

This is Rhonda Hurwitz interviewing John Kilamanjaro at his home on July 17, 2005. John, will you tell me a little bit about your family history?

My family history.

Your family history. When and where you were born.

I was born in the city dump.

Where?

In the city dump.

You were born in the city dump?

No, umm, I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, June 6, 1930. My father was Arthur L. Stevenson. His father was Edward Alexander Stevenson, and his father was Alexander Stevenson. As you can tell, I, my paternal ancestry were Stevensons. They were slaves, my great-grandfather was a slave in Virginia. I found all this out when I went to the National Archives during the Great Revolution made by Alex Haley and his Roots. And this is significant. I'm starting at the end to get to the beginning. Since you asked me about my ancestry, my great-grandfather said that he was, he had some of the other slaves in Virginia, he never said what town it was, or what farm it was or anything like that, but when the Yankee soldiers came to our place on the old plantation, he said, "they told us that we were," these are the words, of course, that he explained to the soldiers going about emancipating the African slaves, they told them that they were "now henceforth and forever," that little phrase comes in, free. And that "me and some of the boys," this is what he has written down, "me and some of the boys decided to follow them." Now, how I got this information, and why I got this information, was I guess it was 50 years later, he applied for a pension. And they wanted to know what in the world he would get a pension for. Because he served in the Yankee army. And he said, "me and some of the boys decided to follow them. Because they turned us loose just like dogs or chickens or something out there in the yard." And they had no place to go or no place to sleep, no place to get their next meal. But he said they decided to follow them. He must have been, I guess he must have been about 17 or 18 years old. I'm just guessing that, and they followed them out, they became what's known, if you remember your Civil War history, as camp followers. They followed them out to Forth Smith, Arkansas. That's where they joined up, and he became an army private. And served up until about 1898, when he became disabled. He had some kind of a stomach disease. I guess it was like cancer. And this is how we got to know the story, that the army scribe sat down and said, "What do you mean you want to get a pension?" And he went on to explain to him..."How'd you get in the army?" And he said, these are the words that he told him, "I don't remember. When the Yankee soldiers came to our place, we followed them. We used to dig slip trenches", that's what they used, they call them that today even. I was born in Little Rock Arkansas. I am a 4th generation Little Rockian, and I don't believe if someone came through here, they'd be able to find another person, not an African-American, anyway, who'd be a 4th generation Little Rockian. My father's name was Arthur, Arthur Stevenson. He married my mother, who was Isabelle Lawson Broy from who was from Mississippi. But he met her, I guess, when my mother was doing nurse training in Little Rock at a hospital that my late uncle had founded, my late uncle founded 3 hospitals in the state of Arkansas. She became a student nurse there. I was the 3rd of 3 children. My sister who is still living, living in Chicago now,

When was she born?

She was born in 1927, she's younger than I, and my brother was born in 1925, he's deceased now. He's buried there in Little Rock.

What are their names?

Arthur, Jr., Arthur Leonard Stevenson, Jr. Sister's name is Beatrice, Beatrice Stevenson Altman.

Can you describe what life was like growing up, and where you went to school?

We, I grew up in a matriarchal home. I had a father, but he was a porter, which was one of the best jobs that a black man in America could have at that time, but he wasn't a physician or a lawyer or some kind of professional person. I mention all that because, I, I'm not falling asleep either, this is sort of traumatic to me, this is what happens to me, my daughter says that I'll fall asleep when I get ready to think about...When you say tell me about my early existence my early childhood, it causes me to wonder. I've written my book, been writing my book 10 years, never touched it, never wrote another line. My grandmother never went to any school, prep school in Fort Smith, Arkansas. That was were my paternal great-grandfather had been stationed, in Fort Smith. Fort Smith is the second city in Arkansas now. And my mother was the public health nurse, a registered nurse. My father had 2 years of college. His father worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, and after my great-grandfather, my great-grandfather Edward, I'm sorry, my great-grandfather's name was Alexander Stevenson. My great-grandfather's name was Edward Alexander Stevenson. We lived, the family home, it was in Little Rock. That's where my mother finished her training. That is where my father, my father never left there except to go wildcatting on the railroad. What I mean by that is, to wildcat on the railroad meant that they didn't give him a steady job. He was on a as-necessary basis. I said to you before that the job that he had was the best job that a black man could have. In fact, one of the things that I wrote about in my book, and I'm much more articulate when I'm writing than I am when I'm talking about it, but anyway, he was, as was told to me by my maternal relative, Alexander Stevenson was out wildcatting on the railroad when I was born. That meant that he left Little Rock when they called him to work on cars. He worked on cars. I grew up in a neighborhood that was typically all-black. I grew up in a neighborhood which was considered to be the colored part of town, but it wasn't. As I remember, we had white neighbors who would be living two doors down, but they were poor whites, you know. I went to school, my grandmother took me by the hand, I can almost remember that, my grandmother took me to the Catholic school, which was parochial, private -

Were you Catholic?

No.

What religion were you then?

My grandmother was a Methodist, and all the people on my mother's side were Methodist. My father was a Baptist, and all the people on my father's side were Baptist. So for my to come in Jewish is 17 years away, the way I'm talking. I went to Catholic school, and the Catholics taught me to read and they taught me to play the piano. And this becomes significant, because my mother, by the time I was 7 years old, my mother was dead.

And what did she die of?

