

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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Arkansas Memories Project

J. Chester Johnson
Interviewed by Scott Lunsford
November 4, 2011
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Objective

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Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Double underscores indicate two people talking at the same time.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
 - annotations for clarification and identification; and
 - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

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Scott Lunsford interviewed J. Chester Johnson on November 4, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: We—I believe we ended up talking about how—uh—how minimal your social involvement was here when you were at the University of Arkansas. Last night at dinner you likened it to—uh—forty days in the wilderness and . . .

Chester Johnson: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . I think [*CJ laughs*]*—uh—you mentioned that your mom thought you were the first hippie in Arkansas . . .*

CJ: My aunt did, but that's okay. [*Laughs*]

SL: Your aunt—your first hippie in Arkansas [*CJ laughs*] minus the drugs.

CJ: Right. [*Laughs*]

[00:00:24] SL: So—uh—it was an introspective time for you, but it was . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . a valuable time . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . for you, and you—uh—you allude to that quite often, that it

was a time that you needed to—uh . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . reinvent yourse—or maybe not reinvent yourself but really look at what you were doing and what . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . you would like to do. Um—uh—so I . . .

[00:00:50] CJ: We can spend a little time on that if you'd like me to
[unclear word].

SL: I—I would like to . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . spend a little . . .

CJ: Okay.

SL: . . . time on that. Um—so—um—your degree from the University of Arkansas ended up being what?

CJ: Well, it was English and history.

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: Um—as I indicated, I had more than enough credits to graduate [laughs]—I—'cause I took courses that were of interest to me. Um—but I had thought that I probably would ultimately be—I don't know about ultimately, but that—one of the interests I had was teaching.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:01:26] CJ: And, in fact, a year after I graduated I—uh—I taught in the—in the all-African American school in Monticello before the year—before integration. So I—I wanted to make sure I had the credentials to do that, so I actually graduated with a B.S.A.—B.S.E., which was a bachelor of science in education with my focus being on, obviously, English and lit—English literature but also on history, which . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . um—um—and in all the—in both of those disciplines, there were k—there was a—a lot of good professors here in those areas, so—um—I felt—uh—very comfortable in—in—um—in spending a lot—uh—most of my time in that. But—although as I've indicated, I sorta [sort of] broadened myself out a bit—uh—in terms of art courses and math courses and that sort of thing. So—um—and—and there was enough flexibility in the curricula—curriculum here that—uh—you could do that and—and enjoy the educational process, which—which I did. Yeah, but it—it was a period of time—um—if we're getting sort of that personal—of—um—of—I—sort of reconstituting my—the image of myself. Um—you grow up in—um—in an environment where you think of yourself in certain terms, and then as events unfold in your life—um—you begin to realize that the model that you had been living

with for certain peop—a certain time period—um—no longer functions and—um—and growing up in—in Monticello without a father, for example, the town sort of became a substitute father for me in—in the sense of their image of me—the town's image of me—um—substituted for what I thought my father would—would have thought of me. That may sound a little . . .

SL: No.

[00:03:46] CJ: Um—and so—um—and that was important. I—I wanted the—I wanted the town to be—uh—proud of me and to give me approval and that sort of thing. And then durin' [during] that time—um—I was here, in particular, I went through a period where I realized sort of the reconstituting an image of myself that was outside the range of what—what I had thought of myself previously. But m—but equally as [*laughs*] important—maybe not equally but certainly important—it was outside the range of—of what others had thought of me. And they didn't know where I was going. Quite frankly, I didn't know where the hell I was going either. [*SL laughs*] But—uh . . .

SL: Most of us don't. [*Laughter*]

CJ: And—but at the same time, I knew I wasn't going back to what I was—and you say, "Well, what was that image?" Well, you know, did well in school; good athlete; good in politics—student

politics; a future probably very bright if he does—if he doesn't mess up. If he doesn't—uh—make adjustments—he du—you know, if he—if he doesn't go crazy; he doesn't—you know, that sort of thing.

SL: Sure.

[00:05:14] CJ: And just steady as you go. And I realized that was not going to be my life. I realized—during that period I was here, I had inklings of it when I was at Harvard, and I—I wasn't sure—I knew I didn't know [*laughs*] where the road was leading, but I was willing to take a seri—began to take a series of risk that broke the model that I had been living with up until the time I was nearly, you know, twenty years old. And I needed that time, as I used—you used—um—the—um—forty—forty days in the wilderness, basically by myself, and working through, and it was a difficult process of exactly who I was and what I was—what I was—um—what I was about.

[00:06:14] SL: How—so at this point in time, the civil rights movement is—is in full swing. There's—uh—marches going on. There's bloodshed. There's . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—um—riots are—are—you know . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . it's—it's got the national attention.

CJ: Right.

SL: Mississippi, Arkansas—the South is . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . as well as major cities in—in the North and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . even in West Coast—all this stuff is just really hot.

CJ: Right.

SL: And—uh—it looks like somethin's [something's] [*laughs*] gotta
[got to] change and . . .

CJ: Right.

[00:06:49] SL: . . . something's gonna [going to] happen. [*Claps hands*] And so I'm assuming some of—some of—part of your decision to apply and get accepted to be a teacher in the—uh—segregated, all-black . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . school in your hometown was the—the—the—the—uh—civil rights movement played a role in shaping your decision to go do that. I mean . . .

CJ: No—course [of course] not.

SL: . . . that's a very unusual—uh . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . decision to go back home and—and, as a Caucasian, want to teach in—in a segregated African American school.

CJ: Right.

[00:07:34] SL: And so how—how did—how did you facilitate that? How—how did that happen?

CJ: Well [*scratching sounds*]*—um—I had—um—I had gone to—uh—New York for, like, a year and a half or a year after I graduated—just sort of test the waters, you know, and that sorta thing. And I was actually working at Moody's at—at that time in [19]68 right after I graduated here, and my wife at that time and I had toyed with the idea of going into Vista, who was the—um—you know, it was the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps. And we had interviews with people in Vista and our representatives and that was something that—that my first wife just couldn't do. She couldn't bring herself to do that. And—and I had always toyed with the idea of wanting to go back and—and the way I expressed it some is—uh—finding people I had—no—being with people I had never—I had never—I knew, but I hadn't found. And that being the black community within—within Monticello. And I—you know, it was the year before total integration of the schools, and I said, "If there's no—you know, you do it—don't—you do it now, or you—you forever hold your*

peace."

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:09] CJ: And so I came—um—I went to Monticello and—uh—made the decision I'm gonna move here, but I'd like to get a job, of course, and—but I want a job in the school system at the—at—at Drew School, which actually had been—had been built out of—um—or at least a large portion of it had been built out of a prisoner-of-war camp that was on the outskirts of Monticello—uh—during World War II. I mean, there had been a school previously, but it did—and—and the powers that be had given medical buildings and—and barracks from the war—uh—to—uh—the African American community, who moved those buildings to this school and—um—and so that was their—those were the facilities that they used. And . . .

[00:10:04] SL: This is a German prisoner-of-war camp.

CJ: Actually, it was Italian.

SL: Italian.

CJ: Italian.

SL: Okay.

CJ: And—uh—it—they had—you know, I've—I've seen pictures, and I've spent time, you know, and they had lots of wonderful Catholic little small chapels and praying areas and—and Maria of

[*unclear words*]. You know, it was really quite—quite nice in certain areas. But, anyway, the facilities—part of the facilities were given to Monticello school system—the whites—but a very large number given to the African Americans for their school system. So they—and that became sort of a—a core facility for them. So—um—anyway, I went down, and [*laughs*] it was really interesting—you know, going back to this issue of—the town had sort of substituted, at least in me, mentally and emotionally for the ab—for not having a father. I ?wouldn't? [CJ edit: had], you know, and that—I had become a little bit suspect. I was no longer—by that time—um—I was—you know, I was no longer seen as the person who was sort of—you know, great athlete, good student, active poli—you know, "Where is he going? We don't really know where he's going [*SL laughs*], and he probably doesn't know where he's going, either. He's come back, and he wants to—he wants to teach in the"—I'm talkin' [talking] about in the white establishment's view.

SL: Sure.

[00:11:36] CJ: So I had to meet every member of the school board before—and it wasn't a matter of going in and—and just—for a job. They wanted to know I wasn't [*laughs*] gonna create—you know, some—whatever. [*Unclear words*]

SL: A commune.

CJ: You know, [*laughter*] whatever. But the—every—I had to go to every school board member . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: . . . and sit down and have a conversation before they—before they—uh—appointed me to—or allowed me to—to teach in the all-African American school.

[00:12:08] SL: Was—was that board consisted of all whites?

CJ: They were all whites.

SL: 'Kay [Okay]. That's interesting.

CJ: They were all whites and—um—but, you know, I passed all of that and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: But it was pretty clear in some of the questions, you know, what's your purpose? You know, do you—you know, are you in—[*laughs*]*—there was an implication—*are you gonna be—*are you gonna create trouble here?"*

SL: Agitator.

[00:12:32] CJ: Right. Exactly. And so, anyway, I started that process and went through it for the year—um—and I think I've mentioned this. If I haven't mentioned it, it's at least an interesting vignette. Um—during the course of that year—within

a matter of a few months—the—uh—mayor of the town re—
resigned and left, and there was a special election.

SL: Yes.

CJ: And some younger whites and a large segment of the black
community thought I should run for mayor. [*SL laughs*] I
thought I—and I—I thought it—you know, I—I—I felt okay.
"This is my home, you know. It's—I could bring a perspective
here to Monticello that hasn't been here before in terms of race
relations and that sort of thing." So I ran for mayor. And I
didn't win and that was probably good for the town and [*laughs*]
probably good for me. Uh—but—uh—it was a marvelous
experience. I mean . . .

SL: Well, now . . .

CJ: . . . a wonderful . . .

SL: . . . didn't . . .

CJ: . . . experience.

[00:13:41] SL: But there—there was that concern that you might
win and didn't—was—wasn't there a candidate that came in late
or . . .

CJ: Right. Yeah, exactly.

SL: . . . an established politico.

CJ: Very established. He had been—he had been county judge. You

know, in Arkansas county judges have . . .

SL: Rule.

CJ: Well, they rule.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: And he had been county judge, and then he had gone into the private sector for a while. And there was real concern that I was gonna be elected. And—um—because of the coalescence of, you know, young people and new professors coming in at the University of Arkansas, Monticello, and coal—you know, the coalescing of—of black people behind me and all of that stuff. And—um—um—and so they brought him—James Jordan—he's passed now. I th—a wonderful man. I mean, I—I didn't necessarily think so then or whatever [*laughs*] because he—he definitely came in and neutralized me.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:14:40] CJ: And—uh—and he did a good job of it, you know.

They tried to get me out of the race. They—a lot of the establishment—they said I'd—I hadn't had—uh—didn't have residency in accordance with their—with Arkansas law, and actually, that didn't prove to be the case. We went to the courts, and the courts decided in my favor and they kept me on the ballot and that sort of thing. But—but James Jordan won

and—but a wonderful—I mean, I went—I went through every—I went on to every house in town and—uh—and talked to everybody in town and our experiences down in—I mean, there—when I would go into the black community, there were—I won't mention the names of the people because I don't know if they still live there or not. But there were people who would escort me around because, you know, having a—so, anyway, it was a—it was a very educational and fascinating experience for me.

[00:15:44] SL: So is this 1970?

CJ: Nineteen sixty-nine and [19]70.

SL: Sixty-nine . . .

CJ: That was the school year, [19]69 and [19]70.

SL: Uh-huh.

CJ: And—uh—so anyway, after that, I went back to New York, and I've never looked back. So—uh—but—uh—what a wonderful year—uh—and I'm so glad I—I did that.

SL: We—we—we did talk a little bit about—uh—your experiences in earlier . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . uh—in—um—however long ago it was we first talked.

CJ: Right.

[00:16:16] SL: Um—well, so really, despite all your assurances or quietening the concerns of the all-white school board, you did kind of stir things up.

CJ: I did. I did. [*Laughter*] I did stir things up.

SL: Well, you know, [*CJ laughs*] as unlikely connection as it is, I see—um—you know, you—kind of your—uh—uh—uh—a little bit of your hellion—uh—high-school years personality . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . uh—you know, actually doing something—getting out and doing something and making something happen and . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[00:16:54] SL: . . . uh—some of that—uh—well, how the town and your family raised you—uh—that . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . there's a fine line. There's not a—there's not a whole lot of difference in that you became active in the [*claps hands*] community, growing up, and you [*claps hands*] became active again.

CJ: Right.

SL: It's—it's really maybe a different flavor and a . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . different look, but . . .

CJ: Oh, exactly.

SL: . . . on analysis, you're still—there's still a core—uh—Chester Johnson there that . . .

CJ: Right. No, I agree.

SL: . . . that survived.

[00:17:26] CJ: I agree. It's a matter of the focus of it as . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . opposed to—so—there's a—it's a—was a matter of approval or not approval in the sense of if—I lived through a period where I—yes, we all do. I think in teenager years, you want approval. You want to—you know, and then as you mature, you become an individual, and the need for approval lessens—at least I—for me, the need for approval lessened. And [*coughs*]*—and—and* that was applied to family as well. And—um—and I became less focused on receiving their assurances that I was moving—that I'd been doing the right thing or was . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:18:19] CJ: . . . doing the right—because during that period of time when—you know, there were families split over racial issues and—um—you know—so—and there were lots of people who disagreed with my—uh—with my choice of—of what I did . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . that year and "Why in the world would you do that?" Well, you know, I mean—and—um—so I think there's a difference. The—the difference is that—is the—speaking personally—was how much approval I needed as opposed to self-approval, and I think that period here—um—what—you know, the forty days in the wilderness—helped me to come to the conclusion that I needed to have integrity of the person before I needed approval by a group we may call prevailing society. And if you don't have the former—uh—the latter is hardly worth a lot and . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . so that—you know, that was important for me to go through that period.

