



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA
THE DOY LEALE McCALL
RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

DTB 037 Marlon D. Gaines
Down the Bay Oral History Project (DTB), Acc. 757
Interviewed by Kern Jackson on July 5, 2022
45 minute audio recording • 26 page transcript

Abstract: In this interview, Marlon Gaines is interviewed by Kern Jackson in Mobile, Alabama. Mr. Gaines explains that he grew up first in Maysville, and then his family moved Down the Bay. He talks about attending different schools in Mobile, and some of his family history, and then relates his thoughts on the boundaries of Down the Bay. Mr. Gaines talks about where he got his hair cut growing up, offers reflection on his current profession as a barber, and talks about his and his wife's kayak business.

The Down the Bay Oral History Project focuses on the historic Down the Bay neighborhood on the south side of Mobile, Alabama. Led by Drs. Philip Carr and Kern Jackson of the University of South Alabama, in collaboration with the McCall Library, the project took shape in conjunction with archaeological mitigation work for the I-10 bridge expansion. Down the Bay is a historically Black and Creole neighborhood, and a central focus of the project has been to document the constant threat of gentrification and the legacy of urban renewal.

Preface: This is a transcript of an oral history recording archived at the McCall Library of the University of South Alabama. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word which has been minimally edited for readability.



Use Rights: This interview is provided under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License. The interviewee(s) retain copyright, but the recording and transcript may be used for noncommercial purposes (research, education, etc.), so long as the narrator and archive are appropriately credited. This interview **cannot be used for commercial purposes** without the express written consent of the individual(s) providing the content for the interview.

DTB 037 Marlon Demetrius Gaines

Interviewed July 5, 2022

This is a verbatim transcript of an oral history interview recording, composed and formatted in accordance with the McCall Library transcription style guide.

Verbatim transcription is a style of representing as closely as possible the exact wording and phrasing of the speakers on the recording, though false starts, repetitious phrases, and other minor edits have been made as needed only for the sake of clarity and readability. Readers of this transcript are strongly encouraged to listen to the recording.

Please note that if any text is **bolded** in the transcript, this indicates uncertainty of either spelling or accuracy of transcription regarding what was said. Italics indicate emphasis, or are applied to titles and similar proper nouns.

This interview was transcribed by:

Draft transcript:	Candice Fairchild, 2022
Audit-edit:	Ryan Morini, November 15, 2022
Final edit:	Ryan Morini, October 6, 2023

DTB 037

Narrator: Marlon D. Gaines

Interviewer: Kern Jackson

Date: July 5, 2022

J: My glasses!

G: Oh man, you messing up now!

J: Dude.

G: I'm thinking about having that Lasik surgery.

J: I'm right behind you.

G: Serious, man.

J: I'm right behind you.

G: I'm getting tired of wiping these glasses. They talking about—everybody I know talking about 2200 an eye!

J: 2200 dollars an eye? Jesus!

G: That's almost five grand!

J: That's like, you have to get your eyes on credit! [Laughter]

G: For real! You serious.

J: 2200 dollars?

G: Seriously. I'm getting tired of the sun and the doggone mist in my eyes. The sun, and then wiping these glasses all the time. The sun bother my eyes so bad, it's ridiculous.

J: I just get tired of—I don't have glasses-glasses yet.

G: What?

J: I just have readers, because I can see fine far away. It's this that gets me.

G: Man, you better get you some glasses!

J: Man, they told me I ain't need them.

G: For real?

J: They told me to go to the drugstore and get some readers. But I think I'm aged out of that.

G: I did readers for a minute, but I noticed that—like, I can see all that on the wall, but close up, like when I'm doing afros, and looking at loose ends?

J: Yeah, you can't.

G: I said, "I need some nearsighted."

J: Yeah. I ran into that brother Nick. Nicholas? At a barbecue on Saturday.

G: He **talkative, don't he?**

J: Oh, my goodness! He talked like a preacher, man.

G: Nick want to be a preacher, but I don't know what you call it. He been renting from me about seven or eight years or whatever.

J: Oh no. Auto power off? Why are you turning off? Don't do *that* to me. What's going on?

G: I like your setup, man.

J: Yeah, but shoot; I can't have the power going out on me. I might have to run and get the cord, see how much juice I got. Oh, I got plenty juice. Got plenty juice. Go ahead. Got my questions on my phone.

G: Oh, prepared!

J: Oh yeah, I'mma blow it up.

G: Prepared!

