RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROY L. JONES

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
KENDRA BOYD
and
JESSE BAYKER

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
SEPTEMBER 17, 2021

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Jesse Bayker: Okay, we are recording.

Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second oral history interview with Mr. Roy L. Jones, on September 17, 2021, with Shaun Illingworth, Dr. Kendra Boyd and Dr. Jesse Bayker. Thank you all for being a part of this. I will be bowing out in about twenty minutes, but just to remind everyone, last session we had ended with the end of Mr. Jones' time at Rutgers-Camden. If any memories come to mind, feel free to share those as well. We can pick up with--what was your first move once you graduated from Rutgers-Camden?

Roy L. Jones: Okay. Is that where you want to start?

JB: Well, actually, we have a couple of questions to wrap up our Rutgers-themed part of the interview. One thing, Mr. Jones, that we wanted to ask you was during the time when you were a student at Rutgers, in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and I wonder if you could talk about any memory of that event and how it may have affected you or other students at Rutgers.

RJ: Okay. Well, the assassination of Dr. King was kind of a turning point and also heightened our consciousness about systemic racism in America. It made us question how could this happen in America to a man that espoused nonviolence really. It kind of just solidified our really radical concept of democracy and how it should benefit everybody. I mean, that's not radical, but that's how we looked at it at that time. Camden was still just coming out of segregation, the tail end of it, and so we still were students that were isolated on campus and we saw the disenfranchisement in the city as well. But the King assassination actually struck us pretty hard and even encouraged us to move forward. I would say that it created a lot of tension in the city. It created tensions, I believe, somewhat on the Camden campus with what we were doing. I would say that we will never forget that day, that brutal murder, and that's kind of etched in our psyche forever really. It did have an effect on us, but we continued our movement efforts. It did not deter us in anyway. We, in fact, just heightened up what we were doing.

JB: Thank you so much for sharing that. We did get to the end of your time at Rutgers as a student, but I know right after you graduated, I think you worked at Rutgers. Is that right? Can you talk a little bit about your kind of transition from being a student to working at Rutgers?

RJ: Right. Well, that was a pretty interesting timeframe as well, and that also created some events around the student activism at Rutgers, which is maybe not much talked about. I think we talked about it maybe earlier, but anyway, I want to kind of back up and talk about that. Anyhow, the university ended up hiring me, and I was one of its first EOF administrators. I was just coming out of the radical efforts in '69 and graduating, so I guess they thought I was kind of the perfect choice and also people had a kind of attitude about me as a pretty calm guy, very quiet guy. I don't think the university saw me as a threat, but it evolved into a threat to them, just to highlight that. [Editor's Note: Established in 1967 in the aftermath of the Newark rebellion, the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) provides financial assistance and services to students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who attend universities in New Jersey.]

I ended up working at the university in the EOF Department, and I was a liaison to the Black Student Union. Of course, in '69, not a lot, but some of the demands were not met. We had now a younger crew of students coming in that were pretty fiery and gung-ho about testing the university's resolve about diversifying the university. One late afternoon--no, I would say around one o'clock--there was a huge call for a meeting with the Black Student Union, and about, oh, I would say 130 students showed up. What happened was I'm in the meeting as now a Rutgers University administrator, and you had new leadership in the BSU, Black Student Unity [Movement] organization. They were talking about, "Well, what can we do radically that would shake up the university and get more attention to what we were trying to do at the university?" One of the more radical students said, "Listen, let's storm and firebomb the science center." I said, "Wow." I'm now in the meeting, the students were fired up, "Yes, let's do that, let's do that." They were chomping at the bit to do something very dramatic.

I knew one of the students who had worked in the Science Building, and I thought about, "Well, okay, if you go over there and firebomb the Science Building, it's going to set off a chain of events. It would set off fires, uncontrollable fires, because all the chemistry materials were in the Science Building." I said, "No, that could lead to a huge explosion." I said to myself, "Well, we don't know how many students are in the building. We don't know who can get hurt, and then if a fire got set off, we don't know how soon the fire department can get in." So, all this is going through my mind. They were all like, "Yes, let's do that, let's do that, let's do that." I stood up and pretty much put on my H. Rap Brown hat and said, "Listen, no, let's not do that. That's too soft of a target." I actually diverted them to the library as a way to not storm the Science Building and set off fires. So, it was my suggestion that we go and ransack the library, not hurt anybody, just turn over books. So, they said, "Yes, yes, that'll get a lot of attention if we go in there and throw all the books on the floor and stuff like that." [laughter] So, I was able to divert them then. The problem with that was I was a university employee.

