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Oral History Interview

with

David Speck

Interviewer: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Narrator: David G. Speck

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Transcriber: Yahney-Marie Sangaré

Summary:
David Speck formerly served on the Alexandria City Council and in the Virginia house of Delegates. Speck recounts his perspective on the University of Virginia, racial tensions in Washington, D.C. and Alexandria after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his journey into politics.

Notes:
This interview was conducted for the "The Law of the Land, The Law of God: Blacks and Jews in Civil Rights Era Alexandria, Va" internship project in July and August 2024 by Yahney-Marie Sangaré. The first part of this interview was conducted on June 5, 2024 during the Alexandria City High School's Senior Experience. This is the second part of this interview.

Table of Contents and Keywords

General	Jewish Alexandria; 1960s; 1970s; 1980s; Judaism; Black-Jewish Relations; Interracial attitudes; Interfaith attitudes; City Council; House of Delegates;
People	David Speck; George Speck
Places	Alexandria, Virginia; University of Virginia (UVA); Washington, D.C.; George Washington University

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:00:40] I know the last time we ended up talking a bit about how you felt about segregation and integration when you were younger. You were talking about how you felt like your whole life has been a series of asking questions, and that's kind of where we ended, beginning to get into that. So, the questions I had left were more based on experiences, and also how you felt about experiences. It gets into some of the things that happened, out of the 50s and 60s and then into the 70s and 80s, when I think you were on City Council as well for Alexandria.

David Speck [00:01:29] I was elected to the [Virginia] House of Delegates in [19]79. It was several years after I left the House of Delegates that I got elected to council. It would have been '91 to '94 that was the first term. I did not run for reelection. Changed parties. Came back on the council, and that was the one where I came back on for, I guess, 8 or 9 years. [I] sort of retired in [20]03 and then, came back in '09 for that court appointment, to fill a vacant seat for a while. So it's been, you know, different times that I've been on the council, but the period that I was probably most active and involved was after I changed parties and came back on the council, as a Democrat in 1986.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:03:07] So the question I had ended on was just asking, in general, what sort of relationships did you see between Black and Jewish community members during the 50s and 60s, if at all?

David Speck [00:03:29] I think that there was a strong contingent of Jews, mostly with the Beth El [Hebrew Congregation] side, but not exclusively, in comparison to Agudas Achim, and a lot of that was led by the rabbi at the time, whose name was Emmett Frank. He was quite outspoken on the issues of racial equality, segregation, and education. It was a struggle, I can remember, because his position he took was not always popular with some of the population. There were a couple of active White clerics who were part of that effort. I'm trying to think now of what would be examples. But I think, historically, there was an alignment of Jews and African Americans. You know, the March on Washington and that sort of thing, where Jews were quite prominent in the cause of integration, desegregating, and education, and the level of activity was most pronounced, I think, between what at the time seemed like a natural affinity. Blacks and Jews: both oppressed, both subject to discrimination. But the discrimination against Blacks, I think, in many ways, was more overt. Because it was more obvious, and the discrimination against Jews, the antisemitism, was less obvious, because in many instances, Jews just looked like everyone else. The classic distinction was color of skin. At time, there were really only two communities of consequence: Blacks and everyone else, who was generally White. It was only in later years that the Hispanic community began to assume a more prominent role. And a lot of that was work related, in the sense of people wanting jobs and where they found it difficult to do that. Language was one of those dividers but only with the Latin and Hispanic community. But when you looked at who among the White population was [working towards taking a] supportive role in the community? There were a lot of Jewish people that were taking [it] upon themselves to provide support to the Hispanic community. The interesting thing was that one time the Black neighborhoods were easily identified by census track. So, it was only in probably the mid-to-late '60s that you begin to see Blacks, particularly middle class Blacks, buying homes in historically White neighborhoods without a lot of problems. But the Hispanic community was much more monolithic and had less interest in physically assimilating into other neighborhoods. It's somewhat different now, but not as much as you would think after all these years. You know, you go down into Arlandria, and some related areas, and you can tell by the kids in school that they are coming largely from Hispanic families, where English is not necessarily the primary language spoken at home. Now, arguably, it's developed into, you know, the mini–United Nations: so many people

from so many different cultures and languages. But because it's so splintered among all of these different nationalities and languages, you only see it where the group is larger. In this case, it would be the Spanish-speaking community. I think I digressed.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:09:12] Going back to sort of that moment in the 50s and 60s. Did you notice that? Growing up in Alexandria, was that something you paid attention to, this relationship? Or even were aware of this relationship between Black and Jewish Americans?

