woman to be your representative." And that's really what happened, now. Who's going to hear this? Who's going to hear this tape?

Wilkes: Somebody interested in Ted, or somebody interested in schools, or somebody interested in the black community, we can't tell you.

Curtis: Well, there was a – (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) – all of us, we did, anyway. There was a – Phineas Hirsch (sp?), who used to be in politics, in Democrat politics. He knew I wanted to run, and he told me, he said, "You want to win?" He said, "I can tell you how to get big Democrat support." I said, how? Well, at that time, Reverend Shokes (??) and Reverend Hale, (inaudible) were kind of the strong people in the Ministerial Alliance, and they had basically knocked Reverend May aside, see. The Reverend May enjoyed being in charge of a political action committee, and they had took it from him, see? And so finally Hirsch called me, he said, "You go to Reverend May and get his support, and he'll probably openly come out and support you against Reverend Hale's wife, because he was mad at them. And when he told me that was on a Wednesday, I went straight over to the guy's church, and I said, "I want to run for school board, and I've come by to ask for your support and everything." I could see the wheels turning in Reverend May's head. And he said, "Well, I don't know, Ted." He said, "We've got a meeting tonight. Come back and we'll have a group of people here, and I'll let you speak before them, and we'll see what happens." And I went back that night, about 7:00, and I talked and told them what I wanted to do. And I knew that the preacher, Reverend May had already made up his mind. He said a few nice things, and then he said, "Oh, we're going to support Ted Curtis because he's the only one that came to us and asked for our vote." I understand the underlying reason, but it didn't make any difference. A lot of people in his

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church were not people that I would – I knew them all, because being from here, I knew –

Wilkes: At this point, was that Second Timothy, or (inaudible)?

Curtis: Yes. Yes, Second Timothy had just begun, we had formed over there at 23<sup>rd</sup> and Cook.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And I knew almost everybody in church, but not close. And so when I was out knocking on doors, I would run across his members, and I'll never forget this one guy, I know he didn't particularly care for me, and I knocked on the door, and "Hey!", he said, "Don't worry about it, Ted." He said, "The reverend already told us what to do, and we're going to support you." So I knew then that I had it. And then – Hattie Cobb (sp?) was a very powerful Democrat at that time, and she went to – and she was powerful because she had had these old women working for her, see? Working her phones. And she went to one of the workers and said, "We're going to support Mrs. Hale for county board." And – I'm trying to think what was her name, but it was Hale – but this particular worker said, "Well, I can't, I'm not going to do that, Hattie." She said, "I'm going to be supporting Ted Curtis, because that's my sister's son." She was talking to Virginia Burton, who is my mother's sister. And so Mrs. Cobb said, "Well, I didn't know he's your nephew." She said, "I don't particularly want to go for Mrs. Hale anyway, because the party leaders picked her and didn't say nothing to me." And so she turned around and said, "Well, we're going for Ted."

Wilkes: We're voting for Ted Curtis.

Curtis: Yes. And then another person, who's kind of young, so I won't mention her name, but she was very influential, and I went to her, and she basically had the same thing. "Well, they didn't come to me to ask me, they just said for me to support her; I'll support you." And there was another incentive for her, but we won't talk about that, but – anyway, so that's how I got elected.

Wilkes: Yes, yes, with the support of some important people.

Curtis: Of Democrats.

Wilkes: By Democrats, yes, and you were, of course, in an election where presumably it doesn't make any difference.

Curtis: Right.

Wilkes: But you always were active in the Republican Party, and still are.

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Curtis: Right, right, right, right.

Wilkes: So tell me –

Curtis: Believing in Republican principles. I actually do, yes. I don't believe in all these people who are Republicans, I can tell you that. But I lean – (inaudible) I lean more toward what the Republicans think than I do what Democrats think.

Wilkes: Do you suppose that's because you are a businessperson?

Curtis: Probably. And I think, also, I see what I consider the damage some of the thinking that's predominantly in the Democratic party; I see some of the damage that's being done. I think as a people we're just getting to the point that we're just – won't get off our butt and do anything. And –

Wilkes: As a people, are we speaking –

Curtis: Black people.

