

[0:00:00]

Horace: This is Horace Peterson; Executive Director of the Black Archives Mid-America, today is August the 31st, 1976. I'm interviewing Mr. Phillip B. Curls, State Representative, 26th District.

Rep. Curls: 28th.

Horace: 28th District, excuse me. Good morning, Mr. Curls. First of all, Mr. Curls, what is your complete name?

Rep. Curls: Phillip B. Curls.

Horace: And I believe you said that you did not know what the B stands for?

Rep. Curls: That's correct.

[0:00:30]

Horace: Okay. When were you born?

Rep. Curls: April 2nd, 1942.

Horace: Where?

Rep. Curls: Kansas City, Missouri.

Horace: Where; what hospital?

Rep. Curls: What hospital? I really don't know, General, I imagine.

Horace: And your parents' names?

Rep. Curls: Velma Edith Curls and Fred A. Curls.

Horace: Okay. Do you remember -- can you expound on what the address was that your parents was residing at at the time of your birth?

Rep. Curls: It was on 10th and Troost and one of the apartment buildings that have now been torn down...

[0:01:04] ...a sign of urban renewal.

Horace: Do you have any brothers and sisters older than yourself?

Rep. Curls: I have one brother older than myself, Michael Curls, Garland Michael Curls, who is living. I have one sister, Millicent Curls, who passed in 1970 at the age of 30.

[0:01:30]

Horace: Where were your mother and father from? Well, first of all, let's start with your father...

Rep. Curls: Did you want to know about my younger brothers and sisters?

Horace: No, not at this time. Where was your father from?

Rep. Curls: He was from Nowata, Oklahoma.

Horace: Do you remember the circumstances why he came to Kansas City?

Rep. Curls: Accompanied his mother and she moved here, no, I don't recall why she came. I imagine for economic opportunity, so she felt.

[0:02:04]

Horace: His mother?

Rep. Curls: Hm-hmm.

Horace: Okay. And what about your mother?

Rep. Curls: She was from Chanute, Kansas.

Horace: No particular reason why she came here or did he meet her in Chanute?

Rep. Curls: I really don't know where they met or how they happened to have migrated to Kansas City.

[0:02:30]

Horace: What portion of your life was spent at that particular address?

Rep. Curls: None that I know of. I imagine my early years maybe at age one, possibly age two.

Horace: What was your first school that you attended in Kansas City?

Rep. Curls: Wendell Phillips on 24th and Vine.

Horace: What grades did you attend there?

Rep. Curls: From kindergarten to the fourth grade.

[0:03:00]

Horace: Do you remember any of your teachers?

Rep. Curls: Miss Lewis, Emma Jean Lewis, Emma Jean Byrd, whatever her name was, now with the Kansas City school district as a reading consultant or some sort, that's really the only teacher that I recall from my grade school years.

Horace: What type of an individual have people said you were at that particular age?

[0:03:33]

Rep. Curls: What type of individual was I at age...

Horace: Let's say fourth grade, fifth grade, in that particular area; were you a studious individual; did you run with the fellas; what type of a person was Phillip Curls?

Rep. Curls: Well at age -- after fourth grade I transferred schools. Now prior to that during my time in Wendell Phillips...

[0:04:00] ...I would imagine it was -- not that it was very studious, but not one of running along with the fellas, sort of shy and withdrawn, scared of the girls, all that type thing.

Horace: Well you did have two older brothers and sisters at that particular time?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: More or less lead you, too; didn't they?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: Okay. What school did you go to when you left Wendell Phillips?

[0:04:30]

Rep. Curls: St. Monica Catholic School at 16th and Lydia -- 17th and Lydia.

Horace: Were you baptized Catholic?

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: Were you ever baptized Catholic?

Rep. Curls: Yes.

Horace: You were? Were your family a Catholic family?

Rep. Curls: All the children are.

Horace: Why do you think that your parents withdrew you from public school and put you into a Catholic school situation?

[0:05:01]

Rep. Curls: At that time I really don't know. We started attending a Catholic church -- see, after I moved from 10th and Forest, I then resided at 2103 25th, which is now the present location of the Martin Luther King Hospital, but there was

across the street from my address, so within that residential complex called Brooklyn Center...

[0:05:35] ...on Garfield Circle, Holy Spirit Catholic Church, which were providing social services and other activities for young people. And because of our association with the church we began to go to a Catholic school, which was St. Monica's Catholic School on 17th and Lydia.

[0:06:04]

Horace: Do you remember the principal's name at that time?

Rep. Curls: Of that school?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: What about Wendell Phillips?

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: You don't remember?

Rep. Curls: Dr. Thurman.

Horace: Dr. Thurman was the principal?

Rep. Curls: Was the principal of Wendell Phillips when I went there.

Horace: Okay. What grades did you attend at the Catholic school then?

Rep. Curls: Fourth through eighth.

Horace: All right. Then what happened?

Rep. Curls: You mean where did I go to school after that?

[0:06:30]

Horace: Yeah, where did you go after that?

Rep. Curls: De La Salle.

Horace: Okay, was this the time during the time that De La Salle was a military type school?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: What type of an attitude did that give you going to De La Salle? That was a very prestigious school at that particular time in Kansas City to go to, in fact.

Rep. Curls: What type of an attitude did it give me?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: Well it didn't really give me any particular attitude or airs of...

[0:07:02] ...no, cause I knew really that it was quite a strain to even go there and it was only from a combined scholarship, neither of which was scholastic basically because I was a poor boy, or that our family was poor, that I went there; so it wasn't -- at least I don't think that there were any particular airs; could have been.

