



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Myron Contee

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Location of Interview:

Bethlehem Baptist Church, 7836 Fordson Rd #401, Alexandria, VA 22306

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Transcriber: J Orisha

Summary:

Myron Contee discusses his family roots in Alexandria. He shares his experiences with sports, faith, history, and community.

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Myron Contee [00:00:01] Myron Contee, 68, born December 25th, 1955, in Alexandria.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:10] Kerry James Reed. I am 27 years of age, and we are at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Alexandria. So, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. Mr. Contee, it's been a pleasure getting to know you over this past month. You just mentioned where you were born. Could you describe some of your earliest memories?

Myron Contee [00:00:26] My earliest memories. I remember that there was a hospital on the corner of Duke and Washington Street, and it was the only hospital in Alexandria. And that was many, many years ago, even though it was on South Washington, and I lived on 328 North Patrick Street. And that's where actually all my years in Alexandria were spent.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:56] At 328 North Patrick Street. Could you describe the neighborhood around 328 North Patrick Street?

Myron Contee [00:01:02] At that time, well, growing up, when I first grew up on Patrick Street, it was not what it is now. Now it's called Route One. It's pretty much a 3-lane highway going north through Alexandria. When I was born, it was not even 3 lanes. It was 1 lane going each way. The sidewalks were twice the size that they are now, and it was a neighborhood with kids always playing in the street.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:36] So when the kids were playing in the street, what games would they play?

Myron Contee [00:01:42] The one that I really can remember when they decided to make it 1 lane and the street was closed off, we used to play football right there all the time.

Kerry James Reed [00:01:50] Really? Football in the street?

Myron Contee [00:01:52] Football in the street. Because remember that traffic didn't come up at all, because of blocked off. And see the sidewalks back then were big enough that you could play on the sidewalk. I mean, you could play marbles. You could play jump rope. You could do everything on the sidewalk because you're talking about a sidewalk that probably was 6 to 8 feet wide.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:14] Oh, wow.

Myron Contee [00:02:14] Yeah, like I said, the sidewalks were double. When they did move one, that's where they took it from, the sidewalk.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:20] Jeez. That's huge. My word. I can't imagine those type of sidewalks on Patrick Street. That's crazy. Can you describe what your home looked like; what 328 North Patrick looked like?

Myron Contee [00:02:34] Back then it looked big. Now it looks small. [Laughs] Well, the house was an older house because me coming up - this is 2024. In 2020, I want to say maybe 2022, the house

was down as 150 years old. So, the house was old when I was coming up. So, the house is still almost 100 years old when I was coming up in it. So, it was an old house. It was heated by a gas space heater that was in the middle of the house but was used to heat the whole house. Because back then, before I was born, they probably had a two-way side fireplace and they closed down one side of the fireplace. And so, they still used it [to] heat the house. Bathrooms were in the back of the house because I don't know when they added plumbing. It's probably before I was born, but all the bathrooms to the older houses were located in the back of the house, with the waste pipe running on the outside of the house to identify if the plumbing was added to the house. We had a nice sized yard. Matter of fact, we had one of the bigger yards on the block. We had a porch on the house. So, in the house alone I had a lot of play area in the yard.

Kerry James Reed [00:04:08] Can you recall what businesses that were in the neighborhood where you and your family shopped that?

Myron Contee [00:04:13] Yes. Across the street from where I lived, there was a funeral home that's still there. They're owned differently now. On the corner there was a grocery store, which now Ebenezer Church owns. It's not a grocery store anymore. There was a laundromat on another corner. Growing up, at one point in time, there was a fast-food chicken place. And also growing up, on another corner was a pool hall. A little small hall. On the opposite corner there was a church.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:03] You remember what the church was called?

Myron Contee [00:05:04] It's still there. Third Baptist.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:06] Third Baptist.

Myron Contee [00:05:08] Yeah. The church there bought the grocery store was Ebenezer and it's still there too today.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:23] So you mentioned that when they closed off Patrick Street, you and your friends would play football in the middle of the road, which is really cool, by the way, that that image is really, really neat. Could you describe other areas you hung out or played in?

Myron Contee [00:05:37] Yes, I can. [Laughs] A couple of different areas from where I lived. I lived in the 300 block of North Patrick. One block over going east was Alfred Street. Okay. On the corner of Alfred and Princess Street was a church called Meade [Memorial Episcopal]. We played in Meade's parking lot and across the street from the church was a parking lot that we also played. In that parking lot we played baseball, football, basically rode our bicycles. And in the Meade parking lot, we played football. On the 400 block of Alfred Street there was a vacant lot next to one of my best friend's houses where we played slow motion tackle. The lot was vacant. Grass was there. Then, west of my house was a basketball court that's still there today. It's at the corner of Queen and [inaudible]. We played basketball there. And then at the corner of Princess and Patrick was the boys club, that also I was a member of.

Kerry James Reed [00:06:52] When did you join the boys club?

Myron Contee [00:06:55] Oh, man. To be safe, I would say [19]65. It might have been a year earlier, a year later, but around [19]65.

Kerry James Reed [00:07:07] Lots of kids in the neighborhood join the boys club?

Myron Contee [00:07:11] A lot of my friends [were] at Boys' Club. At that time, it was a Boys' Club only. It wasn't girls, and anyone that wasn't a member of the Boys' Club went to the rec [recreation center].

Kerry James Reed [00:07:22] I about. So, you mentioned that your best friend lived near one of the places that you would play at. Can you describe some of your friends from the neighborhood?