About a hundred students stormed the library. They knocked over shelves, and no one was hurt now. Everyone in the library was completely shocked. People ran out of the building. All these students were running in, and students were running out. So, it happened. I was able to divert them from the Science Building because to me, that would've been more catastrophic and it could have set off all these fires and really, honestly, explosions. I was able to divert them, but of course, it got back to university officials that now I was a--there's a term, what would you call it in the law? But, anyway, I had violated the university's employee standards. I'm trying to get a word for what [insubordination]--well, they ended up charging me. Oh, here's the right word. Inciting to riot. Okay, so, they charged me and some of the other leaders--no, I'm sorry. They charged me principally for inciting to riot and defacing government property because the university has this quasi kind of position as a state university and as a private university. I was charged with inciting to riot and some other charges. After about a year of working there, I was literally fired. There was a big move on the campus up around, "How could you have an employee that incited these students to ransack the library and still maintain his tenure at the university?" There was an outcry, "Let's get rid of him" and all of that. Then, at that time, the state was investigating the uprising from all three campuses too. So, this was very dramatic.

Now, the reason it caught the attention of the news media was because when you went into the library and you took photos of the library, you could see hundreds of books all over the floor and

shelves turns over, so it looked like a hurricane went into the library. So, the picture was dramatic, and then it set off, at that time, a university outcry that I had to go. I was let go, but I was charged with inciting to riot. I actually ended up--one day, an undercover police--at that time, on most campuses, they had undercover police because of the riots and the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, and at that time, J. Edgar Hoover had instituted a program called COINTELPRO. Are you guys familiar? [Editor's Note: From 1956 to 1976, the FBI conducted a counter-intelligence program called COINTELPRO to target individuals and groups deemed political dissidents, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam. In the program, the FBI, working with local law enforcement, would track, harass, discredit, infiltrate, destroy and destabilize groups.]

Okay, so, COINTELPRO was very interesting. On every campus, they had FBI informants and police informants, or the police informants would cover as FBI folk as well. So, it was a young guy, very tall guy, Black guy, who just kind of suddenly was on campus in 1970, but he was an informant. So, he comes to me one day after I was charged, and he said, "Listen, the police are ready to come in and just drag you out." I said, "Drag me out?" He said, "Because your charge was inciting to riot and then you're charged with these other state charges because you incited people to destroy state property." I said, "Wow." He says, "You are under arrest." He said, "Now, you can do it the hard way or the easy way. We can storm the campus, lock you up, make a big scene of it, or I can simply walk you over there and have you locked up in prison." I said, "Wow." Anyway, I took the easy route. [laughter]

I was in jail, literally, for ten days, and at that time, the county jail was in City Hall on the fifth floor. Now, you had county inmates from all over the county and whoever else all on the fifth floor of City Hall. It was both a City Hall, mayoral and city council and partly county office and a jail. Now, I'm in a jail cell with about five guys. That's how crowded it was. So, I had to sleep on the floor. I always slept with my face up. I was not terrorized, but I didn't know how to take jail. I wanted to, at any point, be able to defend myself if somebody tried to hurt me. Anyway, this is kind of a long story.

What happened was I contacted my pastor--no, it was a friend of mine at the church I was in, in Jericho. It was called the First Baptist Church of Jericho. Anyway, this guy's name is Martin Hawkins. He's now a very prominent evangelist and assistant pastor in Dallas, Texas. I met him on campus, and he and I always had words about church and that the church wasn't relevant. He did see me as a radical, and he was always trying to say, "You've got to get back in church," and all that. So, I ultimately ended up doing that. First, my wife went to people and asked them [for donations]. They had to raise about 3,800 dollars to get me out of jail on bail. So, they went to people all over the city trying to raise money, and people basically said, "Hey, the guy's so radical, leave him in jail. That's going to be good for him." This was people that were in the BPU, the Black People's Unity Movement, but the economic development side. Anyhow, this guy, Martin Hawkins, Dr. Hawkins, raised the money. He goes to the most prominent lawyer in Camden County at that time, and he was just an incredible lawyer.

On a Friday evening at six p.m., they held my trial. Now, the interesting thing about that is that was actually unheard of. Most trials occur either in the morning, nine o'clock and then there's a one o'clock session, but never on a Friday evening at six o'clock. So, I was ushered downstairs

in chains. The judge is there, my lawyer's there, this friend of mine is there, my wife is there, and the prosecutor's there, and they had a transcriber. So, I'm like, "Where are my witnesses?" and all that kind of thing. But this lawyer had made a deal, and because of his prominence, when he showed up in court, he had that kind of pull and power. Anyway, they held my case on a Friday evening at six p.m. All the charges were dropped, every charge. Now, the word on the street is that the judge was paid off [laughter] because if you think about it, how was it possible that I could not end up in a full trial and face ten years in state prison for what I did, or [what] they claimed [I did]. They made it into inciting to riot. So, I never thought I would go to jail for that. I never even thought I was going to be charged for that, but Rutgers had to make a scapegoat of someone, so it ended up being me. So, six o'clock; by seven-thirty, I was out free, all my charges dropped, every single charge. I had maybe four charges against me: defacing government property, inciting a riot, oh, and then some other stuff. Then, of course, the university had charged me with insubordination; that was the word. So, they charged me with insubordination, and then with the state charges against me, there was no way they could keep me as an employee. So, that ended my one-year tenure [laughter] at Rutgers University after I graduated. Because of my radical activity, that's the price I had to pay. Honestly, I was one of the few Black administrators at that time. I could have stayed at the university, gotten my doctorate degree, all my family went to school free. [laughter]