[0:07:30]

Horace: Did it help form any types of discipline for you?

Rep. Curls: Oh, definitely.

Horace: Think so?

Rep. Curls: I do.

Horace: Did you participate in any sports at De La Salle?

Rep. Curls: I played freshman football and basketball, but I got a job right after that at age 14.

Horace: What did you think about going to an all men's school, or all male school at that particular time?

[0:08:00]

Rep. Curls: What did I think then or what do I think now?

Horace: What did you think then at that particular time?

Rep. Curls: It really -- I felt that it was satisfactory. I didn't see, really, the need to go to school in a coed environment.

Horace: Then you did graduate from De La Salle?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: At that particular time you were a Catholic then; right...

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: ...you had become a Catholic?

[0:08:30] Did you see the necessity of that type of an environment at that time as an offshoot of the Catholic church, more or less, to strengthen that type of discipline that was required of a Catholic?

Rep. Curls: I saw it as helpful.

Horace: What type of a student were you there?

Rep. Curls: Average.

Horace: Average student? So that means that an average student at De La Salle is a B student in the public school system?

[0:09:03]

Rep. Curls: I really don't know. I mean I doubt if I'd have done any better had I been in a coed, so it's difficult to really say that simply by being a C at De La Salle I would have been a B at Lincoln. You know, a different environment would have brought about a different result.

Horace: Were you college bound at that time?

[0:09:30]

Rep. Curls: Was I college bound?

Horace: Yes, were you intending to go on to college; had your family intended you to go onto college from there?

Rep. Curls: I believe so, yeah, I had always thought in terms of that, right.

Horace: You had? Did you immediately after De La Salle go to college?

Rep. Curls: Yes, I did.

Horace: Well first of all, what year from De La Salle did you graduate?

Rep. Curls: Nineteen sixty.

Horace: Sixty? All right. And did you immediately go into college from there?

Rep. Curls: Yes, I did.

Horace: Where?

Rep. Curls: Rockhurst College.

Horace: Okay, you're still staying within the Catholic organization, more or less, as far as your education is concerned; right?

Rep. Curls: Right.

[0:10:03] Catholic, all boy.

Horace: Yeah. What type of association did you make at Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: You mean as far as friends?

Horace: Yes, as friends, the faculty, as such, at Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: Really did not participate much at all in the structure of Rockhurst as far as student government.

[0:10:34] Really even as far as very much intra-student activities other than to play chess.

Horace: Oh, you had begun to play chess even at this particular point?

Rep. Curls: That is when I started.

Horace: Your father has been in the real estate business for a number of years, was he at that time in real estate?

Rep. Curls: At what particular time?

[0:11:00]

Horace: At the time of your entering into Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: He was? Had you begun to work in real estate at all at that time?

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: Had your father entered at all into working in the political arena as of yet?

Rep. Curls: Yes, yes.

Horace: Had you become orientated as to what the system was about at that particular time?

[0:11:30]

Rep. Curls: As to the political system?

Horace: Hm-hmm, as to what the political is at that point?

Rep. Curls: No, not -- in 1960?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: No, not really, not really.

Horace: What political affiliation was he?

Rep. Curls: You mean Republican or Democrat?

Horace: Or Democrat at that particular time?

Rep. Curls: Democrat.

Horace: He was in fact?

[0:12:00] Had you met Mr. Leon Mercer Jordan at that time?

Rep. Curls: No, I had not.

Horace: You hadn't? Had you become an affiliate of the Freedom Incorporated organization at that time?

Rep. Curls: No, I did not. I don't even know if it was that active at that time. I think the first political election I can recall for which we, or I, actively participated was in 1961 -- it was '63, I know I recall that, that was the year that...

[0:12:35] ...we had city council election, but in 1961 was a year that Freedom really began and I do recall the race because I was very familiar with J. McKinley Neal who was the State Representative that Leon Jordan defeated.

[0:13:01] So he owned the store at 25th and Brooklyn, at 2449 Brooklyn, -48 Brooklyn, and we lived one block from his store, so I was familiar with politics based on my association with Mr. Neal, which was only as a worker, not as a political worker but as a worker behind the fountain.

[0:13:30]

Horace: You worked for Mr. Neal?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: All right, then you did not participate in politics at Rockhurst at all as in, let's say, in student body or anything of that nature?

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: What was your major at Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: Accounting.

Horace: Accounting. Okay, so you're saying that you did not actively get involved until what, 1962; right -- or your family didn't get involved...

[0:13:57]

Rep. Curls: I became involved in politics, or the political structure, or just the political mechanism in 1961 when as a member of the NAACP Young Adult Council, we went to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for an NAACP convention. And the politics that occurred there is something that intrigued me, you know, the...

[0:14:30] ...you had the total political system right there before you in a sort of in a capsule as they were trying to get, one, where the convention was going to be the next year; two, some type of a rule change.

Horace: How long had you been a member of the NAACP?

Rep. Curls: I just joined when we went on that convention.

Horace: What were some of the other organizations that you participated in as a youth then?

[0:15:00] Was that a young Catholic, YAC, or...

Rep. Curls: No, I never participated.

Horace: You didn't do that? Did you participate in any sports at Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: No.

Horace: You did not?

Rep. Curls: Intramural, other than that, no.

Horace: All right, what year did you graduate from Rockhurst?

Rep. Curls: Sixty-five.

Horace: All right. You graduated in 1965 from Rockhurst College in accounting; right?