Wilkes: The black people.

Curtis: Yes, and so I think we're being hurt more. But I'm not a George Bush fan, or (inaudible) like that, I can tell you. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Wilkes: Well, now let's go back to the school board. You were elected.

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: You had to stand up in front of people and say what you felt about it –

Curtis: Right, right, right.

Wilkes: – about the schools. And whatever you said, were you able to do something effective?

Curtis: Well, probably yes, but not in a way that I envision. I really thought I would have more influence on policy. But when you get in a political situation, the reality starts hitting you. And the reality was that even though you're there with your own kind, what you suppose to be your own kind, they figure out the majority votes and then forget the rest. In other words, they start organizing and, if this group comes up with four votes, then they'll be nice to you and hope you come along, but they don't care, because they've got four core votes. And I was not in that core.

Wilkes: But what would –

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Curtis: Even though all of us are Republicans.

Wilkes: What was the issue that there was a core against you?

Curtis: Well, they weren't against me, it's –

Wilkes: No, I mean, against your (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Curtis: The issue is, who's going to have the major influence on this board? Four people – it is really is one person, but then he organized and got four votes. And so they had the major influence when it comes to policy and things like that.

Wilkes: And –

Curtis: And that kind of puts you in a quandary, because if you come out blasting on certain things publicly, you'll really get further forced in the corner. So you have to kind of play the game, and win, take small wins and things. I think where I was effective is a) just my presence on there, I stopped some things, because they couldn't keep me out of (inaudible), so I know all the things that are done that the public don't see. I was able to get black principals at schools and things. Most of them (inaudible) was directly attributable to me.

Wilkes: Is that right? Is that right?

Curtis: Oh, no question about it, no question.

Wilkes: Give us the dates of your tenure with the school board.

Curtis: 1989 to 1999.

Wilkes: Yes. Ten years, give or take a month. So during that time, more of the black principals were able to get their (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) –

Curtis: Oh, absolutely. I can tell you – not only that, like we had a lady who was a director of a program. And another one was the chief financial officer in the district. I would – see, this director, she was making \$53,000, and all the other directors were making \$64,000. And I'm like, hey. If you bring something like that before the board –

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: – and it wants me, you know you're going to win if they don't want you to win, OK? So on negotiating that, I went straight to the superintendent, say, "Hey, this ain't right about..." "you say this person's compen[sation] – this versus this. She ought to be making the same as the others." And I remember,

he said, “You’re right.” He said, “OK, Ted, within two years I’ll have her up to where the other ones are at.” And to this day the person is, the person’s still there. And the same way with this person that was chief financial officer. Everybody else was making \$90,000, she was making \$77,000. I said, “This is chief financial person (inaudible)”, and he said, “You’re right.” And he brought her up. Those are the type victories that you get.

Wilkes: Very good. Very good. And he needed your nudge at that point.

Curtis: Well, 1) he knew I was right. Number 2), I didn’t front him off. If I fronted him off, you lose.

Wilkes: Yes. Does that mean you went to his office?

Curtis: Yes, we talked to him one-on-one.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: If you front them off – see you can be right and end up getting nothing done. You know what I mean? I can – you’ve got a right to say anything you want at the school board – publicly at the school. At the end of the session, “Anybody got anything to say?” – you can say anything you want. But if you say things that embarrass them and put them in a bad light, then you’re going to get shoved further and further in a corner. That’s just the reality of the situation. And the truth of the matter is, if I was in charge of the group that had a say the power of the board, if you cross me, the same thing would happen to you. You understand?