I don't know. She didn't live long, she didn't suffer long. She went to the hospital on a Monday and one Wednesday they called us in to the breakfast table, and my grandmother said, and I noticed there were people, the house was just crowded, because everyone in the county knew my mother, she was their nurse and that was significant because they, at that time, that's the Depression, back when they were dying like flies. Almost literally so.

Who raised you after your mother died?

I'll get to that in a minute. My grandmother lived with us. And my mother's sister lived with us. My mother's sister was head of the YWCA, she was the secretary there, and my mother was the principal of the school there, Midling Heights Elementary School. So, that's what I mean when I said that I grew up in a kind of matriarchal society, because my father was not mean, you'd have to know what I mean. I black man had that...my mother got this job because the federal government was looking for people who were health trained or health education trained or something to do with, to help stem the, all the tuberculosis and all the diseases that would affect black families and poor families and people who were underprivileged.

OK, so from there you went to what kind of school did you go to?

Here's where it gets interesting. Why when I get through and you walk out this office door, you'll say, I see why he stumbles around a bit. Although I tell you about it, I could jump all over everything, but you would not know the history of who John Marshall Kilimanjaro is, and why, so, my mother died about a year and a half later from cancer, and in between the time my mother died, she died before I was 7 years old, my dad came down from Little Rock. We lived in an all-white neighborhood at that time. We'd moved, I guess the insurance or something must have provided for us to get in a very nice home, a very, very nice home. It was colonial, it had columns, you know. I remember that, and it was white. He came in on mother's day 1937, and they came into the house, they being people from the Health Department, Public Health Department, her colleagues, nurses and social workers from, from family's acquaintances. We thought it was some big holiday or something when the stars began to fall. We went on back to school, but my daddy was, the family had a, was like most families, there was descention between the Robinsons and the Stevensons. The in-laws said who's going to make my, come up to Forth Smith to get us, and my brother waking me up, must have been early about, early for me to get up, about 6 o'clock, and he said, "John Marshall," and my sister was kneeling beside the bed, he said, "Daddy's come to take us home, to Little Rock. We're going to Little Rock." Little Rock seemed to be the haven for us, because when we lived there, we didn't get the training, the discipline we got in Forth Smith, which was my mother and Aunt Leigh. That was his sister, and we didn't live with him. He was living kind of a bachelor's lie you might say. So, anyway, it seemed that when I... When I went to Little Rock -

How about moving a little closer to the mike?

I can remember talking to Rabbi Asher, and he was reading in the paper about who I was in the community, this was back when I first came back to Greensboro, he'd read where I said that I went to the public, to the parochial schools. He jumped, and I didn't understand why he did this, because it was opposite of what we think of Jews doing -

It might have been different then.

Right, right. Anyway -

So, did you go to high school?

I loved my dad, he came there, and instead of coming to our house, he went to a boarding house down the street. One that was our competition. And so that we could maintain some semblance of dignity and so forth, we had to rent the rooms in the house that we had. When the bands would come to Little Rock, to Fort Smith, a number of them would stay at our house. So when Jr. woke me up that morning, when my brother woke me up that morning and told me that Daddy had come to get us, I did something that was strange. I got up and put my clothes on and went outside. I knew that he could only be at one place, because blacks couldn't live at hotels and so forth. I walked 2 blocks down the street, I was 6 or 7 at the time, to Miss Lee's house. That was the lady that had the house, big like ours, but she had been in the business a long time. And I saw Daddy's old car out there, and I knew that that was his car, and I walked up to the door and rang the bell, and she came, and invited me in. Daddy was sitting at the table, big table, big white table cloth was there, because he was paying for it, and seldom did we ever do that, you know, have a table cloth like that. When he came down the house with us, and he told them that he came to get his children, Aunt Leigh, who it wound up was the one who raised me, said, "No, you don't have any place to keep these children." Because they had lost the home, the family home that they had. It was a big, they had never forgiven Arthur Stevenson for marrying his favorite niece, I put it in my book here. When my daddy came in to get us, I hid, because I thought that going to Little Rock meant that we could stay up late, and that was a neighborhood that had what you called Juke Joints on the corner, and I never heard a record. When I went there, I hid in the rumble seat of his car, and my grandmother was walking out, I guess she must have been 53 years old then, and she was going to call the police.

Because they couldn't find you?

No, because she, my Daddy was adamant about taking us back.

Ok, wanted to stop him.

Yeah. And the reason I mention this is because I never saw her again. And I was her favorite, and she was the one that had taken me by the hand -

That was a big loss to you? To lose your grandmother?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My gosh.

So you had trouble, your family was really poor when you were in Little Rock?

Mmm-hmm. It wouldn't have been poor if my dad had been tied close to home. We lived 7 blocks away, he was not trained, he was not educated to be a provider, to be a husband and a provider. Even though he had a father, for some reason or another this was not done.

So, did you have to work?

No, no. No, no.

Who provided for you?

My aunt. The one, she had two years of college. One of the things I say in my book, when I was born, a dark star rose over the Stevenson family. It's like that. My literary way of putting something. She washed and ironed for white people who came to the Baptist hospital six or seven blocks away. And she would, you could see her coming down the street with a basket in her arms, and you could hear her feet scraping the sidewalk. That's why I do what I do now, why I have great compassion for people who are less fortunate than I am.

Ok, so what did you study?