J: So first, Marlon, let me just thank you for participating in the Down the Bay project. We really appreciate it. Just for some context, like we said before, this project came out of a grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation, and we're doing an oral history Down the Bay, and also archaeological digs along Conception Street. And so, this is in preparation for putting the new bridge across the bay.

G: Oh, okay. Okay.

J: Yeah. So as we get started, why don't I just—today is the 5th of July, and we're having this interview at your barber shop. Why don't you go ahead and get you to give your full name.

G: My name is Marlon Demetrius Gaines. I'm from Mobile, Alabama. I have a wife and kids, five children. My wife is LaKeisha McAlpine Gaines. I'm a native of Mobile, and my mom is Renay Gaines Phifer, and my father's Eddie Phifer.

J: All right! That's cool, man. Is your wife one of those McAlpines—they used to live on Palmetto Street?

G: Yeah, that's them. That's her family.

J: Okay. Because I remember the sign on the house.

G: Yep, that's her family.

J: Take the kids trick-or-treating over there.

G: It's a bunch of them.

J: Ton of kids.

G: Yep.

J: All right, cool. So, I know that we had spoken previously about growing up around Lyons Park, and then moving—what year did you and your family move Down the Bay?

G: I was born in Maysville, and we moved Down the Bay when I was like, about nine years old.

- J: And what was the the residence you grew up in?
- G: On Garrity Street. Over on Garrity Street. And then we moved from down there. We stayed there a year because my mom didn't really like the area, and then we moved by Lyons Park. So, we lived by Lyons Park from the age of 10 till about 16. So, we stayed over there six years. And then we left there, and then we moved over there on Navco. And we didn't like that, because when it rained, the grass was just too spongy. And it took a long time for the water just to dry out. Then we ended up moving Down the Bay, and that's when we just went on the sublet, and bought that house Down the Bay.
- J: What's the address of the house Down the Bay?
- G: 454 Augusta Street.
- J: Augusta Street, that's right across the street from Texas Street Park.
- G: Exactly. On the backside of Texas Street Rec.
- J: And for years and years and years, I've been seeing your dad go by on his truck with them pallets on it.
- G: Exactly.
- J: So, what did your dad do for a living?
- G: Well, he was in the pallet business for about 30-some years, and he worked for hisself.
- J: Tell us, because this is important: pallets are really important in Mobile. Tell us what the pallet business is all about.
- G: Well, people normally use pallets for forklifts to pick up heavy loads, and keep everything together. And pallets come in different classes: A, B, and C. A mean they real good. B mean they, you know, mid-grade, they all right. And C mean they on the low end. But that's how they price them. My dad tried to get me to get in it when I was younger, because I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I told him, "No, this not for me!" [Laughter] But I realized it's a good business, especially for if it's somebody that don't know what they want to do. I enjoyed it for the time being,

but I had to move on. I guess that's kind of where I learned my entrepreneurial skills from.

J: Oh, from him?

G: Yeah.

J: What do you mean? Be more specific.

G: He always worked for himself, you know? He was born in Greenville, Alabama. He say he left Greenville when he was about 15 or 16 years old, and he moved to New York and lived in New York for 20 years. And he said it just got too cold for him up there, and he say he just came on back to Mobile. He said he just learned how to hustle; you know, even though he had a job, he just learned how to hustle on the side. And he used to hustle aluminum, copper, and brass, and steel. And when he met my mom, he was doing it at the time. And when I seen how he did it, it just amazed me because he did it in such a big volume. And he cut it down with like a torch. He had a torch, like a welding torch. And he cut all that metal up and cleaned it, and put it in big 4x4 boxes. And I was like, "Woah!" And when we went to the recycle center, and I used to see the checks he used to get, I was like, "Woah! I didn't know there was this type of money in it!" And that's what drew my attention to it.

J: Where was the recycle center at?

G: At the time, we was going to the one over there behind Orange Grove. We was going to that recycle center over there behind Orange Grove, and it was another one in Crichton on, I think that's Bayshore. So.

J: Let's see. Now, tell us a little bit about where you went to school and stuff.

G: I went to school—I started out at Craighead. And I left Craighead, went to Maryvale. Then Maryvale to Old Shell Road, then I left Old Shell Road and went to Azalea Road, then Booker T., then Murphy; finished from B.C. Rain.

J: When you drive by Old Shell Road School, what do you think about it now, your old school?