Myron Contee [00:07:34] Some of my friends from the neighborhood, most of [them] had nicknames. Well, one of my best friends lived to the back of me. He stayed with his grandparents. I could walk out my back door and walk into his back door. We grew up playing table football. Well, no, let me not say table football because it's different. We had electric football sets. Yeah. You don't know, but yeah, I know I'm going off too far back for you. And where it was is they came out with teams. You know, I was a Callaway. He was a Redskin. And so, you had the teams, and they were in their colors. You would get 11 men and they would be magnetic. They would fit on this board. You plug the board, and then you set them up where the offensives play, because you could [inaudible] passes and everything. And you cut the board on, and there'd be two teams going against each other electrically. I know. You just wondering what it looks like. I know. [Laughs] Yes, that was way before the video games and everything. But yeah, they were called electric football sets. Then a couple of my friends, we used to play basketball together. We grew up going to Queen Street and picking teams. Other than that, I had a friend who lived across the street from me. You know, we saw, three men on one bicycle. We went see. So, what other descriptions do you want? I can tell you a whole lot, though. You want me to describe them? They were tall and they was short. They were stout, stubby. You know, everybody was back then just friends, a friendly neighborhood. Some people described the term as, "It takes a village to raise a child." And it was like growing up in a village because your neighbors had access to correct you when you were wrong. If your parents went home when you were hungry, you could go to someone else's house. Back then, a lot of doors were unlocked so you could just walk in the house.

Kerry James Reed [00:09:47] So there's a big focus on community.

Myron Contee [00:09:50] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:09:54] What was your favorite aspect of your neighborhood growing up? Was it the community? Was it your friends?

Myron Contee [00:09:59] Probably my friends.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:01] Absolutely. Do you remember any of your friends' names?

Myron Contee [00:10:06] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:07] Do you mind telling me some of them?

Myron Contee [00:10:08] I know all my friends' names.

Kerry James Reed [00:10:09] Okay. Can you give me some?

Myron Contee [00:10:10] Yes. Gary Jordan. Ervin Napa. Jeffery Coleman, Carl Jackson, Earl Saunders. I'm trying to make sure I stay in my age bracket because I can tell you those that are older than me. I'm just trying to get the ones that actually I grew up with that were closer to my age. Jeffery Carl, Jeffrey Longhorn, Jerome Harris. Scorpie Hargrove. I'm trying to remember what his real name was. Bobby Wilson. Who else is on my street? Marvin Elliott. Want some more?

Kerry James Reed [00:11:15] If you can give them. Absolutely. But you know, I mean around ten, but that's more than that.

Myron Contee [00:11:21] You know, and just so you understand, I'm only talking in my direct neighborhood.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:27] Right.

Myron Contee [00:11:29] I haven't gone up to Michael Johnson, Harold Hughes. I haven't gone up to his neighborhood. I'm just still in my vicinity. I'm still in a four-block percentage, you know what I'm saying? So, I mean, I can keep naming.¹

Kerry James Reed [00:11:51] Yeah. Right now, it's fabulous. Did you and your friends ever play around cemeteries growing up?

Myron Contee [00:12:05] We didn't play in cemeteries. We might have went down every now and then to not actually, Douglass, but the cemeteries located next to them. We might have went down every now and then to play, but we didn't actually play in cemeteries because they weren't located across the street. You following what I'm saying? And when we was playing, we didn't just travel down there just to play in the cemeteries.

Kerry James Reed [00:12:33] Yeah. So, when you would just be, you know, going around the neighborhood and you would come across Douglass or Bethel, or Coleman, whichever ones, what did those cemeteries look like back then when you were growing up?

Myron Contee [00:12:45] All of them probably upkept a little bit better. You know what I'm saying? I've come from being raised at a time that you had a certain respect for the cemetery in itself. You know, I mean, that's where dead people are. You know what I'm saying? Quote quote, you know. So, you had a certain respect for that, [and] just the same honor that you would have for a church. Like if we were out playing and people would tell you're telling a lie, we would say, "Okay, we didn't believe you." We say, "Okay, let's go to the church steps and stand on the church steps." And then if you lied, you would not lie no more. You'd tell the truth. You know, just a certain reverence and respect for those areas.

¹ Some names that Mr. Contee did not include during the interview are: Eric Napper, Gary Jordan, Earl Saunders, Carl Jackson, Jeffery Coleman, Wille Hargrove, Bobby Wilson, Preston Street, Keith Williams, and Chuckie Moore.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:32] Yeah, absolutely. Did you learn much about your family history growing up?

Myron Contee [00:13:38] Not really. My mother's side. Not my father's.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:40] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:13:41] My mother was from Stanford, Virginia. My father was from Alexandria. I've learned a lot of his side of his family recently.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:49] Okay. So, could you describe some of your father's family history that you've learned recently?

Myron Contee [00:13:57] Apparently my father was born in Alexandria, and that was back in 1905. His mother was from Alexandria. I found out that from that side of the family, he had other relatives that were in Alexandria. There were at least 7 properties that they owned and that he ended up with, it might have been more he ended up with. Some of my family migrated to D.C. and Maryland that I did not know. But I found out lately that the Contees in DC and the Contees in Maryland may be kin to me. When I was born, most of his immediate family his age was deceased, other than his mother. He had one cousin that I met that is still living, that was in Boston, Massachusetts. So, all the history that I found out about his family are recently. When I was born, my father was 53 years old. And it was in a time when old folks didn't talk a lot. Certain families did, but most of them didn't talk a lot. So, I really didn't get a lot of information from him. And actually, his mother lived until she was 109 and she really didn't talk a lot. But I found out there are a couple other individuals that matter of fact, her [inaudible] down the line. The Johnsons, I'm related to. Harrison [inaudible]. The Hughes's I'm related to. Then there's some Douglass's in there and then some other names mentioned. Whether by marriage or affiliation in the family history, because my father's mother was a Goldman and a Douglass before she was a Contee.

Kerry James Reed [00:16:19] Okay. How did you learn all this family history recently?

