Johnny P. Johnson: Accomplished Local Artist, Teacher and Civil Rights Activist (Part I) -- 2/21/2006

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Interviewer: Mr. Johnson, you came to Fredericksburg about 1959 to interview for a job teaching school here at Walker-Grant. This your first teaching job...

Mr. Johnson: Yes, my first teaching job.

Interviewer: Will you tell us about graduating from Virginia State as an art teacher and about that first interview? What attracted you to Fredericksburg?

Mr. Johnson: Well, actually because I didn't complete some service time I was able to be available for employment in the fall of 1958. Unfortunately, I did not get a job, and I stayed in Henderson, N.C., my home town, and did a little substitute work.

I was out raking leaves--doing something in the yard--and received this phone call from the placement bureau at Virginia State--it was Virginia State College at that time, and I was reprimanded mildly for not having filled out forms, and then I explained I didn't think I was going to be available for employment... but anyway they told me they had this job in Fredericksburg for an art teacher, and I was certified K-12, and the salary at that time was very attractive. It was the third highest paying city in Virginia, behind Fairfax and Arlington, and it was $3,850--which was megabucks then. That was more than some of my seasoned teachers (friends and colleagues) in Henderson were making. And they were all excited and encouraging saying, "What do you mean, you wonder if you are going to take it?" Well, I came up for the interview and was a little bit late because in spite of having gone to school in Virginia for four and a half years I didn't know I could not get a direct move from Port Royal to Fredericksburg, and I had to wait. So I was a little bit late... And during the interview I had mixed emotions: I needed a job, I wanted a job. My mother was a widow, and although I'd chipped in with a little bit of money to help out, it still was not right for her to have sacrificed for me to go to school and then I stayed there in Henderson and did not pay rent, so I was excited. Well, I finally got there and the interview went pretty well. Although I'd never been that radical I had thoughts ... I'd been active with the youth council of the NAACP when I came up in high school. I was

aware (of racism). Although racism (as a term) wasn't used that much--it was mainly "segregation" or "discrimination," those were the terms that were used. It did strike me as being a little odd that the superintendent did not know from whence I had come because the comment was made "I certainly hope you're not from New Jersey or New York and coming here to try to integrate the schools." Evidently there had not been any looking at my transcript .. I guess in the back of my mind--I didn't dwell on it--but I wondered whether or not just anybody could have gotten a job with a degree. Not questioning one's ability to speak or be personable or be concerned or whatever. At that time I said, "You know I'm here to get a job. I want a job." Which really satisfied the superintendent and basically I started 38 years ago on August 23, which would be my son's birthday, my older son's birthday. That was when I started. My wife had come a year earlier.

Interviewer: She was here?

Mr. Johnson: She was here, but she was not my wife. I met her after I got here.

Interviewer: Did you have friends in Fredericksburg?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yes, I had some schoolmates who lived in Fredericksburg. But it was the first time that I had been in Fredericksburg. I had friends in Northern Virginia, and they would come up and we'd just hit the bypass, Rt. 1, but I had never been in Fredericksburg. It's more what you might say a city than Henderson, N.C. Henderson was more rural. But the same size as far as population. Of course, Fredericksburg has more history than Henderson. But it was in the same size town or city.

Interviewer: What was it like--the climate of it?

Mr. Johnson: If you're talking about the social climate, having grown up in the South--in Henderson, it was kind of a hot bed.

Interviewer: (Henderson was) pretty segregated?

Mr. Johnson: Right, a hot bed for the KKK there in Henderson. I don't remember any lynchings. My mother told me about some. I guess you get little pockets of places in the south, like Henderson, Vance County, was known... The NAACP was very active, so I knew about things. When I came to Fredericksburg, even though the Brown V. School

Board decision (had been in) May of 1954, there was (still) a lot of discussion about that... my conscience and my awareness of what my place should be was still very much important to me. So in spite of what I told the superintendent, after a couple of years or so--and I was married--and Jean and I became involved in the Council on Human Relations which was a regional thing. They had several of those. I was a member of the NAACP and the Council on Human Relations. Now the NAACP was looked on as being something radical, although in retrospect ... it was less radical than the Black Panthers and others. And the legal support that it gave the people who were involved in the Civil Rights movement was something that everybody could respect, and (they could) at least accept that this was a legitimate bona fide group working to rid our nation of some of the evils of discrimination, segregation.

Oh, I guess it was maybe three years into my working here in Fredericksburg, and they asked me to be president of the Council on Human Relations.

Well, I began to get a little bit--just little things that would be mentioned in the newspaper-and the superintendent called me in under the guise of talking about the budget for at at Walker-Grant and chastised me--there again it was a mild reprimand--for being involved--his focus was mainly the desegregation of schools or maintaining segregation of schools... where the Council on Human Relations was for better human relations, just what it said which meant race relations and all and anything that had to do with mingling.