G: I say, "Man, that was a good school!" I really enjoyed that school. I enjoyed the atmosphere. I had a teacher there—because I went there in the fourth and fifth

grade—named Mr. Thomas. I could read very well, but I had a problem with comprehension. And he took time out and worked on me with comprehension. And we started having a definition test every Friday, and that's what helped me on my comprehension. And when I look back at it, I said, "Man, I really thank that guy. He really took time out and really helped me."

J: What's there now where Old Shell Road school is?

G: They turned them into condos.

J: Okay, okay. Maryvale, Booker T. So, you didn't really go to school Down the Bay?

G: No. No, I did not. I take that back: I went to Council one year. Sorry, I went to Council one year. Yeah.

J: Okay then; you hit all the schools, man!

G: I pretty much did! Because we lived in different parts on this end over here—over here in east and south Mobile. And when my mom found a spot that she really liked, that's where we stayed at. And the whole family was happy with the house.

J: Tell me this: what was your mom looking for when she was looking for a spot she liked?

G: Peace and good neighbors. Yep. Peace and good neighbors. She really liked the house by Lyons Park, but the guy didn't want to sell it. We was renting that house, and he didn't want to sell it. So, when we found the house Down the Bay, we fell in love with that house.

J: When you was coming up, what were the boundaries of Down the Bay? Where did it start and end and stuff.

G: You know what? Now, that's a good question. A lot of people considered Down the Bay because, you know, you got this big bay right here. And anybody that live around this whole body of water right down here in the downtown Mobile area was considered Down the Bay—even though they was from Orange Grove. "Orange Grove" just let you know what area you was from, but it still was considered Down the Bay.

J: Really?

- G: Yeah, but mostly people considered Down the Bay mostly from Canal Street, you know Broad Street, all the way down to—I think that's Interstate 65 [read: I-10?], and that Exxon by Ladas Drugstore.
- J: Baltimore Street.
- G: Baltimore Street. But still, people consider on the other end of Broad Street part of Down the Bay too, also.
- J: I never knew that, man.
- G: Yeah. But mostly, they really said, "Them the real Down the Bay people," that was on this side of Broad Street.
- J: Mhm. I got you. When y'all lived Down the Bay, did y'all go to the Mardi Gras?
- G: Yes, we did. And then, we had a lot of people that—friends and family used to come to our house and park, because we lived so close to the Mardi Gras area.
- J: Yeah, folks don't really realize that if you live Down the Bay, your yard, your front and backyard, sort of become a parking lot during Mardi Gras.
- G: It does, it does.
- J: Was this the case for you, that your house became like the spot to gather at?
- G: Yeah. And we really didn't mind, you know. Because when I was younger, we used to get a lot of company. And as I got older, my mom and them, we didn't hardly have that much company as much. But for Mardi Gras, we had like a little cookout, family event; they would come by. Mardi Gras is one of them time of year where we knew they was going to pop up and come by. So.
- J: Where would y'all stand as teenagers?
- G: Basically when I was in high school, I used to go mostly by the McDonalds, and then when it started getting a little rough I just started easing from down to McDonalds and just going on Broad Street and Springhill.
- J: Were there a lot of kids from Down the Bay who was going to school at B.C. Rain?

G: Yes, it was.

J: Now, how would y'all get there? Was it busing then? Or how'd y'all get to school?

G: I caught the bus most of the time. Then I had a little car to drive sometimes, and I had a motorcycle so I used to drive that sometimes.

J: Who was your principal?

G: At the time—I forgot his name! I forgot the guy name. I can't think his name right now. That's a good question.

J: That's all right, that's all right. We been out of high school a long time! [Laughter]

G: Yeah, 30 years, man! So, that's a long time. That's a long time!

J: You were telling me about, you know, as a barber, where you used to get your hair cut. Tell me about some of the spots along the way you used to get your hair cut.

G: In the Down the Bay area, I used to go to a guy named Noon's. I used to go to Noon's sometimes.

J: Where was he at?

G: Right there on Charles Street. How should I say it? You know where Gayle Street at?

J: Mmhm.

G: Charles Street run parallel to Gayle. What's that street come right along the public works, and where Naman's used to be at, Naman's Grocery Store?

J: New Jersey?

G: New Jersey Street. It was right off of New Jersey Street.

J: Noons, did you know him from anywhere else?

G: No, I met him through my mom' friend. She used to work there, her name was **Deborah Blaire**. And Deborah used to work there with Noon, and she used to cut

my hair. And she was a good friend of the family. I been knowing her for a long time.