[0:15:31]

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: All right, had you participated as an officeholder at any time with Freedom Incorporated organization at that particular time?

Rep. Curls: In 1965?

Horace: Before 1965.

Rep. Curls: Well, yes, I was an officeholder in Young Freedom, which we formed in 1963, 1963.

Horace: And what was that position?

[0:16:00]

Rep. Curls: At least treasurer, it might have been Chairman of the Board, I don't recall.

Horace: What size organization was the Young Freedom organization?

Rep. Curls: Oh, I would say it was 30 or 40, 40 or 50.

Horace: Initially what was the impact of Leon Jordan on you?

Rep. Curls: What was the impact?

Horace: Hm-hmm. While you were a student, let's say, at Rockhurst and the organization was really being formed?

[0:16:31]

Rep. Curls: Well he was a man who would take the time with you, which, you know, you could go in any time in the Green Duck and he would be sitting in his chair overlooking his business, but he would always stop and take the time to talk to you, you know, try to encourage you to participate.

[0:17:00] He would -- Leon Jordan really was by far the most influential politician, I would say, in my young political career. You know that we really as young politicians ought to try to emulate in as much as regardless of how busy he was, he would always take the time to work with you.

[0:17:33] And he was so shrewd that you would always think that he was entrusting you with some secret, or entrusting you with some information that was not necessarily available to the public. He would just leave you with the feeling that you were a confidant, you know? He might sit and tell you really nothing, but it just left you with the impression...

[0:18:00] ...that you were someone that he had taken into his confidence.

Horace: Do you feel that -- what attributes do you think were gained by you through knowing Mr. Jordan? I'm talking about in the political arena, with all the stigmas attached to politics at this particular time, you know, this is immediately after the Watergate thing...

[0:18:30]

Rep. Curls: Hold it, hold it, hold it. Watergate was in 1972.

Horace: Right. I'm talking about now; I'm talking about the stigmas that are attached to politicians as such...

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: ...do you -- what type of an individual was he in that regard, is what I'm asking?

Rep. Curls: Well...

Horace: You know, you always -- politics is looked upon now as being a very sneaky, shady business, you know?

[0:19:00]

Rep. Curls: Politics has always been a sneaky and shady business and always will be as far as I can see. You know it just...

Horace: Does that necessarily have to be the rule?

Rep. Curls: Since humans are engaged in politics I'd say, yeah. You know what'll happen you'll go through cycles of who will be sneaky and shady.

[0:19:32] But it'll always be a sneaky, shady business.

Horace: Are there ethics?

Rep. Curls: Ethics in politics?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: Politicians make strange bedfellows. You know, in other words, it is a game and I don't really say it's a game, but it's just like business.

[0:20:00] The only difference between politics and any other business, profession, or walk of life is that all things that we do are done in an open forum, you know, that's why it is viewed as a shady business. Of course it is the business of the people when really most other things are the business of the people eventually, too, because...

[0:20:30] ...it eventually gets to the consumer. I mean if everyone had an open view on, say, the oil industry as they do on, say, the politicians, we wouldn't be -- you know politicians wouldn't be really looked upon as any sneakier or any conniving than, you know, any other profession or any other type of a business venture.

[0:21:01] But the press seems very -- and that's just part of our system where the press is open to criticize politicians. I mean that is one of the checks and balances. You know if it weren't sneaky or shrewd or if it didn't have some fallacies to it, you would have the -- well, I mean...

[0:21:31] ...it's just composed of people and that truly is a frailty of human nature.

Horace: What was the first office that you sought?

Rep. Curls: Politically?

Horace: Politically, right.

Rep. Curls: Elected office?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: The one I now hold, State Representative.

Horace: When did you first run for that office?

Rep. Curls: 1972.

Horace: 1972. All right, during the period of 1965, let's say, when you graduated from high school to 1970, what was your involvement in the Freedom Incorporated organization?

[0:22:02]

Rep. Curls: Well in 1967 I was the assistant circuit clerk under Bruce Watkins in Jackson County.

Horace: Which brings about another question: What was the impact of Bruce, a young man born with a golden spoon in his mouth...

Rep. Curls: Well, see, that's a fallacy.

Horace: ...one of the members -- well is that a fallacy?

Rep. Curls: Well to my understanding it is as far as being born with the golden spoon.

[0:22:31] I mean he has not always been wealthy, they had not always been Watkins Brothers, but, you know, from all times I've known him he's been Watkins Brothers. But now what is the impact of Bruce; the impact of Bruce as compared to the impact of Jordan? Jordan was a shrewder man. Jordan would seem to give more thought to the actions that he might take...

[0:23:05] ...and his actions would be -- would just be shrewder. Bruce is more open, he's more defiant, they were a perfect combination in that Bruce would be the vocal critic of problems that existed, and Jordan would be the one to whom they would try to seek to resolve the problem.

[0:23:31] He would help form the solution, while Bruce would only articulate the problem.

Horace: Now mix Harold Holliday, Sr., in there.

Rep. Curls: Harold Holliday, Sr., again, is a very vocal critic, a very articulate statesman, he possibly -- he is truly viewed strictly as a statesman. One who is extremely honest...

[0:24:01] ...probably as honest a politician as I know; very knowledgeable and an extremely good debater. He does not have the quality of shrewdness as does Leon.

[0:24:30] He and Bruce are more similar, of course Bruce is even more outspoken on more issues than, say, Holliday, at least during this particular time.

Horace: Comparing those attributes with today's leadership, how would you compare them with the present leadership of Freedom Incorporated?