I'll never forget, I stayed in Little Rock one year. My grandmother died while I was there. Her last words were, "If I could only see my boys, if I could only see my boys." And her brother, whose decision it was, would not let us go, because she was not in her right mind as they would say. But when she died, I, they buried her in Little Rock, not in Fort Smith, with aunt, my great-aunt who was a Robinson. She was my grandmother's sister, and my great-uncle's sister. She was what you call a genes [not sure about that word] teacher in Mississippi. She had a hundred schools she was in charge of.

What did she do?

She was what you call a genes teacher.

And how did she influence you?

She was a my mother's grandmother, and all the others were, even on my father's side, I was raised by a whole bunch of people. Everyone would tell you, I had to jump back and forth, because I never knew one place for years in my life. I was always, I'd go back to Little Rock, but I couldn't live in a central place over the summer, and I'd come back to where ever, to Tulsa, OK, to Kansas City, Kansas, to Missouri, and back to Fort Smith. Over to Holly Springs which was a college town, and it was there that I finished high school. But in between there, I was in an orphanage.

Who put you in the orphanage?

It was the Robinsons' decision. And Daddy didn't like that, he always talked about it, but they never asked him. This is the thing: they never asked him.

Did your brother go in the orphanage too?

No.

Just you?

My sister and me.

Your sister and you?

My dad said to me, years afterwards, when I confronted him about why things were like they were, he said, "Yeah, they came and took you away. They never said a word to me about it."

How old were you when you were in the orphanage?

8 years old.

And how long were you there?

2 years, it was like being away in a boarding school.

You were very unhappy about being there?

No, no. No, no.

Life was good there? You weren't hungry?

Oh, no. It was, there were other boys and other girls. There were about 20 boys and 25 girls.

Did you see your sister a lot?

I saw her every day. We went to the same school, the same school house. The peculiar thing, why I feel I had to get that in, I didn't know it then, but 15 years later, at the orphanage, I was the smartest boy on campus. It was there that they had me, I would get up on holidays and recite passages from the Bible.

“New Testament”, huh? “Old Testament” too?

Whatever, I would recite from Matthew, “[recites too quickly to understand]”.

I don't know that part.

Wonder why! I did the whole thing. And the Easter story, and I did the Psalms.

Was religion important to you?

Yeah, umm, not like you would think. It was just going to be part of my life, because the Catholics had indoctrinated me. The main point that I'm trying to give you, is that the Robinsons were determined we would not be running the street. We would not be street urchins. Not in Fort Smith. Between that time Aunt Bea got married again, a second time, and they moved to Tulsa, OK. By that time, the economy picked up. When we came home, we just didn't go back to the orphanage.

So you were still in Little Rock at this point?

No. My brother was in Little Rock, my dad was in Little Rock, my great-uncle lived in Little Rock.

And where were you?

The year after I left the orphanage, I went to live in Tulsa, OK, which is where Aunt Bea was.

Aunt who?

Aunt Bea.

Aunt Bea. Was she a Robinson?

Yeah, she would be a Robinson, yeah.

So, who is Aunt Bea?

My mother's sister.

So is she the one who had the greatest influence on you?

I would say so, yeah.

You called her Aunt Bea?

Yeah, mm-hmm. The war started, December 1941, I was living with Aunt Bea. I enjoyed my life in Tulsa with Aunt Bea. We lived down on the line, the business district, the black business district, and people who studied black history would know what I meant by that.

Did you have any racial problems in Tulsa?

No. There had been. They burned down the black business district -

But you were exposed to any?

Oh, no, no. I never had any problems. They would shield me from anything untoward in my life. I can't tell you, except for the life of being a motherless child, but anyway, aside from that, I never went hungry, I never, I still had when I was living with the Robinsons, I had a discipline regiment. When Aunt Bea got married, she became a Josey, you know what her name was? And she signed her name like this, Mrs. Julius Rubenstein Josey.

Where'd she get that name from?

Her husband!

And she was a Rubenstein? What was her last name?

Josey. J-O-S-E-Y. By the time I came out -

Did she have any children?

No.

Did you go to high school in Tulsa?

No, I'm only in 8th grade.

Oh, only in 8th grade.

Still Methodist, still going to Sunday school. We decided to leave Tulsa, because of racism, I would say now. She couldn't get a job.

Oh, so she was having trouble getting a job because of racial problems?

Yeah, well, you know, it was at that time that Franklin D. Roosevelt was influenced by A. Phillip Randolph, if you know that name, who was head of the _____. Finally Roosevelt passed the FEPC, you remember that?

No, I don't know that.

That's the Fair Employment Practice Commission, that was one of the things that caused the rift between the northern Democrats and the southern Democrats. We left Tulsa and went to Kansas City, Kansas. And she got there and she found that that was not the haven that we thought it would be. But she got a job, and I can remember her, I remember waking up and hearing her crying, this would be about 2 o'clock in the morning, because her hands would be aching so, she had a job in a meat packing place. And they had to pay money to keep up with the contractors, anyway -

So, you went to high school in Kansas City?

Jr. high. Junior high found me 12 years old and graduating from 9th grade.

Was it a black school?

Mmm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Were you happy there?

Relatively so. I didn't stay there, but 4 months, 4 ½ months.

Then where did you go?

Went back down to Little Rock. Went to 10th grade there. I was 13 years old, had my 13th birthday. So I was going to school, and I knew people, people knew me, well, let me tell you like this -

You confronted your father when you were in college?