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: So I understand that. I understand that, so I’d say in the area of employment and stuff, when it comes to the district, I probably got 25, 30 janitors on. Now that doesn’t seem like much, but –

Wilkes: It’s a lot. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Curtis: Yes. For janitors it’s economic, but they’re able to get insurance for a family, (inaudible) That, I think, is important. I – sure, I’ve got six goes on at the – and girls, that – see, one thing about the school district, it’s sort of like the state; you can’t lie about your past, because when you’re hired at the school district, every person is investigated by – their background is checked by the state police. Every person. It may take them five months to get it done, but they’re going to do it. And I think that’s a state law or something, I don’t know. But we had several that they had the records and would lie. Even after I told them, look, if you robbed something, went to jail, just put it on there. You’re getting hired on kind of my say-so anyway, so they’re not going to do

nothing. They're going to say OK. They're not going to say anything. The school code says you can't hire a person that's been convicted of narcotics or a sex offense. Those are the only two things, OK. But if a guy murdered something, or stuck up the governor, you could put him in there. But some of these people didn't want to admit. I remember one guy, six months later they fired him. He said, man, that happened 30 years ago. I said, I told you to tell me.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: – to put it down. It doesn't matter how long ago it happened, it's still reality in your life. So anyway, I enjoyed my ten years on the school board, and I think I had some influence. I did not have the influence that I thought I would, but maybe I had more in another area than I thought I would, who knows?

Wilkes: That's right, you had more in employment –

Curtis: Probably.

Wilkes: – and the financial structure of the board as related to blacks –

Curtis: Probably.

Wilkes: – but not so much in the –

Curtis: Educational, or what's being offered from the educational standpoint, and from some of the policies.

Wilkes: Right. Tell me about –

Curtis: I was part of them, but you get the bull on all of it.

Wilkes: That's right.

Curtis: But – other people kind of steering it sometimes.

Wilkes: Did you have any opportunity to reflect on the fact that by then, when you started with the school board, that was about 14 or 15 years we had had something, and desegregation, and –

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: – things had evolved so that there were some things good, and some things bad, about the process.

Curtis: Yes.

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Wilkes: Were there any changes that took place in the ten years you were there related to integration?

Curtis: Primarily the employment situation.

Wilkes: Yes. Again, state employment.

Curtis: Still, yet, there are subtle things that happened that you just couldn't stop, such as the resources – it seemed like certain schools always get the resources. The better teachers always seem to end up at certain schools, and that type of thing. And so you're constantly fighting that. Well, I'd say that the employment thing was probably the main (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Wilkes: But in that regard –

Curtis: In addition to that not only just teachers and janitors and things, but the school district hires craft people, electricians, plumbers, and then brings them in – while I was on, it brought them at \$46,000. They bring them in the same level, union, and never had a black in there. And so when I left there was, like, probably, five [heaters], plumbers, electricians, maintenance, maybe about six.

Wilkes: That is a real – that's a (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Curtis: Those guys start from – they start at \$46,000. And plus the benefits for them is, they get all the union benefits, and they get all the holidays and stuff, the school district gets.

Wilkes: And the insurance of the –

Curtis: Oh, sure.

Wilkes: – of the school board, as well.

Curtis: Yes, you get it all.

Wilkes: Yes, whichever one is better, right. Well, that's real interesting. I really am appreciative of that, now. We've got to go back, though –

Curtis: Oh, sure.

Wilkes: You were involved in politics, and you started in at the state. You went on to CMS –

Curtis: Yes.

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Wilkes: You were doing all of that at the same time you were doing the volunteer job with the school board. So tell me a little bit about the progress in the state.

Curtis: In the state?

Wilkes: In your employment in the state? Not how the state progressed –

Curtis: Do you want to know how I personally progressed?

Wilkes: Yes, that's what I meant.

Curtis: Truthfully, the same things that applied to back when I was telling you that I told my wife I needed this degree, and how they can help me, and things like that. Those things still apply, they used to have a saying that you help me get the job, but you've got to keep it yourself. I basically was assistant real estate commissioner at the Department of Registration and Education. Which was a good way to bring me in; it was at a high level, but it was an area I understood completely, the real estate. And my primary responsibility, I was the administrator of the approved real estate school program, which is a statewide program, which included colleges and universities and things, and proprietary schools. And basically we license the instructors to teach the real estate courses that would make a person eligible to take the test.

Wilkes: Right.