Rep. Curls: Charles and I?

Horace: Hm-hmm and yourself?

[0:25:00]

Rep. Curls: We just don't measure up -- I mean, to me, well lets go with Doc, okay, now, Doc is an extremely...

Horace: Doc? Who is Doc?

Rep. Curls: Harold Holliday, Jr., he's president of Freedom Incorporated. He is an extremely articulate debater, he is more politically...

[0:25:31] ...Doc is probably a combination of all three of the gentlemen that we've previously spoken about: Leon, Bruce, and Harold, Sr. Not reaching anywhere near the limit of affection that those three men have...

Horace: Had attained?

[0:26:00]

Rep. Curls: ...had attained in their particular, but he has somewhat of all three, something that I guess time and age will develop. Now Charles his seems more along the line of, you know, Leon as far as not really an outspoken person, but one who gives more thought to what particular program, you know...

[0:26:33] ...trying to put things together, trying to develop a work [unintelligible 0:26:41] for the community from a silent participating way more than a vocal outspoken critic. Myself, really, I would have to say that...

[0:27:00] ...have not really demonstrated much as it relates to a leadership position. You know as far as taking an outspoken stand on not very many issues at all, really feel that my best contribution would be more so not as an organizer, but as a conciliatory.

[0:27:30] Someone who will attempt to bring various positions into focus.

Horace: Bring it together?

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: Right. Do you feel that Freedom has lost any of its impact with the, let's say, in this transitional period that is going through?

Rep. Curls: I wouldn't say that it was a transitional period that has affected its impact...

[0:28:00] ...it's just like anything else that when Freedom had its greatest participation was during the time that we, as a people, had our greatest problems, or at least what we thought to be our greatest problem, that was during the times of voter -- when we had Fair Housing, when we had public accommodation, these were the two springboards for the maximum in participation of Freedom, Inc.

[0:28:32] And after those two had been accomplished then the community participation has slackened.

Horace: Why?

Rep. Curls: Why has community participation slackened?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: Because the interest in the issues has slackened. See now after public accommodation and after Fair Housing, which any idealist can attach to those...

[0:29:01] ...particular ideas and be ready to participate and rally around that pride; but after those two issues had been dealt with, then you get down to the nuts and bolts of candidates and there is quite a bit about politics which to an idealist is unglamorous because you have to make compromises. There are certain things about political reality that many people...

[0:29:30] ...you know, have problems dealing with: accepting a candidate based not only on his 100% merit, but based upon how he will contribute to you achieving your merit.

Horace: Are you telling me that between the time of 1970 -- no, 1965 and 1970 that since we dealt with the issues of Fair Housing and public accommodations that there are no other relevant issues within the Black community that Freedom can attach itself to?

[0:30:01]

Rep. Curls: No, I didn't say that there were no other relevant issues; I said there were no relevant issues that...

[Break in audio 0:30:09]

Horace: ...issues in the context of what, now?

Rep. Curls: To the issues in the country. I mean high unemployment, you know, this is a problem; crime. These things should have attracted more attention than should either of the other two issues.

[0:30:30] Fair housing: you can go live with white folks. Public accommodation: you can go eat where you like. Really I personally would like to have seen those two things possibly delayed myself.

Horace: Well like Malcolm X say public accommodations where you can sit on a stool next to White folks?

Rep. Curls: Yeah, right. I mean, you know, we should have stayed bottled up a little longer.

[0:31:02]

Horace: You think so?

Rep. Curls: I do. You see, I mean, our political strength has been diluted by our dispersal, wide area of dispersal. I mean, you know, we talk about reintegration with these housing complexes because we were building them all in the Black neighborhood and then there was a hood requirement that before any housing complexes was built...

[0:31:34] ...you know, they had to meet the wide area or the dispersal requirement. That is they had to try to build them out someplace out of the impacted area. But, you know, if we can be distributed by some scheme across this total American system, then our total strength is completely diluted within the vast majority...

[0:32:04] ...that we would be mixed with. I mean how important or what impact can the Blacks out in Grandview have on the political system in Grandview? You know we lose 1,000 here, 1,000 to North Kansas City...

Horace: Well reapportionment, as such; right? Do you think that that would work as a benefit to the Black people in [unintelligible 0:32:35]?

[0:32:35]

Rep. Curls: What do you mean "reapportionment?"

Horace: Maybe I'm using the wrong word. The way the districts are aligned right now within the city, the various wards and such, when they go through their reapportionment patterns of determining these wards and such...

[0:33:01] ...of how will they, in fact, work to our benefit as Black people?

Rep. Curls: No way that I see other than possibly to reapportion those two senate districts and draw one of those such that a Black person can, you know, be the senator.

Horace: Speaking of the senate districts: Why do we not have a Black senator at this time?

[0:33:30]

Rep. Curls: Well we had a candidate that ran in this past August 3rd election, 1976, who was defeated by 200 votes. Why do we not have a Black candidate at this time is because there is apathy within our community, people do not come out and vote.

Horace: The votes were there, we just didn't -- I think that if you don't have but three votes, that's the vote, right there, huh?

[0:33:59]

Rep. Curls: Yeah, of course if your opponent has five then you've lost.

Horace: Why is there a split within the Black community in the Democratic party? Why did we allow ourselves to have Holliday and Ross running for the same office?

Rep. Curls: What do you mean when you say "allow ourselves?"

Horace: Well we are Black Democrats.

Rep. Curls: Right.