Myron Contee [00:16:28] I've been blessed. I tell people this. I have not done anything. It has come to me. I'm also the chaplain at the Alexandria City Jail. There's a lady there, Amy, I can't think of a last name right now, that does family histories. It started off with her asking me the question if I had a problem with her looking up my family history. And I said no. Okay. And she began to look up things and began to bring me information. There's another individual named Char Bar that does a lot of historian history for Alexandria. She was doing a couple different reports. She actually is doing one now for the city. She was doing one for Sharon Chappell and my name came up as she knew me, and she began to research and pulled history on my family and send it to me. So, all the history that I have, the genealogy, the family tree on my father's side, anything that I have, one of those two individuals have given it to me. They've done the research. I come to find out that over at the National Black Museum, over top of the elevator, there's a picture. In that picture, those are my relatives.

Kerry James Reed [00:17:59] Oh, wow.

Myron Contee [00:18:00] Yes. And she's giving information. I got the picture. I got the names of the individuals on the picture.

Kerry James Reed [00:18:14] So what was it like to find out that you have kin sort of all over DC, Maryland, and Virginia that you didn't know about?

Myron Contee [00:18:23] I was thankful. You know, you don't know what you miss until you begin to see [things] get very real for you. Now all of this information I know now, I wish I had known then, but I didn't. But I don't take it as, man, I wish I would've known, you know, I'm not resentful. I'm not remorseful. I'm just thankful to be able to know it now, because if nothing else, I can give it to my children and my children's children. And so at least they know some history of their family.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:10] So you mentioned that you're the chaplain over at the Alexandria City Jail. Growing up, were there any, traditions, or practices around faith in your family?

Myron Contee [00:19:20] Oh, yes. We grew up in Robert's Methodist Church on South Washington Street. Okay. So, my father was the leader there for over 60 years. And my mother was head usher there for over 60 years. So yes, we have some faith background. I actually grew up at the church. We come from a household that Sunday morning, if you couldn't go to church, you couldn't go out and play. You say you sick for church; you sick all day, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:19:53] So can you describe some of your favorite memories from going to Roberts Memorial?

Myron Contee [00:19:58] My favorite memories. I don't know what to tell you. Getting plucked in the back of the head for chewing chewing gum, sitting in the back of the church, or falling asleep. [Laughs]. But I used to be an altar boy. I was one of the first ones. The Methodists took on a process where they begin this service in the, when the pastor and all come in, the alter lights would come in before him. That would be me and another friend I grew up with. We would come in and we would go light the candles on the altar, and then sit there while service ran. That's probably something that was done in the Catholic Church, and other churches. But what happened was we began to do it in the Methodist Church. You know, that and then Sunday school. Though there was something that the church used to do back then. They used to have a Tom's thumb wedding, yeah, it was weird. It wasn't a physical wedding. It was in an enactment where the use in the church would enact a marriage ceremony. And, you know, and you dress up and, you know, all nice and all. And I think, you know, I was, best man for my sister one time. Stuff like that. You know, it's just something that was a tradition that the churches did.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:34] Interesting. You said it's a Tom's thumb wedding?

Myron Contee [00:21:37] I think that the name of what's it's called is a Tom thumb wedding.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:41] Very interesting. So, did you always want to be a chaplain or how did that come about?

Myron Contee [00:21:51] I can't say I did. [laughs]. I went through a time in my life when, let's just say, of turmoil of living on the other side. Okay, and got in some trouble here and there. And in the

process of doing that, you know, God opened my eyes to some things and put me in a heartfelt wanting to change my life and go back and minister to others to help them change their life. And so, I started out at Alexandria [Prison] as a volunteer, actually roughly 30 years ago. I've been the chaplain there for 14. So, I've been going in and out of there for now about 29, 30 years. But it didn't start with the chaplain. The chaplain retired and I desired to fill in. And two years later, after his retirement, I became the chaplain. I've been the chaplain ever since.

Kerry James Reed [00:22:57] Fabulous. So how do you think faith helps those who are on the other side, as you put it? What is bringing somebody to faith or ministering to somebody? What does that do for them, in your opinion?

Myron Contee [00:23:17] You know, the biggest thing from society's perspective, and that's the person on the other side, is we don't realize that we are spiritual beings, okay. You know, we think it's just a physical realm we live in. And so, we don't never put the two together. But when you share some realities with individuals and they come to a place of accepting and realizing, then it gives them enlightenment, opens up their eyes to some realities of some things that may be going on in their life that has the power over them that shouldn't. And so, they, it gives them hope. Give some hope for, a change, you know, because out of all the people lined up only 20% of criminals. The other 80% made a mistake and don't know how to rebound from it, or just caught in a lifestyle, and keep getting locked up.

Kerry James Reed [00:24:29] Yeah. Absolutely. So very briefly, could you describe your father for me? Just like a physical description of what he did?

Myron Contee [00:24:48] Short bald head man on the top. Very quiet. Very faithful on things that he took on to do, or he was asked to do. He used to work for the government. He used to work at the Pentagon. He probably worked there for, 60, 70 years before they made him retire.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:15] Okay. 60 years working for the Pentagon? Wow, that that's a long time.

Myron Contee [00:25:20] Yeah. Back then, you know, you work certain amount of time, [then] you were made to retire, you know.

Kerry James Reed [00:25:29] Then briefly, can you describe your mother?

Myron Contee [00:25:33] My mother, a little bit taller than my father. She, on her side, a little bit Indian. Country girl, born in Stanford, Virginia. Came up here in the [19]40s, 30s, from there, to get work. Ended up staying. End up getting married. She was the head usher of the church at Robert's Memorial for like 60 years. She lived to be 99. After my father passed, she took on responsibility of raising me and my sister. So, you know. Very likable. You know, everybody around her, loved her. Spoke her mind. You know, she had something to say, she wouldn't hold her tongue. She would say whatever it was. But like I said, got along with everybody.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:41] Absolutely. And then, could you tell me their names?

Myron Contee [00:26:46] Earl N. Contee, and Virginia Margaret Davenport Contee.

Kerry James Reed [00:26:54] Margaret Davenport.

Myron Contee [00:26:55] Her maiden name was Davenport. Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:03] So where did you go to school in Alexandria?

