

**“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville
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Danny Harp, Nashville Big Picture High School
Howard Gentry, Criminal Court Clerk and former Vice Mayor of Nashville, whose family has been involved in Civil Rights activities and in politics
Mary Margaret Randall, One Voice Nashville

MMR: Welcome to the “My Witness” podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support Witness Walls, Nashville’s Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

HG: I still can see racism. I still know how racism feels, how segregation feels. I know how discrimination feels. And so when I feel it and see it, I know it’s there. And I’d respond to it. And sometimes, I’d probably over-respond. But, maybe it’s my frustration because this is 2016 and it shouldn’t happen.

DH: My name is Danny Harp, and I just graduated from Nashville Big Picture High School, and I’ll be going to American University in the fall. I’ll be studying public relations and strategic communication. And so we have with us Mr. Howard Gentry, who has many experiences with the Civil Rights Movement. One of the first questions I want to ask is: Can you describe the first time you became aware of race, or racism?

HG: I was probably 5 or 6 years old. And the reason I can say that is because I actually can remember. I’m 64, but I can remember back to 5 years old. I know I actually have clear memories of that, and the reason that I’m aware of it is that our family had just integrated a community on 22nd Avenue near Centennial Park. And I attended First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, and our pastor Kelly Miller Smith, Sr. was great friends with Martin Luther King. So the members of the movement were in our church a lot. So while we were at the church, we saw what was taking place. Not really understanding it in total, but seeing it and being a part of it and also being...I guess we could call ourselves victims of segregation. Because many times in my life I was told no because of my color, and many times in my life I was either told no by my parents—don’t do it—or I was told no because I did it. I remember not being able to do things and being able to do the same things in other places. Like, I knew that I couldn’t go to Centennial Park to the little pond, but I knew I could go to Hadley Park. And I knew why. I was too young to actually formally sit-in, but I had my own sit-in really unconsciously, but consciously. Like at Centennial Park—when I was 9 years old, a couple of my buddies and I integrated Junior Knot Hole baseball, which is Little League now. And Coach Gino Marchetti was a giant in my life because he is the one who came to my house and asked my parents to let me try out for the team. And me, along with my buddy Walter Overton—who is the general manager of LP field now, went to Vanderbilt and played football, one of the first African Americans to play football in the SEC—we played on that team. And that was huge. That was two blocks from my house. And of course, the integration of the swimming pool at Centennial Park—I was in that group. Just swam in the pool legally the first time. Now I will have to admit I jumped the fence a couple times and swam in there when I wasn’t supposed to, but when they

finally allowed us to do it, I was part of the group that did it. There was just a few of us, but unfortunately a few weeks later they closed it down and made a parking lot out of it. I had a friend who was African American who looked white—he had blonde hair and blue eyes and his name was Bobby. Bobby's sister...they were all fair, and she was old enough to drive, so there was a Krystal hamburger place near where Rotiers is, and it was right next to us. I think there's a pharmacy there now, and a Smoothie King. They used to have a drive-thru and we would get in the car with her. And we'd get under some blankets, and she would go through the drive-thru and order and they wouldn't know what her race was, but the funny thing we'd do is—after we'd get our food, we'd pop up from under the blankets and let 'em see what we really were. So, there were a lot of experiences in that community. And then our church was just a mile down the street, and we were on the fringe of downtown—First Baptist, Capitol Hill. And where the Federal Reserve is located right now—we were right next door to it. And that's where our church was. So, that's where the Civil Rights Movement began and that's where the training was in the basement, so all the names you hear trained in our basement of the church. And so I can remember some days, sitting on the steps of the church in the basement and watching them go through the civil rights training and that's how I learned all the songs that they sang during the movement, because they learned them there and I still know them today. And um, that was an awareness. People like Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young and Martin Luther King would come to our church and come to our church often enough where we would know who they were. These were from outside of Nashville, of course—the ones in Nashville we'd see all the time. But it was kind of...there was a period where it seemed like almost weekly—it wasn't weekly, but it seemed like weekly there was a bomb scare at our church. And we would have to leave the church. And the police would come and we'd go back, so you know, if you didn't realize what was going on through that period, then you were almost disconnected. But the fact that I was a member of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill...the fact that we lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly white but it quickly turned predominantly black within a couple years because the whites then moved out of the community...and because I was in that environment, we were able to experience the Civil Rights Movement firsthand. And then my parents, even though they did not sit at the counters, they were a part of the movement through transportation, through funding efforts to get the kids out of jail, and doing transportation to the hospitals, so they were very active and my mother was pretty feisty. My mother—I remember her taking me to Harvey's store downtown and you could go to Harvey's and you could buy things at Harvey's but you had to go to the colored bathroom. And I had to use the restroom, and we were up on another level from the colored bathroom and my mother told the lady that I needed to use the bathroom and I had to use it real bad. And the lady said—and there was a bathroom right there—she said, "He can't use that one." And my mother said, "Why?" And she said, "He can't, but he can go downstairs." And my mother said, "He's not gonna make it downstairs." And she [the lady] said, "Well, he can't use this bathroom." And she [Mrs. Gentry] said, well, if you don't let him use that bathroom, he's gonna use it right here on this floor." And so, they let me use the bathroom. And so, so these are just memories that have stayed with me all of my life. Through one part of my life though, probably close to the aftermath of segregation, I had anger and resentment in me. And I didn't want to go to those places that wouldn't let me...now, let me explain to you what not going to those places meant. That was not going to the War Memorial, the auditorium—which used to be our symphony hall—because I always had to sit upstairs. I never got to sit on the floor. When the public school kids would come there, we'd have to sit upstairs. Not wanting to go to the Ryman Auditorium, because my dad was the athletics director at TSU and we played a white school one time and they wanted to go to the Opry, and I went with them on the bus and they could go in, I couldn't. And they snuck me through the back door. It meant never