A lot I ended up losing, but through the grace of God, I ended up at Rowan University, or, at that time, Glassboro State College. There was another friend who moved me to that position. He was leaving, and he had talked to the administrators at Glassboro and said, "Listen, he's a friend of mine." They loved him as an employee, and his recommendation was that I should take his place. I ended up at Glassboro, Rowan University. I stayed there for about twelve years. I went from Rutgers for one year, fresh out of college, one-year tenure, and ended up in Glassboro.

Well, believe it or not, my history did not follow me to Glassboro, so people did not know me as a Camden radical. The university or, at that time, the college was also isolated in Glassboro. There was a small Black community there. At that time, Rowan was not a very political university like it is today. That's the transition from college to the first year working at the university and then moving on past that point.

JB: During these years, 1969, and then as you were transitioning out of being a student in 1971, again, there are these events taking place in Camden that have been called often the Camden riots. Some call them the Camden uprisings. I am wondering if you could talk about any memories of those clashes of the community with the police and what you remember from that.

RJ: Well, the city equivalent to the university Black Student Unity Movement was the Black People's Unity Movement, which was the premiere civil rights organization in the city. They were super active at that time about police brutality, believe it or not. What happened, one of the things that set off the riot was on Newton Avenue, I believe, there was a call--who knows--I think some people set fires. Then, the word was the police heard that there were snipers waiting for the police. When the police went in that area, it caused a lot of drama, a lot of drama, and the riots continued to escalate. So, you had that escalation. It actually started because of police brutality.

This BPUM group, which I was involved with too, did a demonstration, and the chief of police at the time was Harold Melleby. He was kind of the forerunner to Frank Rizzo, in the '60s. The BPUM took about thirty-five people in cars, went to his home, and drove by his property with signs and demonstrating and all of that. He comes out--and this is all documented in newspaper articles; hopefully, I've got the timeframe right--he comes out with a shotgun. I think it was a shotgun or a military rifle. He stood on his lawn daring the demonstrators to confront him. So, that was big news that continued to escalate the tension between the Black community and the police department. Again, all this set off tensions between the police and Blacks trying to end segregation and to transition from one mayor to this new mayor, so it was tumultuous time in terms of police brutality. [Editor's Note: Harold Melleby, Sr. served as the Chief of the Camden Police Department from 1967 to 1981. Frank Rizzo served as the Police Commissioner of the Philadelphia Police Department from 1968 to 1971 and then as Mayor of Philadelphia from 1972 to 1980. Alfred R. Pierce served as the mayor of Camden from 1959 to 1969, followed by Joseph M. Nardi, Jr. from 1969 to 1973.]

Now, at that time, the police were particularly aggressive. They had even Black police officers that were aggressive. So, one officer was notorious for just beating down Blacks in the Black community. He would raid numbers joints and speakeasies and just beat down people. He was literally notorious for it. Of course, the police department at that time was pretty segregated too, and they had a few Blacks. He was, I think, one of the few lieutenants. But, ultimately, things changed with the police department after all these confrontations and after the riots. The riots set off and helped move forward what the BPUM was doing to desegregate the city.

The opposite, in what the riots created, was a backlash of white flight. At that time, you had a really strong white population more principally in what they call Fairview, which is the kind of southeastern end of Camden. Actually, it's southwest. So, many whites just up and left. Many businesses closed. Camden was very vigorous in terms of economics, so it was a slow drip down with economic instability. Then, ultimately, most whites left. I think Camden now might have a two percent white population, if that. So, the riots created both an effort to move the civil rights agenda forward, and then on the other side, it affected the economics of the city and ultimately led to the city's decline. I think that's what you can summarize in terms of what the riots did.

Of course, when the city was pretty much on fire, I remember trying to come into the city and take pictures myself. I ended up over there by the Ben Franklin Bridge, and I'm telling you, there was so much smoke and fire everywhere. What are those things that the police use to deter crowds? Anyhow, the smoke was so thick, you couldn't even move around in the city. The fire departments had to just let many properties burn. Many businesses burned; many properties burned. That started Camden's civil rights aggressiveness and, ultimately, total desegregation, but it also ended up promoting white flight and the economic decline of the city.