At that time Mary Washington College--despite of Dean Hargrove, a really respected woman as dean, who was involved on the Council of Human Relations, Clyde Carter, Dr. Clyde Carter who was a Presbyterian minister but he was in the sociology department, Dr. Alan Pierce in the biology department, very actively involved-- spite of having all of those people involved in the council we could not have a meeting at Mary Washington College.

The Methodist Church, St. George's, all of the black churches, Christ Lutheran, Trinity, these were churches that would allow integrated groups--so to speak- to meet and then of course you'll find out when you interview Aunt Mamie or Mrs. Scott--you'll find out what happened as she joined the Methodist Church, and as she attempted to provide the best in education for her son who is now a judge in the area...

The superintendent passed away. His wife had taught at Mary Washington. I don't think she held the same views. But he grew up in the South and some people who grew up in the South were more adamant about maintaining the status quo and keeping things as they were than others. Others could see it from a moral perspective... when I mentioned religion to the superintendent he said, "Well, we don't bring that in." But, you know, how do you not bring in something that it so vital? How do you leave it out?

Interviewer: What did you tell him?

Mr. Johnson: I don't recall exactly. I know when I came home--when I left him he had tears in his eyes--when I came home I told Jean I may not have a job, but I do feel good ... I said (to him) is it okay if we speak man to man? and that's when I went into this about the moral aspect--how can you morally justify discrimination or separation?

The separate equal concept, it doesn't fly. You know, I had too many experiences at Walker-Grant to know that it doesn't. We didn't have the equipment that students had at James Monroe. In terms of science equipment, I remember how our science students in order to use the telescope ... a biology teacher at James Monroe at the time had to come down and oversee that. The inference was that if you had it you wouldn't know what to do with it, so why have you exposed to it? You know, there again I don't know just what's in people's hearts, but I did question very often how religion allowed some people to be blatant in their dislike for others or their hatred even, and yet they could be very comfortable in their religion. I always had problems with that.

I talked to Dr. Wyatt who was a staunch fighter for equal opportunities and rights. He was just a brilliant man. I used to question. I'd say, "Doctor, what about the pastors in these churches?" and he told me, "Well, Johnny, if they make certain moves they are -automatically eliminated." So you question whether the good somebody would do would be really minimal so they'd be moved off the scene. It would make it harder on the person who replaced them because they definitely would watch their step. He (Dr. Wyatt) although he was a fighter, he was very pragmatic. I was more idealistic and less willing to accept the hypocrisy.

But be that as it may, finally through Aunt Mamie's (Mrs. Mamie Scott's) lawsuit the schools were integrated and Fredericksburg, of course, had one of the first freedom of choice situations.

Interviewer: Go back just a little bit, you were talking about Walker-Grant, and I think you mentioned once about the supplies for the art students.

Mr. Johnson: See what happened, many black administrators felt, I think, that if they were fiscally responsible, even to the determent of some of the staff... I never did get all of my art supplies. There was joy that Walker-Grant didn't use all of its money, if you know what I mean. I didn't get all of my art supplies. I just never did. I discovered later what happened. I would not want to go into detail... I'll say again, there're some administrators who feel that if they can show the school board if they can stay within budget (they are fiscally responsible). Too much so.

When the schools were integrated, at the end of the school year for me at Walker-Grant I had no supplies. I spent a lot of money on supplies for my students because I wanted--when we competed in exhibits and so forth at the community center, and we did--I wanted my students to look good. So I would never send my work up to the community center when it was not mounted properly and all. Most of the mounting board that I ordered I never got.

They did compliment me at the community center. They would tell me, "Johnny, we always know the work from Walker-Grant." And it was the same thing when I moved to James Monroe. It was not so much that all of my students did very well, it was a matter of having the presentation done correctly.

But I found at James Monroe reams of construction paper and drawing paper. The construction paper if you keep it a long time, a couple of years, you know, some colors will fade. I went in and I looked and I couldn't believe it. I could tell that they just had it. I couldn't believe it. We (Walker-Grant) gave out. I couldn't order but so much. The last time-that interview I was telling you about--that had to do under the guise of talking about art supplies. The money that was going to be granted to me that year was $335 and that was for the whole school. Paper, construction paper and all. So I would have to distribute it to the teachers, and I could have whatever was left.

Interviewer: That was a K through...

Mr. Johnson: Not a K, first through 12. You had one high school art, and then I taught elementary art, too. It was kind of rough. You had to get the tempera paint, brushes... that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Then what happened when you got to James Monroe? Were there plenty of supplies?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, yes, there were plenty of supplies. Easels, storage space, and that.

Interviewer: You came when they integrated the entire school system?

Mr. Johnson: Well, no. I was there when you had both high schools functioning. I taught four classes at James Monroe and one at Walker-Grant. I would leave James Monroe and go to Walker-Grant for the last art class of the day. I went to James Monroe 'in the fall of 1967. The following year, 68-69, they had one high school. Then that year I taught middle school, one class at Walker-Grant. It was a memorable experience. I had 36 students--30 young ladies and six guys. They gave me an aide to help out. But it was a good experience... ... Dr. Garnett who has just recently retired was the principal of the school.