Yeah. I said, "You never did anything for us." I had big tears, I'll never forget it, to this day when I talk to black boys who are in the same position that I was in, they say, "My daddy, he didn't do this-that" Every time you read about somebody in the papers, the father's always an S.O.B.

Did you consider your father an S.O.B?

No, not really.

And how old were you when your father died?

I was married and had Afrika. Anyway -

Did you have a relationship with him?

Not really.

Was he a grandfather to your children?

I got pictures of him with them sitting on his lap. This was back, when I went back to Little Rock for a funeral. He and Uncle John, they were getting on in age, my father died he was 70,

So you really felt motherless and fatherless?

To some extent. My mouth won't let me say that, because they did everything they could. They used to call that my rolls gallery, and my voice gets high like -

In the 10th grade what subjects did you like in school?

I just liked school.

You just liked school. You were a good student?

I don't know about that. I could have been a good student. I didn't have to study. I had a good background.

So, when did you decide to become dramatic?

It was years later. No, let me tell you this. I went back to Little Rock, and in a year I was locked up for watching grown men shooting mice in a corner.

You were locked up?

Oh, yes! They locked the black boy up!

Where were you locked up?

In the jail.

Because you were doing something you weren't supposed to do?

I wasn't. I wasn't shooting, I was just watching because I hadn't seen it.

Did they lock up the men who were shooting?

Yeah.

So you were all arrested?

Uh-huh. They thought that Uncle John was the most influential black man in Arkansas.

So, where were you in jail? Did you go to school while you were in jail.

No, no. Just 3 days.

Oh! 3 days.

I shouldn't have been there that long. But he had pulled himself up out of Mississippi, and finished medicine, was practicing medicine when he was 21 years old. I got out. I remember being in high school and the principal of the high school later on got his doctorate, and that was a unique thing for a principal to have a doctor's degree, a doctorate. I came back to a group of guys at lunch time talking -

And you're in high school?

Yeah, in high school, still in 10th grade. And the guy said, "Hey, John! What'd you have to pay?"

In other words, to get out of jail?

Yeah, out of the detention home or whatever you call it. I was the only one there, and while I was in the space it was perfect. They had to provide for you since I was a minor, it had bars on the windows and so forth -

Alright, so, what kind of influence did this have, since you were in the wrong place and you were put in detention? Obviously, it influenced you.

Well, yeah. It taught me one thing, it taught me one thing, when you hear the cops coming, you run like hell.

So you run like hell when the cops come?

Yeah. That's right. In other words, when they came, I wasn't doing anything. When I got to Greensboro, they said, are you going to this party, now, we want you to go and have a good time, but -

Run like hell when the cops come. Alright, so what happens -

I didn't stay there but a year and then Aunt Bea came down to get me. I was pushing pebbles, riding a bicycle to the grocery store to deliver groceries.

Ok, so you were delivering groceries, how much were you getting payed?

More than any boy I knew! \$12 a week.

\$12 a week!

Aunt Bea used to tell me this, she came down there, and the man was going to fire me, because I had to ride a mile and a half in the city to get to the grocery store. I was 2 minutes late, I was 3 minutes late, he wasn't going to stand for it. So this time, he was a nice old man,

He as a white man then?

Yes.

So, you did have racial problems then?

Well, he wasn't doing it because I was black, he wasn't getting \$1's worth of work for \$1's worth of pay.

So, you've had a very difficult childhood then...

It wasn't as difficult as most of my buddies, though.

Ok, so get me through high school, and we'll go on to college.

Well, I went to high school, and Rust College, a Methodist College in Holly Springs...

It was in Arkansas?

No, it was in Mississippi.

In Mississippi, ok. Who were you living with then?

It was Aunt Ruth.

Ok, you've gone from Aunt Bea to Aunt Ruth.

That's the way it always was.

Back and forth?

Not back and forth. It was a triangle. My great-aunt, the one I was telling you about that was the supervisor of schools in Holly Springs, she had, tried to keep tabs on, and she taught at summer time at Rust College -

What college?

Rust College, R-U-S-T. Located about 60 miles -

And so you went to college there?

No, she came to pick me up just as I was being fired, I didn't know where I was going. At the grocery store.

Because you were late?

Yes, and he had the cash register clean, and the telephone rang, and his wife said, "John, it's for you", and it was Aunt Bea. It was like a guardian angel.

And then you went back with Aunt Bea?

Yeah, I went down to Mississippi, where I would go in the summertime. In the summertime, I was there, everyone knew who I was, there were 2 black colleges there -

Alright, so which black college did you go to?

I went to high school there. Prep school, they didn't have colleges for black people in Mississippi.

So was it a black high school?

Yeah, Rust College.

It's called a black college, but it's high school?

Yeah. It was a college prep school is what it was. So I went there, and I had the benefit of my people who were somebody, you might say.

So you had a problem of identity. You wanted to be somebody.

Yeah. Well, I knew I was somebody. I never had a chance to not be somebody when I was placed in a situation where I was nobody. So, anyway, I finished Rust College Prep School, and I was 15.

That's pretty young.

Yeah, yeah. Well I had a head start.

Did you start college at 15?

Yeah.

What college did you pick?

I went to Touglolu College.

What's the name of it?

Touglolu, T-O-U-G-L-O-L-U College. It's an Indian name. It was the background or the foundation of civil rights in Mississippi. It was interracial.

This was 1945, it was right after the war?