[00:19:32] SL: Well, before we—uh—get out of—uh—Monticello—um—I—I wanna [want to] talk a little bit more about segregation and—and race issues.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And—uh—particularly—I mean, you know, the civil rights movement certainly brought all that to a head, but—um—I sense—um—uh—an underlying kind of insidious—uh—racial overtones in—in the—in their concerned about you coming back and—and wanting to teach in an all-black school, and I mean, I—I believe to this day there's still racial . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . overtones—particularly in—in the Delta in—in . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . southern Arkansas.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:21] SL: And I know that when you were growing up you experienced something in a restaurant one day that really caught you off guard.

CJ: Right.

SL: A confrontation between an African American patron that walked in and a restaurant owner and that kind of caught you off guard and you actually witnessed . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . this under—unspoken undercurrent stuff that really wasn't out for display . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . but was very—I don't know, it surfaces in emotional ways. Was there—I know that you had a grandfather that—I believe he was—he worked on the railroad, didn't he . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and going—and I—it seems like to me you may have mentioned in an earlier interview and maybe yesterday, but I

think it was earlier—you heard one time that he may have been a member of the KKK. Is that . . .

CJ: Yeah, well, my mother—his daughter mentioned a few times when I was growing up that he had been a member of the KKK. And when I would sort of inquire about it, she said—you know, she would make a comment—"Well, the KKK was not exactly the way it's portrayed, and you know, that the KKK would get out in the middle of the night sometimes and—even in the white community, if a father was abusing or otherwise not being a good father for children or not a—whatever—that they would make—the KKK would make a statement about that." And then it was a—and she would try to use that as an . . .

SL: There . . .

[00:22:22] CJ: . . . as an apology. But, nonetheless, you know, the KKK also had some very [*laughs*] immediate priorities that dealt with keeping the black community in chains. And I also recall that it was very interesting—my mother made one comment—I don't think she ever made more than one comment about my grandfather, who worked on the Missouri-Pacific and whom, by the way, I adored. He adored me, too. I mean, he took care of me. After my father died, I spent a lot of—I'd lived with my grandparents, and by that time they had moved from McGehee

to Little Rock. But, anyway, I adored him. So these are the [laughs] conflicts that you live with. But she said that, you know, he was involved in the Elaine race riots or race massacre or whatever you call it. And that—and I didn't realize what that meant until I have been doing a lot of research on the Elaine race riots or massacre in the last few years, and you know, in some places, it's described as the largest race massacre that's existed in this country's history. And so little is known about it and—but the—it's hard to get from McGehee, where he was living, to Elaine without the railroad. You can't go directly by road. And so it se—and so story was that, you know, he got on his—he was part of a group that left McGehee and went to Elaine and participated in the slaughter of African Americans in that general area.

[00:24:35] SL: What precipitated that? Why did that happen?

CJ: Well, my understanding is—and there have been several books written on this—not enough—and there hasn't really been enough attention paid to it institutionally or even in a popular culture in any—but, presumably, the—it was a time when there was great concern in this country about unions. And it was also the time that the Communist Party had successfully overthrown the czar in—this was—you know, it occurred in September of



1919—the actual riot/massacre—whatever you wanna call it— and there was great fear of unions. And there was this rumor that had occurred that some agitators had come to unionize sharecroppers in the area of Elaine and to increase the va—the monetary value and also to allow those circumstances where blacks were selling—or they could increase the value of the cotton that they had—were harvesting. And there was a union—it was reported there was a union organizing of the black laborers in that area in a certain small community and that the deputy sheriff of the county came out and the—there were a series of guards protecting the meeting, and that one of the guards shot the deputy sheriff. [00:26:45] And then a call went out from there to whites locally and—in Mississippi and Arkansas—the places in Arkansas, et cetera, and it became a turkey shoot in terms of the killings of blacks in that area. There was a call to—for the National Guard, and there was rep—in the various reports, sort of representations that members of the National Guard who came joined in to the turkey shoot. And the number of people—number of African Americans who were actually killed—clearly unknown but reasonable to assume that well over a hundred, maybe two hundred—who knows? And . . .

[00:27:41] SL: These are men, women, and children.

CJ: Men, women, and children. And, you know, now we're within seven years of a hundred years since that happened, and most of the people who survived that or who were part of it—they've all—well, all of them have died, clearly. I mean, virtually, all of them have died. And then a lot of that history has just been lost. But there have been several books written on it and information that really has only—you know, has come out about it. And in some of the records—it's interesting—there's—this—what happened around the same time. And I grew—I spent the years from the time I was four years old till eighteen in Monticello, and one of the books I read on the Elaine race riot described a lynching that occurred in 1921 in the square at Monticello. I—you know, I lived all those years—I went back to teach—never heard anything about it. So I started inquiring about it and—through friends and others. And I—you know, it—I was—I determined, yes, there had been a lynching and had been—and the reasons for it had been sort of all conjured and that sort of thing and—fear. But, anyway, my own view is that I'm—I would like to see more done as we approach 1919 to commemorate the Elaine race riots—the Elaine massacre—and I'm just hoping that we can. There'll be efforts—I've already begun some efforts. I just hope there will be additional efforts

taken to make sure that we do not fail to recognize what happened—try to get some semblance of why it happened for—the old saying, if you don't respect and honor history, you're bound to repeat it. And it's important for us to give a lot of consideration in Arkansas to what happened and what has been referred to as one of the largest race killings in our country's history. And too little is known. Too little is expressed about it today.

[00:30:24] SL: You know, I sense that that stuff—that—those activities still have—still ripple through the communities out there, and no one seems to be comfortable about talking about it or that don't wanna bring it up or stir things up. But I sense that it has been allowed just kinda [kind of] fester underneath the surface, and it's a difficult thing to . . .

CJ: It's a very . . .

SL: . . . approach.

CJ: . . . difficult thing.

SL: Even . . .

CJ: Very difficult.

SL: . . . a hundred years later . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . it's still a difficult thing to approach.

[00:31:11] CJ: There's a wonderful Arkansas poet—she's poet-in-residence now at Brown University. Her name is C. D. Wright. And the Academy of American Poets just awarded her the best book—poetry book award for 2010. And the book portrays a march for freedom from West Memphis to Little Rock and how a white woman from a certain city participated and became involved with it. But in her research—in C. D. Wright's research in this book, she became convinced that if she used real names and real places, that there could be a backlash. And, in fact, she was pleaded with to make sure she didn't do that kind of disclosure. So she—her protagonist is given the name "V," and the place is called Big Tree, Arkansas, and these were attempts to disguise what had been hap—because in this instance the protagonist is kicked out of her home by her husband because she participated in this march for equal opportunity and equal freedom for African Americans at the time, which occurred in the [19]60s—[19]68, [19]69, actually. And she—C. D. was at the Memphi—taking an advanced course of—at Memphis State, she knew this woman, and over time, she just couldn't get it out of her system, and she had to go back, ultimately—and C. D.'s a couple of years younger than I am—but she had to eventually write about, and that was this most—you know, most recent

book. [00:33:21] But she was persuaded, and C. D.'s a very courageous person. I mean, she went into the Louisiana Prison System and wrote about that. And so it would take a lot of persuasion for her to decide, "Okay, I'm gonna stay away from absolute transparency to accommodate survival for a lot of people." And she was convinced—and this is a book published in 2010—not to disclose real people's names or the real locations. So there's a lot . . .

SL: It's amazing, isn't it?

CJ: It is amazing.

SL: It is amazing.

[00:33:58] CJ: It is amazing. So that—there's—that clearly serves as an obstacle for us to do a lot regarding the Elaine—but it seems like an inappropriate excuse for not giving attention to such an important historical event as the Elaine race riots.

SL: Yeah, I would assume that as long as you accommodate that, it will always be uncomfortable.

CJ: Right.

SL: It will always hang . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . over and be under the surface, too.

CJ: Right.

SL: Same time. It's a fascinating piece of history that I think we oughta [ought to] look at in the future.

CJ: And continues.

SL: And continue.

CJ: [*Laughs*] Right.

[00:34:49] SL: Well, you know, I think this—civil rights and your concern for racial matters probably may come up more as we talk, but it's interesting to me that you get a degree from the University of Arkansas in English literature and history, and you end up at Moody's. Now—and Moody's was a financial service organization. How did that happen? I mean, I would think that you would need a—an accounting degree or a business degree or some—or maybe math or something that crunches numbers and reads data and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: But English literature and history—I just don't understand how you became a candidate for that.

CJ: Right.

SL: I guess maybe your Harvard resumé helped you with that. How did you get the job at Moody's and . . .

CJ: Well, actually, it was done—I went to New York, as I said, and—to experience it for a few years and then come back and live sort

of a Faulknerian life—contin—write and spent [*SL clears throat*—you know, that sort of thing. And I went to a headhunter—that's a, you know, employment agency.

SL: Yes.

[00:36:08] CJ: And they went through—and it was a pretty extensive resumé that I had to put together, and they could see, you know, interest in government and politics and what I had done over the years and, plus, English literature. And "he could probably write a little bit," you know, and that I could write a little bit. And that . . .

SL: Sure.

CJ: That these [*coughs*—pardon me—it was actually—Dun & Bradstreet Municipal Department, which eventually sort of morphed into Moody's Investors Service—they owned this organization of Moody's Investors Service, which is a well-known bond-rating agency. But, anyway, it was a combination—and I'd take some—like I—you know, I mentioned before, I'd taken advanced algebra course here for the fun of it and, I mean, I had some facility with numbers. And so they had—they—after looking at it, they said, "You know, we've been advised by D & B they're looking for this kind of person. Would that be of interest to you?" And I said, "Well, tell me about it." And they said,

"Well, you have to write long reports on debt and governance and economy and administration and all this stuff—and for communities and states and authorities who bring bonds to the market to try to build facilities. They sell the bonds. And would you be—wanna do that?" And I said, "That sounds real—that sounds interesting." So I went in—person liked what they saw—the director of the department—and gave me a—and at this time—this whole industry—it's now become mushroomed into a very large—I mean, public finance is a very large industry now. [00:38:11] It was really backwater in those days, and there wasn't any advanced degrees. There weren't advanced degrees in degrees in public finance. Now you've got every—you know, many, many universities all over the country giving advanced degrees in public finance kinds of issues—public administration and that sort of thing but didn't have that. So, you know, I would—first day I go in, and the director comes in and gives me, you know, a stack of books like this, [raises hand to indicate height] which is the equivalent of, [laughs] you know, my advanced degree, and say, "You know, I want you to"—"Well, I"—"Read all of this over the next, you know, x number of weeks, and we'll talk." And it was an unbelievable education. It was just a phenomenal—I mean, I learned so much about

municipal bonds, the administration of government, debt administration—you name it. It was just fascinating.

[00:39:20] And I was there for, you know, like, for a couple of years, and then, you know, as I said, I went back to Arkansas, and then I came back and made myself available to financial services, and I was hired by J. P. Morgan for their public finance department and—it was actually Morgan Guaranty. J. P. Morgan was the holding company, and Morgan Guaranty was the bank underneath it. But it was actually J. P. Morgan. So I went to work—that's when I actually knew New York was gonna then be my home, after I had taught in school in Monticello, and I said, "This is gonna be my home." And so I really—I got into it—into public finance in a major way—still writing my poetry but also working at 23 Wall Street. And I worked there for a number of years. I became vice president pretty quickly—ran their public finance research and advisory group. And what we were doing was very—it sounds like, "Well, how—what this connection between what you were doin' in Monticello. What were you—in your past history and all this, what—what's the connection?" And, actually, that was a time when urban America was—what do we do with urban America? I mean, New York City went into effective default, and they couldn't get funding in the mid-

[19]70s, and our bank took a major lead in trying to work that out. And then I was [CJ edit: worked for] the treasurer of the organization who was head of our very large department, which included public finance and government bonds, treasury bonds, municipal bonds—I mean, whatever. And he picked me out, and I worked directly with him on all kinds of different issues, and he was the point person for the banking industry and working on New York City issues.

[00:41:53] SL: And what was his name?

CJ: Frank Smeal.

SL: Me—uh . . .

CJ: *S-M-E-A-L*.

SL: Okay.

CJ: Frank Smeal. And he's a—you know, he's a legend in the business and a wonderful man. And he allowed—he gave me access in ways that I had never been given access—otherwise would've been given access. I was relatively young, but then—and we worked on New York City. We were the bankers—we—when New York City was goin' through major problems. But then that sort of mushroomed into areas that we became overall advisers to Detroit, to Boston, to Buffalo, to Newark—did a lot of work—Philadelphia, Baltimore—all the places that had really

become urban—Northeast urban, industrialized, old cities having problems that were partially related to this influx of African Americans from the South as a result of the industrialization of agriculture in the South and that sort of thing. And . . .

[00:43:10] SL: So this is in late [19]70s—mid-[19]70s?

CJ: Mid-[19]70s. Mid-[19]70s.

SL: Mid-[19]70s. And, let's see, the administration . . .

CJ: I became deputy assistant secretary in [19]78 after Carter—[19]77, I'm sorry—when Carter [*coughs*] was elected president. And [*coughs*—pardon me—and he—the way I got—maybe I should get a little water. Sorry. [*Drinks water*] Coleman Young was the mayor of Detroit, and he was the first mayor to—major mayor to come out in support of Jimmy Carter. And there was an initiative that Coleman Young wanted the new administration to take, and that was a national urban development bank, plus, really givin' attention—especially on the finance side—to urban finance. And then, in addition, some people who had worked with me in New York City on New York City problem recommended me for the position. [00:44:29] So I became deputy assistant secretary for state and local finance at the Treasury Department. And I covered general revenue sharing and the loan program to New York City. But one of the main

things I was supposed to do was work on the development—this national urban development bank and—which I brought a lot of experts together, and we developed this program, and ultimately, there was a decision not to institutionalize it, but they—but to take the programs that we envisioned and spread it through the various departments. So we had economic development loans going into commerce department. We had urban action grants going into the—to HUD, and there was a dis—there was a sense that, politically, it would go down a little smoother if you didn't have the—this institution—new institution of a national urban development bank. They—and so we put criteria on it in terms of eligible—eligibility. You had to have—there had to be unemployment and per capita income had to be at a certain level in order to be eligible and . . .

[00:45:48] SL: Is this like community block grants? Was that . . .