Interviewer: And he worked at Carl's.

Mr. Johnson: That's right. He worked at Carl's. and he was criticized for working at Carl's ... when Garnett told them if you paid me more I wouldn't have to do that. My wife is not a professional, and this man helped me through college. I'm not only helping him, but I'm deriving much needed income. Increase my income and I won't (work at Carl's). I was amazed that the School Board would call someone in (to discuss that)... of course I worked at The General Washington Inn my first year. The same superintendent after getting some complaints about another black teacher had a memorandum about working on certain jobs. Bob Law was a wonderful singer, and he worked in the taproom at The General Washington Inn and I waited tables.

On the weekends I would work parties at the Mount Vernon Club.

I didn't have any money when I came here. So that late August, September, Mr. Griffin--the late Mr. Griffin--gave me a job. He'd been known by vice presidents and congressmen who would come down here because it was a rather prestigious hotel. But he gave me a job, he called me Mr. Johnson, I guess because I was teaching. He said "Mr. Johnson, you need this job?" I said, "Yes sir, I need it ... ... I thought I was going to get paid in August because I thought we got paid year round but when they came with the checks (there wasn't one) so I had to go.

So I ate at Robinson's Newsstand. Mrs. Robinson was a dear lady. I ate what she cooked for her husband. If I opted to I could have eaten off the menu at the restaurant. The General Washington Inn... it was a good experience.

Al Gore's uncle bought it (The General Washington) ... I think that's why the vice president indicated that he'd had wonderful experiences in Fredericksburg, and one of the most beautiful was going across the street to Carl's to get ice cream.

Interviewer: Go forward for a minute to James Monroe once the integration took effect. What was the climate like?

Mr. Johnson: You had lots of things that I thought could have been done differently. In the sense that, for example, if the planning had been so that the cheerleaders... we have X number of cheerleaders we want to make sure that we try to have them integrated. Some people might call that affirmative action.

But black people are not the quietest people, and I know that some of those kids have enough rhythm and are loud enough to cheer. But if you have always had this. Some people would argue that (the) James Monroe (cheerleading squad) was already established. But you keep in mind the black kids lost their Walker-Grant Tigers--their school. They shouldn't lose their identity as being an integral part. I had problems with that.

Interviewer: Did the kids have problems with that?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, sure. The kids were not as open about their feelings ... they would come and talk to me to other people in the community about it. You had then an all-girls club and these were only white girls. It had already been established. It meant that no black girls were allowed to be in that club. They were not invited to be in that club. Therefore when they would have the dances--you know if you're in class with somebody and I say "Nancy, are you going to the dance and you say'oh yeah I think I'll go if such and such invites me." You couldn't have that kind of conversation. It doesn't mean that I expected all white students to "say come on in and do this and do that" but (there was) the sensitivity or lack of sensitivity about these things.

But there again if you have felt--and it had been fostered that a group of people were inferior, you would act out--and there were students at

James Monroe who felt that way. There were other students who did not have that sense but they were so outnumbered it was no way that you were going to be able to do anything..

Plus, the dances would be held at places where the blacks couldn't go like the Elks, so that the excuse would be that "well we didn't set up the rules, you know the Elks just didn't allow that." And so as I see it it was a lack of sensitivity towards the feelings of people. That intangible.
For example after things were integrated I was on the Economic Opportunity Commission which was sponsored by City Council. I think it was a half- hearted effort on the part of council to say "well, we have this in place but nothing would come about." Everything had to be forced--the open housing, that kind of thing. I told them on the commission, "Just because the doors are open now you aren't going to have people rushing to be in the knitting clubs and all that when they know they are not wanted."
A law could allow things, but I don't want anybody throwing food at me. I don't want anybody coming to me "Can I help you?" I want--if I'm going to take my wife out for a meal-I want the atmosphere to be conducive for proper digestion and whatever. You know you want a good evening. You don't want to prove a point "Hey, I can go here." There were problems along those lines.
But generally I would force people in the faculty to speak to me, especially females. I'd say "good morning" not in an arrogant way, but I'm a friendly person and I was brought up to speak. If I hadn't seen you this morning I might say "Gee, Nancy you look great. I like that green." Or something like that. That's the way I am. It didn't matter if you were female or male I was going to speak.
What the experience taught me is that if you don't have meaningful interactions with people, the stereotypes you have grown up to accept will be very much apparent and your response to people who are different from you will be basically based on that. I didn't have a problem, I felt good about myself I didn't have a problem being in a room full of white people. It's just my personality. I just never thought about it.

It was suggested one time by one of the supervisors that we should maybe have some courses to help black teachers learn to teach white. I said if you do that you make sure you have white teachers and black teachers together learning how to teach in an integrated situation.

Interviewer: The biggest problem that the students had at James Monroe was finding a lack of sensitivity on the part of white teachers and white students?