Kendra Boyd: Mr. Jones, I want to move on to talk a little bit more about your activist career later.

RJ: Okay.

KB: I know you said you worked then for twelve years at what would become Rowan University in university administration, but I know you have also had a long career in environmental activism. Could you just say a little bit about how you started being an activist around environmental issues and what sort of sparked that for you?

RJ: Okay. Well, my venture into environmental justice work was precipitated by a young white lady from the Fairview section--actually, it was several white woman activists that were environmental activists in the City of Camden. They were trying to stop the building of the incinerator in Camden at that time. They met me through one of the City Councilpersons at that time named Helen McHugh because her daughter was a key activist in that movement. So, they met with me, we had lunch, and they said, "Roy, we're trying to stop this incinerator. Do you know the impact it would have on the community if it was built here?" The problem is every time we'd testify, you'd have these white women testifying, and [there was] nobody from the Black community, I mean, nobody. So, they said, "Would you be interested in just learning more about the incinerator, its health impact, its economic impact, and how it could end up harming the city and what it produced in terms of its smokestacks?" I said, "Yes, sure." I started a more dynamic effort to learn about the environment and incinerators. The more I read about it, I said, "Wow, they're going to put an incinerator basically in the Black community. Why not a rural community? Why Camden?" That ignited my interest in environmental work. [Editor's Note: The incinerator refers to the Covanta Camden Energy Recovery Facility. Helen McHugh was a member of the Camden City Council from 1975 to 1987.]

I worked for many years with these ladies on environmental issues. One of the ladies that I still work with today, her name is Sharon Finlayson. She ended up being the chairwoman of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, which is an 85,000-member suburban mainstream environmental group in New Jersey. They tackle environment issues all over the State of New Jersey. Ultimately, I ended up being on their board. I got awards from them for my work in Camden, and I presented many years at their annual conferences. These white women from Fairview pricked my interest in the environment, and from that, I have never stopped that work. I escalated the work.

Just to give you an example, in 2000, there was a national and actually an international convening of environmental justice activists from all over the country and the world in Washington, D.C. The Ford Foundation was giving out scholarships to Camden activists. I ended up, through Camden Regional Legal Services, to get some scholarships for people from Camden, so about five of us went. There were about forty-five other people from all over the State of New Jersey, lawyers, many of them Black, people involved in civil rights work. We're there at the environmental justice's second convening. We kept learning about all of these actions all over the country and all over the world, people from South Africa, everywhere. We formed what they call a New Jersey Caucus. We met in the caucus, and we put it on the table and said, "Listen, New Jersey is one of the most contaminated states in the nation." You may not know it, but New Jersey has the most contaminated sites of any state in the nation. It has over 22,000 contaminated sites in the State of New Jersey. So, we kept learning more about New Jersey, wow. Then, of course, we had profiles about Camden and all the industries that kept moving into Camden and polluting the air, water and soil in Camden.

We said, "Listen, why don't we form the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance," which was a statewide alliance. There were three organizations formed from that, a South Jersey Environmental Alliance, a Central Jersey and a North Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance. So, I ended up being the executive director of the South Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance. The same white ladies that helped introduce me to issues on environmental issues were a part of this movement. We had about a twenty-two-member board of whites, Hispanics, and Black farm workers, and our mission was the seven counties of South Jersey. We worked on farm worker issues with pesticides, [which] is a serious issue with working on farms and being exposed to pesticides. We had a group there named CATA, and they were working all over Pennsylvania with the mushroom farmers and in New Jersey with the farm workers. We learned a lot. We did a lot of networking with different people. It just escalated my work with environmental justice because I met people that had doctorate degrees in environmental science. The more I learned, the deeper I got into it, and the more I learned about Camden, I got into it even deeper. It's something that I've continued, even to this day. [Editor's Note: CATA is the Comite de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agricolas.]

We just had a press conference and demonstration a month ago about a massive toxic dirt pile on an unregulated site in Camden, right smack in the middle of a neighborhood. This dirt pile is about four stories high, half a block long, and it contains all kinds of toxic chemicals that were studied by the state. Now, we're in court--well, the attorney general is in court about this. The city is a party to it. So, I'm a part of a network of Camden residents through my organization to adjoin the lawsuit to try to get justice for people who live in the Bergen Square neighborhood, which is kind of like central Camden. Bergen Square is maybe ten, twelve blocks away from downtown Camden. My work is continuing.

Over those many, many years, I've been involved in many crusades around environmental justice, both in Camden, all over South Jersey, and in the state. I've also done work in Chester. I'm now working with the Native American group in Philadelphia, helping build their capacity to address Native American issues and to form a Native American commission in the City of Philadelphia and also in the State of Pennsylvania because none exists. It's kind of a rich history of environmental justice work that filled full many, many pages, I could tell you.