CJ: That was part of it. This was a add-on to community block grants—urban action grants were added to it. And so we got a lot of the prog—pieces of our program into—effectuated, but it—without the institution itself. It worked—and it worked fine.

[00:46:14] SL: So you're in Washington, DC, now.

CJ: I was in Washington for two years.

SL: And had your children come along yet? What . . .

CJ: Yes, my daughter was in the first grade—Juliet. [*Clears throat*]
And my son was, I think, a year and a half old. And I didn't get to see them very much, and I spent—you know, it was a job that forced me—be out at work before seven, and I didn't get home till eight or so at night, and so I didn't get to see them a lot during that period. And I'm glad I did what I did. It was a wonderful experience. I wouldn't do it again, though, as I've been . . .

SL: Too much?

CJ: Well, as I've said, you know, there are people who are—have white marble fever, and those who don't, and I don't actually have white marble fever. And [*clears throat*] it occurred to me that—I'm sorry, should I do something about—I have a lozenge. I'm sorry.

Trey Marley: Let's take a break.

[Tape stopped]

[00:47:31] SL: Well, okay, so we were talkin' about people that have white marble fever and how you didn't. And I guess white marble fever means people that need to be in Washington, DC, or in government—big—you know . . .

CJ: Yeah, big time.

SL: . . . hallowed halls of government . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . you're glad you did it—you're glad you worked in the government for, what, a couple years?

CJ: Right.

SL: But you would not do it again.



CJ: I wouldn't do it. No, I wouldn't do it again. It's a—and I came away from Washington realizing that I really wanted to focus my efforts—the future—along, you know, with continuing to write poetry, but on public finance issues, dealing largely with state and local issues, because the politics in terms of—at the state and local level—while very keen, it—it's not—you—it's not the rev—the level of revision and adjustment and discussion that just wears people out—in Washington, you don't have that at the state and local level. I mean, you have it, but eventually something has to occur at the state and local [*SL laughs*] level.

SL: It has a finite property that . . .

CJ: It does. I mean, you . . .

SL: The national level doesn't . . .

[00:49:02] CJ: Right. I mean, they can theorize all they want to in Washington, but you know, people who don't have their garbage

picked up and when they turn the water on, and the water doesn't flow, that only lasts for a certain period of time, and you're gonna have folks in the—you know, in the waiting room of the mayor's office or circling the—you know, the governor's mansion. Things have to get done at the state and local level.

[00:49:34] And so I left Washington with a renewed commitment in working with state and local governments. And I set up this firm, Government Finance Associates, in conjunction with a bank in Pennsylvania, Philadelphia National Bank. I had a provision where I could buy them out after a—you know, a certain period of time, and I began to work with state and local governments and some governments that I had worked at when I was at J. P. Morgan. J. P. Morgan had decided at that time—they had been given renewed or newer powers to underwrite—that means buying and selling—securities that it didn't have when we served as adviser. So they were getting out of the advisory business, and they got out of being adviser to Boston and to Buffalo and doing a lot of work with the city—New York—and that sort of thing. So I picked up where they had left off, and I became advisers to Boston [*laughs*] and Buffalo and so—and then I started—expanded the business into—ultimately, into airports and to water and sewer and the states and then became

adviser to Alaska and, ultimately, Louisiana and to Vermont and had—but we kept the company—ultimately, kept it small because we felt that we wanted to give people senior advice, and that's what they wanted. And it was a very—it was wonderful business and continued to be a wonderful business. And I retired and—my wife and I retired on August 1.

[00:51:34] SL: Well, what an interesting . . .

CJ: After forty-three years, I might add. After forty-three years. Now we—I started the firm in 1979, and we retired in 2011—August of 2011, so that's not a total of forty-three, but when I put public finance starting at Moody's doing that; going to J. P. Morgan; then going to the US Treasury Department; and then adding the time that I had—and I'm—but—and my wife joined me—my second wife joined me in 1990, and she and I have worked together ever since.

[00:52:21] SL: That—her name is Freda. Maiden name . . .

CJ: Well, this is also her second marriage. She was—her maiden name was Stern—*S-T-E-R-N*—and then she married a person by the name of Ackerman, and she took his name, and she was known—and she ran Moody's mostly as Freda Ackerman. And she got a divorce in the [19]80s. I got a divorce in the [19]80s. And we had known each other very well over time because she

was—not only ran New York City—I mean, ran the Department of [*unclear word*] [CJ edit: Municipal Bond Department]—she had also been the New York City loan—New York City analyst at Moody's when I was running the New York City loan program for the federal government. And so we—and we had known each other—we had actually started to work together within about six months of each other at D & B, which morphed into Moody's, so we had known each other and admired each other and been friends for many years. As a very good friend of ours once said, you know, "Now I get this right. You know, y'all have known each other for over twenty years, and now you're getting engaged." This was before we married. [*SL laughs*] And I said, "Yes," and he said, "Well, there's one thing you can't complain—y'all don't make quick decisions." [*Laughter*]

[00:53:57] SL: Well, you know, last night we were talkin' a little bit about Freda and her career. And she's had a remarkable career because . . .

CJ: Remarkable.

SL: . . . first of all, she was a woman in a overwhelmingly predominant male arena.

CJ: Right.

SL: And do you wanna talk a little bit about some of the things . . .

CJ: My God, she . . .

SL: . . . that she had to go through?

CJ: . . . was just—it's extraordinary. She has been a real trailblazer, and she'll be recognized that. I'll get into that in just a minute. But just extraordinary what she's accomplished. At the age of—tender age of thirty-one, she became head of Moody's [*clears throat*]*throat*—the municipal department of Moody's Investors Service, which meant that, over time, she was in charge of thirty-five thousand ratings; ran a department of well over two hundred and fifty people; and this was a position that she—after being an analyst and working herself up, took over when she was thirty-one years old. And also at a time, as you've correctly pointed out, where the—financial services were actually clearly dominated by men before we—I think I was telling this story to you last night that there was an event where I brought the mayor of the city of Portland, Oregon, in. We were tryin' to get a triple-A rating for the city. And I invited Freda, who was running the department at the time, and we hadn't—we weren't seeing each other socially or anything, you know, like that. [00:55:58] It was strictly professional. So I set up a meeting at a—in a—in New York, downtown, at a particular location, and I hadn't done my research in terms of what they would allow. So

Freda was gonna meet us for lunch. And this was as recent as, like, the early 1980s, and she arrives. They wouldn't let her in the front door. They wouldn't let her in the main elevator. And they wouldn't let her walk up the main staircase to get to the luncheon. She had to—be—come in the back door—get in the service elevator in order to get to the—and this was the person who's running the municipal bond department. She was also—in addition to that, she was the first woman on the Dun & Bradstreet's senior executive committee and did a wonderful job. [00:57:01] I mean, she moved Moody's into primetime, as you would say, and now that we're retired, *The Bond Buyer*, which is the daily newspaper nationally for the public finance industry and Northeast Women in Public Finance have set up an annual award which will be named the Freda Johnson Award, and it will be given to trailblazing women in public finance on an annual basis. And the first recipient who will receive the award on December the ninth—December the eighth at a black-tie event in New York City is the state treasurer of Connecticut, an African American s—woman—state treasurer—who, again, is known for her trailblazing activities. So I'm very proud of Freda, and she's—I had a—in terms of public-finance work, I had it a lot easier than she did, and she did it with honor, integrity, intelligence, and

grit. And so I feel very fortunate to associate my life with hers.

TM: Scott, we should change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

[00:58:23] SL: I wanna get back to Freda a little bit. First off, I— you know, you were very—you're so—I believe it comes from your not wanting to upset anyone, but it would be interesting to know where this meeting took place when you were workin' with the Portland mayor to get a triple-A rating, and you invited Freda to the luncheon, and she wasn't allowed [*laughs*] in the front door.

CJ: Right.

SL: Where was that?

CJ: Well, it was actually—it was in downtown Manhattan, and it was a club. It was a male—a men's club that clearly excluded women, and they made ever attempt to make sure that women couldn't get in, and if they did get in for professional reasons, they made it very uncomfortable for them.

[00:59:18] SL: Do you—is it okay to know the name, or do you remember the name?

CJ: Well, the name was Downtown Association.

SL: Okay.

CJ: And it was one block off of Wall Street, and it was a very large men's club. And, of course, soon thereafter it—you know, it closed down because it developed a reputation for [*TM sniffs*] what had been perpetrated against Freda, and you do that enough against Freda-type women, and you're [*SL laughs*] not gonna do that very long. [*Laughter*]

SL: Hell hath no fury . . .

CJ: Right. Exactly. And it's not going—it's not gonna last very long, and so they're out of business.

SL: Excellent. [*Laughter*]

CJ: Right.

SL: That's so excellent.

CJ: Exactly.

SL: They weren't expected to, like, smoke cigars or [*laughs*] anything . . .

CJ: No, no.

SL: . . . once they got in.

CJ: No, they weren't. [*Laughter*]

SL: Well, that's . . .

CJ: But . . .

[01:00:15] SL: That's good. You know, I—now, what was—Freda was also a first-generation . . .

CJ: Yeah, she was a first-generation American. She's Jewish by culture, although now she's Episcopalian. Surprise, surprise. [Laughter] But she's Jewish [SL clears throat] by culture, and it means a great deal to her, being Jewish. And her father was run out of Germany.

SL: And his name?

CJ: Fred.

SL: Fred.

CJ: Fred Stern.

SL: Okay.

CJ: And, actually, Freda is named—she doesn't have the *I* in the name, it's just *F-R-E-D-A*—and it was only later that she really realized that she was named after her father. And, technically, in English, it'd be Freda [pronounced FREHD-ah], not Freda [pronounced FREED-ah]. But, you know [SL laughs]—anyway, her father came—left Germany when he was in—he was thirteen years old—alone. And . . .

[01:01:23] SL: During what . . .

CJ: Well, it was in the [19]30s. The early—mid-[19]30—1930s. His father had died in World War I and had fought for the Kaiser and actually won the Iron Cross, and his mother—the circumstances of her death are not really known, but anyway, we—he was

alone and Jewish and left when he was thirteen years old and came to America and made it on his own. His—her mother came from Vienna, and her family was pretty prominent in Vienna and very interesting story that they waited—because they were prominent and didn't wanna leave Vienna, they waited until the—virtually the last minute. They were—it was in [19]38, [19]39, and the mother had to wear—it got to the point where she had to wear a yellow star on her clothing . . .

[01:02:42] SL: This marked her as being Jewish.

CJ: Jewish, yes. Yeah, the yellow Star of David. And Judah, I think, they had it marked on 'em [them] as a Jew. And the only way she got out is the—sort of the patriarch of this family in the tailoring industry—tailor industry—had had an affair with a Gentile woman and had a child and that—a son—and that son was a member of the SS, and he was half Jewish. And he didn't want the—his—the commanders or others of German and Austrian officers' group to know that—because he was an SS officer, and he didn't want them to know that he was half Jewish. So he worked with the family to get—or members of the family—there's—out of Vienna at—in the last—very last minute, and they were booked passage on, and both came across, you know, the Atlantic Ocean—the father and the mother—and

arrived in the United States. But many of—otherwise cousins and uncles and—all perished in various concentration camps, so she—you know, that's her history in terms of—but she's first-generation American and loves this country. Well, you know, it protected her, and so she's—she loves this country. [01:04:33] And we did work in the Soviet Union in the late [19]80s and early [19]90s, and soon after we'd gotten married, we were appointed to a joint US American task force to bring public finance to the Soviet—old Soviet Union as the devolution was occurring. And one of the trips we took, we were there for three weeks, and when we got back to Kennedy, the jet way wouldn't work. And so we all had to come—get out of Pan-Am and going down the stairwell. So we go down the stairwell, and when we get to the end, Freda gets on all fours and kissed the ground. [Laughter] And so that's a sense of her love of the country, so . . .

SL: Passionate.

CJ: Very passionate, so . . .

[01:05:21] SL: So when did she leave the—did—when y'all got married, did she just come into your business or . . .

CJ: Yeah, she came in there—I mean, it would've been very—I think she was ready to leave anyway 'cause she had been running the

department for, like, a dozen years, and she was ready to leave anyway. But then it would have been impossible for me to—in addition to being head of the department, she was chair of the rating committee. [*SL sniffs*] So it would've been impossible . . .

SL: Conflict. Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . for me to bring clients in and—with, you know, Freda Johnson, and I'm Chester Johnson. [*Laughs*] It wouldn'ta worked.

SL: Right.

[01:06:04] CJ: So eventually she—I mean, she sort of eased out of that [*SL sniffs*] in terms of conflict positions for a while, but then—and we were married in [19]89, and she left in [19]90. And then she became a consultant to GFA—Government Finance Associates—and then eventually became fully integrated into the company and has done a wonderful job.

SL: So y'all pretty much ran that company since [19]90.

CJ: Yes, we had others involved, but it was a—we—it was primarily Freda and me. But . . .

[01:06:39] SL: And talk to me about your children now. They're—did they—were y'all—were you still living in New Jersey, or did you move to New York or—and . . .

CJ: Yes and yes.

SL: Yes and yes.

CJ: I mean, we had a . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: Freda had her own apartment in Manhattan when we got married. I was living in—I had a home in New Jersey in Princeton. And, actually, we had—the company had offices in Princeton and New York as well as other—a few other places. But, anyway—and so we would spend part of the week in Princeton and part of the week in New York City and—but, gradually, when we would see the kids, the kids would rather come to New York than our coming out to Princeton. So we eventually sold the house in New Jersey and then moved into New York, and I moved into New York. And then we lived full-time in New York City.

[01:07:52] SL: Now did Freda bring any children to the marriage?

CJ: No, she was—she had been married for a few years and got a divorce, and then she had really focused on . . .

SL: Career.

CJ: . . . her wor—her career and didn't have any children. But she's become very close to the—to Guilbert and to Juliet. And Guilbert only lives twelve blocks away from us. And there were rough,

rocky times after the di—my first wife and I divorced, but all that's something of the past. We're very close, and Juliet and Freda are also very close. I'm close to Juliet as well. We don't see her as much 'cause she works in the national capital in Washington, DC. So we . . .