Mr. Johnson: I think it was more white students. You know the white teachers made an effort ... I would have some teachers come to me and talk about getting a student to try and take a higher level course and even now there are students--white and black--who'd just as soon make a "B" in a lower level class than to make a "C" in a high level class... I think there again, integration was not something everyone was working towards. Blacks were working towards it mainly because of their lack of confidence in separate but equal. We knew better...

There were some teachers who really wanted to be fair and I guess overall people were fair, fair in their own mind. If I know you are reticent or abused, maybe I have been privy to information about some man in your life then I need to be very sensitive to you. I need to meet your needs and I need to let you build confidence in being around a male.

You are 16 years old and every male has taken advantage of you, then I need to be sensitive to that. Well, the same type of sensitivity that you show to people based on this you can show based on what you know about race relations. You wouldn't come in as a young white teacher and call a young black kid who's 16 years old a boy because you know something about history. Whether or not the dictionary says that boy is the right thing, You know what to do and that's because you're intelligent and you're sensitive and you are aware that if I can make a person feel comfortable with me I can help to teach that person a little bit better than if the person is alienated by me and by what I say and though I mean no malice it's just that it's a reality. It's a turnoff. I saw that. I don't think there was a violence at James Monroe but there was just a feeling.. it was awkward for the students.

Interviewer: For several years?

Mr.Johnson: For several years I think. The athletes were able to move in--the black athletes.

Interviewer: What happened to the black cheerleaders?

Mr. Johnson: We didn't have any that year. I've forgotten how long it was before we did have them, but nothing was done. They (white cheerleaders) had already been selected. That was the excuse so far

as I am concerned. They had been selected in the spring. Well, you knew in the spring that the schools were going to be integrated in the fall. That was one of things that I felt could have been corrected. It would be a matter so far as I am concerned of breaking a rule--if you had eight cheerleaders end up with nine. if you had ten end up with eleven. That would been a gesture of good will. As I look on these things I am thinking there were many mistakes that were made, because I think it was not something that people wanted to embrace anyway. And therefore why go to that extent?

Interviewer: There were some activities started for the incoming black students. The Miss Fredericksburg contest?

Mr. Johnson: Well, I think it was open. You had a black one, but I think she was from Stafford... I can't think of her name, but she was active in Harambee.

Interviewer: Was Harambee something that was started?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, one of the reasons is that once the schools were integrated for the most part some of the activities at school the black students either did not feel that they could go out and be a part, you know. A lot of this is based on the history of the treatment of people of color. So Mr. Todd (Clarence Todd) started Harambee based on giving the kids a forum and there were many black males and females who were able to go and be in plays at Harambee and in the dance group and in speaking--you know oratorical types of things. It was just amazing--and they would never have gone out for a school play or a senior play. There were senior plays back then, as opposed to musicals. They had become a part of the mainstream, so to speak, based on what Mr.Todd and others who worked with Harambee (provided). I was on the board back then.

Interviewer: And that was about?

Mr.Johnson: In the early 70s ... it was after the schools were integrated.

Interviewer: Let's talk about the days following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Tell me where you were when you heard the news and about the community and what happened.

Mr. Johnson: I can't think exactly where I was when I heard the news. Probably across the street there (his old home across Charles Street

from his modern day studio) and things began to happen shortly thereafter in Detroit, Watts, Washington, D.C., and there were people coming down... because of the proximity to Washington, there were people who would drive down here to get rid of loot--some of the things that they had looted from the burning.

It kind of caught on, you know, it was like a wild fire thing, and there were some young men who wanted to go downtown and break windows and all that. They were just ready to go.

They were misguided.

And Lawrence Davies (long time mayor of Fredericksburg) had been here and had become a member of the City Council. He's an activist, was a fighter on city council, and I recall things leading up to before Martin Luther King was assassinated the fighting for open housing here in the city was met with all types of opposition and he was more or less a loner.

And yet when those boys were getting ready to fight (go downtown and break windows), I had to restrain him (Lawrence Davies). He was going to fight them one by one. We probably wouldn't have had a mayor later on. Anyway we convinced him to go on home. Because when he was younger, he had a temper. For something that seems blatantly illogical or ridiculous he had little tolerance and we--Buddy Hamm, Dr. Wyatt and I--were in what was then Browns Funeral Home---it's Bennett's Funeral Home now--we tried to convince them that they should not do this.

Interviewer: People from Washington?

Mr. Johnson: No, it was the local black males. High school age mainly. And so we stayed there and preached that night. Fussed and fumed and decided we would start a group called the Young Men's Club from that group that summer through the Council on Human Relations and other people of good will-- white and black--who offered jobs to these young men throughout the summer. From window washing on big projects like the Stratford Square and the Monticello--all that over there near the Park and Shop--the Park and Shop was not in existence then--but the apartment complex... it worked out pretty well. It stopped the civil disturbance.

I think I got the story mixed up. It was after the riots that Davies was pushing for open housing. I shared with Dr. Lloyd--he came up to

school to talk with students for something-I don't know whether it was American history or government--but I pulled him aside and talked with him about the opposition council was giving Davies.