David Speck [00:09:30] I don't think I was as aware of it, because some of it was just natural connectivity. And you didn't think about it. Like, I had friends that were White that were very good basketball players. They had no problems assimilating into the neighborhoods where there were a lot of Black basketball players. Friendships formed there that were long lasting, in part because gradually there was the melding of the East side [and] West side, you know, the Hammond, GW. Sports really, not just "Remember the Titans," but all of sports, was causing more natural connections and less tension for that reason. But once you got beyond sports, it was not as assimilating. I think there's concerns that there's some of that now. You, obviously, at Alexandria City High School, you can you can see that in terms of how people--Well, I guess people aren't walking over to Bradlee [Shopping Center] the way they used to, but you could certainly see it at lunchtime for a while that, you know, there were Black groups and there were White groups, and you didn't see them, you know, gathering together. I'm really jumping ahead, but I think that created some of the tension, because the older White community is not used to seeing kids, mostly Black, out and about while school was in session, going over to Bradlee or to McDonald's or whatever. And I don't know with [the new campus of] Minnie Howard now opening and, other things that have brought people together. I don't know how that's going to evolve, because now you've got this delineation between people of Mid-East origins that are dealing with their own assimilation, and feeling, in many cases it would appear, [that they are] not being accepted. And then, add to that, Israel and Palestine and Hamas, all of that, and Gaza. I don't know how that's going to all work out, because right now there doesn't seem to be a lot of coming together. Jews probably right now, I think, are finding themselves in a far more awkward position. You know, this knee jerk support of Israel that so many Jews feel. You know, it's less about religion and more about Zionism and the country, the state of Israel. There are some barriers and I'm not sure ever going to be truly broken. Do you know who, the columnist on foreign affairs, Thomas Friedman, do you know who that is?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:13:42] Yes.

David Speck [00:13:45] Several years ago now, he was speaking on one of the news shows. And I'll always remember this. He said, "How do you think there's ever going to be a resolution when both sides feel that God promised them this land?" And I think that was a pretty good summary of where it'll be hard to reconcile. And, you know, I'm not smart enough to be able to opine about the two-state solution, but what Thomas Friedman said really stuck with me, because that's not one of those things that, you know, "Let's all get together and sit down and hold hands and we'll figure this out." It's so fundamental to the kind of DNA of who everyone is. I'm not sure DNA is the right word. More the gestalt of how people are. That is pretty powerful. Have you ever been to Israel?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:14:54] I have not.

David Speck [00:14:56] I've been once in connection with my work with the airports. There was an airport safety security conference, but they made sure that those of us that were coming from the U.S., primarily the Washington, [D.C.] Area, got, in a short period of time, a pretty good overview of Israel. There's nothing like standing somewhere and having people point out, "Well, this is this is where this started, and this is why they couldn't resolve this issue because they had people coming from a different direction." You know, history comes alive when people explain to you while you're standing there. So put that on your bucket list. It's a powerful experience. I'm digressing again.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:15:47] No worries. And if you'd like, we can actually sort of elaborate. So, Israel declared its independence in 1948. Obviously, the Israel discussion becomes more preeminent in Black-Jewish dialogue post-Civil Rights Movement. But growing up, how did you discuss Israel in your household? Was that a topic of discussion? And did you see Zionism be eminent within the DMV area conversations at the time?

David Speck [00:16:16] No, I did not. And remember, I was not brought up in a Jewish family religion, even though all of my heritage was Jewish. My parents really rejected a lot of the dogma of organized religion. I don't think there was any denial about being Jewish, but it didn't come with the same intensity that I think [is there] in some families. But this also has to do with the assimilation of Jews in the South generally. There was, you know, for many years, decades, there was a desire to assimilate, and be less obvious in your religion. So, I didn't have a lot of exposure to what it meant to be Jewish in a primarily Christian or non-Jewish community. And it was only as I got older and, you know, I was raising my own family and begin to understand more of that. I mean, I'm much smarter about a lot of that than I was at the time, because where were you going to get it from if you didn't go to temple or Sunday school? Yeah. So I feel like that was, you know, that was lacking in my life.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:17:51] Would you say that was common amongst some of the other Jewish-American families you might have known in Alexandria at the time?

David Speck [00:17:58] Yes. Not exclusively, of course, but definitely there was a lot of that. But, you know, you get a sanitized version of a lot of this. I was on the Hammond side of the city. It was almost all White. So, assimilation there was between--I don't think it was particularly distinctive--was people who, at least by name, seemed Jewish, and who didn't necessarily go to temple, or if they did, it wasn't often. They may observe the holidays. And remember now, you know, I'd say probably two thirds of the membership of Beth El [Hebrew Congregation] is non-Alexandria residents. But the core, of course, was Alexandria. And I think that the more secular Jews were, the more they became just simply part of the fiber of the city. But there was no denying that, you know, there was a Jewish population. You know, the Bendheim's and the Bergheim's and the Cohens. And, you know, a lot of the merchants were Jewish. Hayman's store for dresses [Hayman's Department Shop]. Cohen's Men's Store. Bradshaw Shoes. I mean, and so you knew that, but it's funny how you never much thought about it, because it wasn't a big deal. But I think also that some of it was just obliviousness to those things. It just wasn't part of our everyday lives. And if you if you stopped someone and said, "What do you think about this?" You might get an answer, but it was only because somebody asked, "What do you think about this?"

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:20:15] Do you remember any incident where you were pushed into thinking about it, and how you might have felt, even if you don't remember specifically what happened?