[0:34:30]

Horace: Why was there two Black Democrats seeking the same office? Why do we allow ourselves to do that?

Rep. Curls: Well how could you have controlled it?

Horace: There is only one Democratic party in Kansas -- well there's supposed to be...

Rep. Curls: Right.

Horace: ...only one Democratic party...

Rep. Curls: This was the Democratic primary. Democratic primary -- see, how can you -- I mean I understand idealistically what you're saying...

[0:35:01] ...the community should have been together such that it would have thrown its total support behind one Black candidate for the benefit of Black folks having that candidate. But what can you do to stop -- I mean is it the first one

who files is the first one who should be given consideration? I mean is the numerical order in which a person files the most important criteria that you should use to judge who will run? I say that because Henry Ross filed first...

[0:35:31] ...for the senate and there has been some concern expressed to me that, you know, Freedom Incorporated was the one who muddied the water because Henry Ross had already filed. So now is being first in line mean that you're the best qualified for that particular office? I don't think so. I mean Henry Ross got a total of 1,900 votes; Harold Holliday got a total of 52.

[0:36:00] I don't really think that there is any question in my mind as to which particular candidate was the most qualified, but there had been some expression on the part of people that Harold Holliday should not have gotten into the race and that he is the one who had actually jeopardized the Black community getting a Black senator. I don't agree with that.

[0:36:30] So now we don't agree as it relates to the qualifications of the two candidates, they don't, they being the opposition, Henry Ross specifically, don't agree, that he should withdraw, so there you have it. I mean I think that Henry indicated in later conversation that the only reason he was in there...

[0:37:00] ...and this is something that can be confirmed by Reverend either Hartsfield or A.L. Johnson. I know that I was at a meeting in which A. L. Johnson speaking to the Baptist Ministers Alliance indicated that he had been advised that Henry at a meeting, or in [Moonies], had indicated that he realizes that he is not going to win, but he is going to stop that other nigger from winning.

[0:37:31]

Horace: What's the strategicness of a Black senator from Kansas City, Missouri?

Rep. Curls: Oh, it's just -- oh, it would have just been monumental and especially if we had gotten a Black senator with the qualifications of a Harold Holliday, Sr., who had been a member of the Missouri House for 12 years...

[0:38:01] ...who would have immediately upon going in have had tremendous seniority. There is going to be a tremendous turnover in the Senate this year, and a lot of that turnover is going to exist in the majority party. So that you may have -- there are a total of 34 senators; you may have ten Republicans and 24 Democrats...

[0:38:30] ...in fact, there was something like 22 Democrats and 12 Republicans, so that if you had a turnover of 18 in that Democratic party although you have ten Republicans who had a long list of seniority, they would not have meant very much cause you split it down and those 22 who control it, such that a freshman senator this term would have been a powerful senator right from the start.

[0:39:00]

Horace: Let me ask you this, you bring up seniority: Would Harold Holliday's 12 years in the House of Representatives been transferable to the Senate?

Rep. Curls: No. Pardon me. No, not as far as seniority within the House, but he would have been coming into the Senate this term with quite a few first-termers, you see? And just by personality and...

[0:39:30] ...the fact that he had been in the House for 12 years, you know, he was knowledgeable of all of the people who made up the system. I mean there had been an interaction between the Senate and the House to where they were aware of what his abilities were and such working would have -- he would have gone immediately as a chairman of a committee and possibly into senate leadership right from the start.

[0:40:01] It was a very tragic and unfortunate thing that we weren't unable to get that Black senator from Kansas City. He deserved to be the senator; I mean he's by far more competent than the fella who was elected.

[0:40:30] Well in comparison with St. Louis politics and Kansas City politics, St. Louis for years has had Black senators. What do you attribute that to?

Rep. Curls: Population, population. St. Louis has a Black population that's four times as great as Kansas City. St. Louis has a population of 40-45% Black.

[0:41:00] Kansas City has one of 18. I think 100-150 thousand Blacks in Kansas City; they have 400 thousand in St. Louis.

Horace: Backing up to 1965, again, entering into real estate: What major changes have you noted within the real estate laws other than the Fair Housing activities of the '70s?

[0:41:30]

Rep. Curls: From what point of view; you mean as a state representative or as a...

Horace: No, as a relator, as a realtor.

Rep. Curls: I guess that's the greatest -- I primarily am a real estate appraiser. Of course there is one other change in real estate law that is that a wife can buy property of her own now without, of necessity, a husband having to sign it.

[0:42:04] The new credit laws are -- you had Fair Housing which dealt with, you know, a racial minority, now you've got the credit laws that are dealing with a sexual minority as far as discrimination. In Fair Housing it addressed itself to the fact that Blacks could not live in certain areas...

[0:42:31] ...the new credit laws addresses itself to women cannot, for long periods of time without, number one, the signature of a husband buy certain things. Now a man was able to buy without a woman, but a woman was not able to buy without a man.

Horace: Is that State or Federal?

Rep. Curls: That's Federal.

Horace: It's a Federal law?

Rep. Curls: Yeah.

Horace: Have there been State revisions to that or anything of that nature?

[0:43:00]

Rep. Curls: No, no, because once a Federal law goes in that supersedes...

Horace: Everything else?

Rep. Curls: Yeah. Now there have been some laws introduced which addresses itself to that; we haven't taken them up or passed them quite often if the Federal law acts, and all we're doing is bringing State law into compliance.

Horace: There's a saying that, "So goes the real estate and the housing industry, so goes the economy,"...

[0:43:33] ...do you feel that way?