Interviewer: On open housing?

Mr. Johnson: Yes, I said that man (Davies) was there fighting to save a city that was his adopted city--I don't know where you all were in terms of coming to talk to people (during the period). The mayor then, Joe Rowe, and I had a little bout--I was upset. I told him, I said "You know Mayor Lindsay in New York did something that was courageous and foolish. He was down 'in the heart of Harlem. You know here was this white man during the riots .....

Anyway, I was really upset that they would give him (Lawrence Davies) so much flak on an issue of a moral nature--an issue that had moral implications- ..And people could be so cold and hard hearted.

He (Mr. Davies) told me later that he saw the difference.

I talked to a couple of council people. I'd just meet them. I didn't go out of my way. You know what the man (Mr. Davies) was doing? He was willing to fight. There was no one else to my knowledge.. I just believe in becoming involved. Put your money where your mouth is. You just got to do...

Since Fredericksburg was a very historic place. Rioting down here could really affect tourism, especially in the summertime. It could really have done that ..so economically speaking it was not a good thing to not be cognizant of the kind of explosive situation that could develop from people not tuning in and saying lees do something to show our concern for equal opportunities for the problems of minorities so far as discrimination (is concerned) and so forth. And that was it.

There again, the massive resistance that Virginia tried and it failed. The old argument--the Civil War idea--we're coming into this place, and you're telling us what to do, the encroachment of the federal government, but then why don't you do something on your own and then you don't have to feel like it's forced. That was my concern.

Interviewer: What was housing for black people like?

Mr. Johnson: You had housing, but as far as being able to buy where you wanted or what you could afford...I had a friend who called--a

home was available when he called. Evidently his voice didn't sound black--or the perception was if there's someone going to pay this money, they can't be black, but you had a lot of employees at Dahlgren who were making equal pay--I mean they were doing well. They were in high paid positions--GS-10s, 11s--they were able (to afford certain housing). When they got there (the home was not available).

Well, when Jean (Mrs. Johnson) and I tried 24 years ago, we had one lady who was just a super realtor and she told us, "I'm not going to show you this house. That man has indicated "what are you doing showing niggers this house?" She was aware of that. Probably, if you wanted to go through all of this you would have ended up causing the person to say "I'll withdraw the house." But you didn't have the kind of protection that you do now, if you pursue it.

And it still goes on. There's just a way of sometimes getting around it.

But then 25 or 30 years ago whether you had the money or not you weren't going to be able to get things in a certain place.

I know when I went to James Monroe and there was a man who was ready to retire--this was a teacher, very well known white teacher--and he said what do you think about how I've invested my money all these years and all of a sudden somebody moves in and it causes the value of my home (to decrease). I said it wouldn't happen that way. If anything the value should go up. Everything was based on economics. And people didn't ever get beyond that.

It was hard to see that when I suggest to a child that you are inferior, that I am planting a seed that I might have to end up having to reap a crop of violence, indifference, welfare, imprisonment, all kinds of things. If I keep giving you all kinds of obvious hints about your personhood then...

I worry about how people become demoralized, and therefore they don't function. They have no self-esteem, and therefore: "I don't mind being on welfare. We've white, black, Hispanic whatever (on welfare). It doesn't matter." There's a mentality that says you don't expect anything, I'm not going to give you anything. What you see is what you get.

But I've seen some progress. I was the first black to go to Mary Washington to teach there.

Interviewer: But you continued at James Monroe?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, sure. It (Mary Washington) was a part-time position over a 20-year period. But they made a big deal out of that. Put my name, picture in the paper. I had a b.s. degree then. A few hours towards a masters. They said I was an excellent teacher. I think I was a pretty good teacher. But I didn't see a big fuss over putting me there. I went to the president and I said why was my name, my picture (in the paper)... He said we had nothing to do with it--we sent the list to The Free Lance-Star. I said, "You had people who won awards, medals...I don't want to be a guinea pig... a token."

Interviewer: What was your reception at Mary Washington?

Mr. Johnson: Fine. I wasn't over there enough to get in the way, and I wasn't politically motivated, and once they made the rule that adjunct people did not have to go to faculty meetings I said thank God. Here I would have all these people coming "FE, Johnny". I didn't know who the heck they were, but they knew I was the only black on the staff, so they knew I was Johnny Johnson. You know, I didn't want to hear all of the infighting of departments and that kind of thing. But it was a good experience.

Interviewer: And you were there 20 years.

Mr. Johnson: Over a 20-year period.

Interviewer: The same thing happened to you in the Jaycees.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, the Jaycees. Gilbert Coleman and I came in the Jaycees. I needed the Jaycees at that time like I needed a hole in the head. The Jaycees wanted to make sure they integrated, and I think there were people who genuinely wanted me there and there were some who just could have cared less. They weren't anti-Johnny or anti-black. It meant that every Tuesday I had a meal at the Princess Anne. Of course you had to pay for it. I had become very active then in the community. Some of the awards that Rev. Davies had won--I ended up winning their young man of the year and then later on in education I was the state teacher of the year for Virginia. That was the first time an art teacher had done that and the first one from this area and later on Gaye (Mrs. Gladys Poles Todd's daughter) was a teacher of the year.