David Speck [00:20:36] Certainly, I genuinely do not remember any overt antisemitism. [It] probably was a little bit different for my sister, who was a couple years older and me because my father was becoming a prominent figure in the community as a doctor, and he certainly was secular. My mother died when I was ten, but she got sick when I was five, so I didn't have a long experience with a complete family, because [in] the latter years of my mother's illness, she wasn't really able to function very much. The only time, I think, I'm sure it must have happened, but the only time [I remember was] my father said, "Somebody came in, a prospective patient came in, looked at me, and said, 'I don't want you to be my doctor.'" It turns out that she thought he was too young. But he said, he first assumed that it was something about [him] being Jewish. It wasn't. [*Laughter*] He said, "She just stomped out and said, 'He's too young.'" And, what are you going to do? He was young looking. I think I must have inherited some of that. I'm sure there probably were instances of antisemitic behavior, but I don't ever remember any of my friends, or people that I went to school with, or anything else, ever talking about it as an issue. Blacks certainly did [think about racism], because they were overtly mistreated. Jews were so much a part of the fabric of the city: politically, from a business standpoint, [and] civically. It's an interesting study. I'm reading a book right now that a historian wrote that's particularly interested in the Jewish families in North Carolina, because that was also a strong area, and that's where some of my maternal relatives were. It's really interesting to read about how they assimilated similarly to the way [Jews in] Alexandria did: active in business [and] politics, civic, community stuff. It's interesting. You wouldn't get that same answer in other parts of the country.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:23:42] Thinking about it now even, this can be semi retrospective, how did you and do you kind of feel about that? When you were growing up, was it a positive outlook or even when you went to college or to other areas and you saw the differences? How did you feel and reflect on Alexandria's kind of unique, or uniquely Southern, culture with Jewish assimilation?

David Speck [00:24:09] Well, I mean, there was a certain pride in being from Alexandria. Still is. I do remember--When I went to college; it's interesting. I don't think this is quite as defined as it was in the [19]60s, but there were Jewish fraternities and sororities and non-Jewish fraternities and sororities. And you got rushed--I'm talking about college, not high school--You know, you got rushed for who you were. I remember, you know, people weren't sure who should be rushing me. And I said, "Well, I'm really not Jewish. I wasn't brought up that way." My father, at some point, even though he was very secular, you know, he'd say, "What's that all about?" I think he was quite put out with that. I said, "Well, you know, that's kind of how I was raised, and I sort of like the people that in the fraternity I joined." And although now I have some friends who [I] became friends [with] as adults, who were at UVA [University of Virginia] in similar time periods as I was, the ones who were Jewish were all deeply involved in Jewish fraternity life, and never thought for a moment about pledging a non-Jewish fraternity because they weren't asked. That was probably one of the first times that I became aware of a certain level of denialism. I look back now and say, "I know why that took place," but the recovery of some of my roots and heritage only really happened when I had kids, because my wife at the time was brought up in Philadelphia in a conservative Jewish temple. And that's what led to me becoming bar mitzvah-ed. At 44. I've actually met recently, before we came up for the summer, with Rabbi Spinrad. I told him, I said, "You know, as I'm about to be 80, I'm feeling a stronger need to have a kind of a spiritual foundation," which I don't think I really had, and I've talked to other friends of mine, not all Jewish, by the way, all sort of saying the same thing. I hate to feel that I'm predictable, but I think that you get to a certain point in your life when that's become something that you either regain or start. But my sensitivity is in many ways directed towards people that were not given the

same opportunities as I was. And that was largely in the African-American community. And that's why a lot of the work that I did politically was addressing things like that. Addressing some things better than others.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:28:19] I want to go to [the subject of] UVA. What year did you start at UVA?

David Speck [00:28:30] '63.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:28:31] So, [the same year as the] March on Washington. What was the campus climate like at UVA during the Civil Rights Movement? Were people talking about it?

David Speck [00:28:46] UVA was a pretty conservative campus until probably the late 60s when the anti-war stuff really started. It's been, I think, a more active community since then. But up to that point, it was a very Southern, genteel kind of environment where people were more concerned about, you know, going to the football games, even though they never won--never as a little bit of an overstatement, and, you know, where the good parties were. The culture of UVA was very much a function of what they called the Greek life: fraternities and sororities. You know, I'm really going back and trying to recollect. There wasn't a lot of activism. If anything, there was a rejection of some of that activism with a sort of unspoken, "That's not the way we are." But I mean, that's clearly not the case anymore. But I think that's probably true for a lot of schools. Now that I think about it. And probably some of the Ivy leagues too. Like you'll discover. It's kind of a little wild at Columbia these days. Three deans got tossed or something. You're going there at a very interesting time.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:30:29] Yeah, especially researching this. It's an era. At UVA, 1959 is when they had their first Black students on campus. Do you recall having African-American students in your classes?

David Speck [00:30:47] There weren't many. I mean, my recollections were more about when Alexandria started to integrate and how tense that was. I think I told you about when the first two Black students came to Hammond. I mean, that was wild. Then there were some incidents related to the police and young teenage Blacks that were--Well, I'm going to say it in a way that I think you'll understand. They didn't know their place, and they didn't know that there was a place they were supposed to be in. So, there were issues that came up from a police standpoint that created some real tensions. And one of the big issues with the police, this was probably in the early 60s, was police, almost all of whom were White, being allowed to carry shotguns in their police vehicles. That was a big deal. It caused some real dissension within the community.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:32:11] How did you feel about the issue?