This work started in the mid-early '80s sort of with the incinerator coming to Camden, being built in Camden. We are actually still fighting, believe it or not, to close the Camden incinerator. We're just about at the point that because it's so unproductive, the county is finally willing to close it, but imagine thirty-plus years of an incinerator being in Camden. Fighting the national deep-pocket folk that produce and build incinerators was an incredible fight. The politics, as you know, in Camden County and South Jersey is pretty thick, and so we were able to expose what it did and to educate people about living near that area and what it does to people. But the politics we could not get past, because of the state connections and the deep connections in South Jersey of this company that built the incinerator.

JB: Mr. Jones, you mentioned that you are also now working with some Native American groups across the river in Pennsylvania. I am wondering, are there any Native American groups that you have worked with in New Jersey on this issue of environmental justice?

RJ: Right. Yes, part of the South Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance, we had gotten funded from the Ford Foundation for about five or six years. One of the issues that we took up was an island which is at the border of Pennsauken and Camden and it faces the Penn Treaty Park near Northern Liberties in Philadelphia. Anyhow, Petty's Island, by the way, is one of the largest urban islands in this region. It's over three hundred acres, and it sits right on the Delaware. It's partly bordered by North Camden, Cramer Hill, and Pennsauken, but it faces the skyline of Philadelphia.

Anyhow, I was part of a documentary, we put together a documentary about the Native American experience, the ten-thousand-year Native American experience, on that island, how that island was then ultimately sold, what Native Americans were doing in Philadelphia to end up selling the land that is now Philadelphia to Ben Franklin and people who dealt with the Constitution and all that stuff. I did a documentary about Petty's Island, and I learned a lot about Native Americans. Just to get to your point, we did work with the Lenape Indians, which is a strong New Jersey tribe, and the Lenapes were key settlers at Petty's Island, which, like I said, borders North Camden, Pennsauken, and Cramer Hill. I got a chance to work with Native American groups there. One of the people who has a deep advocacy interest in Native American issues is Danny Glover. On the documentary, Danny Glover's voice is doing the voiceovers.

The island is now owned by CITGO. They put up two million dollars to convert the island to an environmental preservation entity. Now, suitors are taking tours of the island. But the history of the island is super incredible. The island has that ten-thousand-year history of Native Americans. Then, it has that multi-year history of European settlers on the island. Then, during slavery and the importation of slaves and bringing slaves to Philadelphia, many slaves were docked at Petty's Island, because in Philadelphia, they had a tax on slaves. So, the slave runners docked in New Jersey because New Jersey did not have a tax. They would come to Petty's Island and buy slaves and then take them underground back to Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. That history is very interesting, and my work started with the Lenape tribe in this area in New Jersey, on the New Jersey side. [Editor's Note: The New Jersey Natural Lands Trust has been granted a conservation easement for Petty's Island, and ownership will be transferred from CITGO to the Natural Lands Trust by 2022.]

Now, the group that I worked with in Philadelphia is kind of a multi-tribe. Some of them are Lenapes, some are Nanticoke, some are Lumbees. Several tribes are represented in this Native American group in Philadelphia.

KB: Mr. Jones, I know you have an organization, the National Institute for Healthy Human Spaces, Incorporated. I wanted to know if you could talk a little bit about how you established and co-founded this organization.

RJ: Well, remember, I had talked about how we had met in 2000 and formed this statewide group and then I was the executive director of the South Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance. So, I was the director there maybe going on twelve to thirteen years, and the group split. Several members formed this second group called the National Institute for Healthy Human Spaces, and we kind of expanded our reach into Pennsylvania, Chester, and New Jersey. So, that's how the

National Institute was formed. It's an actual offshoot of the former statewide southern portion of the statewide environmental justice organization.

KB: Okay. I also know that you have been involved with a lot of initiatives around education and environmental justice issues related to schools. I wanted to know if you can talk a little bit about how you got interested in working with schools and education.

RJ: Okay, schools. Well, actually, the tie-in is around the environment, even though I've worked with this parent and student union group that did a walkout several years ago because they were trying to search for a new superintendent and there was outcry by the students that they wanted some local people considered for the superintendent.

Anyway, the South Jersey Environmental Justice Group did a study, and we found out that many urban schools, specifically in Camden, were built on contaminated sites. Prior to actually getting into more [of the] impact of what the education was and the level of education, we dealt with the environmental part of it. We kind of backed into getting involved in the environment with schools. One day, we read this small article in the *Courier-Post,* and it said for twenty-two years, Camden residents had drunk contaminated water. Some folk from Legal Services said, "Do you believe that?" I said, "Wow." I said, "Well, how can we get a copy of that study?" The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services actually did the study. The Camden Regional Legal Services OPRA'ed or asked for this report. [Editor's Note: The Open Public Records Act (OPRA) provides procedures for the public to review or copy government records.]