Curtis: And so I traveled throughout the state doing that, and got to meet a lot of people and everything. But I was in there probably four or five years, and then Jim Edgar was going to run for governor. As he was preparing to run for governor, the Secretary of State then, in their infinite wisdom, they thought, well, it might be good to have a black person in a position of authority. And so – I can't remember the day, I could count back, but probably about four months before we were going to announce I was transferring over, they'd say, "Hey, you want a job over here?" and I got a job as the deputy director of purchasing for the secretary of state.

Wilkes: I was thinking that had something to do with your Air Force background, but it –

Curtis: Didn't hurt.

Wilkes: Right, that's for sure.

Curtis: No, it didn't hurt, but it had more to do with politics.

Wilkes: Yes. OK.



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Curtis: If you just want to be truthful about it, it had more to do with politics and so on. I went over to the Secretary of State in a very high position, the deputy director, and – volunteered my services, doing a lot of [kiddie] stuff. The governor was elected, and – six, eight months later I was transferred over to the CMS as a manager of purchasing. But, I had all of the qualifications, see, I had the degree, I'm a veteran. I was black. I had it all. And it's kind of interesting, Jackie, because 7, 8 years later I said, "I want to see my personnel file," and here it was in here, justification for hiring me, "He's a veteran, he's black, he's a minority, he's got a college degree," had all these things.

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: They were getting all their points in. I thought that was interesting.

Wilkes: Got the record right.

Curtis: Yes. So I – then I ended up as purchasing manager statewide for commodities and equipment. And I really enjoyed that position; it was pretty awkward at first, but I really enjoyed it.

Wilkes: What was awkward?

Curtis: I didn't know anything about purchasing.

Wilkes: Oh.

Curtis: Purchasing –

Wilkes: You had staff, you had staff.

Curtis: Oh, that's right. I did have staff. And that's way I got – that's the only way I got through it.

Wilkes: Sure.

Curtis: But yes, at CMS I had, generally, 32 to 34 people working for me. So I did have a staff.

Wilkes: Sure.

Curtis: I had three supervisors under me, and so. Yes, I did have staff on that. And I worked that for, like, 15 years, I think. And all Edgar's administration, all through Ryan's administration. So that's 12 years, I guess.

Wilkes: And would you say that you took the "early out?"

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Curtis: Yes, I (inaudible) took the “early out.” I mean, two reasons: I was about tired of working for the state, but being a realist, and being a politician, I knew that when the Democrats come in it would be the year of my demise. And so I thought I’d get out. And the truth of the matter is, I kind of was a lucky one, I mean, I had these good positions at all times. My salary was...

Wilkes: Significant.

Curtis: Significant. And so to get out at that point made sense to me.

Wilkes: Sure. And let us just say that you’re going on now, after the early retirement.

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: You are, in 2003, what age?

Curtis: 64.

Wilkes: Now can we go back a little bit and start another thing?

Curtis: Oh, absolutely. Yes. Talk about other things, yes.

Wilkes: How do you feel about your children’s progress? Would it be a credit to your grandfather and your grandmother, and –

Curtis: My parents would be – me and my wife often say, my parents would be very, very pleased with their grandchildren, just –

Wilkes: Good.

Curtis: – very, very pleased. In my own individual family, I had one to succumb to the modern-day illness of drugs. But even that person, I think because she had the background, and stuff, was able to come out of it, and go on and live a productive life. But – and it’s kind of interesting. She was dealing with cocaine, and stuff like that. And I went to a friend of mine who, a guy I know – who I know was a drug addict, and I went to him during my concern. I went to him and talked to him about, whether I should try to get my daughter into some kind of rehab, and that type thing. And he was telling me, he said – he had me telling him about her, and all that, and he said, “I’m going to tell you, Curtis, I’ve been a drug addict for 30 years” – I mean he’s straightened out, he said, “But for 30 years I was a heroin addict.” He said, “I had to have it every day, so,” he said, “I know what I’m talking about.” He said, “your daughter really isn’t a drug addict yet.” He said, “She’s... what happens with all the young kids, they think they need the drug.” He said, “But I know when you need it, you know.” So mostly it’s psychological with the young kids, until they go too far, and then it becomes physical.