Myron Contee [00:27:07] I went to Charles Houston Elementary School. Parker Gray Middle School. G.W. High School and T.C. High School.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:23] What year did you move into T.C.?

Myron Contee [00:27:28] The second year after they put school together.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:30] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:27:31] My first year at GW, it was a high school, and they was separated. My sophomore year at GW, they put the schools together. So, my junior year I ended up having to go to T.C because they only had one high school at that time. So, we're talking [19]70s. So, my first year at T.C probably [19]72.

Kerry James Reed [00:27:59] Did you engage in any extracurriculars at T.C or GW?

Myron Contee [00:28:05] I was a basketball star.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:06] Basketball star? Okay. What position did you play?

Myron Contee [00:28:09] Guard.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:09] Guard. So, T.C had recently been integrated, I imagine when you first started going there or created for that.

Myron Contee [00:28:24] Okay. The reality of it is integrated before that.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:28] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:28:29] What happened was around that time, [19]71 I think it was, [19]71, [19]72, Alexandria had 3 high schools. We had GW, [and it] became a majority Black. You had Francis Hammond that was on the West End that was a majority white school. And T.C. had some Blacks already there. What they did was, they took the 3 high schools and made it 1 high school. So, the racial mix came from Hammond and GW, because T.C already had a mixture, you following what I'm saying, from the time that they opened. It just didn't get mixed as it was until [they combined schools]. That's where the friction came from. I'm sure you remember the story Remember the Titans. And that really was talking about that year. You know, now I'm not saying that there weren't issues before that, because they were separated. But that was when you took and put them all together. And that's why the issues were played out. So, because that's the dynamics of the movie by the high schools coming together and the GW and the Hamon coming up to T.C., you

got me? And so, you're talking about mixture because now you're bringing whites from all over the city and Blacks from all over the city and putting them in one location.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:01] Okay. So, what was it like playing on a team that was integrated?

Myron Contee [00:30:10] Playing on a team.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:10] Playing on a team.

Myron Contee [00:30:13] [Laughs] I mean, you know, I can't speak for anyone else, but for an athlete, you know, you're concerned with, no matter who you play with it, if that they can play.

Kerry James Reed [00:30:29] Absolutely.

Myron Contee [00:30:30] Because it's about winning. You know, you got a problem if you're playing with somebody that can't play. Now, for me, I don't really care what color you are if you can't play. You can't play!

Kerry James Reed [00:30:41] Absolutely.

Myron Contee [00:30:41] You know!

Kerry James Reed [00:30:45] Do you have any special memories of playing basketball at T.C? Did y'all go to state or anything like that?

Myron Contee [00:30:56] I have several special memories. Our biggest rival [during] my time there was West Springfield.

Kerry James Reed [00:31:06] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:31:07] Okay. And we had a couple interactions with them. And a couple of years in a row, they stopped us from going to state as varsity team. But my varsity year, I guess the biggest thing [was my] coach was new to coaching varsity. But my varsity year at the school, we took my same high school team. [Inaudible]I was actually player coach. We took my high school team, and we went and played in AAU [Amateur Athletic Union] and we finished third in the country. We went to regionals up in Cincinnati, Ohio. We were without a coach, my high school team, we drove up there, stayed up there for the weekend, did the tournament, came back third place. We won this region playing against all-star teams. Most of the teams we played were all-star teams where they pick players from different teams to make an all-star team. And we had our high school team. At that time, our high school team probably talent-wise were one of the best talented teams in there. We should have went to state and played against Moses Malone that year. Yeah, we probably would have had a better chance than anybody else in the state against them.

Kerry James Reed [00:32:46] So you were the player and coach for the AAU team? [Mr. Contee nods yes] Did you start that yourself, or how did that come about?

Myron Contee [00:32:58] I was of one of the captains on the team, and I was the leader. Okay. By being a point guard, you had to be leader. What happened was, we wanted to play in a tournament, and we wanted to put ourselves in a tournament and play. So, it was a combined effort of all of us who want to play. And they allowed me to be the coach. I mean, I don't want to act like I took over and made them. No. You know, they would follow my instructions, and that's how we ended up playing up there.

Kerry James Reed [00:33:33] Absolutely. That's really cool. I didn't know AAU was such an old thing. I know about it recently.

Myron Contee [00:33:39] Everybody knows about it recently. No, AAU goes way back. The difference now is like today, today there's more teams playing AAU and all ages and all different areas. And then it wasn't as big as it is now. Most areas had all-star teams. Now they don't have an all-star team like they did then. They have [inaudible], but what I mean all-star teams, most people would pick the best players in their region and put them on one team to try to win. Now you have so many teams. Like for instance, for Alexandria you might have 4 AAU teams. You know, back then [inaudible] combined. Prince Georges might have different areas for a team. Everybody trying to get players and put them in the competition. Back then because it wasn't as many tournaments to play in then, then the tournaments you had to play in you take your team and put in the tournament, and you had to win that tournament to go to the finals. You know what saying? Now you can go on a trip and go to Florida. No, it didn't work back then like that. You to win that tournament, and wherever the tournament was, you would have to get there.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:07] Okay. So, while you were at T.C, was there a focus [or did] anybody teach Black history at all?

Myron Contee [00:35:13] Not really.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:14] No.

Myron Contee [00:35:15] No, not really. Might have been, and if there were some it was minor. It wasn't a whole lot of Black history.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:20] Okay. So, you mentioned previously the big focus on the community in the neighborhood. Growing up, did you learn any Black history from people in the community by any chance?

Myron Contee [00:35:36] Some. You know, I gotta say this, not that it wasn't there. It probably wasn't as pushed as much as it is now. And I don't want to use the word wasn't "important" as far as trying to get a life. You know, you live, and you find out the importance of knowing some things, you know. Dick Gregory said, "I'm not a Black American. I'm American." See, we've done the separation. Black history is a part of history. You following what I'm saying? There shouldn't be a separation. When we teach history, we should teach all the history as a whole. You know, what if it's some of our mistakes, it's still part of history. You following what I'm saying? We have separated and made it two different things, instead of making it what it is. It should be one thing. It should be taught as a part of history.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:48] So what do you think that separation does for the understanding of Black history?