Lo and behold, the report was astonishing. It was incredible. The first thing we learned, as I say, was that for twenty-two years, Camden residents drank contaminated water. Then, one of the more starling things was that the Camden water well system originates at the border of Pennsauken at a site called the Puchack well water system. Well, the most unbelievable thing about that is that the Puchack well system ran through a Superfund site. Camden water was literally being pumped and being taken from a water well system that was already compromised as one of the worst contaminated properties in the nation. So, we kept reading this report, and it was a startling revelation. This is what propelled us to become very known about our environmental justice work. We got the report, we studied the report, we asked for other reports around the issue of water quality, and we started having public meetings about it. One of the things we learned was that in this contaminated water, one of the main contaminants was lead. The second main contaminant was something called VOCs, or volatile organic [compounds]. Now, VOCs are some of the worst toxic chemicals you can imagine, but also imagine people being physically introduced to that through their water system, between lead and the VOCs. Lead alone reduces the IQ of a child by fifteen points.

We take this research and we go to the Camden Board of Education meetings and we say, "Listen, we have this study. We want copies of these studies that the city school engineers, the water quality people, were doing also studying the water." They say, "Well, no, no, you can't have those reports because those are exclusive, you're not a parent," and they came up with all kinds of excuses why we couldn't get these reports. Then, that pricked our minds and we said, "Well, you know it has to be something about these reports." Lo and behold, we got Legal Services to file a lawsuit, on behalf of Camden parents and students, to get copies of water

quality reports from the school district. We already know the city residential water has been compromised, severely comprised. Now, we said, "I wonder what the water quality in the school district is like?" We asked for these water quality reports.

Believe it or not, the city school board had been studying the water quality for about five years. They never, at any meeting, released the reports to parents. They never released it to the public. We go into federal court, and the judge says to the school board lawyer, "Listen, this is outrageous." He said, "It is ten-thirty now in the morning. I want all of these reports submitted to Legal Services by three p.m. or else you will get fined thousands of dollars an hour until those documents have been delivered." Believe it or not, they delivered these documents by three o'clock. Then, we pour over the documents, and we analyze the water quality. The city school district's own report said that lead was in the water that kids were drinking in the school district for years. The report didn't say they didn't do anything, but they did nothing about it.

Now, we find out the level of lead in each school. I have to tell you guys this. For lead to be toxic, there's a standard. It's twelve parts per billion. If you test the water and you see that, that's your first indication, nobody should drink that water. We found the reports for thirty-two schools, and believe it or not--I want you to keep it in mind, the standard, it's twelve parts per billion--the average of the thirty-two schools were seventy-four parts per billion. Think about that now, these kids are already poor, they're already challenged, and the average was seventy-four.

The highest level of lead in the water was found at the ECDC school, the Early Childhood Development Center. The Early Childhood Development Center is located in Parkside. Now, the Early Childhood Development Center is a center specifically for kids who are slow learners, who are autistic, and who come from parents who are addicted. All these kids at the ECDC school are already challenged. The level of lead found in the water at the ECDC school was 444 parts per billion. The parents went crazy.

We had meetings all over the city. I'm telling you we had meetings with four or five hundred people in the meeting because lead also will affect the developing fetus. Pregnant women were concerned, parents were concerned, and they wanted to learn, well, what were the effects of lead on their behavior and their academic performance? We were able to draw the connection, and that's why we were able to get the attention of community people around the environment, because we drew the connection between a toxic chemical, the health effects, and the impact on the academic performance of young kids.

I'm telling you, we did non-regional conferences about it, and since we learned about Camden and how some schools were built on contaminated sites, in addition to the quality of the water coming into the district, we did another report called "Toxic Schools in New Jersey." The State of New Jersey at that time had no standard where a school could be built. You could build it in an industrial area. You could build it on a former facility that was a dump site, and several schools in Camden were literally built on a dump site. Now, the ECDC school was built, believe it or not, on a dump site too. It's over there by that Campbell's Soup area and that river, the Cooper River, the west side of the Cooper River, which is the Camden side.

I want you to imagine 444 parts per billion, these kids are drinking this every day.
We file motions with the court, and we were able to settle with the city and the state. The state helped too. They spent thirty-three million dollars to put in new water infrastructure systems. Even today, Camden students cannot drink water from the fountains at any school in Camden. Every school should have bottled water.