wanting to go to the movies downtown, because I would buy my ticket at the counter and then I had to walk down the alley and go up some fire steps to sit upstairs. But I paid the same amount of money to go. So, that anger...not wanting to go to Elliston Place Soda Shop or Krystal or Centennial Park on the lake side and those things, I mean....they stayed with me. And thank God for my parents, especially my mother, who helped me—and really, my dad too—who helped me to process that. My mom was poor in Georgia, in Sparta, Georgia, on a farm. Folks were sharecroppers. My dad grew up poor in Columbus, Ohio. His grandparents—get this, now—his grandparents were slaves. His mom and dad were born into slavery. My grandparents were born into slavery. So, that's how close they were to real segregation. See, I didn't come up under the real segregation and they had already fought the fight. And they had already taken the lick, so to speak, and walked through the fire. And they didn't want to let me waste a lot of time fighting a battle that's already been fought. And carrying forward hatred that I really didn't earn. I didn't need to carry it...maybe it did happen to me, but I didn't need to carry the hatred for it.

DH: So a lot of people say we're in the midst of another civil rights movement, you know, with a lot of different race relations and...do you agree? And do you think that nonviolent change can still be...can still happen in today's time with things like social media and so many different things?

HG: Yes, and it is happening. We see it every day, and I'm gonna be blunt and straightforward. It was historic that Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. It also created overt...it created opportunity for overt racism. For people who had been maybe subdued, they couldn't hold it in any longer. This is the President of the United States. This is our leader. And I was told, when I was Vice Mayor of Nashville, by a councilman, that—he just was blunt with me—he said my problem with you is I've just never had a black man tell me what to do. I've never worked for a black man. I've never experienced that and I struggle with it. Now, I'll go to my grave and I won't tell anybody who that was, but he was honest. I didn't like it, but it was honest. Now, did he say he hated me? No! Did he say he wasn't ever gonna be my friend or didn't want to be both[ered]? No! We were having a problem and he just gave me the reason. So there are millions of people who are in that position and there are millions of people who haven't had to be led by a person of another race or another nationality or whatever. Or another sex—some people have never taken orders from a woman. I mean, so, and they struggle with that only because they haven't...and maybe someone told them that a woman shouldn't tell them what to do, or a Latino shouldn't tell them what to do or whatever. So, the fact that our President was African-American gave a wake-up call to some people and they didn't like it. And they were very vocal about it, and it has created discussion. And so I saw it, I know it, I told you I know it, I feel it, I know when I see it...people don't want to hear it. Especially young people like you, it's probably like “man, really? Is that still going on?” Absolutely. I don't care whether it's race or gender or nationality or just because some person might be a little more able than another person or financial differences...it doesn't matter to me. Discrimination bothers me. And it's wrong. And it bothers me because of what I experienced. And I know it does. And sometimes I find myself responding to it, sometimes a little aggressively, and I have to catch myself. So, I guess I do have some scars and some wounds and when I think about what my mother and father had to have gone through and what my grandparents went through...when I think about that I sometimes don't have a lot of internal tolerance with what happens today. Now externally...I might be more bothered inside than I show it, but I'm always about trying to end it in some way. And that's why my work in poverty and homelessness and even with youth violence and violent crimes right now, it all stems,

believe it or not, from things that have occurred decades ago. And it's not all just about race anymore. It's about circumstances. And opportunity should be afforded to everyone, in spite of their circumstances. And so I fight hard for that. I've given my life for it.

DH: What lessons from the Civil Rights Movement are you passing on to your children?

