Interview Summary

Interviewee: Vaughn Deel

Interviewers: Tyler Bemis and Sydne Call

Date of Interview: October 17, 2012

Location: Trible Library, Christopher Newport University

INTERVIEWEE: Vaughn Deel was born in Clintwood, Virginia on July 22, 1953. He moved to Hampton at a young age and still lives in the area today. He attended Sinclair Elementary School, which was integrated during his time there. He has had multiple jobs throughout his life. He was a paperboy, shipyard worker, bricklayer, truck driver, mechanic, and is currently a musician.

INTERVIEWERS: Tyler Bemis and Sydne Call are history majors at Christopher Newport University. Tyler is a senior and plans on graduating in spring 2013, and Sydne is a sophomore. They conducted this interview for the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW: This interview focused on Vaughn Deel’s life and his experiences during the civil rights movement. He discusses his views on race relations in the area, the civil rights movement, and the troubles that face today’s society.
TRANSCRIPT-VAUGHN DEEL

Interviewee: Vaughn Deel

Interviewers: Tyler Bemis and Sydne Call

Interview Date: November 14, 2012

Location: Christopher Newport’s Trible Library

Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, 47 minutes 21 seconds

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SC: When and where were you born?

VD: I was born in Clintwood, Virginia, July 22, 1953.

SC: Where is Clintwood?

VD: Clintwood is in southwestern part of the state near the Appalachian Mountains.

SC: OK. What was your childhood like?

VD: Very happy [laughter]. To me, it was a completely normal childhood and I have no other way to describe it.

SC: Do you have any fond memories of your childhood?

VD: Yeah, pretty much everything. I mean that’s one of those things. My childhood was wonderful. I had a great childhood. It was surrounded by love, family, music, and an overall good feeling.

SC: What were race relations like in the town where you grew up?

VD: Well, I grew up in Hampton. We moved down here when I was small and there was some tension but not like you would find in bigger cities like Memphis and places that are in the Deep South. Actually, everybody got along pretty well.
SC: Do you remember any events that galvanized the community?

VD: Not necessarily, although I was starting to become aware of social issues at a very young age. When I would see reports on TV or read the newspaper about race riots in other cities in the country, I was first worried whether this was going to happen here. With my father being a police officer, I asked him about it and he said, “Well no, everyone seems to get along pretty well here.” And I’m sure there was tension on both sides, but it never reared its ugly head so to speak.

SC: And what school did you attend?

VD: When integration started I was going to Sinclair Elementary School, which is no longer there. I think there is a hotel there now.

SC: OK, and it was integrated at the time?

VD: No, not when I first started attending there. I think I was in the third or fourth grade when integration started.

SC: Did you notice a significant change in the area after schools became integrated?

VD: I saw a lot of angry adults. Well, not a lot, but a fair number. And I saw some kids of these angry adults that were angry. But honestly, I don’t know think they knew why they were angry. I think they were angry because their parents were. That’s pretty much all I saw. I’ve always tried to get along with other people, and when I was a child we knew black families. My dad was also a farmer, so we lived in a rural part of Hampton and a lot of the black people there were farmers. They weren’t sitting there talking about social issues; they were talking about the best way to grow collards. [laughter].

SC: Was there a specific segregated area of the town that you could recall?
VD: Yeah, there were a couple that were fairly segregated. There was a place off of Aberdeen Road, I believe it was called Aberdeen Gardens. If I’m not mistaken, I believe a lot of this area was built around World War II as housing because of course this is a big military area. I can’t really be sure about that. But that, I know, was one of the areas that was fairly segregated.

SC: And did you notice any differences between the sides of town that were pretty segregated and not segregated?

VD: Well, I would hear people say, “Don’t go to that section of town.” And of course the first thing on my mind was, “Why? why not go there?” And the response was, “Well, black people live there.” “OK, well why not go there?” I didn’t understand why there was hatred. I was never taught hatred when I was younger.

SC: Do you have any memorable moments of segregation while growing up?

VD: The biggest memory I have of when I was young when this all started was people kind of shying away from black people. In high school, there were actually a couple of incidents where some rednecks and some black people didn’t get along with each other and they wanted to start their own little war in high school. And, luckily, we had some great teachers who came in there and said, “Okay you guys sit here and tell each other what your problem is. Why don’t you like him? Why don’t you like him?” And they couldn’t come up with an answer.

SC: Did you notice segregation in any public facilities?

VD: No, because I didn’t go to a whole lot of places, maybe except the grocery store and church. Of course, church seemed fairly segregated. A couple of times a year, my folks would go to a big revival meeting and usually it was in one of the large churches in
downtown Newport News and that was all black and white people. So they aren’t arguing about anything. They’re in there to sing and do whatever.

SC: Were you influenced by your parents’ beliefs? If so, what were they and have they changed over time?