J: Where else did you get it cut?

G: I used to go to Greg's before I started going to Noon's.

J: Was he on Duval Street then?

G: Yeah, Greg was on Duval Street.

J: Greg Morris?

G: He was, he was on Duval Street back then. Yep.

J: And then, where was the first shop you worked at?

G: The first shop I worked at was—believe it or not, it was Bayshore Barbering.

J: Where is Bayshore Barber?

G: In Crichton. And this lady named Diane Buchanan, she owned it. She had a salon and a barber shop. And then I left her and went around to Exclusive, because they had a little higher volume around there. So I went to work at Exclusive for Bo Trotter. So, I worked there for about three years, then I went in business for myself.

J: And where was your first shop at?

G: On the corner of St. Francis and Claiborne downtown.

J: Which is now—is it still there, or did they tear it down?

G: It's still there. It's a bar now. I still would've been there, but I was trying to buy the building and they didn't want to sell it to me, so I ended up moving to this location.

J: What do you think—that's the second time you mentioned selling and not being able to buy when you're ready to buy; what do you think that's all about?

G: Well, everything is about timing, you know? I guess it wasn't the right time. That wasn't what God had for me at that moment. I think this is what He had for me.

- J: When I first came to Mobile, you was down there, and you had a couple of barbers with you. Talk about the barbers who was with you.
- G: Man, I went through so many barbers, man! I had—
- J: I'm talking about the ones that were there long-term.
- G: Long-term? Most of them there that was with me long-term, they went on to get they own shop, man.
- J: Like who?
- G: Monteil Fluker, he went and got his own shop. He was there with me for about a year and a half or two. Brandon Levrett, he went on to get his own shop. He end up passing. He was there with me about three years.
- J: What was his nickname?
- G: Beehive. Yep. They went on and started doing pretty good for theyself. They got some real good shops, too. Thriving shops. Good business, too.
- J: You and I have been talking about small business and barber shops for years. And what constitutes being a good barber, number one, and what constitutes having a shop that thrives?
- G: Discipline.
- J: Talk about it.
- G: Discipline, being on time, and you know, running it proficiently and keeping it clean. And keeping respectable people in there. Keep God in it, you know, keep the good in and evil out.
- J: Because evil can gather at the barber shop sometimes.
- G: Quick! Quick, man. [Laughter] So, it just take discipline, that's all. And if it's in you, you can do it.
- J: How long you been at this spot here on Springhill Avenue?

G: 12 and half years.

J: Wow.

G: 12 and a half years.

J: Time fly, Marlon!

G: This is a good location too!

J: Oh, shoot; it's about to jump off, dude.

G: Man.

J: Talk about Springhill. What's happening on Springhill quarter, between Broad and Five Point?

G: It's been a lot of development. A lot of things are changing. With downtown growing, it seem like they starting to branch out outside of downtown. With them fixing Broad Street, it seem like everything starting to come this way. I can see the change since they started developing downtown.

J: I know the answer to this already, but talk to me about owning land, owning property, and the importance of it.

G: Well, to me, you got to retire one day. And I think it give you an edge as far as, you know, you got something to fall on. Because you going to get old one day. And Social Security and SSI, that helps, but you still going to need that other little cushion to add on to it. Everything going up today, everything's getting more expensive. So, every little bit counts.

J: I'mma ask you a couple of questions about your eye as a small business owner. In the Down the Bay area when you were coming up, what were some of the businesses you frequented—period? What were some of the businesses that were there and around?

G: Well, in the Down the Bay area, I remember going to some of the small businesses—like the shoe shop downtown. The peanut shop. Reflections, that was

a clothing store. Naman's—they still down there. They been down there probably about 50 or 60 years. Al Hotdogs, I used to go down there a lot.

J: How about over on the south side of Broad Street?

G: I remember going to Naman's Grocery Store. Church's Chicken sometimes. Greer's. What else? King's Package Store. The carwash.

J: Where is King's Package Store?

G: It's next to the car wash, right there on the corner of Broad and Texas.

J: And tell people what a package store is, please, and what they carry.

G: [Laughter] A package store is like a mini convenience store, like a little Circle K, but it's just privately owned, and it's convenient. They have drinks, chips, snacks. Anything to that make it convenient. Toilet paper. Anything to make life easier. But you know, beer, liquor, wine, whatever you want.

J: And the people who own the package store, how do they make their money?

G: Buy and sell. Buy low and sell high. That's how they make they money.