SL: What does she do there?

CJ: She's the director of communications for the woman representative—House of Representative Diana DeGette, who represents Denver, and she's one of the lead—members of the leadership—Democratic Party. She was deputy majority whip when they controlled the House, and I guess now she must be deputy minority whip. But, anyway, that's a—she's a—and that's in Juliet's blood. She is a person that has white marble fever. [*SL laughs*] And . . .

SL: She fell victim.

[01:09:21] CJ: Yeah, she did. [*SL laughs*] Maybe because, you know, when she was young [*laughs*] she was in Washington. I don't know. But then Guilbert works for Bloomberg, the corporation, and is doing very well, and so we're very fortunate. The—our children are very successful, and they love doing what they are doing and passionate about what they do. And . . .

SL: He's . . .

CJ: . . . that's all you can really ask is that children be passionate about what they do. That's—but that's the greatest compliment I think one can get.

[01:09:50] SL: You related a funny story last night how Guilbert claims to be from Arkansas . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . even though he's not.

CJ: Right. [*Laughs*]

SL: But he's a passionate Arkansas sports fan and . . .

CJ: All right.

SL: . . . loves everything about Arkansas and . . .

CJ: Well, last year when I was given this award—Distinguished Alumnus Award—he came down. And he takes any excuse to come to Arkansas. He loves it. I think if—he went to Arizona State University, but I think if he had to do it over, he would go to University of Arkansas now. And he's all—the Mad Hatter in Manhattan is where Arkansans collect—congregate for Arkansas football games. He's always there.

SL: This is a bar in Manhattan.

CJ: In Manhattan. I'm sorry.

SL: Mad Hatter.

CJ: In Mad Hatter, and I think ESPN's actually doing a short story

about that or had—did last week or something like that. Anyway, Guilbert's always there. There's an event—I've mentioned before, it's St. Paul's Chapel in the middle of the ser—ten o'clock Sunday morning service, they'll stop and go around in the swirl, and people in the congregation ask where they're from, and the first time Guilbert attended, they asked where he—you know, I mean—and he didn't say New York or New Jersey, he said, "I'm from Arkansas." He's never lived in Arkansas. [*Laughter*] But he associates himself with the state, and I think that's a—and I'm glad he does. I mean, he—you know, he's a—he has a love for this place and, you know, we—I've spent time with him here, and he's—has close relationships with my former wife's family, and that's good for him, so . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: So . . .

[01:11:47] SL: So [*TM sniffs*], Chester, I know that you guys have retired now. Is there anything that you want to say about the—your business that you just—you decided to shut the business down rather than . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . sell it. And . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . that was kind of surprising to me. But is there anything else you wanna say about your career businesswise? 'Cause what I'd like to do is—and we can always come back, of course, and—but I'd like to kinda steer toward your poetry here next. But is there any—was there a particular highlight in your career once you got your business going, and you took advantage of the niche that was left behind . . .

[01:12:39] CJ: Well, I've got a few awards in the business. I was awarded the Industry Contribution Award by the National Association of Municipal—National Federation of Municipal Analysts, which is a national organization for my work on two things, but primarily disclosure—transparency in the business. And that was very important. I set up the National Association of Independent Public Finance Advisors. I called that group together, and I was the first chairman for a couple of years. And I loved the industry. I loved what it did. I loved all about it, and there was logic for when we closed it down. I—we were given the opportunity to sell some time ago, and we made a decision that—they wanted us on the road, both Freda and I, primarily selling services of the new company that purchased the business. And we realized that if we just continued to work three or four more years, clients—I—we wouldn't have to be

traveling constantly, and we could continue to work with the clients that we love. And you—after you work with people for twenty, twenty-five years, you—they become much more than just clients to you.

SL: Family. Mh-hmm.

[01:14:08] CJ: And we—and so we did that. And the financial return of our continuing to do that over those years were—was at least equivalent to our—the purchase price of the company, and that was a good decision. And we made a commitment to our clients that when we retired that we would not leave them high and dry. We would stay until they found a satisfactory replacement for us. And we lived up to that. State of Louisiana came very close. [*Laughter*] We weren't sure, but they actually did find a firm very . . .

SL: Well, you . . .

CJ: [*Unclear words*].

SL: And I'm assuming you helped them with that. You . . .

CJ: Oh, yeah, we helped all of our—virtually, all of our clients wanted some input from us about the financial advisers who would succeed us. Magnificent car—I mean, it was a wonderful career. Wonderful time for us. The industry was good to us. We assume we were good to the industry. The—when we

retired, the industry gave us a retirement party, and we just didn't realize how many people would show up, and it was a [laughs] large group of people who came. The only, as I say, is—probably been a larger group or—a group celebrating our retirement, and those would be our enemies, so [laughter]—and—'cause we—both of us have taken a passion in making sure our clients have been—well, and others, too—but—in the company—but Freda and I have been passionate about making sure that our clients were handled correctly and with integrity and at the lowest possible cost. And so we're proud of what we accomplished and . . .

[01:16:03] SL: You know, in the description of your career in the financial sector, it seems to me that, yeah, you have your clients and you've developed those [CJ sniffs] relationships, but the work that you're doing with your clients just doesn't affect just the clients. It's . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: It's a populous. I mean, it's almost logarithmic—the things that you accomplish affect people at the street level.

CJ: Yep.

SL: And you have to—that has to be the driving force or the . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . where the passion comes in for the work that you do, that you're actually making a difference to everyday people, not just people in towers or people of political . . .

[01:16:48] CJ: No, that's what gets you up in the morning and gets the juices flowing. And we had a rule—every bill that I would—we would send out, the last line of it would be, "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be of service to the state of, the city of, the authority of—and the citizens of" blank, blah, blah, blah. It always—the final word was the citizens of the client, and that is—that makes all the difference in the world. It's that—you're exactly right, it's not just the few people that you're dealing with on a regular basis, but there is a direct effect on the way in which good management—lower costs of capital—works its way through to the citizens as a whole, and that's—that makes it all worthwhile. You feel like you're really accomplishing something.

SL: Well, it makes me think that it's just a great miracle that you survived falling off that high diving board [*CJ laughs*] in Monticello at five or six years old.

CJ: Right.

SL: And you made a difference in many people's lives, so . . .

CJ: Well, thank you. Thank you.

SL: It's kind of remarkable . . .

CJ: Thank you.

[01:18:20] SL: . . . in a lot of ways. Well, now, you know, there's a real [*laughs*] dynamic to your interests. I mean, not only have you had this wonderful career in the financial community, but there's this other side of your being—and I'm not talkin' just your brain, but your being—that is lined up with literature and poetry.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And I want to ask you, when did you first start writing? I mean, when did it—when did you gather the—I don't know—the gall to pick up something and write something down that was revealing? I mean, how did that come about? Was there someone or something that happened back in Monticello that drove you to do that or . . .



CJ: Well, I'd—I started writing when I was in high school, and it continued in—but I would only show it a—I only—I never would show it to friends. My goodness, you wouldn't show that sort of stuff to friends. I mean, they're—people don't write poetry when you're playing football . . .

SL: Well . . .

CJ: . . . at Hyatt Field . . .

SL: But . . .

CJ: . . . you know. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . they weren't like—were the love poems to . . .

CJ: No, they were mostly sort of poems to myself. It—they were ways of thinking out—thinking and articulating views on various subjects, and I would—you know, it was like writing a letter to yourself, you know. And I would try to make—I'd try to use structure a little bit and that sort of thing.

[01:20:13] SL: Was there anyone teaching structure, or was this just stuff . . .

CJ: I was always interested in literature. I mean, I was always—particularly in poetry. And I can actually remember when I was in the twelfth grade, I was in the—in my literature book there were series of poems by W. H. Auden, and as you know, I got to work with W. H. Auden.

SL: Yes, how serendipitous.

CJ: And I mean, it was just sort of—so symbiotic, you know. You look through your high school English course—literature course—and there I was reading—and I can envision the picture that was in there of Auden and the—and several of the poems. And so I was attracted to verse. And my aunt, who lived in Monticello, and I've mentioned to you, she wasn't married, and she lived with her grandmother and—I mean, with her mother—and took

care of her, and she loved literature. And she had a great influence—and I've made this point—she had a great influence on my interest in literature. She was very interested in literature. And would've loved to have been a writer herself, I'm sure, but neither had the time nor the access to do that. So—but, anyway, she had sort of inspired that and at least the—we would read poetry to each other, I would walk home from school, and they were on the way home. They—their home is—house was right by the county courthouse—Drew County courthouse—and I'd stop in, and we'd—you know, and read and that sort of thing. I mean, I wouldn't admit that to my friends and I [*laughs*—but we . . .

SL: Well, there . . .

CJ: . . . would read [*laughs*] . . .

[01:22:04] SL: You know, and the reason for that is that it's kind of a—it goes beyond nerdy. It's kind of a sissy thing, isn't it?

CJ: Yeah, I . . .

SL: I mean, the whole . . .

CJ: I guess it is.

SL: . . . poetry . . .

CJ: But I was attracted to it. I kinda—I was very attracted to it.

And then reading modern stuff. I mean, her interest was in,

like, you know, the Brownings and Swinburnes and Keats and Shelley and, you know, all of that—romantics. She wasn't big on the Bard—you know, Shakespeare. We didn't do much of that. But those were—but then when I got in high school and you could read, you know, Frost and Eliot—I mean, and—yeah, and Eliot and Auden and Sandburg, you know, all the—you know, it was a—it was quite illuminating. And, anyway, I got interested in that stuff. I mean, I got—and, you know, "The Fog" by Carl Sandburg and—you know, those were poems that I—you could sort of say, "Man, I think I could write something like that or like"—and it would be—but I didn't start that way. [01:23:12] I started—they almost sort of were letters to myself. You know, little things to me—to myself. And—but I wrote in high school, and I showed a few things to my teachers, and they would—generally, I know—they were, I'm sure, horrendous. [SL laughs] I still have a few of them [laughs], but I—you know, I know they were just horrible. But, anyway, then I go to Harvard, and I developed a very close friendship with person who had gone to private school, Belmont Hill. His name was Robert Egan. He got advan [CJ edit: advance placement]—I mean, you would take—you know, we were diametrically opposed—I mean, in terms of different backgrounds. I had come from this—you know, I had

sort of the biggest scholarship they had 'cause it was based on financial need. His father was in—and he came from a very—sort of old-time . . .

SL: Old money.

[01:24:09] CJ: . . . old Massachusetts family, you know. And he got advanced placement—he could've started as a sophomore, you know. He—advanced placement at Harvard, and you know, my background was not bad, [*laughs*] but I didn't have that kind of educational background and that sort of thing. And we—but we took a real attraction for each other, I mean, in terms of interests. I found interests. I got close to his family. He—and they, too—and he took interest in me, and he loved writing. And one day I wrote a poem that eventually—I wrote it so many times over again that it's part of [*laughs*] *Selected Shorter Poems*, but I wrote it when I was at Harvard—the initial draft. But I'd written some other things, and I remember—and so I decided I would show him this poem. It was called "Darkness." I haven't changed the name. But I showed him the poem, and he was studyin' Eliot, and there—I mean, advanced courses and all—you know, and this was both, you know, freshman and sophomore years—and he read the poem, and he came to me, and he said—and, you know, this is the kind of friendship we

had—he said, "Chester, I just to wanna tell you I could never write this good a poem." And that sort of—you know, it got me goin'. [*Laughs*]

SL: Sure.

[01:25:39] CJ: And so I continued to write, and I wrote through high school. I wrote, you know, in co—I mean, I wrote through college, and then I really started focus on it when I was living in New York City, and that's when I got into working with Jean Starr Untermeyer on his [CJ edit: her] translations and then worked with Auden on the tran—you know, the retranslation of the Psalms and *The Book of Common Prayer* and . . .

SL: Did you . . .

CJ: . . . the summer work . . .

[01:26:06] SL: Did you ever meet Auden?

CJ: Yeah. Mh-hmm. Yeah.

SL: And [*CJ sniffs*] what was your impression?

CJ: I really liked Auden. He had a—this reputation for bein' a curmudgeon, and he had weird views, there's no question about it. But he did it for—I mean, I think he did it for effect. He was a very generous man. I went—I remember I got to—I may've told this story. If I have, cut me off. But I got to New York and—the first time—and I went—I was goin' through a phone

directory, and I knew he lived in New York. And I came across this name in the phone directory that said, "Auden, W. H." I said, "I'm sure it's not the same one." [*SL laughs*] And so I pick up the phone, and I call—you know, just out of the blue—just sayin', "You know, what—could you really be W. H. Auden?" So I picked up the phone, and I said, "Is this W. H. Auden?" He said, "Yes." And I said, "The poet, W. H. Auden?" [*Laughs*] And he said, "Yes." [*Laughs*] I said, "Well, you know, I like this poem, this poem, this poem"—and he—we just actually carried on a conversation for a few minutes, and then he thanked me for it, and you know, we worked later—I actually told him that story about it. [01:27:21] But he used to—he was so generous with his time. There would be a—if you were, like, a graduate student—you know, you couldn't necessarily be just some—but you were a graduate student, or you were a senior working on a thesis and whatever on something related to Auden, and you wanted to have a conversation with him. You could call him up and say, "Could we schedule a time"—not for money or anything like that. Could we schedule up a time? I'll call you—you know, or you know, like, we'll talk at a certain time at—on a certain day, and Auden would spend an hour with you. And sometimes he would have students come over to his apartment, and he

would serve tea and cookies and have—and talk about poetry with 'em. He was a very generous guy and, yet he doesn't—that doesn't come across in a lot of stories about Auden these days. He was very, very generous, and I've gotten—his principal biographer and literary executor teaches at Columbia —Edward Mendelson—and he and I are close. He—his wife, Cheryl, and Freda and I—we're close friends, and he wrote the introduction to my *Selected Shorter Poems*, and you know, I—so I've continued to follow Auden along. [01:29:18] I mean—and you know, again, our backgrounds are nothing alike. I mean, he grew up in Birmingham, England, and went to Oxford and—but he actually had something similar to me in terms of this sort of forty days in the wilderness. I mean, he came from a very prominent family, and his father was a scientist, and you know, he didn't know exactly what he was going to do. And he turns into being this poet and—but you know, I mean, they're—just 'cause your from Monticello, Arkansas, and you're not from Birmingham, England—and there are certain personality characteristics that develop over time in terms of wanting to find yourself and—you know, so you—so, anyway, there's a certain camaraderie. I'd never say I'm a W. H. Auden, but he was a very appealing person. A very appealing person and very—you

know, he'd exaggerate like crazy. I mean, he said that Hamlet should only be played by a person in the street—a mad person in the street—because only an individual like that could understand the mindset of Hamlet. [SL laughs] [01:30:09] And, I mean, he would—you know, [laughter] and he would branch off—and he wrote me a letter about the Psalms and about the whole revision process—and, again, if I've said—talked about this—but you asked about him, so I thought I'd tell you—but—so he wrote me this letter, and he said, "You know, I've been giving a lot of thought recently to this whole revision of that *Book of Common Prayer*." He said, "It's—you know, it's—this is all being foisted by a bunch of mad clerics who think that their hijinks will cause the next generation to come back to the church, and they're sadly mistaken. They're—that is not going to happen. And if they had any creativity"—I'm paraphrasing a little bit, but I'm pretty close—if they had any creativity, what they would do is—you know, they—Chester, the communion is the meeting of the unborn and the dead, and it is—you know, it is that moment in time where the dead and the unborn actually meet in communion. And what we ought to do is not use a contemporary language. We oughta go back and get a dead language and use that for purposes of having the Eucharist."