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Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: And he said, “(inaudible) your daughter is just psychologically hooked now, and she’s not physically hooked.” He said, “You can’t turn it on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.” He said, “When you’re hooked like I was, you’ve got to have it every day; you don’t care what day it is.” But –

Wilkes: So where is she?

Curtis: – that person turned around, and – well, there was a few –

Wilkes: Did she go to treatment?

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: Where?

Curtis: Here in Springfield.

Wilkes: OK.

Curtis: Oil. (sp?)

Wilkes: But I don’t...

Curtis: She – there were some incidents, but the one that obviously broke the camel’s back was she tapped her mother’s bank account –

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: – and at that point, my Bill Cosby tough love came in, and I just told her that you’re going to do this, or I’m signing a complaint. I’m putting you in jail. And she had a couple of days to think about it. She had a daughter by then, and I told her. I said, “You’re not going to ruin this girl’s life. I’m taking your butt to court, I’m taking the kid, and we’re going to do the whole thing.” And so it turned out good. We put some good stuff in her, and she stepped up to the plate, and we went to court because she’s going to rehab. So I told her, “Now, you’re going to do it or else.” She’s going to go to rehab, and so that meant we had to keep the kid. But I wasn’t going to get in the situation a lot of people get in, where you’ve got to keep the kid and you don’t [adopt] him or her legally, so your son or daughter is constantly threatening you with, “Well, I’ll take the kid,” because they know [how] to use the kid as a bartering chip. So I told her, “OK, your butt’s going to come up to this court, and you’re going to turn this kid over.” And we went to the court, and me and my wife took her to court.

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Wilkes: Are you talking about adoption, or temporary?

Curtis: Temporary custody. But legal.

Wilkes: Legal. Yes, got you.

Curtis: And she went to rehab. She only went 30 days; she went right over there

Wilkes: Strangle? (sp?)

Curtis: No, it's right over there. She went there, and she come out. She relapsed again. And when she relapsed then, I still think we put good stuff in it, because she knew what was happening. And I remember watching football down there, and she comes to sit downstairs, comes down, "Dad, why don't you come upstairs?" And I went up there, and there's a woman sitting in there and (inaudible) "I just want to tell you that your daughter's got a drug habit, and she's come to me, and she wants to do something about it." So that time, she could only get in over at Quincy, so we took her over to Quincy. But it was obvious that she needed to be in there longer than 30 days. 30 days wasn't long enough, so she was in Quincy 30 days, and then came back here to Gateway, Gateway is the name of it. She come back here, and was in 60 days – she was in 90 days in all. And the truth of the matter is she's been straight ever since.

Wilkes: All right, and there have been some tremendous leaders at Gateway.

Curtis: Yes.

Wilkes: I know a bunch of them.

Curtis: She's been straight ever since, she –

Wilkes: And talk about the other kids, then.

Curtis: Well, I'm just pleased at all of them. I mean – they'd probably be shocked if they heard me say that. But – those boys – actually my stepson, but he really has done well. He's really a smart guy. He just can't sit for an hour. He's got to be outside, or something like that. But he's done well. Every job that he's had, he's done well. He's basically a salesperson. He can talk the sugar around of anything. But he's done well –

Wilkes: What's he doing?

Curtis: He's a salesperson for the lottery. Actually, he's a supervisor now. Got all the – back into –

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Wilkes: For the lottery.

Curtis: Yes, for – he works for the state. He’s got, actually, the (inaudible) Chicago. And what they do is, they put lottery in stores, and he has to take them out, and you have to set up programs, and try to increase –

Wilkes: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) store person who wants to have the machinery, yes.

Curtis: Yes, sure. And introduce different games, and things like that. And the middle one, really – the middle one is (inaudible) and he had an unfortunate thing happen; his wife got killed in a car accident, a little over a year ago, July of 2002. And he always lived in Florida, see. And me and my wife, we went down there, and we ended up bring the kids back here. And so we’ve had the kids since then. But he’s an IRS agent, and really pretty good at it. He is an IRS supervisor in Daytona Beach. When this happened, he was able to get transferred to Chicago as a supervisor, and as of two months ago he was transferred down here, now.