Rep. Curls: It seems to hold true. In other words, real estate, when you're talking in terms of real estate, you're talking in terms of new construction. And you're talking in terms of the construction industry, which is a basic industry; you're talking in terms of...

[0:44:00] ...the lumber, steel mills, concrete plants, and all the related industries that would feed from the real estate industry. See real estate is a major industry because that takes into consideration construction and everything related to it. You know the auto plants are a major industry, you know, that takes into consideration the steel mills and those type things...

[0:44:30] ...so that from those basic industries they provide the income source for many of your service agencies such as, you know, stores. Stores is a service industry but it's a necessity, but it's a service agency. You have tire plants, your service stations, your hardware stores...

[0:45:00] ...which provide services to these, so that if you don't have people making the basic income from your construction, then they in turn cannot feed to these service agencies which cannot feed to; so, yeah, it's a basic industry.

Horace: All right, quickly, back to politics. Can you give me some type of an answer to what happened to Richard Tolbert...

[0:45:30] ...and the Freedom Incorporated organization?

Rep. Curls: I really don't know. I mean, you know, I've heard it said that he was a man before his time. Richard Tolbert had a lot of good ideas. I don't think that you could say what happened to Richard Tolbert in Freedom Incorporated as if to indicate that there was friction that existed between Freedom and Richard...

[0:46:01] ...because there was friction that existed between Richard and the world as it related to the implementation of his ideas. And that same problem existed within Freedom because he saw the need for certain changes and to do certain things, which leadership at that time did not see the need to do, and so there was the clash. But he saw the need to do things in the community as a whole...

[0:46:33] ...and many of his ideas were good, but ideas have to have some means of implementation. And the means of implementation have to be more thoroughly thought out than I saw Richard doing. He had tremendous ideas but...

Horace: Do you feel that Freedom Incorporated can align themselves with Joanne Collins in her congressional race...

[0:47:05]

Rep. Curls: No, I don't. No, I don't. Really I don't. I mean she's running against an incumbent who had been very responsive to the Black community; I mean we cannot simply promote candidates strictly and solely on the fact that they're Black.

[0:47:30] Especially in a race in which they don't have a chance of winning. I don't really think Joanne has a chance of winning. I think that she is part of a larger scheme to divide the Black vote and try to swing some part of that to the Republican Party. I can appreciate the role that Joanne plays in the political system, and, well, do I believe that she should do as she's doing...

[0:48:01] ...I just do not see us, nor would I encourage anyone else to follow along with her. But you need some people in all parts of the winners' camps. I mean we, as a people, don't need to lose when we lose. I mean there's got to be some Joanne Collins, some Sam Jacksons...

Horace: Henry Roth?

Rep. Curls: Uh, yeah, there is -- you know I minimize Henry Roth's role even more than I do Joanne's...

[0:48:31] ...but they serve the same purpose to an extent. Everybody has some constituencies so they have some representation; they represent somebody.

Horace: As a member of the House of Representatives for the State of Missouri, how did the Watergate incident affect you personally; and how does it affect your colleagues in the House?

[0:49:00]

Rep. Curls: One of the effects has been what you always call your "backlash." And that is we have a campaign spending law which is now extremely -- man, you really have to be a CPA just to file those forms, just to really complete those forms. And, you know, I think there has been an overreaction to Watergate especially on a level in which we're dealing.

[0:49:35]

Horace: Where does Phillip Curls go from here politically?

Rep. Curls: To really attempt to be a good legislator; to begin to try to exert myself as far as leadership on the legislative level. I don't think in terms of, "Well, shortly I'm going to go to here."

[0:50:00] I really think in terms of first trying to satisfactorily do the job at the level that I'm presently at.

Horace: What committees are you on in the State?

Rep. Curls: I'm presently on Banks and Financial Institutions, State Institutions, and Property and Welfare. I hope to this coming term become a member of the Appropriations Committee, which is a very time consuming committee, but which is one I want to devote my time to...

[0:50:35] ...because we have not had a Black from Kansas City on the Appropriations Committee since 1970.

Horace: Do you plan to chair any committees?

Rep. Curls: No, I don't.

Horace: Do you have that type of seniority whereas you could?

Rep. Curls: There will be some third-term chairman, but I doubt really if I'll be one.

[0:51:01] There will be very few third-term chairmen. Chairmanships in the Missouri House are based a lot on seniority and there are some very qualified people there who are chairing some of these positions. I eventually intend on chairing a committee, but, you know, it's all in due time.

Horace: Finally, what is your impression of Jimmy Carter versus Gerald Ford?

[0:51:35]

Rep. Curls: Well personally I'm in favor of Carter because I've seen what the country, you know, what direction we've had since we've had Ford in office. He has vetoed some bills which I consider would have been very beneficial to my community.

[0:52:00] Ford is more business oriented in the type of legislation that he seems to promote or that he seems to be in favor of. Carter seems to be a man more in tune with the needs of the people, you know? I'm impressed, and although it might be a shallow impression, or might be a shallow issue...

[0:52:30] ...but that he has -- his children go to school with Black kids, so that he has a firsthand knowledge of what the educational problems or the educational benefits of integrated education. I mean it's difficult for me to give just a blanket endorsement of the man not knowing more about the man than I do, but the few things that I do know, you know, they have impressed me versus Gerald Ford.

[0:53:03]

Horace: Phillip, in looking at the State Legislature, how many issues would you say the Legislature confronts themselves with annually?

Rep. Curls: About 1,000.