David Speck [00:32:15] I was too young. I was aware of it. And sort of followed it from a curiosity standpoint, but not much more than that. I think my awareness of these things really only began in my--trying to think--probably in my early to mid-20s. I'd gotten married, started to have kids, and I started to look at things very differently. [I] became much more outspoken about where I think we were letting people down as a community. My wife at the time was very active, and she ended up working for the city. This is after we got divorced, I think. So that would have been like '86, '87. But she got very involved in Project Discovery. Are you familiar with that?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:33:25] Yes.

David Speck [00:33:26] I mean, she was kind of one of the people that really led that. And stayed in that role for a long time, as is now my 52-year-old daughter that takes on that kind of interest and focus.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:33:57] What were some of the motivations or reasons you think you started coming to that awareness?

David Speck [00:34:06] Well, I mean, some of it is maturity, and seeing the world a little bit differently. You know, as I was progressing in a career, and having a family, and realizing that, you know, the world was changing. I mean, people of my generation, and older and younger, but close enough to my generation; every single one will be able to tell you exactly what they were doing the moment they heard that John Kennedy was shot. I mean, it was one of those connecting experiences that a whole population related to. You're in a generation that kind of doesn't have that yet. 9/11 was to some extent, but for whatever reason, it wasn't quite the same. I mean, I can certainly remember what I was doing when I heard that. But I think having moments in history that unite a population is one of the ways that we think about the world differently than maybe we would on September 10th, [2001] or November 21, '63. We have individual moments like that. You know, you remember if someone in your family that you were close to died, you always remember that, but that's you. These were things that millions of people of my generation can all answer that question without a moment's thought. I don't know what that means exactly. I'm not sure. I'm not aware that anyone's actually written something about that, but there must be something that is written in in that context. The Holocaust of course was different, but it wasn't a moment. It was an incredibly horrifying experience that ended up uniting most of the Western civilization. But not in the same way. Does that make sense?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:36:38] It does, and you're not the first person I've spoken to who has mentioned a very similar thing; that my generation doesn't have a moment. 9/11 I think to a degree is, but I was born in 2005, so, you know. So Kennedy is shot in '63--

David Speck [00:36:58] '63.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:36:59] Yes. Where were you when JFK was shot?

David Speck [00:37:02] I was in language lab at UVA. I don't know if they still have language labs. [*Laughs*] But you know, you'd go into this room, and you would listen to tapes, and you would do a lot of repetitive pronouncing of words. One of my friends came in, because, you know, you've got the headphones on, so you don't know a whole lot about what's going on. There weren't TVs, there wasn't internet or anything. He was one of my friends from Alexandria, and he came in and said, "Did you hear what happened? "And I said, "No. What, no. What happened?" And he told me, and it was just, you know, you could feel sort of this lump in the pit of your stomach saying, "Oh my God." Because up to that point, you know, everybody was aware that Lincoln got shot, that sort of thing. But that was a completely different generation, obviously. This was our generation. I think people just for a while, people just sort of walked around like zombies because nobody knew what to do. Or what to say or how to think. We weren't prepared for it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:38:20] I know you said prior [at] UVA the campus culture was very separate from what was happening in Washington or larger cities.

David Speck [00:38:27] Yes.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:38:27] Do you recall a shift after the assassination?

David Speck [00:38:34] Not too much at that point. I think the shift really started in the later 60s, largely because of the Vietnam War and how people were being drafted, the changes in the way the draft was operating. I can't think of any particular person or event that you could say [was] where that started, but remember that was also during the time [that] you were beginning to see the emergence of a much more active and outspoken African-American community; not just in this area, everywhere in the country. I mean, you know, these were the moments of, I don't know the exact timing, but certainly Black Panthers, Malcolm X, you know, all of that. Obviously Martin Luther King. '63 was Kennedy. What year was Martin Luther King shot?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:39:59] '68.

David Speck [00:39:59] [19]68. And so, Bobby Kennedy--See, this is where things get cloudy for me. Was Bobby Kennedy before Martin Luther King or after?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:40:19] It was after, a few months after.

David Speck [00:40:23] Okay. Boy, that was that was a pretty wild time. I was working at GW [George Washington University] at that point, and I volunteered to help. There was a transportation issue because all of the people that, among other things, work at the hospitals, GW Hospital, they had no way of getting home. They were used to taking a bus or driving, but there was a citywide curfew. There were no cars driving unless they were official. There were no buses running. So, I drove a big van that was clearly marked "Red Cross," and I would pick people up at the hospital, and drive them home mostly in the more African-American neighborhoods in D.C., because there was a large population that worked at the hospital who were Black. Then I would pick people up that wanted to get to the hospital to work. There was a curfew. There were armed military everywhere, and I'm driving through these checkpoints seeing a city like I'd never seen before. I think those are, you know, those are the elements of the awakening, if you will, at least for me, but I think it was probably the case for a lot of people. This is what's happening around us. You know, in modern years, you're seeing a lot of that happening. Are any of the relatively recent events unifying pieces of history like, George Floyd. Do you remember what you were doing when you heard that? Or saw that?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:42:41] To a certain degree, yes. I remember the day after. So, it's about those moments. With UVA, when you came back to Alexandria, like on summer breaks or etc., did you notice a difference in the culture in Alexandria from Charlottesville? Maybe because of D.C., or it just in general, how did it feel? What differences, if at all, did you observe?