J: They sell everything a little higher, just to make it work. You know, there used to be a lot of package stores.

G: Actually, I think it's a good, legitimate business because it's needed. A lot of folks just don't want to leave the neighborhood after they get settled in. And they going to buy from a package store, you know? You know, they like the convenience of it. People have a schedule. Like my schedule at home, me and my wife, you know, we'll go to the grocery store and buy our big items, you know. Especially, like, we'll go to the wholesale, like Costco and Sam's. But then, sometimes we just don't want to go to Costco and Sam's. We go to Rouse's, Piggly Wiggly. Then sometimes, we don't want to go to Piggly Wiggly. We'll just go to the gas station and pick up a little something—just for convenience. So, that's where the package store thrives at, you know? Convenience. You know you going to pay for it, but—[Laughter]—sometimes, you can't win, you know?

J: Sometime the convenience outweighs the cost.

G: Yep! And you'll pay for the convenience.

J: Yeah, you will.

G: Yep.

J: Every time.

G: I don't mind sometimes, you know?

J: And you can't—we always talk about that when I'm in the chair: you can't always worry about it, you know?

G: I don't. I got where I don't even worry about it, man. I just realize that I've got to work, got to eat.

J: Speaking of eating, you know, like with our families, we go to Costco or Walmart or whatever, but when you was coming up in Down the Bay, where would your mom and dad shop?

G: They used to go to Winn Dixie a lot.

J: Which one?

G: You know what? It used to be Delchamps back in the days. That was the store, Delchamps.

J: Catherine and Government.

G: Catherine and Government, that was our spot. And then it turned to a Winn Dixie later on. Yep, that was our spot.

J: Tell me about—let's switch to food. Tell me about a meal—first of all, do you have any brothers or sisters?

G: I have two sisters.

J: What's their names?

G: **Kirsten and Crystal.**

J: **Keirsten** and **Crystal**. Now, was y'all all in the house together at one point?

G: Yes.

J: Okay, because you have to ask. Because I have sisters that, I was gone when they came along! [Laughter]

G: Yeah, I understand.

J: But what was one thing that y'all as siblings really looked forward to your mother cooking?

G: Seafood.

J: Talk about it, how? Done how?

G: Man, fried, and they mostly cooked it on Fridays. Then, we used to fish a lot, me and my dad.

J: Where?

G: All over Mobile! We used to fish a lot. On the Causeway, Dauphin Island, Pensacola; because my dad had, his baby sister lived in Pensacola. We used to go there and stay with her on the weekend, and we used to go on that Pensacola bridge and go there and fish a lot.

J: What y'all catch?

G: Man, we used to catch reds, specks, Spanish mackerel, king mackerel, catfish, shark. Catch everything, man. We used to fish a lot, man!

J: Were there any spots convenient—let's say within walking distance, or bike, or short car drive—that was part of Down the Bay? Fishing spot?

G: At one time before it became Cooper Side River Park [read: Riverside], we used to fish at Cooper Side River Park sometime. It used to be called "the foot of Government Street." We used to go there and fish. It was pretty good fishing over there, because that water's pretty deep. And we used to drive over there, but it still was walking distance. Because you got to think, you don't want to tote no big cooler

with a lot of fish back Down the Bay. That's heavy—and ice! So, we used to fish over there a lot.

J: Do you fish with your boys and little girls?

G: Yeah, I do. Actually, we had—I was walking around Municipal Park yesterday, and one of my little boys was fishing, and the other one was skating. And then my other oldest little boy, he was over his aunt' house. It started raining on us, matter of fact. And my son that was fishing, he said that he saw an eight-foot alligator.

J: In Municipal Park?

G: Yep. And a friend of mine took a picture of one and showed it to me, it looked like it was bigger than that. Like about a 12-footer. In Municipal Park.

J: That's not good! All them children that go over there! [Laughter]

G: But guess what? They have signs around there.

J: Oh, they do? That say "Alligators Present?" Okay.

G: We kayak in there. And there people like, "Man, what you going to do if an alligator get after you?"

J: Yeah, you were telling me that you and your wife started a kayak business. How many y'all got?

G: 20. 20 kayaks.

J: And you rent them out in a how many mile radius?

G: A 13-mile radius. It's called Mobile Kayak Company.

J: Tell me about that. Because that speaks to leisure in Mobile. How did y'all decide, how did she decide to do that?