Myron Contee [00:36:55] You don't want me to get starting on that.

Kerry James Reed [00:36:57] [*Laughs*]

Myron Contee [00:36:59] Our culture had done it. You know, we've been deceived. For instance, I don't know if you realize this. I want you to think about this, the next thing I'm about to say. America is the only place on an application of something that we have separated America than any other nations. On applications you don't see white-Hispanic, Black-Hispanic. You don't see Black-Chinese. You don't see Black-Asian or white-Asian. You see Asian, Chinese, Hawaiian. But when it comes to America, you see Afro-American or Black or American. We're the only country. And because of our leadership of the world, that's how people look at us. I never seen a stipulation between a white-South African or Black-South African. They're from South Africa. We're the only ones that do that. So, like I said, it's a deception that we fall into. Whether the Black or white has caused that, it's just the world we live in.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:26] Yeah, absolutely. So, what were your plans after you graduated high school?

Myron Contee [00:38:31] Go to college and go on to pro basketball. [*Laughs*] I did go on to college. I just didn't make pro basketball.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:39] Where did you play college ball?

Myron Contee [00:38:40] George Mason University.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:41] George Mason. What made you decide to play ball at George Mason?

Myron Contee [00:38:51] They offered me a scholarship.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:58] Were they a good program when you went there?

Myron Contee [00:39:04] When I went there, they were a Division II. We took them to Division I.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:07] Oh, really?

Myron Contee [00:39:08] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:11] What was that process like taking them to Division I? Did you have to win a Division II tournament to get that? How did that work?

Myron Contee [00:39:17] Back then it had a lot to do with the size of the school and the teams you were playing.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:23] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:39:24] So, to go to Division I, you had to change your schedule to meet the requirements of a Division I team and play those. And even your conference could change to Division I.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:36] Okay. Were you still living in Alexandria while you were going to school there?

Myron Contee [00:39:44] Yes. Except when I didn't go to campus. We were the first person to live on campus.

Kerry James Reed [00:39:51] Oh really? [*Mr. Contee nods*] Interesting. Did you have dorms before then.

Myron Contee [00:39:56] They didn't have dorms when we lived there. Well, we were the first to live in the dorms that they built there, but also, when we first went there and they were housing, there was a motel on Route 50 that they were using for college students before they finished the dorms on campus.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:33] Interesting. So, I'm trying to picture what basketball was like at George Mason and in the 1970s. I'm familiar with the early 2000s George Mason team, with the Final Four and everything like that. So, I was curious, what sort of offense did you guys run while you at Mason?

Myron Contee [00:40:52] Point guard, two wings and two men inside, down low.

Kerry James Reed [00:40:56] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:40:57] You know, it was probably pretty much the standard offense that was back then. You had two post guys. You had two forwards on the wing. You know, the title was then the still same title they're using now. You had a point guard. You had a shooting guard. You had a shooting forward. You had a power forward. And you had a center. But the power forward and center would be underneath the basket. The shooting guard, and the small forward would be on the wings shooting. And then you would have players that dealt with interchang[ing] those positions. Post man screening down low switching position. Double up, double up low. Post screening for the forward breaking out. You know, so you had an offense that involved them, and then what most people did when they went to the triangle - the triangle would still involve the man in the center, and then would involve two other players on whatever side of the court you were, you know what I'm saying? And then you had [*inaudible*] that came up with the motion. Everybody always moving, everybody always screening. That still fundamentally came off that same sound setup. The only difference is everybody's moving. So, at one time you might end up with the shooting guard posting up whoever was stick him that was shorter than him. Trust me, only thing they've actually done a lot, is put motioning into something. That put some type of motion, so everybody's moving.

Kerry James Reed [00:42:46] Do you have any particularly memorable experiences from your time spent at George Mason either playing ball over or going to class?

Myron Contee [00:42:56] I mean, a couple of individuals that I played against that probably played pro ball somewhere. Valentine that went to Old Dominion. Archie Talley, that ended up going overseas and being the leading scorer overseas. I used to practice and play against [inaudible] Dawn and Craig Shelton that was from Georgetown that ended up going into pro. Right after college, I was still playing some. I'm sure you remember hearing the name. Went to Maryland and died - Len Byers. I recall scuffling on by Len Byers. I recall blocking his shots a couple of times. I could jump out the gym.

Kerry James Reed [00:43:55] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:43:56] Okay. So, I had a 44 to 40 vertical jump -

Kerry James Reed [00:44:00] Oh my word!

Myron Contee [00:44:00] for a small guy. So, I could jump out the gym, yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:44:03] Oh my gosh.

Myron Contee [00:44:06] Yeah. I recall a lot, even when I look at games today. You know, memories.

Kerry James Reed [00:44:12] Absolutely. Must be really interesting to play against people that you can look back and say, "Oh, I competed against pro hoopers." That's really cool.

Myron Contee [00:44:19] Yeah it is.

Kerry James Reed [00:44:20] "And I beat them too!" Very cool. Did you ever try out for the pros at all?

Myron Contee [00:44:34] I did. I had a couple of try outs. Actually, I tried out for the Bullets. At that time, they were the Bullets. They weren't the Wizards. And I also went to Chicago to try out for international teams. At that time, when I was coming out of school, that was around the Magic Johnson time. Everybody was looking for the big guard, and I was short. Everybody wanted a big guard. Everybody wanted 6'7, 6'5 guard. The short guard had played, unless you were superior in a whole lot of areas and had the publicity. Everybody was looking for the [tall] guard.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:18] That's interesting. So, you said you went to Chicago to try out for international teams. Was there like a big scouting event there?