[*Laughter*] I mean, he had a—you know, he had these sort of very outlandish views, but he used 'em for effect. [01:31:46] And in another letter, he made the point that, you know, "I'm afraid that when I'm—when I die that I'm gonna be put at the very end of the line because I've been able to do in my life what I wanted to do, and that is to write poetry and to be who I am." And he said, "Not many people in this world have that ability, and I have, and I'm sure I'm gonna be put back in the line."

[*Laughter*]

SL: He'll pay for it.

CJ: Right.

SL: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

[01:32:41] CJ: Yeah, he'll pay for it. [*SL laughs*] So—but amazing man and quite a genius. His role model was Goethe, the great German writer, and he was—he knew he didn't have many years left, and Goethe lived into—until he was in his eighties, and he thought, "Oh, my goodness! Why am I going to"—you know. But—and his doctor told him, "Well, you know, Goethe didn't live his life the way that you've lived your life. [*Laughter*] And he didn't—I'm sure he didn't drink and smoke and do as—to the excess that you have." And Auden smoked a lot and—a great deal, and he drank his fair portion as well. So—but he—I mean,

how many people create a body of work like he—I mean, you know, extraordinary amount of work—body of work that he's—that he produced and relatively—I mean, you know, I consider—you know, he died—I would've died, you know, like, three years ago. He died when he was in his mid-sixties, so you know, I'm sixty-seven, and you know, it's amazing what the person accomplished in the body of work.

[01:33:46] SL: Well, I'm assuming, and I'm hoping that you have scanned those letters and that you preserved them well and all that. That's really quite great stuff . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . to—that—what a gift.

CJ: Oh, yeah.

SL: I mean, I—I'm certain that he didn't write them as a gift, you know, with that in mind.

CJ: No, it was just . . .

SL: More in a collegial . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . collegial way, but still, how wonderful to have that.

CJ: Right.

SL: That's really something else.

CJ: Right. It's a . . .

[01:34:15] SL: That's gotta be a treasure for you.

CJ: It is. It's definitely a treasure. I know exactly what I'm going to do with 'em. I'm probably going to give them to a university, and maybe the University of Arkansas . . .

SL: Well, maybe so.

CJ: . . . if they'd like to have it . . .

SL: Well, you know . . .

CJ: . . . someday. But . . .

SL: . . . we've already got some—we're already preserving your story, anyway. So . . .

CJ: Right. [*Laughs*] Exactly.

[01:34:38] SL: You know, it is—are there any other poets that you're aware of that share your same kind of background—financial services and poetry? I mean, is there anyone out there that has . . .

CJ: You know . . .

SL: . . . taken that path? I . . .

CJ: Well, actually, there are several—there are a number of poets who have—Eliot actually started out as a banker. I mean, he didn't stay in the bank—he didn't stay in the business as long as I did. But T. S. Eliot started out as a banker.

SL: Okay.

[01:35:47] CJ: And then made his way into publishing. I mean, you don't make a living writing poetry. You gotta love poetry, or you gotta do something else. You just don't—you don't make a living as a poet. And so that was—Eliot was one, but probably the prime example is Wallace Stevens. He was a—he worked for Hartford Insurance Company virtually his whole life. And—in Hartford. He lived for a while in New York City and . . .

SL: Hartford, Connecticut.

[01:36:03] CJ: . . . Hartford, Connecticut. And he was—in fact—well, he died when he was, like, seventy-one, I think, and he was still working at the Hartford Insurance Company when he died, and he was [*laughs*—he had already been offered the poetry chair at Harvard when he was, I think, in his sixties. And he wrote them back and said, "Thank you, I—you know, I appreciate the honor, but you know, I'm happy being [*laughs*—working at Hartford Insurance Company and writing my poetry." And he wrote it—how he wrote poems in—at night and in the morning and on the weekends. And I actually—another poem in my *Selected*—I'm not doing a [*laughs*] commercial here for my book—but there's one that's called "Stevens' Seasons", and it relates to—he had this habit of walk—he loved to walk to work, and it was, like, two miles to work. And you can sort of get a

sense of the rhythm when you hear—read a lot of his work because it's a—like, it's a walking kind of thing—the rhythm—and he would work on the lines, and then he'd get to the office, and he would dictate the lines he had been working on to his secretary and then just keep them together and whatever. And there are these stories about him, and he would be walking on the—someone would come up in a car, "Wallace, would you like a ride?" I mean, if it was raining or whatever. [01:37:46] And he'd say, "Yes, as long as we don't have to talk." [*Laughter*] 'Cause he was still working on his verse. [*SL laughs*] But it was funny. And then Archibald MacLeish was another poet. He—and his was more in sort of the government. He was assistant secretary of state actually and was business and that sort of thing and taught at various schools. He was a poet. And then the—I guess it was three or four years ago the national poet laureate was Ted Kooser—*K-O-O-S-E-R*—and he was an insurance person out of Nebraska, and he writes. He's not—obviously, not as well known as Wallace Stevens and—Wallace Stevens, Archibald MacLeish, or T. S. Eliot. But there are some precedents on that, but as a friend of mine—he's a former Arkansan—the person that named the swirl, I mentioned, from Stuart Hoke—he always introduces me as "the only person that I

know who thinks out of both sides of his brain." [Laughter] And it's just over a joke between the two . . .

SL: Yeah.

[01:39:13] CJ: . . . of us. But that's always the way he introduces me. And I guess there's a little bit of truth in that. I've gotten excitement on both sides, and I feel—to some extent, I feel like Auden, that I've gotten to do so much in my life that I wanted to be able to do, and it's come to me in abundance. And I've been—you know, I've just been very fortunate. And so it's a—I don't know how it happened. Maybe it was Providential; maybe it wasn't. But in any case, it's a—you know, I've been able to do both, and I'm very—and after retirement—one of the primary reasons we retired the way—I mean, Freda was worn out, but I wanna—there are some things while I still have the energy that I wanna complete on—in the area of poetry, and I just—I need the extra time that retirement will give me to do a lot of that. I—I'm hopeful that I'll live, you know, another thirty years and be able to put a lotta that—but I'm in relatively good health and put all of that stuff together. And—because I've spent a lot of—you know, forty-three years in public finance, plus writing, but now I want a little time to put some of my—some of the poetry stuff in a form—I've gotten—you know, I've been published many, many

places, and I've read at some of the more—the prime places in this country and—you know, National Cathedral and Harvard and University of Arkansas. And I have—you know, I've—and we've been many other places—New School. And I've been published in, you know, the *Times* and *Tribune* and all. But, anyway, I've just—it's been a—but I still—there are other things I wanna do in my writing, and I needed time for.

[01:41:31] SL: You know, a poem—there's a couple of different schools of thought about when to leave a poem. You know, I get the impression that some of the work that you're contemplating is also looking at—everything you've done as well. I mean, there—aren't there poets that constantly tinker . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . with a piece.

CJ: Right.

SL: They just won't leave it alone.

CJ: Right.

SL: And then there are poets that say, "No, this is it."

CJ: Right.

SL: So it's like the work never really ends.

CJ: No.

[01:42:16] SL: I—I'm—I just—that is kind of—that makes—that

wears me out, thinking that [*claps hands*] you can never really—the idea that you don't ever really finish a piece—that . . .

CJ: Well, it—it's—you're right. I mean, a poem is—and I'm like that. I mean, I revise constantly and—even for this most recent book, which is the short—selected shorter poems—I have one—I have a version that I have at home that—the outside I've got a great big yellow pad—a piece of paper on it, and it says, "Revised version." And I go through it, and if I were to read tomorrow, it would not be this—a lot of those poems would not be the versions that [*laughs*] are published in that book. There would be things that I have changed about it, and I just—there are—I try to keep the spirit of the poem, but—you know, there are some exceptions to that. I've—I have not adjusted "St. Paul's Chapel" since it was first published as a memento card at St. Paul's. I've kept it the way it is. I've—there've been times that I wanted to, but I took [*laughter*] a deep breath and didn't do it. But I do—I think it's important in revisions because you're—nothing's ever perfect. I mean, you just—but you can improve on them. I mean, you can—"Well, that doesn't sort of—that work exactly right. You know, maybe if I did this and maybe if I'll do this. And maybe these—I should've used two syllables here rather than three." [01:43:59] And—because I go on the

philosophy that if you can use monosyllabic words, it's gonna ultimately be more poetic than if you use, you know, multisyllabic words—although there's some arguments about doing multisyllabic words as well—but on occasion for effect. But, anyway, I just—"And maybe the grammar's not—well, if you—if I use a dash here rather than a semicolon or I use three dots rather than a dash or what—that will connect these lines in a way that they wouldn't have been connected." And so there's that sort of thing that goes on. And the other thing is that I like about it, it keeps you in constant contact with your work. And you're—you know, there's—and Auden was a very strong revisionist, as I've mentioned—not that I'm following his, but there are other writers, and I won't mention names because I don't want to [*laughs*] invade their privacy. But there are some writers who really believe, "When it's finished, get on with it. Just leave it alone and go on." [01:45:18] But one of the things that you can use—if you know your work by doing these revisions and going back and figuring it out, you can apply it in different environments. You know your work in such a—rather than goin' back and say, "Oh, my God, I forgot about that poem." You know it, and you can apply those things. And J. S. Bach, for example—if you know—in his cantatas—and there are

cross-disciplines in terms of [*laughs*] music and poetry and
[*unclear word*] . . .

SL: Sure.

[01:45:51] CJ: But he would take stuff that he had written, like, in 1707, and he had to—he was under so much time pressure to finish work, he would go back and grab stuff that he had first written in 1707 and make adjustments to it and stick it into a cantata in 1723, you know. And so there's a lot of poetry related to that. You know, if you know your work well enough that you can—see, if I'm gonna be speaking about, you know, like, they had seven leading American poets for September the tenth where I had to read, and the Poets House sponsored this. And they wanted to have—not just about 9/11, but remembrance and reconciliation, and I was able to read "Elegy to a Distant Son" as well as "St. Paul's." And then there was one called "Fear of Flying," which was also another 9/11 poem—but if I had forgotten that poem, it wouldn't have been the same. It wouldn't—you know. So it keeps me in constant dialogue with my work and . . .

SL: I . . .

CJ: And that's important to me. And I think an artist needs to be in constant dialogue with their work.

[01:47:05] SL: Yeah, two things—you mentioned the disciplines of music and poetry kinda merging every once in a while the—you know, Bob Dylan is pretty famous about not singing any one song the same way.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: I mean—and he gets grief for that, you know.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: People love the song the way it is.

CJ: Right.

SL: Don't mess with it.

CJ: [*Laughter*] Right. Exactly. Right.

SL: You know, just leave it alone.

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: You know, I like the first one better than the second or third . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . or fourth.

CJ: Right.

[01:47:39] SL: But—and, you know, I think some of that is out of not wanting to get in a fixed position and becoming bored with your work.

CJ: Right.

SL: So, you know, it's important—for some folks it's important for it

to live . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and have it constantly be reborn or grow.

CJ: Right.

[01:48:02] SL: And then the second thing is is—I—I'm startin' to think in terms of maybe all these individual works—if you look at all of them as one thing . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And you mentioned, you know, stealing from one and putting it in a . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . later work and all that. I mean, do you ever—I mean, are—I would think that you learn from each piece and that every new piece has some of that old stuff in it.

CJ: Right. That's true.

SL: Whether it's actually on the paper or not . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . there's a process that you've gone through that—maybe it's the process of looking at it . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . again, that it's not so much the end result, but how you're looking at it or new ways to look at things that engage you and

encourage you to reconsider what's in front of you. I . . .

CJ: No, there's . . .

SL: Maybe I'm just . . .



[01:49:04] CJ: No, no, I think that's right. But it doesn't always

have to be a new piece that you're working on either. You can take an old piece and something that you've learned in another poem that you've worked on—you can incorporate into the older piece that you're in the process . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

CJ: . . . of revising. And I find myself doing that as well. And as long as you don't leave the fundamental spirit of things—there are dangers, you know, I—as I've mentioned to you last night about the—on revisions. The classic one that I like to use is—you know, the great Auden poem about "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," and he said—you know, the great line was, O all of the instruments agree / the day of his death was a dark cold day. And then later on, he thought that the use of the vocative, "O," was too emotional, and it wasn't intellectual enough, and that it was, you know, you try to stay away—he developed theory about trying to stay away from too many emotional exercises in his verse. So then he changed—you know, "What instruments we have agree / the day of his death was a dark cold day,"

which I consider much inferior to, O all of the instruments agree—so, you know, you can fiddle with stuff a little too much sometimes as well, and you can impose changes in your viewpoint such a way that it violates the integrity of the poem. But on the other hand, it is your poem. It is—you're the artist, and it's yours, and [*laughs*] you know, and it's gonna remain yours. And if you would feel better about it making these adjustments, then you should have the right to make those adjustments. So . . .