My motivation was just to be involved. It's carrying over now to where I am feeling a little bit frustrated because I can't paint enough. But I set the pattern for myself, and I guess I have to follow it. You can't complain about things if you're not involved. Big Brother, Big Sister I was involved in that. The American Cancer Society. It's awkward for a minority that has the wherewithal to refuse to do something in a small city. It's okay in a large place because you have many minorities.

You only have one black male artist who has worked in education as long as I have. You have other artists who would be sensitive to going to a school and working with a group of kids so that they could see a black professional and that kind of thing? It's kind of hard to say no ... you get caught into that situation.

Interviewer: Go back again to the time Dr. Martin Luther King's death. There was some sort of ceremony here in the city.

Mr. Johnson: George Van Sant (Councilman George Van Sant) was very much involved in it. Lawrence Davies. I was involved in it. Dr. Wyatt. And we marched.

Interviewer: Big crowd?

Mr. Johnson: Big crowd. (The march went from Shiloh Church to St. George's Church.)

Interviewer: What about the onlookers?

Mr. Johnson: I don't recall any hecklers. I think we'd marched before for something. We'd gotten together. I didn't see a whole lot of hecklers.

The time that I thought there'd be a little tension was when George Lincoln Rockwell came. There was a picture of him in The Free Lance-Star holding a shotgun, and in the inset there's a picture of Dr. Wyatt with his arms folded watching.

I'm almost sure there were some Nazi party members checking me out over at the college one day because I was biking with one of the young white students--well, it was an all girls school at that time--and the car just stopped and looked. You know, Rockwell had a headquarters out there. I was pretty sure. I guess he'd have really had a fit if he'd known that the young person I talked with was Jewish. I remember distinctly...

One time I was talking with a person who worked with the welfare and a Fredericksburg policeman asked her "why was she talking with that nigger?" Which lets you know the perception of some of the police.

This was a young lady who had a problem with the way that the Welfare Department--social services--regarded blacks. Of course she didn't stay here long--for that reason. I remember distinctly because she gave our son his first gift as she was leaving. A tall, beautiful redhead. And I guess, you know, with the stereotype of black males and white women even back then, and here I was talking to her... She went out and was in charge of University of Nebraska's cheerleaders.

She called us and she came back in town and she came down to the school and that year it was '68 or '69 because I had those 30 girls and six boys and she came in and gave me the biggest hug and they went "ooooh, oooh." You know how kids are. Our relationship was strictly professional.

She was involved in the Council on Human Relations for a little while, and she was very idealistic. Coming from southside Virginia you'd wonder. And (she) wanted fairness to be the thing. She'd tell us how some of the people in the welfare office would talk to black women. Very degrading type of thing. I know of no vulgarity, but just enough to let you know "I can speak to you condescendingly" and then when she told me about the police. She said, "You know I lost so much respect for him (the policeman)".

We were talking on the corner ... near the Irish Brigade I remember distinctly. You see how things stay in my mind.

Interviewer: They stopped her and asked her?

Mr. Johnson: He asked her later. ... I was taking a student back to Mary Washington College who was student teaching for me, and I had to stop at Sherwin Williams at Park and Shop to get some art supplies and this cop followed me. I said, "Now you watch what happens." She couldn't believe it. I said, "He's going to come up and go ahead of me and try to figure out what the relationship is."

So I stopped at the Park and Shop and sure enough he went up and he backed back to look at her. I guess to establish something. When I came out, she was so disillusioned. Because see she didn't believe it.

Most black people can predict the behavior of people in authority.

You know a clerk coming back (to help you) even though I was here first, a clerk is going to ask the white person "may I help you please?" without saying "who was here first?"

Sometimes the white person will say, "This gentleman was here first." Other times, It'll be... I try not to let it get me down. It just makes me aware of things. The philosophy is if you carry that much baggage through life, life is hard enough and if you have excess luggage: hatred and doubt and all these things, then they keep you from enjoying life. So you are aware. And sometimes you will speak to it ... I guess 10 or 15 years ago I decided that if a clerk were to do that I would say "May I speak to your manager please?" or I might say to the person "do you know what you did?" I had to speak to a manager at the Food Lion recently relative to an observation a clerk made that was totally out ofline, and I wanted her to know I wasn't going to tolerate it. Sometimes you help the person. It may be the thing that clicks them into being more sensitive. Other times they may find themselves out of a job. Nobody wants to do that. You want to make sure that people are being treated fair. If you go to the store and you are paying money you should be accorded the same type of courtesy if you are paying $1 or $25.

Interviewer: Mr. Johnson, when you first came to Fredericksburg in 1957 were there facilities like restaurants that were for blacks only?