David Speck [00:43:26] It wasn't obvious, and it wasn't event-driven, mostly. I think it rolled out a little bit, as opposed to it was suddenly different.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:45:27] Thinking also just about some of the major things that were happening in and around the Civil Rights Movement. I know you mentioned the JFK assassination was one of those key moments. I was also curious, in '64, there was Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and--

David Speck [00:45:45] Oh, yeah.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:45:46] Yeah. And James Chaney, who were killed in Mississippi.

David Speck [00:45:48] Yes.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:45:53] If you were reacting to it, how do you remember feeling about that when you heard about it?

David Speck [00:45:57] Well, that's a good question because, I mean, you don't know all the dynamics of my family, but that was one time that my father became very angry with me. Because we're at the dining room table, and my father always wanted to talk about current events, and I probably wasn't very artful in how I saw things. But I said, "Well,"--I don't think I said, "Well, they deserve it for doing that," but I said something to the effect of, "Well, this is what they knew they were getting in for." And my father was really enraged. He said, "What possibly could make you think that these people deserve that?" I'm really kind of paraphrasing because I don't remember, but I just remember how angry he was. That was an event for me that I really had to ponder much more and did. I'm not going to say, "Well, I have a lot of Black friends," but many of my friendships began to be where we had areas of common interest or common experiences. And it was less about, whether you, you know, who's Black, who's not, who's Jewish, who's not, and more about just the common experience, the community, and looking at things differently, particularly politically. For me, a lot of it was political, because I was getting involved in politics, and running for office, and needed it. You know, I couldn't afford to start dismissing an entire group of voters just because I hadn't had a close association with them. So, you know it was an awakening. And it continues, frankly.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:48:07] Looking at the killing of those three men, how do you recall it being reported? What was the story that you heard, and how was it explained to you?

David Speck [00:48:21] I was and am an insatiable newspaper reader. The real newspaper. You know, the one that's made out of paper, and you hold it up and read it? I still am. That's very generational. I read the *Washington Post* every day, now it's online, because I don't get it [on vacation], but I get it at home every day. And the [*New York*] *Times*. I think that my perspective was a function of the more liberal press reporting it in a way that it deserved. You know, these were people that were committed to helping voting rights for others. They happened to be Jewish. That wasn't necessarily the first thing you thought about, but I think that was often how it was portrayed in the news. Which at the time, I didn't focus on as much as I did as I became more aware of it. "Why do they keep identifying them as Jewish?" But, you know, remember, other than *The Washington Times*, which was started by Reverend [Sun Myung] Moon, the papers pretty much were, at least in the DMV, liberal more so. That wasn't probably always the case, but it certainly was during that period of time. The way it got reported, the kinds of information that were shared, both network news on TV and [in] newspapers had that slant to it. That was a seminal moment in my life. I'd never seen my father quite so angry with me. I mean, I did a lot of dumb ass things, but most kids did. [*Laughter*] But this was something that was deep in

him. It was deeply rooted. I don't know if it was because they were Jewish, but I think that must have had something to do with it.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:50:38] Is there a reason in particular that looking back that you think-- and not speculating-- but just why your father was so attached to this in particular?

David Speck [00:50:51] I think probably two things. One, they were Jewish, and that awakened something in his background. He was very secular in his Judaism. He didn't go to temple, and did not go to services, didn't keep kosher or anything else. But that's how he was brought up. I think the other thing was just the injustice of it. You know, he was one of the first white doctors to see Black women patients, because he was an OB-GYN, at the Casey Clinic up at the hospital that was there to treat people that could not afford to get health care. Now, delivering health care these days is very different. You think back, you know, 30 or 40 years, there weren't Urgicares and Surgi Centers and all that sort of thing. There were hospitals, there were doctors, and there was an emergency room. He was willing to make a professional commitment to providing health care, delivering babies. The hospital was segregated, and there weren't that many Black doctors. It became difficult sometimes to get medical care, and that was something he did because, you know, it's the right thing to do. I don't mean to oversimplify, but he had some pretty core values that had nothing to do with religion, but were strong and were very strongly felt.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:52:53] When your father first opened his practice, was he accepting Black female patients or did that come later, if you recall?

David Speck [00:53:05] He was definitely accepting [Black women] because when he first started his practice, he was the only OB-GYN to actually have a practice in Alexandria. Any specialists were in Washington. In Alexandria, it was a small hospital on Washington Street, relatively small. You had some general surgeons, you had some pediatricians, you had a lot of GPs--General practitioners, but there was literally no OB-GYN in practice in Alexandria until he started. I can only speculate. I don't know whether it was a case of they accepted him because he was a good doctor, and he had a good bedside manner, or [that] he was their best choice for convenience. But I know he got pretty busy pretty quickly. And delivered a lot of babies.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:54:15] What year did you graduate from UVA?

David Speck [00:54:20] Didn't graduate [from UVA]. Graduated from GW.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:54:23] Okay. So, take me through that. I know you mentioned this a little bit, but just to reorient.