Horace: All right. What priority, let's say, does integration or would social programs in regards to that 1,000?

[0:53:34]

Rep. Curls: Nine hundred. Well, wait a minute now...

Horace: I'm saying this in regards to are White people, or are White legislators preoccupied with integration really?

Rep. Curls: No. Preoccupied with it? You know, trying to correct it?

Horace: No, is it a constant thing to them; or is that just one of the horns in their side, really?

[0:54:02]

Rep. Curls: Well I mean it isn't anything for which they try to address, you know? I mean it's not really...

- Horace: Well I'm under the impression that Black people will think that a president is constantly at work on the civil rights question, you know?
- Rep. Curls: No, no. No. I don't even think it rates -- at the state level it doesn't rate, you know, if you had ten issues it would be ninth or eighth.
- [0:54:35] Prison reform being tenth, which is an integrated question to a certain extent; but, no, that doesn't monopolize their time nor their thinking.
- Horace: But yet and still we feel that Jimmy Carter is going to suddenly rise as a champion to the social cause more or less; do you feel that way?
- [0:55:00]
- Rep. Curls: I feel that he quite possibly will because that issue -- you see, champion of social causes we're talking about unemployment, which is, you know, not just a White/Black question. See that goes back to what we were saying earlier about Black folks identifying with the larger problem and realizing that they're just part of an overall problem and not a problem in itself.
- [0:55:30] See when you talk about -- see we talked to him once and he talked in terms of crime, he talked in terms of education, and he pointed out that you can never deal with those specific issues as to how to address them and separate that from economics; that we have crime because we have a depressed economic condition for a certain group of people.
- [0:56:00] And that we cannot expect a man to starve while we talk about, "Well let's figure out why he's a criminal?" You understand why he's a criminal but you keep trying to deal with, you know, building bigger jails, or rehabilitation programs, or all type of social oriented programs when truly one of the major problems that is the feeder to all of these other problems is economics.
- [0:56:34] Somebody has got some money, they can afford to, you know, feed their children, or clothe their children when they're going to school, you know, and send their children to school every day; but if he doesn't have any money, then, you know, the child is irritated because he's hungry, or he's ashamed because he's in an impoverished condition and it distracts from his learning.
- [0:57:02] His ability to learn because his mind is occupied with other problems, but you give him these basic necessities and that will improve everything. It will improve the school system; it'll improve the crime problem...
- Horace: And you feel that Jimmy Carter is going to...
- Rep. Curls: Well he at least, if nothing else, he has expressed to me that he at least recognizes that there is a relationship between the economy and these other problems.

[0:57:35]

Horace: Well Nixon, I believe, supplied more to economic development within the Black community than any other president in this era; how do you explain that? And that's the economics.

Rep. Curls: Well we're talking about basic economics, I'm not talking -- see, you're talking about Black capitalism, which addresses itself really to a very minor segment of the Black community.

[0:58:01] See, you're talking about how he attempted to pay people who were in favor with him; and I'm talking about how do you get a majority of the unemployed people...

Horace: Employed?

Rep. Curls: ...employed? See, you know, we're not talking about -- you know, I don't want to distract from nor discourage Black capitalism, but that of itself is not going to solve the problem and when you have tokenism Black capitalism...

[0:58:35] ...as I think that has been fostered heretofore, you know, he's not really trying to address a problem, he's just trying to provide a means to compensate those who have supported him.

Horace: That's politics, though, isn't it?

Rep. Curls: Yeah, that's definitely politics, but...

[0:59:00] ...so I'm saying that I don't see Nixon's position as one trying to correct a problem.

Horace: Do you believe that he'll be back politically?

Rep. Curls: You never can tell about that man. I mean I think that, you know, he might be there now, who knows? And he picked the president, so he had to have something in mind when he picked him.

Horace: Were you surprised at all the Reagan defeat here in Kansas City?

[0:59:34]

Rep. Curls: Was I surprised?

Horace: Hm-hmm.

Rep. Curls: No, I really wasn't surprised. I was surprised that he showed as well as he did. Yeah, I was surprised at that but, you know, Dr. O'Toole went for Reagan, you know? I don't know if you know who Dr. O'Toole is, I don't really know other than to tell you she's a Black lady from...

[1:00:00] ...New York who gave a seconding speech for Reagan at the convention; extremely bright lady, she was sharp, that lady is really sharp. She was on the Tomorrow show once before the convention because she was an unconven...

[Break in audio 1:00:20]

Horace: ...then which direction do you think we're going to be going; Black people anyway? It looks like we're in a void right now; there's no real issue...

[1:00:30] ...Freedom lost two very important races in the last election; where are we going to go?

Rep. Curls: What do you mean there is no real issue?

Horace: What is the issue?

Rep. Curls: Unemployment.

Horace: But that's a national issue; I'm talking about as far as the community is concerned.

Rep. Curls: Well but that's a community issue, too. Unemployment, desegregated housing...

Horace: Do you think that Freedom...

Rep. Curls: ...the education system.

Horace: Do you think that Freedom is going to be able to maintain its strength within the community just being...

[1:01:00] ...an open uncommitted organization that just deals with just all the issues or what?

Rep. Curls: Well when you say it's "open uncommitted," what do you mean by that?

Horace: I mean that we're not dealing with any specific Black issue; you know, we're dealing with the entire agenda of issues, let's say.

[1:01:30] You know, do you think that the organization will be able to maintain itself?