Mr. Johnson: They weren't black only. I think anybody could eat at Robinson's Newsstand. That's what happened in the South. Robinson's Newsstand never had a rule. (Robinson's) was across from Billingsley's Printing on the corner of Canal and Princess Anne. It was a nice place. You could get a nice dinner in a nice atmosphere. It was a news stand. I had them get the New York Daily News. You could get the New York Times, any paper you wanted--if you ordered it. They had a lot of people coming in for that. You could eat from the menu. You had other smaller restaurants where you could get short order things. There again, I guess it was economic: who's going to be able to pay a whole lot for a meal. I think the highest meal was about $3. You could get a steak. (1959)

There were restaurants, and there were clubs. You know, when I came they questioned whether or not I should go to any of those. I questioned myself when I found out because a lot places... you might get hurt. Physically hurt. People get to drinking. Knives were available and guns. You know, you drink too much and someone says the wrong thing to your girlfriend. That's what I perceive. But I was a coward, I

 tended not to want to be in those places. But there were nice places to eat in the Richmond arm. You had some black hotels and clubs. I remember The Market Inn. You had the clubs in D.C., if it was a matter of going out to a club where you might hear some jazz you could go to Richmond or to Washington.

Interviewer: What about the social life in the black community? You've mentioned Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Todd as friends. Were they fellow teachers?

Mr. Johnson: No, they were friends. Mrs. Todd is older than Mrs. Scott. But they were friends. You had two strong clubs. The Progressors Club and the 12-in-1 and these were all women and they would have social functions--dances, functions at somebody's house, parties. The social life was not bad. I liked that it was not a snob approach. You could work at the plant and you could be (with anyone). I came from a town where my school was a former private school--Henderson Institution and it was started by the Presbyterian Church in the late 1800s--and I kind of got the idea that it was a little elitist among blacks in Henderson. In Fredericksburg I did not get that. I never felt that way, it doesn't matter who you are where you are. I thought it was great. We had two doctors. In fact when I came here we had Dr. Ellison and Dr. Payne.

In Henderson I left six dentists, one black surgeon who saved my mother's life, and untold number of black physicians, general practitioners. I don't know because I was too young, but I know that a lot of people did not go to the (same) dances that the doctors did. There was one lawyer. (No black lawyer in Fredericksburg at that time). But then there were a lot of the school teachers... the group of educators was next to the doctors. I enjoyed the idea (of a non-elitist social life) in Fredericksburg. I never liked snobs; black, white, or otherwise.

The social life was good... usually you had the same people for the most part. Dances could be given at the schools then. Black schools were a little hub of social life. I think one of those clubs gave dances down there at (Walker-Grant.)

Interviewer: What about when you met Mrs. Johnson?

Mr. Johnson: I tease... her about having met her at the water fountain. I thought when I came to Fredericksburg I just thought I was

going to go on to New York and paint and really be an artist, really be an artist.

My degree was in art education, and you had all of these courses of education and you had a lot in the practical side of art, painting, drawing, sculpting.

When I fell in love with Jean I decided this was good, and then I loved teaching. I always wanted to be both a teacher and an artist. It's just that the teaching came first. I think I would have been a teacher even if I had gone on to New York. I would have taught somewhere because I love people and I love interacting. But it really hit me, and I sensed I had a knack for getting people motivated. I had a way for making people feel good about themselves. And teaching became my life. The family, of course, was first. The art I did it when I could. But I never stepped back from it, I always did it. Even if it was late at night. But teaching was the main thing. I got so much praise for my being able to motivate. I received letters from students who said I made the difference. When I retired I received a letter, I really cried. This young lady's father was an alcoholic, and she said that "being in your class was the thing that saved me." I guess it was perhaps the best letter from a student I've ever got in my life. That one letter justified my 31 years working there, It was just great. It's good to make little people feel good. People are not in the mainstream, people who are not academically up there, but people who realize later on that someone did something special for them. I keep that letter...I save all these letters. They're around here somewhere. I don't regret not being a really great artist. I really don't.

Interviewer: When did the art start?

Mr. Johnson: The art started when I came to Fredericksburg, really working. I decided to settle down, and I started painting watercolors. I never got away from it. Then across the street over there in the mid - 60s, people came by and bought some watercolors and they told some others. I used to have to pull them (watercolors) from under the bed to sell them.

Then I bought my first easel from Sherwin Williams on William Street, and I walked down from Sherwin Williams on William Street, and I could carry it on my back because it was in a box. That was about 30, 32 years ago. Then I set my easel up in that room over there in that house, and I - had to go down the hall to see the paintings because the room was not very big. I painted what I wanted. I was very

sentimental. A lot of mothers and children. A lot of paintings that dealt with father and son. I had a son. He used to reach for me on the stairway. I did a painting to depict father and son, and when a lady saw it at the community center she just broke down and cried. That was probably the best compliment I've gotten. I've never sold that painting.

I've been offered... it's nothing fantastic. But it's one of the few paintings when my wife saw it she loved it. It could be any father and son... it was an idea.