HG: Everyone I know. Everyone I feel. Every day...every day I try to pass lessons onto them and the truth is that a lot of them weren't here because they're not thinking about it. They're in tune to it—my 16 year old is very tuned in but they are so far beyond where we were. It's just making sure that they don't forget where we were. Because there's some realities out there and realities are that some people are not beyond. And so I want my kids to be ready, just like I was prepared, so if that does occur or if that does happen or if they do have to face adversity based on their race or their gender or their beliefs, that they're able to handle it in a loving, civil way. So what I'm able to do at an older age that I probably wasn't as well equipped to do years ago is to love unconditionally. Is to forgive first. Is to not respond in a violent way or in an angry or ugly way, just because I might feel that way. And I'm trying to get my children to do the same—take a breath, just get some space between the act and the response and just think for a second to consider something that my mother tried to get me to consider for decades that I'm really getting good at now. And that is to understand that everything you do affects somebody else. That it's just not about you all the time.

DH: Organized sports has been a major part of your family's life, and I know you mentioned that a little bit before, but you played football for Pearl High School. How did integration within high school impact race relations?

HG: It was huge. I mean, I was at the game when Pearl High and Father Ryan played for the first time, black school and white school played each other. I was at the game and I got to experience a Municipal Auditorium with 7-8,000 people, no fights, no arguments. We lost by a point, and those kinds of games can get a lot of juices flowing, but we were there together and it worked. Coming from a sports family and when Wilma Rudolph was winning the Olympics in 1960, we couldn't even eat at restaurants in Nashville and she's representing the world, the United States of America. Brought home three gold medals...I mean, you know? To see those contrasting situations occur in your life has gotta impact you. Because I was at TSU. Wilma Rudolph babysat me, I know all the Tigerbelles and to see Ed Temple coach the women's Olympic team and to see our basketball team win three back to back NAIA national championships which was a white conference...to be a part of that in my lifetime, through sports, was amazing. You can only feel there's no color...just the color of the uniform. And it breeds a lot of respect. My dad was the first African-American to serve on the NCAA executive committee and I got to go to the Rose Bowl. Sports had more to do, I think, with moving race relations along than anything else.

DH: You know, we just elected our first female mayor and so, you know, that was definitely historic and a big step. And so, at this point in time, where do you think Nashville is as far as the dream of racial equality?

HG: We're on the move. Nashville is on the move, it's getting better. But we have to understand reality. In 1999, Caroline Tucker and I were the first African-Americans elected county-wide in Nashville. That was 17 years ago, okay? Not 170 years ago, not 70 years ago, 17 years ago. In 2002, I was the first African-American elected vice mayor. Four years ago I was the first African-

American elected constitution officer. We have not been moving at the pace that I thought we would have moved after the Civil Rights Movement and after Nashville really stepped up and became that city to make strides in race relations that nobody else was making across the nation. So we look at our school systems, we look now at the fact that we have 88,000 students almost and the population of the school is around 60-plus percent African-American. We look at poverty in Nashville, and we're the only city that is growing like Nashville who has a poverty rate that's still growing. We look at our homelessness in Nashville. If we look at the racial makeup, African-Americans are at a higher percentage, a higher number than anyone else in this city. If we look at our jails—28% African-Americans in the city and 60% African-Americans in the jail. If we look at our juvenile courts, in juvenile detention, 98% African-Americans in juvenile detention. So what does that mean? Does that mean that somebody is in a room somewhere saying we're going to keep these black people down? No? What it means is that our culture and our community is failing in certain areas and we've got to use the same passion and the same zeal at changing/turning those failures as we did during the Civil Rights period when Nashville really became that city that stepped up and did the right thing. We've got to get into these communities and do what it takes to make sure that people who find themselves in a needy situation have the tools and the wherewithal to change their circumstances. We've got to look in our schools and see what it's going to take to make sure that these kids, even though most of them are of color, who are failing or who are not succeeding at the level not that they should but the level they deserve to be, are getting everything they need to fill those gaps and to shore them up so they can receive the level of education that is being presented to them in the classroom every day. It is a movement that needs to take place in our city that is happening. Mayor Barry is knee-deep into this, she gets it. She's doing a great job and even though I ran against her, I know what this city needs and she is absolutely attacking it in every phase. And so, where Nashville is right now, statistically, we don't look too good. But knowing what I know and seeing what I see happening right now, we are in a movement. And this movement is going to push down the poverty rates, which is going to help people of different races. It is going to increase the graduation rates. It's going to push down the crime rates and the violent crimes and increase true economic prosperity for all people. If we just stay the course, and do what we know Nashville can do. So I think that the best times are ahead and you're gonna have a lot to do with that. And Nashville is going to truly be a place that we can be proud of. I see that happening.

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this "My Witness" podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the Witness Walls public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts' Public Art Collection is funded through the Percent for Public Art Program with support from the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016