We sort of made our reputation off that. We got a lot of attention about it; we won awards for that. But it wasn't the awards, it was the impact that we made, connecting the environment to a person's health and academic performance. We still do workshops every now and then about that, the incredible connections that we made between bad water quality, poor health and poor academic performance, incredible connection. We got the attention of people that would never think about the environment, but when it affected their child, that got the attention of the mother, the father; everybody in the family said, "Wait a minute, you're telling me these kids have been drinking this water for literally years." It does have an effect on a child's intelligence, behavior, physical growth. Some chemicals will make you very violent and very aggressive, and so all of this is connected. That's some of the major work that we did, connecting this environmental justice work to schools. That's the long way to get there, but that's how we got there.

KB: Mr. Jones, you have had such a long career of activism. What do you think of as your biggest impact or the thing you're most proud of in terms of all the work that you have done?

RJ: Well, a couple things stand out. One is, of course, the desegregation of Rutgers, absolutely. That was a major milestone because if you quantify and you qualify that work, making access available to students that would potentially never have gone to Rutgers, to me that was very significant. The second thing is definitely this issue around toxic schools and toxic water and how kids were drinking contaminated water unbeknown to their parents, and at the same time, the Camden district knew that was the case. Toxic schools and water quality, Rutgers desegregation are major milestones I think in my work.

KB: I wanted to ask a couple more questions about your personal life. We talked at the beginning of the first interview about how you moved to New Jersey and a little bit about your family when you were young. I wondered about as an adult, your family, I know you mentioned you had been married, did you have any children?

RJ: Yes, I have a son and a daughter, and I have five grandkids. My son, he's the Director of Technology at Emory Medical Health Systems. I'm very proud of him. He's in the Atlanta area. He has three grandkids. My daughter lives in the Valley Forge area. She has two kids, a boy and a girl. I'm very proud of them. If I think about all the work I've done, of course, I wish I could've done more with my younger son, but ultimately it ended up working out for the good. Now, we're closer than ever. Even now I can see the impact in his life because he's going to end up being a city council person in Austell, Georgia, kind of Atlanta suburbs area. He has an interest in civil rights. All of the grandkids, we talk about politics every time we meet through Zoom. We talk about the Atlanta politics, Stacey Abrams and Herschel Walker and the craziness there and all of that. My family, I'm very proud of them.

Of course, my mother and father, they had five boys. I'm the only remaining son left. My oldest brother just passed in April of 2020. It wasn't so much he passed from having COVID; it was the drama of what Trump was saying and doing around COVID issues and "why don't you drink bleach?" He just, honestly, worried himself to death, and he was already compromised health-wise. He had congenital heart issues. He had COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease]. So, the stress of living at the early stages of COVID literally killed him. I used to always talk to him about, "Oh, man, brother, you have to calm down." Because he had COPD, he would just watch television all day. The more he watched, the more insane it became, and the more insane it became what he kept seeing and listening to, it started to affect him mentally and he just sort of gave up. So, that was a traumatic thing. Plus, it didn't help that I couldn't do a real funeral. I had to do a memorial service, but I got through it and it worked out. He and I were super close. He was still living in Atlantic City. My grandkids and son and daughter, we're very close. We do a lot of work together, vacations together, all of that, so that's the joyful side of my life.

KB: What was your brother's name, and what are your children's names?

RJ: All right, all of my brothers, or just the oldest one?

KB: You can share all if you want, for the record.

RJ: The youngest was Clyde Jr., Cornell, Tyrone, and my oldest brother, his name was Wayne. He had a street name, named Scoop, and they named him Scoop because [he was] as fast as you could say the word Scoop. He was a dynamic sprinter. I mean, literally in the summers in Atlantic City, we would have races; the way people have drag car races, we would have street races. We would bet on them. So, anybody that thought that they were [fast], especially [someone who] ran with any track team at the high school level anywhere, they would test him out. I would make money every weekend. But, yes, he and I were super close. So, those are their names. My son's name is James. My daughter, Kena Sunshine. My wife's Nina, and all the grandkids are Jonathan, Lauren, Caleb, Jada and Curb. Curb, that's the street curb, but his name is Jason Scott, Jr.

KB: I know you mentioned Dr. Hawkins you had interacted with before and he was trying to get you back into the church and eventually you did. Can you share a little bit about your life in the church and how that is important in your life?

RJ: Well, I think, initially, I was telling you guys that when I grew up in the South, that was every bit of my life. It was just part of the South, and it was deeply implanted in everybody in the South. If you didn't go to church, you just were a renegade, that's all. But when I moved North, my departure pretty much happened in college, and the Black Nationalist Movement pretty much started to separate me from the church because Black Nationalists felt that the church was irrelevant. My thing was I didn't want to be associated with any institution that was irrelevant, especially in the sense of what was going on in America at the time dealing with systemic racism. So, they were hard-nosed about that. Then, we read books that talked about how the church was just not good for Blacks and that it kept us oppressed and all that. At first, I bought into it, and then because it was so deep in my system, it never settled in my system deeply.