David Speck [00:54:29] Well, I was at UVA for two years, and I think I had some unresolved issues that had to do with my mother dying and things like that. And so, I did poorly. By mutual agreement, it was suggested that I take a break. In my sophomore year, I left [the University of] Virginia. And there was a brief interlude before I went back to school at GW. My strongest attachments are everybody from UVA, you know, the friends that I made and classmates. GW was, for me, more of a commuter experience, but I ended up getting three degrees from GW, and I worked there for a long time. But you know, you don't see me wearing a baseball hat with the GW initials on it. Every one of them has the big V. My core friendships were all from there. It's like the old story about the mule,

that you need to get its attention by hitting him upside the head with a two by four? [*Laughter*] Well, I was the mule, and I got hit with a two by four when the people that were so encouraging to me at UVA to help me resolve my issues and do better couldn't help me. It was a wake-up call, that's for sure. I transferred from UVA to GW with, I don't know, maybe nine credit hours? Not much, and ended up still graduating on time. And then got my master's and my doctorate.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:56:36] What degree did you get in your undergrad?

David Speck [00:56:40] Psychology. My masters was in--At the time, I think it was called College Student Development. It was sort of a counseling student affairs position. I thought for a long time that my career direction was going to be to become a college president. I mean, that's kind of what I was gearing towards. So my doctorate, with a lot of supporting work in Business and Sociology and related administration, was in Higher Education Administration. It was exactly that to become a leader in college and university. But what I encountered was that if I wanted to advance my career, I would have to move. I would have [had to] taken a similar position that I had at GW in a larger school, or a lateral move at a smaller school. I needed to move up, and I didn't want to move out. I was also kind of getting tired of the politics of academic life, and there was a lot of it. So, that's what led me in a different career path. And I'd have to say, it turned out okay.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [00:58:06] So getting into your time in politics, what inspired you, in the first race you ran in, to take that step? What pushed you there?

David Speck [00:58:23] Sure. I got involved in the community when we bought our first house in Alexandria. I was living on campus at that point, with the job that I had at GW, but I knew I was going back to Alexandria. We found a nice, small starter home, and moved in and were interested in getting more involved in our neighborhood association. I think I got recruited to be on a particular commission. That led to something else that started getting me more involved, getting me to meet people that were doing things within the city. I always said, you know, there's no natural progression from being on your civic association board and then running for office. But what I began to see was that if I wanted to be in a leadership role in terms of changing things, improving things, I needed to think about a role that allowed me to do that in a more consequential form So in [19]79, I ran for city council, because that was sort of the step. I [was] reasonably well known in the community just because of some of the things I was doing and enjoyed. The issue was which party. I wasn't a member of either party. And that was also in a period of time when the sort of progressive political movement in Virginia and in Northern Virginia was Republicans. People don't realize that. Alexandria had the most elected Republicans of any city in Virginia, and it wasn't ideological. It was people that were deeply rooted in the community that had moderate views. I'd say two things got me to decide to run as a Republican. One was they really recruited me. They wanted me to run. Whereas the Democratic Party sort of said, "Well, you know, get in line. Your turn will come." So I was attracted to some of the people that--names that wouldn't make any difference to you--but people that were becoming strong political leaders who were moderate in their views, thoughtful, [and] ideologically balanced. That was what attracted me. So I ran as a Republican. Finished seventh. You know, the top six win, and [I] finished seventh by a couple of hundred votes. The interesting thing was, that council that got elected? Three Republicans were elected, and three Democrats. The mayor at the time was Democrat, so it was still Democratic-controlled, but it was a much more balanced, very effective council because both parties did a lot of cooperative work together. I mean, there was really not much partisan debate; it was more about finding areas of common interest. So I didn't win, but in a fluke, there were two