Wilkes: Oh yes?

Curtis: Yes, and he bought a house.

Wilkes: Oh, great.

Curtis: They’re all going to move starting next week. They bought a house two blocks from me.

Wilkes: Oh, great.

Curtis: But we were able to help out. That was a real challenge for really my wife, I think, because I can see my wife getting a little tired. I mean, we couldn’t have picked a better set of grandkids, because these three are mannerly. They’re smart, I mean, they’re just almost perfect grandchildren. They do well in school, they never give you a bunch of stuff. It’s never a smart aleck or nothing like that. They’re real mannerly, and they’re kids to be proud of.

Wilkes: And that – so that’s going to turn out good, now. Number four?

Curtis: Number four is Tracy, and you know, she’s probably always been my favorite, probably a little bit. She’s always been the one that always knew what she wanted to do. I mean, she said when she was six and seven years old –

Wilkes: And she got her master’s?

Curtis: Yes. She said when she was six and seven years old, I'm going to be a schoolteacher. And I remember when she got in high school, the woman who happens to be president of the union now, "Aw, you don't want to be a schoolteacher, go into business or something." And for about a year she was talking about going into business with Xerox or something. Then she said, "No, I want to be a schoolteacher." And she never wavered, and when she graduated – because of my lateness, I ended up having to send her to Illinois State for a year, and then after that she transferred out to Hampton. And she went straight through, met her husband out there (break in tape) he's from the Virgin Islands, he's actually from Antigua. And both of them were at Hampton together, in the teachers' program. And she ended up getting married. And then the last one, is the youngest one, Tyrone, the baby. And he kind of fulfilled the dream for me. Because when I used to take Michelle, my oldest girl, down to Morris Brown, I would drive past Morehouse, where Dr. King and a bunch of others went. And I used to say, yes, I want to get one of my boys in there. I wouldn't say nothing to my wife or nothing, but that was always my goal. And fortunately, he was an average student. He always was smart, but he was an average student. But in the process of taking Tracy out to look at these – I wanted him to [go to] a black, predominantly black college – taking Tracy out to these schools, he was a baby so we had to take him, too. I mean, he wasn't a baby, but , we had to take him, too. And I remember, we went to Howard University, it was on the campus there. And I'll never forget – he was, like, a freshman in high school. Freshman or sophomore. And some girls came up to him and asked him, said, "Are you going to be a freshman next year?" And I never will forget it; me and my wife both saw him, his chest popped out, and he said, "No," he said, "but I'll be here in a couple of years!" I think he saw these pretty girls, and things, and said, "Oh, my God!" And from that day forward, when he got back to school, he started hitting the books.

Wilkes: Isn't that wonderful?

Curtis: Yes. He started hitting the books, and he started making the honor roll and all of that stuff, and –

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: We applied for [there, Tulsa], Morehouse, Tuskegee, Florida A&M – several schools, and ironically Morehouse turned him down.

Wilkes: Oh.

Curtis: The others accepted him. Morehouse turned him down, rejected him. But Kenny Barton –

Wilkes: Yes.

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Curtis: I knew who Kenny Barton was, he was an alumnus. Now, understand that now I'm a politician, so I got to know how to get around. I knew Kenny Barton was an alumnus, and I knew, more importantly, Kenny was an alumnus who contributed his money to the school, so – he was a good alumnus. And he was a friend, so I went and talked to him. And he said, "Let me see what I can do, Curtis." And I knew he could. And he called me right back and said, "We can have this happen, but you have to take the boy down to the school and have an interview with this guy." And I put him right in there, and took him down there –

Wilkes: You took him right down.

Curtis: Yes, and took him right down, and it was kind of funny, Jackie, you could tell that the guy in the admitting office was pissed that he had to do this. He was, "I ain't going to give you no guarantee," he was kind of surly, and everything. But see, there again, like the Reverend May thing, I knew what was going on before I got down there, see. And so – one of those (inaudible) said, "Well, we'll let him in, but he's going to be on probation." Yes. And one of the things that happened was that he had aced everything his last semester, his last year at school. And I told the counselor there, don't send the stuff down until after the first semester, so you can include those grades, because I knew he was doing real well. Well, you sent them anyway. And so when I was down there talking to the counselor, I said, "Well, do you have his last semester grades, because he was still in high school?" The guy said, "No," said, "only thing we got is from the junior year." Well, I was smart enough to have a copy with me, so I whipped them out, and I said, well, here. And the guy said, "Well, I must admit, he has done right on (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)." Yes! And so they let him in on probation, he took that as a big challenge –

Wilkes: A challenge.