VD: Yeah, I was very influenced by their beliefs. I was taught to get along with people and love was the most powerful force in the universe. You treat everyone equal until they have a reason to be treated differently. Of course, there was a lot of religion and the biggest change was that I got away from the religion part, because I couldn’t see a religion based on child abuse.

SC: What were your views on integration at the time?

VD: Well, the only view I had was that some of the kids I knew will be going to school with me now. That was the biggest thing. I was going to see these people every day during the day instead of after school playing ball or whatever we did in the afternoons.

SC: Did you attend church on a regular basis?

VD: Yes.

SC: Do you travel around a lot today?

VD: Usually I take one trip a year to Austin, Texas and that’s about it.

SC: So have you noticed anything that has not changed over time between races?

VD: Well, I did happen to look around a bit this time because I had been thinking about this interview and I had been told about it before I went to Texas. I just got back two weeks ago. And I noticed that, when I was in Austin, I did not see a lot of black people down there unless I was right near the college, the University of Texas. There was a lot of
Hispanics, of course. You see that all over Texas. But no, I did not see a lot of changes.
You see more Asians in Austin than you see black people.

SC: Are there any experiences that you faced or noticed that would be viewed as
negative in today’s society?

VD: Yeah, I had a friend in grade school that wanted me to join up with him because he
was mad at some “nigger,” you know, and he wanted me to go with him to confront him.
And I said, “Well, if you confront him what you need to do is talk and see what is
wrong.” And he defriended me. Of course, you didn’t defriend when we were kids. We
didn’t have that then [laughter].

SC: Do you recall anything of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.?

VD: Yes, I do. That was a total shock. He and Bobby Kennedy were killed right close
together within a short while. Both deaths, to me, were extremely disheartening because
I was hoping that maybe people would have to learn to get along. I knew that, in a few
years, if this war didn’t end, I’d be going to fight a war I disagreed with. And I was
hoping that if we could learn to get along in our country, maybe we could learn to get
along with other countries.

SC: Did it have a great effect on the community? Did you notice differences after the
assassination?

VD: Well, there was an effect in the community if you mean was there tension.

SC: Yes.

VD: I didn’t notice it in our town. When I asked my dad—he was in the police
department—they were very concerned that there would be something. There was rioting
in Memphis. People were rioting all over the country over this. And they were very
aware of it downtown and were preparing for something to happen, but nothing really happened. I was fairly young then. I was in junior high school when that happened. And I was thinking, “Now maybe this town isn’t so bad.”

SC: What were the social interactions between whites and African Americans like?
VD: Well, I can only speak from my family and the interactions were normal. You treated everyone the same.

SC: Did you notice differences in the school? Did all the African Americans sit together and all the whites or did they blend together?
VD: Yeah, and that was the same way at the beginning. As I moved onto junior high and onto high school, that happened. But as the people got to know each other, then you would see people interacting more often.

SC: Do you have children?
VD: Yes, I do.

SC: Did you tell them about the experiences you faced and witnessed?
VD: I never really did, because my children have lots of friends and they’re black, they’re white, they’re yellow, they’re red. They learned from me and their mom that you treat people equal.

SC: Having your dad on the police force, did you hear any stories?
VD: I heard a lot of stories, but I never knew whether it was a black man or a white man or a black woman or a white woman. He didn’t put that in. He said so and so did this. He didn’t identify them by color.

SC: Were any of them uncomfortable to hear? Were they upsetting or sad?
VD: Yeah some of them were upsetting. A policeman has to deal with a lot of unsettling things. There were shootings, stabbings, and fights. One of the things that scared me most in my life was when my dad came home one day in the middle of the day. It was in the summer time, so I was home, and my mom worked midnights so she would sleep during the day. I had learned to cook when I was real young and I would fix him lunch when he came home. Well, he came home early and he was covered in blood and I was really frightened. He gets out of his police car—he was a lieutenant on the force—and his white shirt was soaked in blood. It was very scary. But all he had done was broken up a fight and gotten blood all over his shirt. It was that moment when I said I’m never going to be a policeman [laughter].

SC: What was your first job?

VD: My very first job was a paper route.

SC: As you got older what did you do?

VD: I became a laborer for a brick mason, I was a truck driver for a hardware store, and I worked in the shipyard for a little while, which I hated. I went to be a bricklayer and then eventually an automotive technician and then a musician. I’ve been a musician for many years.

SC: At these jobs, were most of the people employed white or were they also African American?

VD: All of them were mixed, every one of them. Of course, I don’t know about the paper routes. I didn’t see a whole lot of paper boys because I had the whole housing project to myself. Probably the most integrated was the shipyard, because so many people are there. The others were fairly small businesses that I worked. I probably see at
least half the people in what I do now: playing music. Black people and white people--.

There’s a fifty-fifty mix.