1946, yeah. I went there 2 and a half years, and I joined a fraternity. I flunked out after the first year. I didn't really flunk out.

So, you were no longer a good student?

I was never a scholar. I was 2 years ahead of myself, and my class was 2 years ahead of me -

You were much younger than the rest of your class.

Right, right. So, I remember when I was at Touglolu, I said, "You see that crazy son-of-a-bitch up there? Climbing up a tree!" My freshman year.

So you did whatever they told you to do?

Well, it was my first year, and they were veterans. I was 16.

So you were a lot younger...

Yeah. And they expected me to be a dog.

So you had an identity problem there too? Because you didn't fit in?

Yeah.

So 2 ½ years, you flunked out. So then where did you go?

I had before me a, a, what do you call it, something that you wanted? I wanted to be in a fraternity, I wanted to be an Omega man.

You wanted to fit in?

Yeah. I wanted to be an Omega man, and in order to do that, I had to have the grades. So I began to -

What was your major?

Pre-med.

Pre-med? I didn't know you were pre-med! Just like your uncle? John Marshall Robinson.

Yeah, and John Marshall Robinson, Jr. was the first black to finish medicine in California.

So what happened to your pre-med program?

It went to hell. I went to, I came back, I joined the navy at 18. Oh, incidentally, I had, I went to San Diego, CA.

What kind of ship were you on?

Not a ship. I went to boot camp there, we trained, that's what boot camp is, you know. When they took me from Little Rock on the train with 3 other white boys, I had 2 ½ years of college at 18, they put those white boys in charge. I didn't care, it didn't make much difference to me, but I had to be on the lookout for their trying to make me be inferior.

So you were experiencing racial discomfort and tension in the navy?

Yeah, yeah. But it wasn't that much different that it really bothered me. Riding on a train to get to San Diego, CA -

But you had 2 ½ years of college, and they were making you feel inferior?

They were boys who came out of white hell and joined the navy to get out of it. And they felt that they had gone through so much just to get in the navy, and they're white.

So you get to San Diego?

And they put me in a company, with about 55 white boys. 55 white sheep and one little black ewe lamb...

Say that again?

55 white sheep and one little black ewe lamb.

So, what did you do in the navy?

I was a medic. After I finished boot camp, I went to -

Did you go to church?

No.

Did you have a religion at this time?

Yeah, I was Jewish.

You weren't Jewish yet! How were you Jewish?

I was Jewish. Well, let me tell you. When I was in college in Mississippi, and I was 13 or 14 years old, I read a book called, by Rabbi Liebman, Joshua Liebman, Peace of Mind, it was one of the first books that I had ever read. And it was a best seller.

How did that influence you?

It was little things that I was wondering about when I went to church or to Sunday school. Things didn't add up, things that just didn't add on to confuse and to influence the vulnerable, people who -

Alright, so you felt that because of your upbringing that you're vulnerable, that Christianity was not the proper thing for you?

Christianity did not live up to what they -

You felt you were vulnerable, in other words?

[end of side one, beginning of side two]

I knew the Bible, I didn't know what you would say -

Did you have any Jewish friends?

No.

Did you know anybody Jewish?

Oh, yeah. I knew people who were Jewish.

Did you talk to them about Judaism?

No, no. They were always here. For example, I worked for Jews in Holly Springs while I was in college. Didn't last 2 weeks. The rabbi came to the house, and I was a houseboy, not a Shabbos boy, but a houseboy-

You must have resented that.

No.

No? Not at all?

You did what you had to do to get over, to get that tuition, to get that room and board together. The influence that I got, and I wondered about this man now, I wondered if Mrs. Feinstein's husband was a rabbi, I wondered about that. Do you know why that was?

Why?

Because when I was in school, at graduation, I played piano. And the rabbi who spoke was Rabbi Feinstein from San Diego. I've often wondered.

Alright, so did some people who were Jewish influence you and help you?

No, no. Not really, I did it all by myself.

Will you tell my why you did it?

I found stories that, well, the things that I learned, the books that I read, I was reading Spinoza in elementary school. He was kind of an outcast, he was not standard. He had problems, like Martin Luther with the Catholic church. He didn't, didn't go along with some of the things that were happening. So, when I began to read, and at that time Lauren Douglas's book, which was Christian -

I read it, too.

I was -

So, have you ever converted to Judaism?

Yeah.

When?

You mean converted like my kids are converted? No. No, no, no. I read, I studied, I - No, I'm saying, my kids were - the thing I'm saying, see if I can get this back now - whatever, the contacts that I had

with Jews, that I had a Touglolu College, for example, one in particular was a refugee from Poland. His name was Polinski. And Dr. Polinski had 2 PhDs, and he taught at the University of Krakow and Berlin and so forth, and he came in to teach there. He taught political science and history and so forth. And I was, I didn't know [tape not clear] after I finished college, I was 22 years old.

And did you join the navy again?

No, I became a - I was in the navy for one year.

That's when you were 18.

18, but they put me in the reserves for 6 years.

So this was the Korean War, 1952?

Right. But the Korean War, after I got discharged from the navy and went into the hospital corp, I kind of caught hell. I found out what it was to be smart, to be backward or second class or something like that. And I did not ever accept that.

So, you're in the reserves?

No, I'm in active duty.

Active duty. And where were you?

I was in San Diego.

In San Diego.

And I had this chief, Chief Blocker. [tape unclear]

So, he was intimidating you.

Trying to.