vacant positions in Alexandria for the House of Delegates and two seats. Everything was crazy in those days. There were multi-member districts and stuff like that. But unexpectedly, the two members [of the House of Delegates] from Alexandria, one Republican [and] one Democrat: the Republican left after one term, and the Democrat left after two terms. So you had two open seats. This is coming up in November of '79, after I just barely lost in spring of '79 for council. Well, I hadn't thought about it that way, but certainly looked like an opportunity to continue to be involved in ways that were more consequential. I won very easily. And two years later, I was defeated for reelection, because Chuck Robb [Virginia Governor Charles Robb] was running for the first time as governor, and it was one year into the Reagan administration, and all of the Reagan animosity about the tax bills that he had supported. It was rough being a Republican if you had a high turnout of votes that weren't thinking a whole lot about, "You know, let me look for the best person." It was, "Who's got a -D or who's got an -R after their name." And so, unexpectedly, I lost. Bernie Cohen and I both were elected at the same time in '79. Bernie was the lawyer for *Loving* [*v. Virginia*], and we became great friends. For me, it was a hiccup of some consequence when I lost. So, it was rebuilding my career, and not think so much about politics. That's what got me involved in finance. I can't remember what I've said to you, so I may be repeating, but I always have had a theory that everyone has moments in their lives when all the planets line up the right way, and sometimes you don't even know that happened until it passes you by. Well, when I went into finance, the planets lined up and I realized it. So that was the beginning of a 35-year career that became very successful. But [working in finance] also gave me the flexibility to be able to run for office again, and it took me back to my roots of running for City Council. I was still a Republican at the time. But that didn't last long. About halfway through my first term on council, I realized that what was happening with the Republican Party was just not the Republican Party that I had joined ten years earlier. I became very friendly with Kerry Donley, among others. That was a lifelong friendship until he passed away. He was a Democrat. Partisan Democrat. I wasn't a particularly partisan Republican, but I said, "I cannot run for another term on council and turn right around and change parties. And I don't think I can change parties now, as we're getting ready for reelection, and have the other party accept me, having been a Republican." So, I chose not to run for reelection, and announced that I was going to change parties. In Virginia, when somebody says they're a Democrat or a Republican, it's like, "Yeah. How do you prove that?" You know, there's no party registration. So, you know, Mark Warner was the chairman of the Democratic Party in Virginia, and he became a good friend, and he helped me make that transition, as did others. And so I became a Democrat and was very comfortable with that. And then an unexpected vacancy occurred on the council when [Former Mayor] Patsy Ticer got elected to the state senate. That left an opening on the council. Kerry Donley was the vice mayor, so he became mayor, leaving an opening on council that had to be filled by a special election, and that started me on the next saga of my checkered political life. I've never regretted it. People are shocked to even hear that I was once a Republican, because they think of the Republican Party as it is now, and they say, "No, that couldn't have been you." But it was a very progressive party. Linwood Holton [Tim Kaine's father-in-law] was the first Republican elected as governor, who's Tim Kaine's father-in-law. It was a different time. Very different time. I loved politics, but I also recognized it was not the defining event in my life. I didn't feel like I wanted to wake up every morning, look in the mirror, and say, "Look at me. I'm elected." Some people don't know when to leave, and I'm not talking about current events. I'm talking about members of council that just couldn't bear the thought of not being on council. And I think one of the reasons that I was successful was that I never felt like it's what defined me. And so when I stopped, I felt okay about it. Did it long enough. Did it well, I think. But did it long enough.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:08:47] I'm going to go back and just ask them a few clarifying questions. So at the very beginning, when you move back to Alexandria, when you bought your first house, do you remember what year it was and around how old you were?

David Speck [01:08:59] 1971. $34,950. My mortgage payment was $190.83. In some months, it was a struggle to get that mortgage paid. Yeah. So yeah, I remember. [*Laughter*]

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:09:15] You also said that you were recruited to be on a particular commission. Do you remember what it was?

David Speck [01:09:20] It was the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Control Coordinating Committee. The intent behind this committee was to get everyone that was involved in any capacity in the city on this matter sitting at the table, talking about things that we can do in a coordinated way to deal with some of the developing problems of substance abuse. But it was the only commission where the chairman was appointed by the council. It wasn't a meritocracy or seniority. It was, "Who do we want to sort of take the leadership role in chairing this commission?" There had been only one chairman up to that point. It was a relatively new commission. He could have continued, but he was getting very busy with his own career, and recommended that I be the chair, and the council named me as the chair. That really put me in front of a lot of the community. That's where I began to see things that I learned more about and became more experienced in how decisions and resources are made. You know, how the budget can address some of these [things] and not others. That was the great thing about local government, certainly local government in Alexandria. Kerry [Donley] and I used to talk about this all the time. You know, what we loved about Alexandria was it was big enough to have all the problems of a big city, but small enough that you could get your hands around them. You could see a problem. You could try to think about how to fix it, and you could get your colleagues to go along with it and watch it happen. That's incredibly rewarding.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:11:32] When you first started doing public service in Alexandria, what were the major issues at the time? What were people in the community talking about, what were people in council talking about, and what were you concerned with?

David Speck [01:11:44] Crime was a continued big one, but again, that was because there were tensions within the community. Education and schools needing more money. You might get different answers depending upon who you're talking to because there were lots of--when I say parochial issues, I don't mean that in, a patronizing way. But there were issues that were really local and parochial that occupied attention for a particular neighborhood or community. But I don't think I've ever really changed in my view of what's the greatest concern is, and that's finance and the revenue resources for the city to continue to do things without pricing ourselves out of the market. We were losing the middle class, a lot of the core middle class, both Black and White, actually. We were struggling to pay for the things we wanted to do. Keep in mind, Alexandria by borders is a very finite community. It's an island, if you think about it. You can't go beyond your border. You can't start taxing people in Fairfax County. So, if nothing else, I've been consistent. Whenever somebody has asked me, "Where do you have your greatest concerns?" It's not this year; we'll get through it. But how do we continue to be able to meet the needs of the community, and solve problems, and provide resources and services, when there's a limited resource to get our money, our revenue? You might get different answers from different people. That could be the subject of another oral history. What do people think are the biggest problems, and why?

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:13:57] Thinking about Alexandria politically, I know you noted that part of the reason that you were thinking about the party redirection, part of the reason that you lost reelection in the House of Delegates was because in the white House, was that the Reagan era was highly controversial. Major political shifts that were happening largely in D.C. sort of shifted the zeitgeist around the Civil Rights Movement, even the Vietnam era, which I know we also didn't speak about much, but was also its own sort of political awakening. At the time, how did you feel or react to those changes, especially being so close to D.C.?