G: Man, you going laugh when I tell you this! It was her idea. She actually—we was kayaking before we went into the business. She liked it so much, so she just went on and got some more kayaks and just went in business. But she had to stand

before the city council in order to do it, because they got a program where they wanted us to pair up with them.

J: Did you?

G: Yeah, we had to in order to use the City of Mobile parks. In order to sit on they land. We can deliver there, but we wanted to sit up on they land also. So, we had to kind of team up with them.

J: Sure.

G: And it's a good thing, because what it does is, it help us advertise. That's one. Two, you know, anything that the park and recreation have going on, we on they website also. And we have our own website. And then on top of that, we got push cards where we have them in all the hotels locally around here. You'll see our push cards in the hotel; they real professionally done. My wife did them, and they look real good. She good at that kind of stuff.

J: Both of y'all are like small business geniuses.

G: Man, she got a live band, and it does pretty good.

J: What's the name of the band?

G: Ising Show Band. Look up on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram; and she have videos also. Have a website also, so.

J: When y'all talk about doing business, or starting a business, or extending your business like you've done here with the toupees and stuff: what kinds of things do y'all strategize about Mobile when y'all go into a new venture?

G: Well, these last two businesses that we went into, it's more catered to the tourists. Like, the kayak business cater to the tourists. My website is catered to people in Mobile, all around the United States. Anybody can come and use our business if they decide to, because it's open to the public. The business that I really think going to just sure enough take off-take off is my wife' kayak business. I think all them going to take off, but I think that kayak business for some reason—. I told her, because when we first started, we just go so many people, man. It was crazy! And I was like, I say, "You onto something. You really onto something." I said, "Just wait." And when it really took off is when we sat up there, and we was running

Facebook ads. And we was getting a lot of people booking online. And my wife, right now she was kind of worried about it. I said, "Nah, don't be worried. Trust me. You just opened this business; you got to steady it." I said, "It might be too hot for people to kayak right now. This is the summertime." I said, "People might kayak more in the spring and the fall. Because you got to think: Mobile is a city where it never really get cold-cold, so they going kayak year-round. So, you just learning the business, really. Just give it time." I said, "Watch: I think that business going to take off."

J: I already know that when go back to school, when the kids go back to school, the Cub Scout troop coming to y'all's kayak business. I'm already going tell you.

G: Well, hey: she waiting. How many troops do y'all have?

J: We got about a good 45 kids in the pack.

G: Well, what that'll do, man—

J: But not all of them are old enough to kayak. So, some of them is five years old.

G: No, they not old enough.

J: But the ones that are—we got about 20 of them or 15 of them that are, like, 10 and up. And—

G: We recommend like, seven, eight years old to kayak. Because we got some six-footers, some eight-footers, ten-footers and twelve-footers.

J: And what's the best spot for them, beginners?

G: I would say Municipal Park.

J: Because they already go down to Municipal Park to do the—you know how they have them apple snails clean up?

G: Yeah.

J: Yeah, we already go down there for that.

- G: I kayak in Municipal Park with my kids all the time. *All* the time. And, you know, once you—we start over there on Zeigler and Springhill, right there by the Museum of Arts. We'll start right there, and we'll go all the way around on the other side to the other side at the waterfall, then circle and come back. Take about 45 minutes, maybe an hour. And the kayaks, they float pretty fast through the water. So, good workout too.
- J: That's the thing. Let's get back to your mom and daddy. So, your daddy was from Greenville; where was mom from?
- G: My mom right here from Mobile.
- J: What part?
- G: Maysville.
- J: Okay. Okay. Did you grow up with your grandparents at all?
- G: Man, you might not believe this: my grandmother, she died when my mom was 10 years old, and my grandfather passed when I was like eight years old.
- J: So, you sort of knew your granddaddy?
- G: Yeah.
- J: What was his name?
- G: Ellis Gaines.
- J: And where was Ellis Gaines from?
- G: I want to say, I think he told me it was like Kansas? I forgot how he ended up in Mobile. Yeah. I think it was Kansas.
- J: To get back to Down the Bay, what were some of your fondest memories—I didn't ask you what your mom did for a living.
- G: My mom really was a stay-at-home mom, and then she started working over at Bishop State.

J: What was she doing over to Bishop State?

G: She worked in the child care.

J: Yeah. Is that where you went?

G: I went to Bishop State. I went to Bishop State for barbering, cosmetology, and business.

J: Who was over there in barbering when you were studying, learning?

G: Mr. Lucy.

J: Didn't he have a shop?