Myron Contee [00:45:28] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:45:28] Okay, interesting. Alright Mr. Contee, we've been talking now for about 45 minutes. I don't want to keep you for very long. So, I'd like to move on to Douglass Cemetery, if that's all right. Before we do that, is there anything else you'd like to talk about? About growing up in Alexandria.

Myron Contee [00:45:55] Anything you ask me I'll talk about!

Kerry James Reed [00:45:56] Okay. Fair enough. We can move on to Douglass. So, do you remember the first time that you witnessed a funeral?

Myron Contee [00:46:09] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:11] Would you mind describing it for me, please?

Myron Contee [00:46:13] It was my brother's. I was 15 years old. Other than just being a sad occasion. That's it. I mean, you know, dressing up for it. You know, being at the funeral. And my mother shedding tears. You know, you realize that funerals are about some loved one passing, and the time you said your last goodbyes.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:50] Absolutely. Do you remember where he's buried?

Myron Contee [00:46:54] Yes, I do. He presently is at Mount Comfort. There's a cemetery down, Route One off Collinwood Road. Actually, this is a black cemetery, too. He used to be there because at that time, at his death, they had not totally opened up Mount Comfort to Blacks. When they did my mother bought 7 plots. And we had his body moved from there to Mount Comfort.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:32] Okay. So, when was he moved to Mount Comfort?

Myron Contee [00:47:42] I was 15 when he died. Probably a couple of years later. 17. Obviously roughly 50 years ago.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:53] Okay. I know that your brother's passing was the first time you witnessed a funeral. Do you remember any traditions or any practices in the community around funerals or anything like that?

Myron Contee [00:48:14] I tell you what, all my life, when an Alexandrian dies, Alexandrians come out to support. And that's to this day. When someone has passed from the neighborhood, or one that we know, we gather back to show our support. That has been something that I've seen all my life.

Kerry James Reed [00:48:47] So I know you mentioned to me that you would see the cemeteries, Bethel, Coleman, Freeman, and Douglass growing up. When was the last time that you went to see those cemeteries recently?

Myron Contee [00:49:02] Douglass is probably more recent than any of them.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:05] Okay.

Myron Contee [00:49:07] You know.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:08] So could you describe, physically, how Douglass looked the last time you visited it?

Myron Contee [00:49:18] Falling down. Like not have been taken care of. I know, this has a lot to do since there's a big difference between most of the cemeteries that you called off or are this area. In Mount Comfort, in appearance, and nothing else in appearance, you look at them, you see the difference. You see the difference in the upkeep. You see the difference in things that they do. The people looking nice, you know, for whatever reason, doesn't matter. But you see the difference.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:53] So when you first started learning about your family history and your genealogy and learning that you had so much kin in Alexandria, did you learn where your kin are buried?

Myron Contee [00:50:11] Yes, kind of. Like for instance, in the Douglass project, I realized that it first came to my attention because the one headstone, my grandfather was there on my father's side. I didn't know that. But then, since then, I realized that there are six other members at Douglass with the last name. Contee that are kin to me. After that, when the Freeman thing started, I didn't realize that I had relatives at Freemans. Come to find out, I have relatives also buried at Freeman Cemetery. That I did not know about. See, I know none of my mother's family are buried here, other than those that are buried where she is in Mount Comfort that have died since I've been here. Before I was born, all my father's people had passed, so I didn't know where or whatever. I'm finding all that out now.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:16] Yeah.

Myron Contee [00:51:16] You know, I'm finding all that out now. And like I say, I have maybe another 5 at Freeman.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:26] So, when you went to Douglass after knowing that you had family interred there, were you able to find their headstones?

Myron Contee [00:51:34] I know where one is right now today.

Kerry James Reed [00:51:36] Oh, really?

Myron Contee [00:51:37] Yeah. It's one close to the road that sits once where Douglass starts at. Right there where the walkway is. It's probably maybe 30ft to the left of that. Like you come up halfway where the cemetery is, and you got to walk to go to the center, if you go 30ft to the left of that and close to the road, there's one right there. I know where he is, that's my grandfather. I don't know where the rest of them are, but I know where he is because that's the first one they found of my relatives.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:13] Interesting. So, you know where your grandfather's headstone is but you're not sure where the rest of them are.

Myron Contee [00:52:22] Yeah, I'm not sure about the rest of them.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:23] What is it like knowing that your kin are buried there, but not being able to find them or know where they are?

Myron Contee [00:52:34] Truly at this age of a life, I can't say that it bothers me one way or another. You know what I'm saying? It's good knowing. Unfortunately, it's bad that it's a situation, but when you begin to check your realities and you look at it from a realistic perspective, and you look at time, and you look at history and you look at everything involved, and you know, at some place, you have to come to a conclusion and be subtle with what it is. Because what can I change? You know what I'm saying? And if I could change, what headache would it cost? I can't. Or how detrimental would it be to health or whatever or frustration or what? Let's just say, the same thing with the Freeman. You have a gas station that was built over graves, and you don't know who graves they built over. So here, you know, you found out you got a loved one, but you can't get to them. I can't change none of that now.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:50] Yeah.

Myron Contee [00:53:51] So, why have a whole lot of hostility and resentment built up? I mean, granted, it happened in time. I don't have to agree with how it happened, but I do have to accept what has happened.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:09] Absolutely. So, how is your perception of Alexandria in the neighborhood you grew up in changed since you found out that you have so much kin around? So, growing up the community [that] was like a village, so to speak, and everybody's raising everybody, how does it feel now to know that the people who helped raise you growing up actually might have been your kin?

Myron Contee [00:54:34] Wow, that feels crazy. There were like, a couple of families I used to hang out with. It's amazing you say that. I have some cousins in Alexandria, that's actually on my mother's side through marriage. Out as a teenager, I was in one of their houses one day, and he was just a friend at that time, and we were playing ball together. And his mother walked in and said, "Hi Contee, how you doing?" And then she turned to her son and said, "That's your cousin." So, I went home and asked about it. Come and find out, it was my cousin, and so I was satisfied with that. But now he has some cousins that lived 2 blocks from me that were also kin to me. But I didn't know that. I didn't that until I was grown. That here you have a family that I actually grew up with, knew, but never knew that they were related to me until I was grown and already grew up, and we grew up together. They grew up like they were kin to my cousins, but they didn't grow up like they were kin to me, and neither one of us knew.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:49] Very interesting. Have you reached out to them since learning that they're kin?