David Speck [01:14:42] Well, again, another good question. You remember that I was working in D.C. and was living in D.C. while I was working at GW. So, you know, I had kind of a GW hat and perspective and an Alexandria one. I mean, my family was still in Alexandria. My father was still living there. I still had a lot of connections in Alexandria for different reasons. I don't think I had dual allegiances, but I definitely saw how different our community, the Alexandria community, was from the Washington community. You know, I lived there long enough that I registered to vote [in D.C.] But, you know, I always voted in the Democratic primary because there wasn't really a Republican Party in D.C. That wasn't for a very long period of time, but it was enough time for me to be aware of a lot of what was happening in Washington. Crime was a big concern in Washington. It's so funny to go into town now and drive down 12th Street to a really nice restaurant at 12th and Q and remember that growing up, yeah, you didn't want to go down there by yourself at night. Some of that's good. Some of it maybe not so good, but, those are struggles. I mean, where I am now, on an island; true island. Huge problem with affordable housing. There is a large Brazilian population on Martha's Vineyard, and there are language issues, there are service issues, and housing [is an issue]. I mean, it's a crisis on housing right now, and nobody has an answer. I think affordability of housing in Alexandria--I mean, what's the average price of a single family home now? Like $800,000 or something crazy. Well, my house on Woodland Terrace, the first house we bought in '71, I needed help from both sets of parents to get the down payment to cover my $34,950 home purchase. If you're thinking about the way loans are made now, where banks don't want another housing crisis, so they're looking for 20% down payment to get a mortgage, even with the rates as high as they are? How many young families can afford a starter home that requires that they put, you know, a couple hundred thousand dollars in a down payment? Not many. Not a lot that I know.

David Speck [01:18:26] We're going to have to wrap up in a few minutes, so if we need to schedule another session, I'm happy to do that. I enjoy our conversations. But I have to stop. Go ahead.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:18:37] I only have a few more questions. So mainly I want to go to the retrospective parts, because I ended up asking mostly everything. Looking back, if you could have done something differently--looking at Black-Jewish relations or just in general--because I know you talked about this awakening that happened later. What would you have done differently, or how do you feel now, looking back about the time and not just you as a person, but just the era?

David Speck [01:19:09] Wow. Well, part of the answers to how my life has evolved have to do with the choices I made early on about getting married and having children. I might have done things differently, but I didn't. And then that was consequential. Everything's okay now. You know, I remarried, and we'll have our 37th anniversary in November, so that one's worked out okay. But I was married for 18 years. Some of the things in my life were influenced by that. It's easy to say in retrospect, I wished that I had skipped the Republican step. But at the time, it made perfectly good

sense. I don't know. I'd really have to think about that. Because I think it calls on so many different parts of my gestalt. What would have happened if I spent more time studying and less time carousing at UVA? I started thinking that I was going to follow my father's career and go into medicine, but the choices that I ended up making have been tremendously rewarding. I don't mean in the sense of personal wealth. I mean, my career was successful, but the blessing for me was that I was really able to genuinely help people meet their financial dreams and needs. I think one of the reasons that was successful was because that's what I really wanted to do. It wasn't, "Let me find a career where I can make money." It was, "Let me find a career that that really fits into who I am," and who I am is, I always want to fix things. When I see problems, I want to fix them. When I see voids, you know, I want to fill them. I think that my career allowed me to do that, but I think there's a lot more I could have done. You know, when I say I'm in the twilight of my years, I'm not trying to be maudlin about it. It's just, you know, I'll be 80 in a year, and, you know, I see articles in this paper about an elderly man drove his car through the window of the McDonald's. You read the article, and he's 75. [*Laughter*] I said, "Jeez, I'm elderly!" I'd have to think about that some more, Yahney-Marie.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:23:04] Makes sense. And also, just because I forgot this; July 9th, 2024. My name is Yahney-Marie Sangaré. You should say your name for the recording.

David Speck [01:23:18] Okay. David George Speck I was born on September 12th, 1945. So 80 in about a year and a month.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:23:34] Thank you so much.

David Speck [01:23:36] You're welcome. Feel free to reach out and tell me if you want to do some more.

Yahney-Marie Sangaré [01:23:41] Thank you. There's a few more things I want to ask you. I don't want to take up too much of your time. You spoke a bit about how you saw Black Jewish relations today in Alexandria. Just kind of as a final thing, do you have any closing thoughts on that, or anything else as well?

David Speck [01:24:11] I would probably have given you a different answer a year or so ago. I think that that being Jewish in Alexandria, and being a member of [a synagogue]; there's now, the Lubavitch temple [Chabad Lubavitch], as well as the conservative temple Agudas [Achim Congregation] and the Reform Temple Beth El [Hebrew Congregation], that the undertone of antisemitism is something that I think everyone is more aware of, and I'm not sure I would have said that, you know, a couple years ago, that that's something we need to worry about, but it is something we need to worry about. I'm very supportive of the some of the efforts that are being made to fight back against antisemitism. And one of them is Robert Kraft, who's the owner of the Boston Patriots or New England Patriots, but he's also very involved in the fight against anti-Semitism. I am very supportive to that to a point where, my wife and I have had conversations with Rabbi Spinrad about possibly rejoining the temple. You know, that's kind of a big step. Not a big step in terms of anything other than it serves as a way for me to continue to connect some of my heritage and background more directly.