SL: Yeah, it remains personally your ownership. But, you know, I'm thinking in terms of watercolor painting.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[01:51:19] SL: You know, you can overwork the watercolor where not only does—do the colors become mud, but the paper starts . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . to disintegrate.

CJ: Right.

SL: And so it is no longer—it becomes something less . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . than what it was. And through, you know, the actual hand that delivered something that was remarkable at first, it . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: You—I think there is that line where you . . .

[01:51:49] CJ: And not all art form is the same—the same either. I mean, you can't—but there are different ways of doing revisions even in paintings. I mean, like Rembrandt's self-portrait. He—you know, he did so many of them, and it was form of revision for him.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: I'm sure it was, you know, that he learned . . .

SL: Sure.

CJ: . . . along the way. So maybe he couldn't go back because he could screw up the . . .

SL: The canvas.

CJ: Yeah, the canvas.

SL: Yeah. Mh-hmm.

[01:52:17] CJ: But by virtue of his progression of all this self-portrait stuff, that he would ultimately improve his technique. And so—but it's all mysterious, but it's also pretty grand to be able to do that and just keep work—you know, work it through until you're satisfied with it or reasonably satisfied with it.

SL: Well, it sounds like to me that if you're planning on living another thirty-five years and instead of spending . . .

CJ: At least thirty. [*Laughs*]

SL: . . . spending a third of your time or . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . a quarter of your time on your poetry, you have great enthusiasm for what's ahead of you. I . . .

[01:52:56] CJ: Oh, I do. I really do. I'm very excited about it. I'm very excited about it, and I'm very interested—I'm—you know, I work on this—I have the—I'm known as the [*laughs*] curator for poetry for the—for St. Paul's. It's "Bach at One." They have "Bach at One" on—and I bring in a different poet every week, and they read their verse. There's a cantata and then—and poet—and then a—the second cantata, or there are two motets at the beginning of reading and then a cantata. And, you know, I'm very excited just dealing with areas like that—plus, my own verse, but also being active in bringing . . .

SL: The poet community.

CJ: . . . young—and poets. Yeah. So it's a—and it was a—it'll be a great time. I'm very excited about it. And Freda has many things that she's going to be doing and—but I—I'm gonna give myself this time to really focus on the—my own art, and so it'll be challenging, but—because in some ways it'll be a different lifestyle, and there are things to work out emotionally and

mentally that'll—but I'm very excited about it.

[01:54:24] SL: Yeah, you know, you might need to take on a new activity that you've never done before just to break yourself away from all that. There's . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: To keep your vision fresh . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . and your mind away from it, so you can come back and look at it . . .

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: . . . in a new light.

CJ: No. Very good point. And I'm gonna keep a—we'll keep ourselves open. I'll keep myself open to those types of possibilities. But I wanna stretch myself in the poetry area for a while—see how it feels. So . . .

SL: Well, Chester, where are we? What—is there anything that we haven't touched upon or that you would like to return to that—now that we have this time?

CJ: Well, the only thing that—I don't know if I've answered the question, but I get asked—I mean, you talked about business and how many poets, you know, have been sort of business as—you know, as well as personal. And so—and I get asked the

question all the time, "Why didn't you go into academia? That was you could've written your verse and"—'cause most poets, as you know, are . . .

SL: Right.

CJ: . . . they teach.

SL: Mh-hmm. [*Sniffs*]

[01:55:50] CJ: And I really felt that was very constraining for me. I never—so I'll try to answer that question.

SL: Okay.

CJ: I asked the question. [*Laughs*] I'll answer it.

SL: No, but it—well, it's—in a roundabout way, yeah.

CJ: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

SL: But I . . .

CJ: You know . . .

SL: . . . I alluded to . . .

CJ: Right, right. Exactly.

SL: . . . why and how that came—you know. Go ahead.

[01:56:11] CJ: Yeah, but I just felt—I always—I mean, I love being at colleges and univers—and I love the dialogue and that sort of thing. But it is—I've always felt it more constraining for me that—it wasn't the kind of environment that—well, let's say, working on a sewer project or—when Logan wants to do a

brand-new runway, and they wanna know how you do it. You know, it's—those are, like, puzzles, and they energize—those kinds of projects energize me to find a solution—the lowest cost of capital. "What can we get in terms of the ratings? And how can I negotiate a better transaction with Merrill Lynch or with UBS or J. P. Morgan or what—you know, what can I do?" Those are puzzles.

SL: Analytical . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . skills.

[01:57:17] CJ: And I don't wanna—just didn't want to end up teaching—you know, there's this old philosophy or least old saw that—person teaches the same—he teaches the same course twenty-five times. I just don't wanna do that. I don't—I never wanted to do that. I wanted to be—maybe it's a flip—I don't mean a flippancy, but maybe in the mornings when I get up, I want the day to be fresh. I want it to be new and the challenges to be new every day for me. And I just didn't see that available to me in academia. I don't mean to be undermining the role of academics, but—at all, but I'm—'cause they serve an [*unclear word*]

—it just wasn't the lifestyle that I chose, and I think that's more of an explain—that's also an explanation of why I found the

financial services industry more open to my personality and [*SL sighs*]*—*than spending the time in a classroom, and so . . .

[01:58:36] SL: Yeah, I would say that it is a great deal of personality differences. You know, successful teachers engage at the personal level . . .

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . with their students. And so for that—when considering that, each day could be . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . a fresh day because . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . the personalities are so endless. And if your class size is—the scale is small enough, people find—can find that very, very rewarding and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . exciting.

CJ: Right.

[01:59:13] SL: Especially—and when the responses—when students react to that kind of one-on-one attention, many wonderful things are born . . .

CJ: No question about it.

SL: . . . you know, out of that. And so that—I would say you have to

be almost predisposed to be willin' to go through that to have that trait of—that desire to be so engaged . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . that you feel like you're making a difference one on one, you know. So it's . . .

[01:59:49] CJ: That's an excellent way of putting it. And I didn't mean that in any—I wasn't putting any judgments on either . . .

SL: No, I . . .

CJ: It's a matter of personality. It's just [*unclear word*] . . .

SL: No, it didn't sound like you were, but I . . .

CJ: No, no.

SL: That's just what—the thought that came to my mind—that it is . . .

CJ: No, and I think that's very real.

SL: . . . personality . . .

CJ: I just wanted—thought it'd be appropriate to get it on the record here since we're sort of doin' the . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: . . . of—because it is a question that I'm always asked. By the poets and by students and the general—you know, general people in public. You know, they—"Why in the world would you wanna do what you do as opposed to being able to seek the

sanctuary of academia?" And . . .

[02:00:35] SL: Well, there's also that horrible saying that those that can do, and those that can't teach.

CJ: Right.

SL: You know, so [*laughs*] . . .

CJ: I've never believed that.

SL: I've never [*CJ laughs*] believed that either, but you know . . .

CJ: [*Laughs*] Right.

SL: . . . there is that . . .

CJ: No, I agree.

SL: . . . awful . . .

TM: Scott, we should change tapes.

SL: Okay.

[Tape stopped]

CJ: Thank you.

[02:00:53] SL: You know, we—as always, after a number of hours in these interviews—we try to cover so much. And we kinda—sometimes we drop things; sometimes we completely forget things. It's not uncommon for people, after we're all done, go—"Ah! I didn't" . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: "I didn't say [*claps hands*] this" or "I didn't talk about this" or "I

forgot this person." All that—and so I think we're doin' a pretty good job of talking between tapes to kind of reestablish some things. And in this past hour, we—or at least the second half of it, we've been talking about your work—poetry work and that field and some of the personalities in that field; some of the techniques and work habits that come in the field and different occupations that poets have always had to have in order to live. And—but, you know, I get the impression [*CJ sniffs*—I get the feeling that there's more—that there's some camaraderie that we haven't touched upon that entered your life in a personal way, that you have more experiences. That stuff with Auden was just wonderful. [*Claps hands*] I just wonder if there's any other poets [*claps hands*] that you got to hang with or have [*claps hands*] some time with or experiences with that resonate still with you today. Is . . .

[02:02:34] CJ: Well, there were a number of literary figures, I'll put it that way . . .

SL: Okay.

CJ: . . . who encouraged me in various ways. And I'm not name-dropping, I'm—they're just—you know, they're just—they're people who I've admired—and some more than others—and they're characters who have [*CJ edit: had an*] effect—and I

might just talk a little bit about that. James T. Farrell, who wrote the classic, *Studs Lonigan*, took an interest—he lived in New York City. He grew up in Chicago and that's the basis of the trilogy of *Studs*—the *Studs* trilogy, which established a new realism of fiction and—in a way that launched a whole different genre of—or method of writing fiction. Theodore Dreiser was one, but—as well that sort of began that process, and then Sinclair Lewis and the—but—and James T. Farrell was a person who was a major figure. Norman Mailer considered—may—whenever he talked about influences, he would always refer to James. T. Farrell as being a major influence and a person who must be remembered in American letters. And I—James T. Farrell took a real interest in my writing. And he did something that was very generous to me. He—they asked him to—*Chicago Tribune* asked him to do a piece on current writers who are other writers that he would be recommending to—for the future or even currently—for the *Chicago Tribune*. And so he wrote—and in that—in the article he made a reference. He said, "You've never heard of J. Chester Johnson before, but I'll tell you, you will in the future, and it's the beginning of a major career in poetry." And I'll never forget that he—you know, I mean, *Chicago Tribune's* not a bad place [*laughter*] to say that.

And . . .

[02:05:50] SL: Now what year was this, about?

CJ: It was back in the [19]70s and . . .

SL: Wow! So it's early.

CJ: It was early in my writing. I mean, it was—he was very, very complimentary. But he was a lovely man—a very generous man—and I—I'm a big—I've even made the comment to a lot of people that probably one of the primary reasons I went to New York was because of the New York Yankees. I always was a [laughter] Yankee fan.

SL: Oh, no!

[02:05:53] CJ: And—I was always a Yankee fan. And so, anyway, James T. Farrell shared that love. He actually started out as a Chicago fan, but then he—you know, he lived in New York City, and so he changed his allegiance. But what was fascinating about this person is that he and I used to go to Yankee games together and—'cause he wrote sports articles. In addition to writing fiction, he loved to write, you know, sort of as a fun thing to do, he'd write sports articles. And all the sports figures of the Yankees knew who he was, both for *Studs* as well as for—you know, all the sports articles. And he used to imagine himself—he was sort of—he called himself sort of simian in his physical

appearance 'cause he did have very long arms. [*SL laughs*] And then—so he—and he used to say, "I think I could've played. I could've played second base," you know, and—but, anyway, we would [*SL laughs*] go to the games. And then after the game, we would—we could go into the players' clubhouse. And the personality of James T. Farrell would change almost immediately when a sports figure would come up. I mean, he would—and he'd go up, and he introduce me, which was nice of him to do, but he—you'd see, at that time, Billy Martin or Reggie Jackson and, you know, others around that time playing for the Yankees. And he would immediately sort of shrivel up. He was like a little boy, you know. I mean, here's this very accomplished, internationally known, award-winning writer, and he would be cowered by sports figures. [*SL laughs*] And he literally turned into an eight- or a nine- or a ten-year old boy. And that was a very charming quality about him. I mean, you know, that he could be—he never grew up, which is a great—you know, it's—in some ways, a writer needs to do that, that you never really grow up. If you become too sophisticated, you're—you've lost the edge. And he never—you know, he was a very interesting person that way.

SL: So you got to go to games with him and all.

[02:08:23] CJ: Knew him very well as a person. Actually, there's a well-known poet in New York whose name is Barry Wallenstein was his—we got to know each other. Back then, he was sort of James T. Farrell's "Boy Friday" at the time. He'd come over and do whatever. And so—and it influenced Barry, too. Barry became a poet-in-residence at City College of New York. And he sponsors this—I mean, he's the major organizer of a New York poetry event, which I participate in. And—but, anyway, it's a—James T. brought a lot of—Jimmy, as everyone called him—brought a lot of the people together—a lot of writers together and—but I'll never forget the way his personality really adjusted when we would get around the sports figures. He just became eight years ago—old, so it's very comical. [02:09:26] But there—another person that—and I'm not gonna just list names—but James Dickey took an interest in my writing early on—the poet, James Dickey. And I remember—I—'cause I hadn't really—I sent him some of my work, and he sent me back a note and said, you know—it was like—and I hadn't really gotten a lot of input on my writing, you know, by people of that stature at the time. And he said, "You're one of the few poets." And that was—you know, it was very inspiring for me at that time. And when he would come to New York on occasion, he would—he

lived in South Carolina toward the end of his life and—or—well, even—not toward—he was also in business. I mean, he had been advertising—had the Coca-Cola account for some advertising agency in New York for a number of years, and then he was awarded—he was given the poetry chair at the University of South Carolina, and he'd—he spent time in South Ca—but he'd come to New York on occasion as well. And, particularly, when *Deliverance*, which was, you know, a novel that was very popular and has become somewhat of iconic now, and he came—he had—he came to New York a lot related to *Deliverance* during that period. So . . .

[02:11:14] SL: So he was the author of *Deliverance*.

CJ: Yeah, he was the author of *Deliverance* . . .

SL: Okay.

CJ: . . . as well as, you know, a well-known poet. [*Clears throat*]
So he came to New York, and I would meet him on occasion. And I remember once going to his hotel room, and he lined up—he would—this was on Saturday mornings—and it was a time when poets were expected to be big drinkers. They're not so much anymore, but that was—you know, the—it was, you know, earlier than that, there was the—you know, Dylan Thomas, who had—he drank himself to death and all that kind of stuff. And

there was still that sort of residue of—you know, to be a great writer you had to be a big drinker. [02:12:01] And we're away from that now. But, anyway, you know, Saturday morning, and he would be drinking beer; and when he'd finish a can, he'd put it on the chest of drawers, and each can would be lined up. And he could play the guitar very, very well, and in fact, he told me—I haven't been able to verify this, and he's the only one that I've heard it from—that he composed the theme song or the—"Dueling Banjos" in *Deliverance*. And he definitely could play the guitar very, very well. And by the—you know, by the time he'd finished playing and finished his beer, he would then—at the end of it all he would just swipe all the beer cans into the wastepaper basket and then start again. And—but he was a very entertaining character. He always wore great big hats, and he was a striking figure on the streets of New York City.