Myron Contee [00:55:58] I talked to some of the members several times. We [know] it now, we just didn't know it then.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:04] Has your relationship with these people changed it all now that you know that your kin?

Myron Contee [00:56:09] Not really. We were friends. We just didn't know we were cousins.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:16] That makes sense. So, when did you become aware that the Douglass initiative was happening?

Myron Contee [00:56:43] The last four years, that's when I became aware of it. But honestly when it started, that's when I realized I had family there. Before then I didn't. I mean all the time I saw the question about the railroad tracks, and railroad used to come through there. And we used to come down through there, you know, all the time, never knew. Never knew. All the funerals I've been to on the other side, the cemeteries, I never knew.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:19] What is it like to think about going to those funerals only several yards away [from where] you [have] family?

Myron Contee [00:57:29] I never thought about it. I haven't even thought about the answer I gave you too just now.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:39] How did you find out about the Douglass Initiative?

Myron Contee [00:57:51] I'm totally involved in all the groups. I think the SRG group, I'm part of it. Yeah, but now there you go again, going back to the same thing you just asked before. I'm talking about family members that I really still never knew. So not only that I had no relationship with them, I had no evidence or talk about them in the household when I around. So, there's probably a distance there anyway. It'd be different if you heard somebody talk about it all the time, you know what I'm saying, and how they were and this and that. I can't say I got that.

Kerry James Reed [00:58:37] How do you feel now that the city is doing something to try to recognize the people interned at Douglass and also try to do something about the state?

Myron Contee [00:58:50] I feel great. The process for me has opened up doors of information that I never would have known, you know. And that alone, you know, when we talk history, my family has been in Alexandria for over 150 years, and I'm not counting the last few years. So, I have a lot of history in the city itself.

Kerry James Reed [00:59:22] Absolutely. How do you feel now that your history is starting to be more respected and talked about more in the city? How does it make you feel?

Myron Contee [00:59:36] Good. I mean, okay, the only reason I'm here talking to you, is because of some history I really didn't know about. That because of the initiative that's taking place, I'm getting information. So, it has opened up doors of opportunity as I'm sitting here talking to you. So, I mean, don't get me wrong, I've taken none of it from a negative perspective. I mean, it's been all positive for me.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:19] Absolutely. Have you done any of your own research since learning all this stuff about your family history.

Myron Contee [01:00:24] I did a little bit before I found out all I did. And the little bit I did was pretty much, checking land records.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:32] Okay. So, when were you doing that?

Myron Contee [01:00:37] Man, after my father died. So, we're talking [19]90, 80s.

Kerry James Reed [01:00:50] Did you find anything out?

Myron Contee [01:00:51] Well, that's how I originally got some names of members of the family based on what property has passed from one generation to the other, you know, and who owned it and what names were on the deed. And it gave me some names. It didn't give me relationships, but it gave me a whole lot of names -

Kerry James Reed [01:01:11] Yeah.

Myron Contee [01:01:12] that Contees, you know, come to find out, they would have been my great uncle. And see, because of the age differential, okay, were some people you may be talking to may be talking multiple generations. I'm really not. Like I said, my father had me, but he was 55 or 57. So, most generational families, that would have been my grandfather.

Kerry James Reed [01:01:49] Yeah.

Myron Contee [01:01:51] You following what I'm saying? So, those generations are not because now that's my father. So, his father, and his father's father generations, the time frame closes down. Because, now we're talking, if my grandmother was 109, even though there might have been some generations, there were not generational gaps between us. You know what I'm saying? So, the people we're talking about now that's dead, would have been early 1900s, 1800s. Okay. As far as generational gap, that's not really a lot of separation. My father was [born in] 1905. So, that's not a lot of generational gaps on that side for family members to be born. Because it wasn't like all of them had a lot of children on the Contee side. So, it's not a not a big span. Instead of me looking back 5 or 6 generations, I may only be looking back 3.

Kerry James Reed [01:02:50] Yeah, that is a unique perspective that you can have on it because of that generational gap. It's interesting you bring that up because so many people I talk to for the Douglass Initiative, they're separated from their ancestors by degrees of 4 or 5 or 6 generations.

Myron Contee [01:03:08] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:09] What is it like knowing that your father knew people that are interred at Douglass, it's not a distant relative?

Myron Contee [01:03:16] Right. I mean, I can't say the same thing on my mother's side.

Kerry James Reed [01:03:26] Right.

Myron Contee [01:03:26] You know, there's more generations that I know. So, it's a big difference. And, you know, if I had to say that there was a sad moment, is not knowing and not being able to have asked the questions or obtain the information. But I just don't dwell on that. It's just, you know, I do know my cousin that's in that's in Boston has tried to get together information to send

me and to give to his family so that we will know. He's older than me. He's my second cousin. He's my father's first cousin. So, there you go again. He has to be in his 90s. So, you got a sense of the generation differences there.

Kerry James Reed [01:04:17] You mentioned the importance of family and knowing your kin, knowing your family history. What do you think it does for your family personally to know how many people they're related to in Alexandria and their own history?

Myron Contee [01:04:36] It does good for me to know how long my family has history in Alexandria. So, you know, how many people can tell you that their family has been representing Alexandria for 150 years? That speaks volume within itself, even here in 2024. Well, you're going back further than that, because I said over 150 years, if my father was born in Alexandria in 1905 and lived here all his life, you know what I'm saying? So, we're going way back in the 1900s, 1800s. So, I can trace ancestry in this one particular area, you know, and we're talking about a time where slavery might have had families move here and there. But I can trace it still back centrally located here no matter what they had to go through, with whatever was going on in society at that time. I still can say, you know, my history in Alexandria goes back this far and dated back this far.