Rep. Curls: Well really if that's what Freedom is doing, and I would tend to agree, then I would say, yes, because that's what the people are going to have to do. We're going to have to understand that, you know, we will blend into the system so we must address ourselves to the problems of the system. Now maybe you were talking in terms of, you know, remaining outside the system...

[1:02:00] ...but that is not really what Freedom Inc., is all about; I mean we would not have pursued elected offices, which is recognizing the system and trying to work within the system. So that issues that we must address ourselves to are those issues which, you know, we understand to affect people, all people and not only Black people, but affect Black people the most.

[1:02:30]

Horace: All right, what I'm getting at is this: What percentage of the Black community or the Black vote did Freedom get out doing public accommodations would you say?

Rep. Curls: Probably 50%.

Horace: All right, we got 50% more than we had had previously voting; are you saying?

Rep. Curls: Oh, well, no, I don't have that statistics before me. Now public accommodation was the zenith...

[1:03:00] ...was the height as far as registration, and also as far as voter participation.

Horace: All right, now compare that with the voter registration and voter participation we had in the last election. Was that drive comparable?

Rep. Curls: No, no. We had -- I'll give you a -- you know, in 1974 we had an average...

[1:03:30] ...voter participation or voting on that day of, like, 22% in the Black community.

Horace: Twenty-two percent of the registered voters or 22% of the voters voted Freedom?

Rep. Curls: No, 22% of the registered voters voted.

Horace: Voted? Okay.

Rep. Curls: That's on an average with some going as low as 14%, and some as high as 25-30...

[1:04:02] ...but it was right at the 22% range. Now in this previous election, 1976, we had several precincts that voted in the 45%, which was a tremendous improvement. Now, you know, the fact that we had a senatorial candidate running contributed to that. I think the fact that we worked harder contributed to that.

[1:04:34] The fact that the opponents worked harder contributed to that. The fact that there were opponents contributed to that. But, now, that does not really answer your question which you're trying to point out that during the time of

public accommodation, which could have been a rallying cry for our community, we had tremendous participation and why don't we have it now? I really don't know.

[1:05:05]

Horace: Well is it because of not having a pertinent issue; or an issue of the same magnitude as public accommodation; but what can we do within the community to develop those kinds of...

[Crosstalk 1:05:17]

Rep. Curls: You know, there is no issue that has the magnitude and the impact as unemployment.

Horace: Well why haven't we been able to emphasize that issue; that employment is the key issue right now?

[1:05:35]

Rep. Curls: I don't know. I mean, you know, I search for the answer myself. I mean why...

Horace: Employment would have, seemed to me, would have overridden public accommodations...

Rep. Curls: Yeah.

Horace: ...would have gone over Fair Housing because employment would have cleaned up all this other stuff, you know...

Rep. Curls: Well, see, those were emotional issues, you see?

[1:06:00] And we just seem to react more to emotional issues.

Horace: All right, Fair Housing, I still can't live in certain parts of this city, you know, if I wanted to or not. If you were the realtor selling me the house on State Line, more than likely I still would not be able to be able to buy that house regardless of the price of that particular facility.

Rep. Curls: Why?

Horace: Wasn't it -- well I remember as a lad...

[1:06:30] ...Hector Lopez buying a house on State Line before the public housing thing and they ran him out; right? The social pressures, the social attitudes have not changed in the last ten years...

Rep. Curls: All right.

Horace: ...regardless of Fair Housing Act; right? So we're still in the same position even though they have legislation; right?

Rep. Curls: Of course things have really -- they have really changed, no, the social attitudes have changed a great deal.

[1:07:00] I mean you have a lot great acceptance, of course, you know, you cannot legislate that your neighbor will talk to you, you know, you can't just legislate that. But there have been definite changes no doubt about it. I mean...

Horace: Looking back over the years how effective was Henry Ross in the House of Representatives to you?

Rep. Curls: I really do not know anything about Henry's legislative career to knowledgably comment.

[1:07:34]

Horace: How effective was Leon Jordan?

Rep. Curls: Oh, his was -- he has probably been more effective at the state level than any other Black man. It was just that he had an overpowering personality and he thought big. I mean, you know, there are many who credit Tom Eagleton...

[1:08:01] ...as US Senator to Leon Jordan because Leon thought in terms of things at that level.

Horace: All right, finally, what legislation at state level does Phillip Curls now have his name attached to?

Rep. Curls: The primary legislation deals with housing.

[1:08:31] It deals with expanding the authority of the Missouri State Housing Commission to allow them to make loans and grants to property owners in this particular area who...

Horace: Well what is this area now; what is this area?

Rep. Curls: Well I always think of this area specifically my district, but it would be even larger than the district and encompass primarily the red line areas of the inner-city...

[1:09:00] ...red line meaning that private mortgage money is not available for either home purchase or home repair within a large area of our metropolitan city and also in St. Louis, and also in other different -- well primarily Kansas City/St. Louis, and that really is the primary legislation that I'm interested in.

[1:09:31] I'm also the prime sponsor on four welfare bills which they are important, too. They have a more limited impact in that they would primarily benefit those

who are on welfare, or those who have an appeal, you know, within the system, but...

[1:10:00] ...it's those four in welfare and the one in housing. Now I quite possibly will be the prime sponsor of some bills to reform the penal system. I really don't know whether or not I'll take that on, but I quite possibly will.

Horace: Okay, this concludes the first interview with State Representative Phillip Curls. Thank you very much, Mr. Curls.

Rep. Curls: Thank you, Mr. Peterson.

Horace: See you in five years.

[End of audio 1:10:35]