G: He had about four shops. He had four shops, and taught at Bishop.

J: Because I think he was on St. Stephens Road.

G: He was! I think his son over there now. I think his son at his shop. He was a pretty good teacher, too, man. He was a pretty good teacher, man. Real good teacher.

J: What were some of his pet peeves that you still attribute and remember him teaching you?

G: Hey, you got to be there.

J: You started out with that.

G: Yeah, you got to be there. Got to be there to make money, man. You can't just, because you got freedom in this business—and that's where a lot of barbers fail at. And that's one thing he was trying to get us to see: just because you have freedom, you got a barber license, and you can make your own time, don't abuse it. And if you stick by that, which is the fundamentals, you'll be all right.

J: I didn't ask you: when y'all was coming up, what was y'all's home church?

G: Man, St. Paul AME on Michigan Avenue. We started out at St. Paul.

J: Who was y'all's pastor?

G: Reverend Davis. And then Reverend Davis left, and then Reverend Cook came.

J: Tell me about Sundays going to church, especially when you were a teenager. Tell me about the neighborhood and tell me about that window from 9 to 2 on Sundays.

G: Oh, man! That was like a daily—I mean, a weekly routine: Sunday school and church. And it's like, church was all day. Sunday school was about an hour and a half, then you go to church. And church was from, what? About 11 to about 2. It was like, "Man, you have to stay in church all day!" Yep. But I went to St. Paul AME. It's still there. And then, it is a pretty big church, an African Methodist church. And then you had your—you got your sanctuary, then you had your Sunday school over here. Two different buildings. I went to that church for a long time. Went to that church from the time I was a little kid, till I was about in the ninth grade? Because I was going to Mt. Olive Number Two, Reverend Baker. I started going over there off and on. I moved over to Lyons Park, and then we just became members of Mt. Olive Number Two.

J: I came to you, Marlon, because you always have a nice way of summing stuff up when I'm in the chair. Could you just sum up a little bit about life Down the Bay?

G: Life Down the Bay was real family-oriented. People was real nice. A very family-oriented community. People always speak. That's one of the things I enjoyed about Down the Bay. And then, you had the Rec; you can play basketball, play tennis.

J: Your dad was like the unofficial Rec—I don't know. Like, any time I was over there, he would be speaking to me.

G: He was that type of person, man.

J: He would be speaking to me.

G: He got a good personality, man.

J: He was like, "Those your boys?" [Laughter] He'd be talking to me and stuff.

G: Oh yeah, man! He had a good personality, man. Real good person. I'm talking about a real good person there.

J: Spell his last name again?

G: P-H-I-F-E-R.

J: Okay. Well look, man: thank you for allowing the Down the Bay Oral History Project to come into your shop over here on Springhill Avenue, and thank you for your time and the wisdom that you shared. Appreciate it.

G: I appreciate you having me, man. Talking to me.

J: Absolutely!

G: Yep. Hey, thanks a lot.

J: Yeah! All right, got it.

G: You might have that thing on TV there, Kern!

J: Well, first of all, I'mma send you a copy.

G: Yeah, please do.

J: Second of all, it's going to go in the archives down here to South Alabama, McCall Library archives. And so, it'll be part of—I'd say we've done, thus far, we've done about 40 interviews this summer.

G: Man, y'all keep up the good work! It's a lot of folks don't mind sharing these stories with you, man. And a lot of people—

J: Mm-nm! And if you got a customer from Down the Bay, or even—shoot, it don't have to be Down the Bay. Because everything's sort of—like, your story is interconnected, with different parts of the city. So if you know somebody that you think is a good interview, let me know, and I'll reach out and—. I got another project going on out in Africatown. And there, that project is exclusively about business.

G: I got family that live over there. I think they moved out of there.

J: Where were they living?

G: It's called Magazine Point?

J: Yeah, but where in Magazine Point? Do you know?

G: I forgot the street. I just knew how to get to their house. Last name House.

J: House. Yeah, you told me about that.

G: She just died, matter of fact!

J: Yeah, you told me about her. She showed me the thing.

G: Yeah, but she moved from out of there. Yeah, here's her picture right here.

J: Yeah, you showed me the obituary.

G: Yeah, Mildred House. Right there.

J: Yeah. Hey, do me a favor and shoot me that.

G: Okay.

J: I'll look up her people and see. Because a lot of folks have moved. You know, it's not as populated as it once was. Did you used to go over there?

G: When I was a kid with my mom.

J: Those are your mom's people?