Trying to. So you're still single at this point, and obviously you meet Vickie soon. When did you meet Vickie?

A thousand years later.

A thousand years later? No!

He treated me, the instance of my being intimidated, I said to him, Mr. Blocker, I can break every bone in the human body. And that made him mad. So, at that point he was determined to try, so you see, I'm a smart nigger, but he couldn't out-think me. And so, every time he tried, I was up on the charge. So, there were never enough to give me a court martial, a special court martial.

They weren't happy with you? Did you get a dishonorable discharge?

Hell no! Honorable discharge. I was determined that I was going to get an honorable discharge.

OK, then where did you go?

I came back to college.

And where did you go to college?

Arkansas.

Back in Arkansas? And what kind of degree did you get?

Bachelor of Arts Degree from University of Arkansas.

And what field were you in now?

I changed to fine arts, because I can do that.

We know you can do that! So, where did you meet Vickie?

Back in the service.

Ok.

And -

Was this the reserves?

I was regular navy. They called me back, because of the Korean War. And I went to navy seals, and that was a traumatic thing for me.

You weren't ready?

Yeah, I was ready. I went back in the navy, and I was stationed in New Hampshire.

Ok, and you're still single?

Yeah, oh, yeah.

So, when did you embrace Judaism?

I didn't embrace Judaism then. I was 17, at the time when Israel became free in March or April of 1948, I was Jewish.

So, you felt an affinity to it then?

Yeah, exactly.

Did you ever have any formal training?

Like what? I didn't do anything – I never knew Hebrew, which is where, I'm shaky now.

You never took Hebrew classes?

I taught myself.

You taught yourself how to read.

Uh-huh. I, when I went to the navy, the marines are part of the navy, the marines use naval medics for, in battle, so that I'm up in New Hampshire again, and I am in hell. But I knew, I knew what I had to do. They sent me down to Camp Lejuene. I came down to Camp Lejuene in 1953, I guess it was...

And then you stayed in North Carolina?

No. I was discharged. But I went overseas, I went overseas twice. And I was treated like a king.

Why?

Because I was hospital corp.

Ok, so you finally found something where you had a good feeling.

And the marines will tell you this, that next to G-d they hold hospital corps.

So, you encountered racial problems in the navy -

But, but when I went to marine corps it was like finding I was in hell.

So, you were discriminated against, you felt that being Jewish you could be discriminated in another way?

No, I didn't think about it.

No? Not at all?

No, no. My dogtag said "H", Hebrew...

Hebrew?

Yeah. And unless someone came along and did something that would cause me to have to asset myself

-

Alright, so when did you decide to change your name?

It was a long time ago, it was 25 or so years ago.

So when did you meet Vickie?

Well after I came out of the service, and went to the University of Arkansas. There were 6 of us in the entire University.

In the Arts?

Yeah.

This was the undergraduate degree?

My undergraduate was in English.

And what degree did you get?

Master of Arts.

In Speech and Drama?

Mm-hmm.

Ok, so you now have 2 bachelor's degrees?

Yeah. I didn't tell you about Tn, I went to school there. I finished at the University of Arkansas at M&M, which is now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. And I got my degree, and all of the folks were there to see me get my degree except for him.

He wouldn't come? Your father wouldn't come? Why not?

He never saw me get anything. He never saw me get my high school diploma, he never saw me get my bachelor's, he never saw me get my master's and I told him about it.

Did he come to your wedding?

No. No, no, no. It was a hard – he believed something, and he thought that he hadn't been treated right and to hell with it. But, I told him, a couple days after. I said, you never did anything for me, and he said, I never did anything for you? How can you say that? And I said, you didn't. And he knew I was down there in the detention hall-

Not at that time.

No, no.

Vickie's not Jewish, so where do you meet her?

I went to college, and I went to North Carolina Central.

What were you doing at North Carolina Central?

I was a young instructor. I was a junior instructor in English. It was my first job, when I came here, I brought Civil Rights things to Greensboro.

But you were at North Carolina Central, that wasn't Greensboro.

I'm just saying, I'm just saying, some of the times I'm jumping, but I'm not jumping. The experience that I'm telling you I had, I was going to the field with the troops, and I, when I came down out in the field – [whispers] Like I was coming to Greensboro, I was a purple elephant, because nobody at Chapel Hill, nobody at South Carolina, nobody -

Is like you.

Like me, right. You see, so -

So, how long were you at North Carolina Central?

At A&T.

At A&T?

'65. After I got that Master of Arts degree, and I wrote to 28 colleges and universities and everyone turned me down except for one.

And how many years did you teach at A&T?

25, 26. From 1961 to 1982.

So you retired in '82 then? And when did you have the newspaper?

'67.

So you started that while you were teaching?

Yeah, I was teaching.

So you had the newspaper at the same time, and the university didn't care?

They might have cared, but they knew not to mess with me.

So, you and Vickie got married in 1956 at the Temple?

At the Temple.

You weren't members of the Temple, then.

She wasn't.

You were?

Mm-hmm.

You were Jewish?

Yeah.

Did you have any formal Jewish education? Did you take any classes?

Who was there to teach me?

Rabbi Rypins.

Rabbi Rypins asked me... I'd been going to Temple ever since 1948.

Did you feel different since you were the only black person in the Temple?

Oh, I wondered if I was crazy, I was 50 years old before I ever saw a black person who was Jewish. I was 50 years old before I saw another black person who was Jewish.