Interviewer: What about as a child? Did you draw as a child?

Mr. Johnson: All the time. The librarian would really hate me for my misdeeds. I would draw on any blank space. A border, anywhere. And my parents had to pay for my books at the end of the year. We rented them. The students would pull out their erasers to clean them up at the end of the year and turn them back in. There was no charge.

[My parents paid] damage fees all while I was in elementary school, all the while I started taking books home. I guess in the second and third grade.

Interviewer: Did they realize your unusual ability?

Mr. Johnson: I don't know it was all that unusual. It's just that when I go for something. I put myself in it. Like basketball or the arts, and I just drew all the time. I tell people all the time there are kids who have far more talent than I did in terms of drawing, just as natural. But I worked at it. I loved it. I have just always loved drawing.

It was hard for me to go to church, even as an adult, and not to draw on the bulletins. Then I stopped doing that. I said this was not right. I'd sketch the preacher.

What I think is really weird--you see abstracts. My background was not a sophisticated one. How I end up doing these things, I just do not know. It just evolved. I like to experiment. Everything points to me to be realistic. The late Pete Hearn told me last year, "Johnny, I'm not buying another painting from you until you go back to your old stuff." I said "Well Pete, you may just not get one." He was a great guy. A true blue person.

He was president of the bank when I went to work on my masters in painting and printmaking. I had to buy another car, so I would go up and get these 90 day loans from Pete. He was president of Dominion Bank. Afterwards, we got straight on all my fees, I still tried to go in and get 90 day loans because they work well. He said "Now Johnny, let me just tell you this: We are not going to do this any more because it costs me as much to give you your little $500 as it does $10,000." And I said, "Okay, Pete this is the last time."

I would have a show and make enough money to pay it back in 90 days. It kept me going.

Interviewer: And this was in the 70s? Where did you go to get your masters? Richmond?

Mr. Johnson: Howard University.

Interviewer: And you'd have the shows here?

Mr. Johnson: We'd have them here. I'd clean up the studio. We didn't own it. This place now has insulation. I'd clean up in the back there. You know, sweep everything under the rug and I'd come out here and call lawyers and doctors from DC that wanted my work. One thing my prices were not high, not high at all. So much so that every once in awhile someone would give me an extra $25 or $30. One lady gave me a $200 bonus. I never had anybody to do that. She said, "My husband and I think these paintings are worth far"...I didn't cash the check until after Christmas. I wanted to see the person and find out if they made a mistake. Said, "No Johnny, we didn't make a mistake."

I would have shows at the old gallery on Sophia Street.

Interviewer: Was the art world and cultural world in Fredericksburg as open when you came as it is now?

Mr. Johnson: White people really tried (to be encouraging). I never lacked for encouragement.

You had Betty Embrey, Elizabeth Butler, they were working with a guy over at the college called Ojikobo. Mrs. Van Winkle ... I didn't face any discrimination along those lines.

Interviewer: But there was a community of artists here?

Mr. Johnson: You had Keith Pitzer. Keith was a good artist. But everything was separate. You didn't have a Media group. A King George group. Those things came later.

But you did have people working..

Mainly because of the college community. Back then they would bring some good shows from New York, some top artists. The Silversmith house that became part of the Virginia Museum, its an affiliate, down on Sophia Street they gave me a show back in the 1960s.

Interviewer: So was it marriage that kept you from going to New York?

Mr. Johnson: Marriage kept me from doing a whole lot of things that wouldn't have been positive. Jean's very sedate. She was not the least bit impressed I'd been an athlete in college.

It settled me down. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I endeared myself to some of our white girl friends whose husbands are in the Jaycees when I accepted the Young Man of the Year award and I said this is perhaps the nicest thing that ever happened to me, next to marrying jean. They just thought it was nice for me to think of her that way. She's low key and, as I said, I'm outgoing. She's put up with a lot in terms of people making demands on me ... my being not willing to reject them. She's been wonderful. It's made a difference...

Interviewer: Let's say that --- you were late growing up.

Mr. Johnson: I was late growing up, and I am more serious about everything, more dedicated. I don't regret not going to New York.

Interviewer: What about coming to Fredericksburg in the first place. Did you ever regret that?

Mr. Johnson: No indeed, it worked out perfectly. You know being a country boy and being in a small town, eventually you got to a point where people would speak, no matter what. You just say hello. It just was a good place and it worked out perfectly.

Pieces of Our Past: Johnny P. Johnson (Part Two)

For more information:

Johnny P. Johnson

An interview from the Foundation's Oral History Project, the purpose of which was to interview, tape and transcribe interviews with various members of the community who could tell about important area events. Recorded July 1, 1997 in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Johnny Johnson

Interview with Johnny P. Johnson on DVD filmed May 7, 2003.

Civil rights: Fredericksburg's story

In this forum sponsored by the Young Adult Department of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library, leaders from Fredericksburg discuss their experiences with racism and the city's response to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.