Curtis: Shoot, next thing he did average first year. Well, from then on, Jackie, he made the dean's list. He got hooked up – you heard of the writer Bebe Moore Campbell?

Wilkes: Yes.

Curtis: Well, my son was roommates with her son –

Wilkes: Oh.

Curtis: – at Morehouse. And her husband was a banker in Los Angeles. And – actually he was executive director of this bank, I can't think of the name of it – Planter's Bank, I think, but I can't think of the name of it. But my son fortunately runs into this guy, they were friends, and they got of Detroit, they got out of New York, and they were all tight. This is Bebe Moore Campbell's

son, Bebe Moore Campbell and their husband, they were building houses around Morehouse, and so he goes there – [because he says], “I want to live off campus”, and this guy had built this four-bedroom house with an individual bathroom for each room and everything, so that his kids could get in it. And so my son gets in that. But in the process something happened. And all those kids made the dean’s list but my son, and so this guy was telling his dad – or his dad talking to him, he would say, “Yes, everybody made it but Tyrone.” And I don’t know to this day what happened; maybe the dad said something like, “Well, I didn’t expect him to make it,” or something like that. But whatever was said, it really put a fire under Tyrone, like “I’m going to show them”. And the guy made the dean’s list –

Wilkes: From there on out.

Curtis: (inaudible).

Wilkes: Ted, we only have a few more minutes, I think –

Curtis: All right.

Wilkes: – on this tape, and I am negligent in not prompting you to say something about the kind of supportive role that Audrey played. So say a few things about her values and her strengths.

Curtis: My wife is from Springfield, as I am. And our grandmothers knew each other, and our mothers and fathers knew each other. Audrey’s grandmother, and her grandfather, were one of the first groups who emigrated – [I knew her] grandmother was white, and her father was black, and my dad would talk about how he remembers how her grandfather was the only one who had nerve enough to date a white woman. Openly, and things – so, our family been knowing each other for a long time, and so we have a lot in common. And she was a probably the one I should have married, and I did. Because she’s willing to give to attention to the children that she had to give. Fortunately, I was kind of old-fashioned, didn’t believe in women working, so her first fifteen years of our marriage, my wife didn’t work. And so she was able to sit and nurture the children –

Wilkes: Right.

Curtis: Anytime something happened, she was able to go into the school, and take care of it, and that kind of stuff, and she was always on top of it. Kids never came home when she wasn’t there. That’s important, you know.

Curtis: Really.

Wilkes: Probably if we could get back to some of that, we’d be better off , you



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know...

Wilkes: But our economy...

Curtis: But she has supported me in all of my crazy schemes. I'm certain she never wanted to be associated with the Republican Party in any way. But she went along with it because I did. I've tried several things that something didn't work out some did. But she always supported me, no matter what. And I must say, I always understood that my family comes first, and I can say for her, her family always came first, and including me. (phone rings) (break in tape) So she's just been an excellent partner. I mean, I couldn't say anything – I could just say good about her.

Wilkes: Right.

Curtis: She's been an excellent partner, and went along with me on all these schemes that I've had. But most of my schemes have always been about uplifting us as a family. I must say, I never try to think negatively, or try to do things against the law, and that kind of stuff. It's kind of funny, I'm 64 now, and a lot of people I was associated with that seemed to be doing much greater than I was. Who probably didn't have the same values that I had. I look at them today, and they've reached their apex, or down now and so. So I think keeping a steady understanding of where I wanted to go, and taking care of my family, and those kind of things that paid off for me. And...

Wilkes: Well, that's good. And I do want to thank you for...

**End of Ted Curtis**