G: My grandma, yeah.

J: I got it.

G: You got it?

J: Yeah, I got it. But also, you know, baby girl and the boys, they going want a copy of their daddy talking about stuff.

G: Man, my kids always—anything on Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, they see it on it, they jump on it. Because I got a platform with my website is linked to it, and you can go on there and see all the stuff. People be looking for my service.

J: What's it called?

G: It's called Hairstyle Units. And they look on it, and they'll see it, and they'll be like—hold on. They'll see it and I'll get customers off there.

J: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

G: And then, I get customers off of Pinterest.

J: Really?

G: Yeah! Man, you'll see. Like, this month: I had 700-something views this month.

J: That's crazy, man.

G: All of it is linked to my website. You just tap on one of these and then go to—

J: All of your services.

G: Just go to it. Hold on. Yeah, go to my website. That's one of the blogs you can go to.

J: Man, I'll tell you, you was one of the—when the social media and the websites hit, you were relentless at trying to get that stuff.

G: Oh yeah, man! But see, I'm glad I did that. This what I'm learning about websites and stuff, and people don't know this: you can have a website, man. That's the easy part. But the hard part is finding like a software engineer or computer science major. They so expensive. The average person going to just let the website go, especially when you sell on it. Now, if you just got a website, and you just got it out there, that's okay. But I'm actually selling on mine, so—

J: Like, what are you selling?

G: I sell wigs. I was selling toupees, too.

J: But?

G: But the reason I stopped, my Chinese supplier, they was taking too long to get my stuff. They were taking like three weeks.

J: Oh! So, when they talk about the supply chain on the news, that affected your toupee business?

G: No, it just take a long time in general.

J: In general.

G: I don't really want to deal—I just want to deal with American suppliers, because it's too hard to deal with Chinese suppliers. They're going to—the launch page, the face page of my website. And then you going down into it. And then, if you want to—

J: So, you've got a lot of women customers. I didn't realize that.

G: Well, the thing is, I got a lot of women buying from me. I don't really have a lot of women who—

J: Who come in the shop.

G: Yeah, unless they getting a natural. And I had a lot of women used to get them low haircuts.

J: So, you have a direct ship to them, or how do they get it?

G: Okay, when they buy from me, they buy from me. My money goes straight in my account. And then, the money go to my supplier, too. And it's shipped the same day. It'll be to them in two or three days. Yeah. So, if they buy anything from the wig, weave, eyelashes, make-up; my money go straight to my account. I'm in the money game, Kern! [Laughter]

J: I see. I see.

G: See, like, they buy any of this stuff, any of this stuff—I've got wholesale deals. Like right here: these wholesale deals. Like, people that got like a beauty salon, or they got a beauty supply store, they can buy it and resell it.

J: I didn't ask you this in the interview, but as a barber, you've sort of diversified out, and what is about Black folks and their hair man? They be serious about their hair.

G: Well, you know, barbering and cosmetology, they done went to a whole different area, man. They went to a whole different lane—what's going on, CJ? You ready?

CJ: Yes, sir.

G: But barbering and cosmetology, man, they done went to a whole different lane. Here go your mic. And it's something totally different. You ready buddy? It ain't nothing like it used to be when we was coming up as kids.

J: No.

G: They done took barbering up to a whole different dimension now. Cosmetology too! People so hooked on appearance now? I ain't hooked on it like that. [Laughter] I just like to look nice, neat, and clean. Clean teeth, fresh breath, and just keep it moving. But they done got it so exotic and eccentric now, man. I'm scared of it. They done took it to a whole different level, man.

J: Well Marlon, thank you, man, for letting me interview you.

G: Man, thank you man for coming.

J: Yeah man, always.

G: Thank you for coming, thank you for having me.

J: Mmhm.

G: Barbering went to a whole different level. Ain't nothing like it used to be. They got too exotic for me. And let me tell you something Kern.

J: What's that?

G: And you going laugh when I tell you this. It's a lot of stuff that I can do in barbering, but I just don't want to do it, man. Because they too eccentric. Like, they want all these exotic parts, and they take time, but they don't want to pay for it. But just I won't do it.

J: Get involved in all of that.

G: I don't want to do all that, man. It's too time-consuming, people don't want to pay for it. So I just say, I'm not getting into all that, man.

[Background music; inaudible after 44:26]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Candice Fairchild

Audit-edited by: Ryan Morini, November 15, 2022

Final edit by: Ryan Morini, October 6, 2023