[02:13:01] SL: So you got to know him, too.

CJ: Yeah, pretty well. We had correspondence back and forth, and I spent time with him. And he was a very—he was very supportive of my work, and I'll always be indebted to him. He was really quite a character. I don't think he was as good a poet, by the way, I—as, like, Miller Williams is here. And Miller's also a very close friend, and I think the world of Miller for

many—he's—he has a won—you know, not only he has a wonderful body of work that will resonate for a long time, he's also a critic. I mean, he's written pieces on the directory of poetry terms and using examples. I mean, he's a craftsman. There's no question about that and—but I care a great deal for Miller on a personal level. And one of the great compliments that I've been given is that a number of years ago he gave up reading publicly because his health wasn't so good, and last year when I was here, he agreed at the instigation of someone else—it wasn't me—that the two of us could read together and—as a favor to me, he did it, and it was a gesture of love. And that's the—you know, the—Miller—and it comes through in his poetry, that he does things for the right reasons and he—and the right reasons has substance to it—to them and if he—and caring is something he does very well. And, you know, after the reading he came up and gave me a great big embrace and said something very affectionately to me, and you know, those are things you never ever forget. And it'll—those things will remain with me until I go six under, so . . .

[02:15:22] SL: Yeah, you know, the only other person I know that he's done a dual performance like that is with his daughter.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And I've heard that those were wonderful. I think he did two with her, but . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: Probably around the same . . .

CJ: He was scheduled to do something in New York. I wanted to see it. I never got to see it, but I heard that they were wonderful. I heard that they were spec—you know, really special, and I would've love to have seen it. But, you know, he has a saying that when Lucinda was growing up, she was known as Miller Williams's daughter, and now he's known as Lucinda da—Lucinda Williams's father. [*Laughter*] And so—but that's sort of self-effacing, which he—he's good at doing, but you know, we know that he's—he'll be an enduring poet.

[02:16:20] SL: 'Cause he—you know, there's a family—that's a great example of a family from Arkansas affecting the lives of many.

CJ: Right.

SL: And they really did—right here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Little Fayetteville, Arkansas. That kind of body of work, it's—you know, it springs from this place. It's . . .

CJ: Well, it's so—it's just talent, you know. I mean—so—but—and the generosity of talent, you know. I mean, both Lucinda and

Miller, you know, having that. And it's one thing passed on. Now you—they're—he tells this great story about when he was living in Alabama, and he was a—you know, he was teaching biology in a small college. And Flannery O'Connor—I mean, this sort of shows generosity of writers for others—you know, other poets and other writers. Flannery O'Connor, who was from Alabama, used to invite Miller, and Miller would bring Lucinda with him to Flannery O'Connor's house. And Flannery O'Connor was known for having a lot—a number of peacocks in the yard. And while Miller and Flannery would be talking about poetic issues or what was Miller working on and what she was working on and that sort of thing, Lucinda would be running after the peacocks [*SL laughs*] all through the—you know, [*laughs*] in the backyard. And Miller loves to tell that story, and he tells it better than I do, but it was great. [02:18:00] And Flannery was very helpful in terms his getting his first appointment at LSU. And so generosity is passed on from generation to generation, and it's what we're all about. So . . .

SL: [*Sighs*] Well, those are rich stories. I mean . . .

CJ: Good.

SL: . . . if the—is there—are there any others that affected you in significant ways? I mean, you know, you're talking about folks

that were—had an appreciation of your work that you got to know. Were there maybe some artists that you never really got to know but were big influences on what you were trying . . .

[02:18:57] CJ: Actually, there was one poet who's pretty well known. His name—he was an English poet named Robert Graves. And he wrote me once about something that has stayed in my head forever. I never knew him, but he wrote me a note once. He was very—you know, he was very well known. And he was responding to something he had read of mine, and he said, "You know"—and I probably put in something—poetry award or something that I had won in—something like that. And he wrote back, and he said, "You know, I don't think I've ever won a poetry award, and I think it's done me well that I haven't." And that stayed in my mind. And when I wrote stuff even today about—I had a very—I won't mention, but I had a very famous poet come to St. Paul's Chapel to read about two weeks ago. And when I was introducing him to some people, I made the point of sort of—it was an allusion to a letter that Robert Graves sent to me many years ago. And I said, "You know, "He's the winner of x, y, and z award." And he—actually, his name's Mark Doty, who—he won the T. S. Eliot—it's the British prize, and he was the first American to win the T. S. Eliot Award, and so he

was—and he's very well known—in today. And so—but I made the point—I said, "You know, there's the"—after talking about his prize, I said, "You know, there is poetry, and then there are awards, and they're not always the same." [*Laughter*] And, you know, but Mark's poetry is magnificent, and he read, and everybody fell in love—those that didn't know him and those who did know. But I make the distinction—you know, there's the poetry, and then there are poetry awards. And there's a—and I think the reason [*laughs*] remember that is because of what Robert Graves said to me in his letter, and you never forget those sorts of things, you know. I mean, people who take the time [*sniffs*] to give instruction about very important things. Those are things you never quite forget.

SL: That's a great thing to have stuck in your head, though.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: There's a certain [*CJ sniffs*—I don't know, there's a certain grit to that . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . you know, that you're not driven by the awards.

CJ: Right.

SL: Yeah.

[02:22:02] CJ: I mean, and—you know, because so much of the

world is based upon these sort of artificial criteria, and I've tried to stay away from that. The—there's a—there's some—I've tried to stay away from using awards as a way of judging great work. 'Cause what may be great work today that would honor a certain—may not be, you know, over time, recognized that way—or even today it may not be. It may ultimately—and I don't mean to demean—it may be criteria and maybe personal relations. There may be all kinds . . .

SL: Sure.

CJ: . . . of different ways, and so we all should be skeptical. And that was a skeptical comment that was given to me, and I've never forgotten it. [*Laughs*]

[02:23:04] SL: You know let me ask you this. This just came to mind. As far as today's world goes and, you know, when you started writing, there really wasn't—the Internet wasn't really happening.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And now it's so easy to self-publish or to get stuff out there. Good or bad.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

[02:23:33] SL: As a working poet, do you look for stuff that isn't awarded, or isn't really published by the normal means of [*claps*]

hands] paper and, you know, in book form? Is it—how has—I mean, have you—has any change—has the Internet and technology changed anything for you as far as the community—the writing community? Is there—does anyone ever talk about that anymore or . . .

[02:24:10] CJ: Well, not so much about—I mean, poets are not sort of the immediate practitioners or most apparent practitioners of new technology. I mean, they're—they just typically are not. I mean, you know, that's not their—the way their mind typically is set. But we—I do use it quite a bit for finding works that—you know, 'cause I have the—I am doing this work at St. Paul's, which we bring in poets every week, and the poetry series has just been wonderful. And one thing I can do is—I usually rely on recommendations from poets that I respect and say, you know, "Are there certain poets that you would propose?" And I don't—you know, I don't use all of [*laughs*] 'em; that's for sure. But I can get access to their works by—over the Internet, and they don't even know that I'm investigating their work. And . . .

SL: Right.

CJ: And so—and I would've never had that. And I can just sit at my computer, and within a matter of two or three hours, you know, I can go through a lot of verse, and a lot is on the Internet that

I—and you know, so you—and you get a flavor of people. I just would never have been able to do it in such a short period of time and—as—so I use it that way. I use it—and I can—I also use it to cheat and to steal a little bit once in a while. I mean, I remember a line from a poem, and I wanna see, "How was it done, and why was it done in a certain way?" And I can use the Internet for pulling that stuff together . . .

SL: Sure.

[02:26:17] CJ: . . . and figuring it out and saying, "Well, I'm gonna try to use a similar kind of device in what I'm working on." And so I can—I—and so I use it. I use it very extensively, but I use it in very precise ways with the exception of the poets that I choose to come to St. Paul's.

SL: You base all that on recommendations.

CJ: Largely on recommend—and so my own . . .

SL: Your own . . .

CJ: . . . my own preference.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: Poetry preference. And there's a—there's probably too much verse being written today. When you compare the quality of it to the amount of it being written, there's a—I think there's a disproportion. And, you know, there—in each generation there

are really only a few enduring poems, and we have an avalanche of material that's out there, but much of it is not, I consider, enduring. You know, Auden had a very—and I thought a great definition of poetry—very simple. And it's endurable speech and, you know, if—and—but if—you know, it—so there's a lot of poetry that doesn't fit within that . . .

SL: That . . .

CJ: . . . criteria.

SL: Yeah.

[02:27:58] CJ: You know, that criteria. And—because it's written in forms that are not particularly interested in enduring recognition. And so, anyway, I'm—there's—the proportion between—I just—my own view is that there's . . .

SL: Too much.

CJ: . . . too much stuff being written without enough sort of attention being given to the quality of it. I mean, you could never say that by—about poets like Miller and—you know, or many of the poets who are part of the Creative Writing Department here at the University of Arkansas. But there are others out there that write a lot of stuff that—for writing and not—but not with an eye toward what is endurable and memorable speech.

[02:28:57] SL: Two things here. Do you think, though, that—I mean, I can understand the point of view that there's too much out there. And, certainly, before the Internet, there was probably a lot of poetry out there that never survived.

I mean . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . just by nobody taking it to the next step to preserve it or . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . to publish or, you know, didn't meet the grade or . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . or whatever, so there was a publishing filter that pretty much doesn't exist now, and so I can see how that—but also I'm just wondering if the technology has maybe created a more—encouragement to write that wasn't there before. I mean, you know, back in Monticello, when you were growing up, why would you be writing that . . .

CJ: Yeah.

SL: . . . you know. What good is that going to do you?

CJ: Right.

[02:30:07] SL: That sort of thing. But maybe the Internet has served a purpose to make it more accessible—poetry more

accessible—good and bad poetry, worthy or nonendurable poetry—but also made it more of an interest to folks to write their own stuff. And there is something to be said about that activity that an individual takes it upon themselves or is, in some way, motivated and inspired to write something down that is theirs. That is—that they're working on, good or bad or . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . learned or not learned or, you know, worthy or not. It—there's still the activity that has something—some value to it, if nothing else . . .

[02:30:59] CJ: No, I think . . .

SL: . . . to that one person.

CJ: . . . that's true. I—and I think that's a very beneficial aspect of it—of the Internet. It's—you know, it—I've always felt, and I've made the comment often that the—that poetry is the most democratic of all art forms. I mean, you don't need—you know, you—with poetry you don't need the infrastructure, and you don't need quite the level of training that you do if you're a composer or a musician. And you don't need all the accoutrement for—to be a painter. If you're—you know, everything that you may need just to paint. And Ezra Pound used to say, you know, "Why wouldn't—why don't we have more



people writing because who wouldn't take a chance of writing an immortal quatrain, a four-lined poem?" You know, it's a—and that's a good point. I mean, you don't need anything but a piece of paper and a pencil or whatever, and this is exagger—what you're saying about—the Internet is a further acceleration of the recognition that poetry is the most democratic of art forms. And you can develop an audience pretty quickly with the use of an—you know, the Internet.

SL: Sure.

[02:32:26] CJ: And so I think that's a good thing. And my only comment earlier about so much stuff being written is—relates to that there's a lot of stuff that I just don't enjoy. And that's why I made the point . . .

SL: Well, sure.

CJ: . . . that I did.

SL: There's a lot of content . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . of all forms on the Internet that . . .

CJ: Right, right, right.

SL: . . . really is not enjoyable or . . .

CJ: Right. Exactly.

SL: . . . you know, and you . . .

[02:32:56] CJ: I mean, I've got—my life is—you know, we're all—
have a limited amount of time, and there's a limit on my
tolerance for something that's just sort of generated to be
generated, so . . .

SL: Right. For the sake of being.

CJ: Right.

[02:33:13] SL: The other think that came to mind—and you
mentioned the Creative Writing Program at the University of
Arkansas, and I've always heard that it's gained—I mean, you
were there—you attended the school as that was being founded,
really. Whitehead—James Whitehead, Bill Harrison, Miller
Williams. And they modeled, I believe it—was it from Iowa?

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: But it—they got it established, and it made a difference in the
creative writing community, didn't it?

CJ: It did.

SL: I mean, it is—there is a certain amount of respect for this writing
program at this university.

CJ: I wouldn't say a certain amount of respect, I think it's one of
the—it's considered one of the top creative writing departments
in the country. And I think to get an appointment here is a
very—it's a real feather in your cap. And to be selected to be—

to come here and to, you know, be part of the creative writing program is a real honor. And it's a—no, it's really considered one of the best. [02:34:26] And it was patterned, to some extent, after the University of Iowa. Miller had some relations with John Ciardi, the poet who founded the—and was sort of the brainchild for the University of Iowa program. And so I think that dialogue and that relationship helped to refine—I'm not sayin' it was the same, but it helped refine—'cause there's a level of—you know, in this program there's a level of translation and some—so it's broader than—it's a little bit broader than what the University of Iowa has done. And they have a marvelous translation aspect to the creative writing department. So, you know, they've built on what had happened at University of Iowa. This is one of the top in the country, and I—I'm just—I hope that the people of Arkansas and here in the—and in the university are cognizant of how well this place is respected across the country, and if not across the world in terms—I mean, there are students here who come from all around. I mean, we—I went to a special—I went to a reading of Islamic verse back in—several months ago I was asked to be a responder to—by a poetry organization in New York, Poets House, and we listened to a lot of Islamic verse. And one of the presenters—one of the poets

who presented was actually a student here at the University of Arkansas Creative Writing Department. So—and he was one of the presenters, and yet he was a student here at the Creative Writing Department. So that's the kind of rec—I mean, and he came from Iran and—you know.

SL: Yeah.