This friend, Dr. Martin Hawkins, who was not very close to me, he and I had challenging arguments about the church and the relevance of the church, which you could defend, because later, of course, the church was instrumental both during slavery, after slavery, post-slavery, even now in civil rights issues. But if you talk to a Black Nationalist, they would try to rewrite history. They were revisionists. Anyhow, this friend, Martin, when he was able to do that dramatic move to get me out of prison, when everybody, all of my nationalist friends, couldn't do that, he did it. So, that had a deep impression on me. I said, "You know what?" I said, "Martin, I'm coming to your church." [laughter] That was in late '69-'70, and so I was there for twenty years. It's called First Baptist Church of Jericho, a church across the county, near Woodbury, pretty much all Black church, very dynamic, a solid, very strong congregation. Even this guy Martin, I never knew about his history, but he was a civil rights leader in South Jersey but more in the Gloucester County area. So, he led demonstrations on that end around desegregating high schools in that area and some other things. It ended up, he and I clicked. The church was very opening to me. I loved it. I visit it even today, but it had a major impact on my life.

One of the things I loved about it was they had this very dynamic youth organization and they would have all of these youth activities. Every summer, they would pull together about thirty churches and they would have a Saturday parade and a Sunday event with this massive choir with about two hundred youth, and it was called the Youth Revolution for Christ. So, these young people, on Saturdays, would go out and witness, so it was an activist church. It fit my MO [modus operandi] perfectly. So, the irrelevance part completely was wiped out because I was part of a relevant church and a church that was very dynamic and very connected to the community.

Then, Martin goes to Dallas. I had the opportunity to go too. He goes to Dallas. There's a fellow named Dr. Tony Evans. I don't know if you've heard of him, but he's written about ten books. He's one of the few Black evangelists that white churches would invite to their convocations and conferences. He's just a dynamic speaker. He's also the chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys. Martin goes out there. About twenty-eight people form this church in Dallas; that church today has thirty thousand members. He is their associate pastor. So, he and I stayed connected. We're always talking about different issues, politics, the church. He's a very close friend.

His connection and that very dramatic move that happened when I was in prison kind of ignited and rebuilt my Christian experience. So, that was very instrumental in my life. It actually was a turning point frankly because I could have drifted completely away from the church. To see what he did, to this day, I honestly don't know how he pulled it off. I really don't. He and I talk about that all the time. He said, "You had all these friends around you, and these radical dudes, they couldn't do anything for you." He said, "But I was able to get that done." We just laugh about it, but it made a difference in my life and it helped move me closer to the church. That's how I made the transition to get deeper and deeper into church work.

I look on myself as a social justice ministry-type person. We have enough people that just preach the Gospel straight out, but I believe, of course, the word of God has a particular purpose in social justice. I saw that with Dr. King and other major pastors. Dr. [Michael Eric] Dyson,

Dr. Cornel West, they all were ministers and very dynamic people involved in ministry work at a high level. One of my idols today is Dr. Barber, William Barber, who heads up the National Poor People's Movement Campaign and he does a thing called Moral Mondays, where he has this national prayer thing about social justice issues in America, a very dynamic guy. He's always preaching on CNN and MSNBC, a very dynamic preacher too, great organizer.

KB: Mr. Jones, we are going to wrap up the interview, but I wanted to ask if you have any more reflections or anything else you wanted to share about your life in New Jersey or the Black experience in New Jersey? You have been on the ground so long, so is there anything else that you want to share about that?

RJ: Well, just the last thing would be is I don't know if I shared with you guys, but even as a student, we connected the arts to the community and festivals to the community. I was able to do many, many festivals, which has generated our connections to the community better and actually help promote our work better. I see the arts and civil rights in the community connected, as well as the church and social justice. Art, I work with a group called the Universal African Dance and Drum Ensemble, and they're a group from Camden. I'll send you a tape of them, but they are internationally and nationally acclaimed. They have performed all over the world, and they're based in Camden. I'm their publicist. That is how I make my adjustment in life because I do so much. The arts help move me forward because there's so much energy and life in it. To see these young people from Camden perform African art at the highest level, it's incredible. I'm eventually going to send you guys a tape of them. They actually performed one summer at the worldwide convocation of Campbell's Soup, where Campbell's Soup had all of the executives from all over the world, and they were given a standing ovation. That's how good they are. It's a sixty-plus member group. They have prodigies as young as five years old that play and dance, incredible. So, that makes my life enjoyable. I love working with that. That keeps me connected to youth, and that keeps me connected and energized in this life.

KB: Great, thank you. Jesse, do you want to stop the recording?

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 11/01/2021
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 11/15/2021
Reviewed by Roy Jones 5/10/2022
Reviewed by Kendra Boyd 5/24/2022