Where was this?

Around here, somewhere.

Ok, so let's go back to Rabbi Rypins and the Temple.

Well, when I came here, I called Rabbi Rypins, and I said to him, "Rabbi, I'm John Marshall Stevenson, and I'm an instructor at A&T College." And he said, "Yes, John." And I said, "I happen to be Jewish, and I was wondering if there'd be a problem if I came to Temple." And he said, "Why, no! If you're Jewish you're welcome! You can come on!" And that was that. I found this same experience in Shreveport, Louisiana. Her name was Beatrice Chelsea, and I believe she was one of the first black women in television. And people from down there and the entire area knew Beatrice Chelsea, she was on every week. She was articulate -

But she wasn't Jewish?

No, no. When I found out, when I told my folks about her, when I was at Touglolu, my aunt's husband, she said, she got angry.

Who got angry?

My aunt.

Which aunt was this?

My great-aunt. She thought that I was being, like a lot of people did for a long time, that I was just trying to be different.

Ok. Being Jewish was being different?

Oh, yeah. "Your grandmother, your grandmother died for the church! And you come up here talking about you want to be some kind of Jew."

They weren't very happy?

Well, she wasn't happy, but she was an intelligent woman. So, I told her, I said – during the week, her home was my home, and it had been that way ever since I came out of the orphanage. I said to her, I said, “I have learned everything that you wanted me to know. Even after I became Jewish, I have taught Sunday school”, and they were very proud of me until I said things that they didn't know. So what I said was from the Jewish perspective. So, the point that -

So, you taught Sunday school at the Temple, did you have any other positions? Ever hold an office?

No.

Did you ever have a bar mitzvah?

No.

Do you want one?

Yes.

You do? Why don't you become part of the bar mitzvah class? You can do that. Were you ever confirmed? Ever part of a confirmation class?

Not part of a confirmation class.

So, you really haven't had a Jewish life cycle event, in your life? You weren't ritually circumcised either?

I was scared of that -

You were scared about that?

Well, I wouldn't say that. Rabbi Rypins had told me that for me to convert to Judaism, that was not absolutely necessary as long as you were confirmed and affirmed your loyalty to the Jewish people.

Was that sufficient for you?

Oh, yeah.

Now, Rabbi Fred Guttman, he believes in more ritual.

I know. I've worn out 5 rabbis. Rypins, Asher, Task, Harkavie, Guttman, Salkowitz in between. So, the thing is what would anybody say that was serious. I would wonder if Samson ever had a bar mitzvah. Or if he had a bris. I would wonder about the Jewish heroes, except those that -

Yeah, but you're a Jewish hero, John. How about a bar mitzvah?

I want to have a bar mitzvah! You know who you are...

That would help you to know who you are?

I know who I am. But my grandchildren.

Oh, your grandchildren. That's maybe something we should talk about. One last thing, why did you pick Kilimanjaro, why'd you change your name?

I am a thinking man. I read, I've always read, and I've always questioned what I read. I read stories of David, and I read the stories of Elijah, and the beginning of the world as Jews tell it in the book of Genesis, and I haven't met many Jews who knew more about Judaism. I have not yet understood why Fred [tape unclear] I don't know Moldova. I went to Russia in 1975. And while I was there, I looked all over for a synagogue. I finally found one, and it was closed. I have traveled all over the world -

Did you ever go to Mt. Kilimanjaro?

No.

Then why did you pick Kilimanjaro, was it different?

I needed a name, I'd read Hemmingway's *Snows of Kilimanjaro*.

You read the book?

Yeah.

Was it something you wanted to erase? Your father?

No, no, no, no. My – it was – I know what I'm trying to say, I'm just trying to, I'm asked this all the time. I'm asking myself, Rhonda, who am I? I studied philosophy, and so I asked the question, what can I know, what do I have to do, and what am I?

Right, you want to know who you are?

Right, who am I? And I lost my job at A&T after 3 years, because I did something nobody was ready to do. When I came here, I was already a rebel.

You were too much of a rebel?

No, I was just doing what everybody accepts nowadays.

But back then, it was not accepted. Especially in Greensboro.

Well, it would take too long to explain to you what happens. Alex Haley's father was my professor in 1950 when I came out of the navy. Simon Haley went to school at A&T.

So, he influenced you?

Right, well, we used to laugh at him in class when he'd be telling about Kuntakente. He didn't call him

by name, but I found out later what he was talking about. I had another professor who wrote the book called *The Stolen Legacy*. We are a people who have been stolen and kept away from knowing who we are.

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Do you know who you are now?

Yeah. I know who I am.

Are you happy with that?

Very much so.

So you're content with that.

Absolutely, absolutely.

And you're content with being a member of Temple Emanuel?

I'm content with being a Jew. I'm content, I stand strongly, as strongly with being a Jew as did-

Well, you're wearing a kippah.

I am, and I do it for a special reason.

What's the reason why?

Well, if Christians can wear crosses and flout their beliefs and I am no less Jewish than they are Christian, I hold to that, to that belief. I've been wearing a kippah about 5 years now, I guess.

Nobody thinks it's an African -

No. I have people who knew this, I was in Paris, about a year and a half ago, 3 years...was it 3 years? Second time I've been to Paris, first time I was, I got pictures of me in front of the Sacre Coeur, everything was fine. I don't, I don't – what do you call it when you're showing off?

Flaunt it?