Kerry James Reed [01:05:42] Absolutely. So, we've kind of been talking around this question a bit, you mentioned growing up and the communal responsibility for raising children and then knowing that you have kin all over Alexandria. I guess it's more of a speculative question. What do you think forgetting about the dead, forgetting about family history does to a community?

Myron Contee [01:06:17] I think what it does, is it hinders. I think you need to know. I think you need to know history because it can dictate who you are.

Kerry James Reed [01:06:37] Yeah, absolutely.

Myron Contee [01:06:38] I mean, it defines you. I can't change nothing right now about what's being done, no matter why if like it or not. But it can help me have a better understanding of what my ancestors went through in order for me to appreciate. Because whatever I'm going through today would be nothing like what they went through. So, if I have a tracker that I can track back the timetables and I can look at society where it was and how it has evolved and what freedoms or what liberties or what I have now compared to what they had.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:31] Yes. Okay, Mr. Contee, we've been talking now for about an hour and 7 minutes. I don't want to take up too much for your time. I just have some closing questions for you. If that's all right.

Myron Contee [01:07:50] Go ahead.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:50] Thanks. So, what are your hopes for the Douglass Initiative moving forward?

Myron Contee [01:08:00] Well, my perspective is I hope out of this Douglass becomes - it's already historic, [but] make it look like something to represent what it's called that people can go see it, identify with. You following what I'm saying? Make it attractive. It's not all about looks but making

it attractive. Make it a place that whether you got ancestors there or not, you can go and get a feel of what it meant.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:47] Yeah, the appearance of it should reflect the historical value.

Myron Contee [01:08:50] Right.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:53] Absolutely. Moving forward, what more do you hope to learn about your family history?

Myron Contee [01:09:02] All I can.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:02] All you can.

Myron Contee [01:09:04] And actually, you know, I hope I live long enough to meet some of my ancestors' kin. You know what I'm saying, because, like I told you about the generational gap, I may not in terms of gap-age, I may not can meet them where they would fit in my generation, but if I meet them in the next generation or two. For instance, let's say you're my cousin, okay, you're gone because you're my first cousin. But you would have been 2 generations older than me. But you're still my first cousin, so I may not meet your children. But what if I met your children's children? Because your children probably would be a little bit older than me. But your children's children might be my age, even though in relationship they're my third cousin. You understand what I'm saying? You know, based on the falling in line. But I get to meet them. At least I got to meet somebody from my heritage on that side.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:12] Absolutely.

Myron Contee [01:10:14] And like I say, I know that on my mother's side and some on my father's.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:20] So, how would you like to see this city treat Black history and Alexandria moving forward? I know you mentioned not to separate it as much previously, but more specifically, the city has been sort of, dismissive isn't the right word, but has sort of brushed certain aspects of its history.

Myron Contee [01:10:47] Let me say it like this. An answer to your question that the city would do something greater than what has been done, whether it's in the city or nationally. My hope would never happen. I can't say never. My hope would be the conversation that history in itself would change. It would not be a separation. Black history, okay, we have a month. Why isn't it celebrated all year round with other history? You following what I'm saying? That's how it should be. But no, we have a month to celebrate Black History, when Black history didn't happen in a month. It happened in a lifetime just like the other history happened. So, that's the perfect world. But we're not in the perfect world. So, we're going to take that month, make it more Informative. So, those of us that it attracts or appeals to, that our celebration of it be all year, not just one month.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:05] Right. So, no more degrees of separation, right?

Myron Contee [01:12:09] You know what I'm saying? You know, that's pretty much about anything. And I think, you know, that would be a good place to start. If you're keeping it out of the curriculum. Why? If it was part of what history is. I mean, you're keeping the separation there.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:33] Absolutely. Then finally, Mr. Contee, if you could hold onto one memory forever. What would it be?

Myron Contee [01:12:41] Talking to you.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:42] [*Laughs*] Talking to me? Really?

Myron Contee [01:12:45] Okay. Just one memory?

Kerry James Reed [01:12:47] Just one memory.

Myron Contee [01:12:51] Okay. I leave it at that. You look at me and laugh. We've talked about things that have made me think about a whole lot of other things. So, that one memory would have constitute everything we've talked about, because it will continue to reflect my growing up and continue to reflect, you know, memories of my family. So, you know what I'm saying? So, I know you laughed when I said that, but it has some truth to it. You follow what I'm saying? Because then every time I think about it, I could think about the whole thing that it encased.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:27] Absolutely. Well, I'm glad to be a part of that then.

Myron Contee [01:13:29] And that's how I feel about this whole journey. That's when somebody wants to talk to me, I don't have a problem because all we have is memory.

Kerry James Reed [01:13:45] 100%.

Myron Contee [01:13:46] And some things, all we have this memory. I think when you lose your memory or something, you lose appreciation. So, I never want that to come to a place where I stop thinking about my mother. Because the memories that I have of my mother had me appreciate what she's done and where I'm at and the things that happened in my life.

Kerry James Reed [01:14:13] Yeah.

Myron Contee [01:14:14] You know what I'm saying? I cannot stop thinking of my father, because when I think of him, I realize in my life, no matter where I was then, why I'm where I am now, is because of some things that he did that I kept watching. You know, so memory. So, you have encased all of that. And so, every time I pick a question and think back, who are your neighbors, you start me talking. I mean you asked me who my friends were in the neighborhood. You saw me just call off their names. I called off some names I haven't thought about in such a long time. You know, one of I couldn't even remember his first name. I call it Scortie Hargrove, but you know what I'm saying? So, that's all about bringing it full circle. Me continuing to think about these things. And like I, the questions you've asked me, they'll be here, and I'll be thinking about them.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:10] Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today, Mr. Contee.

Myron Contee [01:15:12] The pleasures mine.

Kerry James Reed [01:15:12] Thank you so much.