[02:36:39] CJ: So those . . .

SL: [*Laughs*] That's . . .

CJ: . . . are the kind of people you get, you know. And that's quality stuff.

SL: Well, good. I mean, I'd always heard that—and not just from here, but that it was a respected program and . . .

CJ: Very much so.

SL: . . . I know locally it created quite a buzz and quite a bit of excitement that—to have these writers—they just kind of gathered in Fayetteville kind of all of a sudden. It seemed like it was, like, over a couple year period that, you know, it proliferated all kinds of activities here in Fayetteville. It kinda became—there became writer groupies and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . writer parties and writer gatherings, and it was good.

CJ: Right, sure it was.

SL: I mean, it was good stuff.

CJ: Right.

SL: Brainy, emotional . . .

CJ: Right. Good stuff.

SL: . . . meaningful stuff.

CJ: Right.

[02:37:33] SL: And so—well, that's good. I—maybe in your time now, you can have some kind of relationship with the program.

CJ: Oh, I have good relationships with the folks here. If you recall when I read last year, when you taped it, the head of the department did the introduction for me. And I've maintained—Geoff Block, who was [*sniffs*] on a New York Public Library fellowship last year was in New York, and I spent time with him there. And his father is here—now here, who taught creative writing at the univer—at Florida State University. He's retired now, but he's living here in the community. That kind of stuff builds on itself, you know. No, I—I've maintained a good—I think I—I've—I won't be able to spend any time this—on this trip, but I usually check in, and we go out and have at least a fairly num—a large number of the writers and I will go out and have lunch together and chew the fat and get—tell lies and [*SL laughs*] get updated. [*Laughter*] So . . .

[02:38:55] SL: That's good, though.

CJ: Yeah.

SL: Who can tell the biggest lie?

CJ: Yeah. [*Laughter*] So those are—you know, those are good gatherings.

SL: Yeah.

CJ: I enjoy that, so . . .

[02:39:05] SL: Well, okay, now we can come back to all things poetry at any moment. But, you know, Trey and Joy brought some stuff up, and you know, it's okay to kind of commit philosophy during the—these sessions. And it's kind of an opportunity for the interviewee to kind of say what's—the way they feel about stuff. And, you know, you certainly have great amount of experience as far as economies go and the forces that affect economy and how economy affects culture and, you know, the lives of people. And you touched upon it a little bit—you mentioned earlier that there's a difference between the work that is proliferated out of Washington, DC, and the stuff that can happen at a more local level at state and municipal levels. And I—I'm just wondering, is there anything—any observation or any position that you can offer up that may—oh, I don't know, guide or help clarify or maybe establish what you—how things ought to

be or how things or how things work and how things don't work or what makes things work and what makes things fail. So do you have—I mean . . .

CJ: Sure. I mean, I . . .

SL: . . . in your experience . . .

[02:40:58] CJ: In my experience, there—I think there are a couple of things I'd like to comment on related to that, and one is  quality of leadership which—I look back a number of years, and I think I—I've earned the right to do that—look back to the days when we had people in Congress whose primary—and the criterion that was used is what can they do and what should they be doing for the country as—at large, not either for interest groups or for political party. But in some ways it didn't really matter. If you go back and you see the time of Everett Dirksen and J. W. Fulbright , John McClellan , John Kennedy, Kenneth Keating, Jacob Javits, Wayne Morris, the tiger of the Senate and the independent; Frank Church—I mean, you can sort of—Smathers—you can go on. These were—generally speaking, these were people or—of real integrity and intelligence, but there may—and it didn't matter whether they were Republicans or Democrats or independents. Their major focus was, "What is best for the country?" And that's what they judged each other

about—not whether it's best for the Democratic Party or best for the Republican Party. And in many ways, the quality of those people—and you can include Wilbur Mills in that group as well—I mean, my God, he basically was the architect of the—when he was chair of the Ways and Means Committee—architect of the tax program for a generation. I mean, we've gotten away from it a little bit. [02:43:13] But to the—I don't think—if those men were alive today, they wouldn't be in Congress. They wouldn't be in the Senate—because they are men of—that would have—would not qualify to be—to met [CJ edit: meet] the litmus test of whether you're a good Democrat or whether you're a good Republican, and that being a primary role of what you're about. And that is a litmus test that people have to meet, which means to me that the quality of the people in Washington have—particularly on the legislative side—have—had deteriorated, and I worry about that in a major way. I just—and to—because when you have that kind of quality deteriorate, the decisions that ultimately get made are short term, inconsistent, small, parochial, partisan, political—all adjectives that I would consider reflective of a diminution in both the work that comes out of Washington, as well as the quality of the people who go into Washington. And I think that it is a terrible reflection of the

world that we're—that we, as the world of America, is now part of. And I decry that in a significant way. [02:45:14] The second area I would focus on is that at the state and local level, as I said earlier, decisions have to be made. Sewer lines have to be open. Water lines have to be available. Streets have to be passable. Bridges can't collapse. And accountability exists. And that's why—as I've said earlier, why I felt it was so important to me to concentrate, after having worked in Washington for a couple of years, to really decide I—this is where—you know, people—the state and local sector is where it's at in terms of making decisions and dealing with issues. [02:46:08] And what I'm frustrated about in terms of the policy implementation is that I—over time, if you don't have a balance and a recognition of public/private partnerships and working out solutions, it's just—the country is gonna continue to deteriorate. I mean, our educational system is—you know, I mean, we're—we have fallen behind there. Our infrastructure is deteriorating—our physical infrastructure is deteriorating. We're behind there. And I ascribe that to sort of overzealous privatization—that there's—that there isn't the recognition that the governmental sector, including the federal government, in combination with state and local and the private sector, can really establish goals and meet

them together. I am—I've been dissuaded. I've [CJ edit: I'm] forever dissuaded that the private sector is exclusively the way to go in getting things done in this country. If there isn't a balanced approach—there has to be a balanced approach. There isn't the—it's gonna be disproportionate, and there are going to be results that none of us are going to be proud of. And I wish this whole tilt toward massive privatization was a thing of the past. I wish that we could prove somehow—the problem is it's very—it's extraordinarily difficult to prove that privatization can't work except when you live through it. [02:48:09] And I'm—and, again, that's the second great criticism that I have of the trend—the—our—the current policy and legislative environment that we now live in—absence of quality—particularly in Washington—I'm not talkin' about state and local—but absence of quality leadership, particularly in the legislative branch in Washington, and this fantasy that everything has to be privatized, which will not work; and a hundred years from now, we're gonna be damn sorry that we developed this philosophy, and we adhered to it for too frigging long. So . . .

[02:49:04] SL: You know, the—it seems to me that, you know, there were—even back—and Eisenhower, you know, he warned about the military-industrial complex and how the companies would

start wielding power.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: And now, you know, you—this—that has kind of come to pass. I mean the corporate presence in politics is now pretty much freewheeling. It's a—with the Supreme Court determining that a corporation is a person, has the same rights as a person—really is a game changer in a very fundamental way. And you—you know, the—there's a lot of talk about the—you know, pledges never to do something—never vote for this.

CJ: Right.

SL: Never vote for that. All . . .

[02:50:26] CJ: Can you imagine a J. William Fulbright or an Everett Dirksen being asked to—or even consider making that kind of pledge? I mean, they would've laughed the person out of the room. We're talking about a country that's gotta survive. We've got a country that's gotta thrive, and you want me to buy in on—I mean, it's like what senator—the previous Senator Simpson said the other night. It wasn't specifically [*laughs*] about pledging, but he said, "You know, Ronald Reagan raised taxes eleven times in his administration. Why in God's name would you agree [*laughs*] to something pledged like this? You know, I mean, it's—I mean, we've got a government to run.

We've got a country to not only just survive, it's gotta prevail."
And to take those kinds of what I would call a land of
Lilliputians—you know, of the small being. That's what I mean in
terms of—everything gets smaller and those—when you make
those kinds of small decisions, everything—the results from it
become small. So we're—you know, we've—we are living in a
world of Lilliputians, and I—where things have gotten a lot
smaller. [02:51:54] And—but I mean, I—I've tried to bring that
from—you can't even imagine Dirksen making that kind—'cause
I'm using this—I'm typically a Democrat. So you [*SL laughs*] run
Dirksen from—you know, Republicans up to Simpson, who is
Republican—but even Simpson said, you know, "We have a
government to run. We have a country to run." Why in the
world would you agree not—I mean, this is a tool that you can
use to solve problems. I mean, why in the world would you
use—would you refuse to use that as a tool in the right set of
circumstances? And I'm not—you know, I mean, it was—it's
extraordinary to me. It's an extraordinary period for me and I—
so I've lost a lot of interest in politics in my—you know, so I can
seek refuge in my poetry, so [*laughter*] . . .

SL: Well, you know, that's the danger—when people give up and
don't participate and lose faith in their form of government. All

kinds of things . . .

CJ: No, I agree with that. I . . .

SL: . . . happen, so . . .

CJ: Well, yeah, you can tell I'm passionate about it, so I really haven't lost interest. [*Laughter*] I just get pissed off.

SL: Well, there's a big difference.

CJ: So . . .

[02:53:10] SL: Well, you know, I think you and I could probably banter back and forth for a long time 'cause—and, you know, quite frankly, I think the entire country is starting to be very suspect about that notion that you can have it all one way . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . or no way.

CJ: Right.

SL: The consequences are starting to come to bear. And, you know, I also—it seems to me that history is manipulated—that they—any—you know, they evoke different names in history, and they're really—they're not good [*laughs*] examples . . .

CJ: Right. I agree . . .

SL: . . . for their case.

CJ: . . . with that. Right.

[02:53:55] SL: And in the instance of Simpson bringing up Reagan.

CJ: Right.

SL: But—and also there seems to be ignoring history as well. It's like, you know, if you put all your marbles in this one basket it's—you know, in the past it did not work. What makes you think it's going to work now?

CJ: Right.

SL: And—I mean, what about—you know, we've talked a lot about civil rights and racism and all of that. I—seems to me that that's kinda bubbling up as well. I mean, I see evidence that, you know, anything—not to let this president be reelected.

CJ: Mh-hmm.

SL: There's undertones there for—it completely disregards all of his credentials and all that he's put forth and . . .

CJ: Right.

SL: . . . tried to do. It's an interesting, dangerous time, I think.

[02:54:49] CJ: Yeah, it's a—but I'm not sure the country's ready to make any bold decisions. You know, it's very difficult when we're finding the economy being—teetering and with high unemployment what it—and there is clearly not the mandate either from the public or—to do something of a—you know, of a public nature to—on a temporary basis. And it's—you know, any—all you have to do is go back to—and I'm not—and I—well,

I won't use an example, but bad policy can come out of extreme circumstances and—or difficult circumstances. And I think we're—you know, we're in that—we're in the period where you do need some bold decisions, but they can be put in place, and we're probably gonna be paying for it for a while. And . . .

SL: Yeah.

[02:56:08] CJ: . . . you know, we're—I do worry, to some extent, whether we're going to be like Japan and have a decade of less-than-robust growth, unless we can—unless in some fashion, technology again rescues us. And you can go—you know, you can back—go back over a number of generations, and technology on a—you know, can frequently rescue governmental policy. And technology can rescue bad governmental policy, and you know, you're—so we—you know, we could—I mean, if you talk about the Internet, I mean, that's—that had—that has served us very well in terms of the productivity levels that have been achieved in this country over a long period of time. And maybe we'll find something like that again that can resurrect a less-than-robust country at this point.

SL: Well, you know, I committed a great sin in kind of expounding on what I see is—and that's—you know, interviewers are not supposed to do that. We're supposed to . . .

CJ: No, it's okay.

SL: . . . remain neutral. But I do th—I do sense that we are in the process of the consequences of bad decisions and bad policy and the—I think the consequences this time around are pretty extraordinary—I mean, wide reaching. Wider than usual, I think. But we're in an unusual time in our history. So, yeah, it kind of remains to be seen how [*laughs*] we get out of this.
I . . .

[02:58:14] CJ: Right, but I—you know, I—it's not going to be—in part, the country—citizens will need to relate well with their neighbors. It's not—and to the extent you bring this down to what is good for—you know, the old Tip O'Neill line of, you know, "All politics is local." And I think there's a lot of truth in that.
 And there's a lot—I mean, Occupy Wall Street—I walk by them every Sunday and—'cause the one's—it's—the park is between St. Paul's and Trinity Wall Street, and as I say, I go to ten o'clock service at St. Paul's and the eleven fifteen at Trinity Wall Street. And right in the middle is the Zuccotti Park, and so I go right through Occupy Wall Street every Sunday. And, you know, that—it's—I don't care whether—what side of the issue you are—you're on—that is in an effort to reach out, person to person, brother to brother, sister to sister, brother to sister, and try to

develop something from grassroots. And that's—that ain't bad. I—it's not—I mean, that's what we are—you know, it's gotta be—and it was regardless—I mean, everybody—when you look at that park, you know, there's ever color, every type of person in the cross-section of the country. [02:59:57] And that's good. I mean, I know—you know, there are a lot of things that'd been going on Occupy Wall Street that we can find fault with, but it's not bad when you start something from a grassroots—Jefferson would've been proud for getting a grassroots message going. And I find that encouraging. I find it very encouraging 'cause I think those are the sorts of movements that ultimately we all have to listen to and—regardless of what—I mean, in some ways, some of the things they say are not [*laughs*] unlike the—what the Tea Party is saying. You know, I mean—you know, and—I mean, I have some strong views about the Tea Party and why you don't see very many African Americans among the Tea Party members. But in some ways, the thing's happening . . .

SL: Yeah.

CJ: . . . at Occupy Wall Street. So . . .

SL: Well, where else do we need to go here? Is there anything else that . . .

CJ: I don't—I can't think of anything. I mean, now, we've—I think

we've—you know, I've tried to respond to your questions and—
but maybe I put myself out on a limb a little bit on some [*SL*
laughs] of this, but . . .

SL: Well, me, too.

CJ: Right.

SL: I'm probably guilty of that on this time around.

CJ: Right.

SL: But, you know, it's fun, and I love the conversation.

[03:01:29 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]