Flaunt it. I don't flaunt it, but I never once have backed up from my commitment to being a Jew.

Were your children happy being Jews?

I think they were. I don't know, ask Afrika.

They never questioned you on it? They never said, why did you do this, dad?... No?

They grew up knowing.

And the name change?

She said, I'm not going to change my name too. I'm going to be Vickie Stevenson. I said, you be Vickie Stevenson, and I'm going to be Dr. Kilimanjaro. Remember, that?

So did you change it for her legally?

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Everything I've done is kosher. Now, the point is, if you're asking me, why did I change my name, and how did I come to the certain name Kilimanjaro? Well, Rhonda, the sad thing about my people, and I back up on that, because when I say my people, I have to explain that this time I'm talking about my Jewish people, but this time I'm talking about my African heritage.

You have a lot of people.

Yeah. And, of course, let me back up, come straight down the line on this, when they bought Kuntekente, when they got him from the jungle, when the slave-catchers came and got him and brought him on board that ship, and then put him on the slave block, and this man brought him in, he was on the horse. Kuntekente's about 16, 15 or 16 years old, and they drag him, they're breaking him. And if you study, like we had to do, back in Arkansas at A&M College, you had to take Negro history. And a lot of people resented it, Negro history. When they brought Kuntekente to the plantation, and the man said, "Boy, now your name is Toby. What is your name?" "My name is Kuntekente." "What?" "My name is Kentekunte." "Your name is Toby." "No, my name is Kuntekente." And they laid the lash on his behind. They did, and they beat him almost to death. Until he was ready to say it -

So this influenced you to -

Well, I'm trying to show you a point. What would happen here -

This obviously was a great influence.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. And I'd planned to do it anyway, but I did not have the final drive to go and change my name. Back home in Little Rock, they don't know me as John Kilimanjaro.

Your kids were little, so they had to change their name.

Everybody had to change. Let me tell you what happened, this is the good part about it, the effective part to me. Vickie, go get the kids' picture. It's in the other room, would you, please? You're talking about changing your name, and you didn't change it to O'Hara or Epstein or what people want to call Jewish names, you see. So I went and got that encyclopedia. My mind told me look in that encyclopedia, and look up names. The thing is, it tells you at the beginning how people get their names - is your name Hurwitz or is it Horowitz? We've got 2 or 3 Horowitzes there. You're the only H-U-R-W-I-T-Z? Am I right?

Right.

Alright. They got their names, they either got their names from the Bible, or the Koran, or from religious things, or they got their names from the job that they did, like Snyder over here. I know

German, I know 5 or 6 languages. I studied German and French both for my PhD. - Now, that's my mother. That was taken about 6 months before I was – I'm trying to bring this as closely as I can to climaxing the story. Her name was Judy Mae Vick. Why Vick? Her ancestors were owned by Mr. Vick. Now, she's going to take that name, and she's going to carry it to the heights of whatever she's going to be? [mumbles] So, anyway, she wanted me to ask you something -

Finish Kilimanjaro.

So, anyway, I found out, I never told you that, I found out that Alexander Stevenson is the only family member in the cemetery that has a tombstone. From the time that I was a little boy and they buried my mother, I noticed that that tombstone was there, because they put it there, the federal government put it there because he was a Yankee soldier. He was pensioned in '98 up until, and died in 1909. And they put on there that he was a private and a USCI, United States Colored Infantry. And he had all kinds of lichens and moss and stuff, and I'd go there after I got, uh, to be 21, and get some paper and rub that stuff off. And the white people didn't give a damn. They're over there burying someone, and I'm over here with Alexander Stevenson, and they spelled his name, because he couldn't spell his name, I'm sure. P-H-E-N-S-O-N. And they changed it to V-E-N-S-O-N, his way of making it more American, you see. Alright, now, the point I'm trying to get to here is that the name Robinson, many Jews have that name, Robinson. What was significant about Robin's son? Our story is that this white fellow, I doubt he was a Jew, was with Lewis and Clark, and when he was discharged, his name was Robins, and he came down to Mississippi, he figured he could make his way with the money he got from helping to explore.

So, how did this influence you?

Well, it didn't have any significance.

Ok, so Kilimanjaro didn't have any significance, either?

No, I'm trying to say, it does have. Do you know what Kilimanjaro means?

What does Kilimanjaro mean?

It's Swahili.

Ok, and what does it mean?

It means the mountain.

And that's significant to you.

And, and the name of the mountain is Anjaro. See when white folks came and always named every damned thing, you know. The Victoria Falls in the heart of Africa, the people in Tanzania, what did they think? What did they think about this? So, I thought it would be just as specious for me to take a name, and Ebo name, or a Urabi name, or a Pree name...

But Swahili was more significant?

Well, Swahili is literally the language of Africa. If it's in English, or in the language of the conqueror,

the master, Kuntekente does not want to be placed in, to be given that name, he wants the name that has some significance for him. Now-

John Marshall Kilimanjaro is the name that has significance.

Mmm-hmm. It's the tallest peak in Africa. It's high achievement.

And John Marshall Kilimanjaro, you're happy with high achievement? Are you content with yourself now?

Oh, yeah. I think my folks would, uh, would, uh, would

They'd be proud?

I think so, I think so. You see, it would be lost, it would be lost if it isn't carried on.

I hope it carries on. And I'm going to end this interview right here. Thank you, John Marshall Kilimanjaro.