SC: So you never experienced discrimination in the work place?

VD: I never experienced the bad aspects. I knew it was there and I knew some other people had those feelings, but it was something I was never taught. Maybe I was looking at it through rose colored glasses, but I don’t know. I was just not seeing what other people were seeing as far as differences.

SC: Do you remember any protests taking place in the area or around the country that really stood out?

VD: Yeah, there was a place, Compton, California. That was terrible. And, of course, Memphis during the whole thing when Dr. King got killed. I think in New Jersey there were quite a few. Being someone who reads a lot and is always interested in finding out new stuff, I would read everything in the newspaper. I found it rather shocking and rather disturbing and I could never understand why this would happen. I realize that racism is a two-way street. There are black racists and there are white racists. I’ve met Asian racists, and I don’t think anyone is born a racist, honestly. It is a learned trait and someone has to teach you to hate. Put a group of five children together. They aren’t going to argue to argue with each other because of their color. They are going to argue because “I want the block that you have.” That’s where the argument is going to come in.

SC: What do you view as the most important accomplishment of the Civil Rights Movement that you either witnessed or heard about?
VD: Definitely the integration of the schools and the opportunity for people to get better jobs. I think those are great accomplishments. I’m kind of mixed to whether it works now or not because people on both sides learn to use the system. People are much more selfish and they always want what’s best for themselves. There’s reluctance to help others along sometimes. The integration of the schools, I think, was very important. If you’re not involved with other people and see them then you don’t know what they are and tend to shy away.

SC: What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the movement? And what are the most pressing problems facing African Americans today?

VD: Jobs are the most pressing, I think, and acceptance in all communities. Acceptance of people as human beings and helping them get along with employment. Helping everyone get ahead. That’s the unfinished legacy. That doesn’t even necessarily mean just the African American community. You’ve got the poor white people that are basically in the same boat and always have been. No one ever points that out because they are white and just fine. There is poverty all across the board. That is the biggest problem.

TB: You say there is not as much tension as you would find in the south, like Birmingham and Memphis. Does that surprise you?

VD: It does now more than it did then. I couldn’t relate to those cities because I had never been there. I could only relate to where I lived. I never traveled anywhere at that time, except back and forth from where I came and here. Where I was from, you very seldom ever saw black people. Recently, in the last few years, some members of my family traced our family back to when our first members came from Europe. I was kind
of shocked to learn that some of my ancestors, back in the 1700s, owned slaves themselves. That to me was very shocking. As I read the histories, the people they owned were treated more as family members. As their owners got older they said, “Okay you have been working for me for this long, I am giving you this parcel of land and the house that you live in is now yours.” They gave them that because they worked so hard. So that, to me, was a big shock to learn that I had family members who were one time slave owners. That was a terrible shock.

TB: We just learned in class about busing. It is obviously still going on in Newport News now. Was this a big thing?

VD: Yeah, they did it there then. I don’t know whether it was a big thing. I lived fairly far away from the school. There was no school closer for me to go to. I knew that there were other kids being bused from some other areas to that school just to try and improve the mix. How big of an issue it was, I don’t know. I do remember reading newspaper articles. There were people upset because their children were being moved to a school that was farther away than the one closest. The biggest concerns I remember reading were white families being upset because their children were being bused to the “bad” part of town and they didn’t like it.

SC: Did anybody protest the busing?

VD: Yeah, I do remember people going to the city council, but I don’t remember any of the details. It’s a memory that is there, that yes, there were protests but they were done through the channels where you would normally do that type of protest. But because of the law, everybody had to comply and do this.

SC: When busing started, did you notice a drop in attendance?
VD: No, I didn’t notice. I don’t remember a drop in attendance in school other than the
day after Martin Luther King was killed. There were a lot less black people at school that
day. There were probably some whites that didn’t show up that day because their parents
were afraid to send them, figuring that the black kids were going to jump them or
something. The rest of us, though, just sat around stunned that someone would do
something like this.

TB: I am from a different part of the country--

VD: Where are you from?

TB: I’m from New Hampshire. Coming down here, I get a feeling of uneasiness with
different races. Did you ever feel that when you were in high school or integration?

VD: Yes, there were a couple times in high school when people decided to ban together.
There was tension then. And I was little afraid to walk through the halls, but I was the
hippy guy. Everyone said, “Leave him alone, he’s not going to fight anyway.”

SC: Did you have any friends that were African American?

VD: Quite a few. Predominantly white, most of my friends were white but I had quite a
few black friends too. They were just people. We talked about all kinds of stuff. We
wouldn’t talk about racial tension because that wasn’t really a part of our relationship. I
know there were a couple of my African American friends who were kind of shunned by
their other friends because “You’re hanging around with that ‘honkey.’ You’re not
supposed to do that.” Eventually they’d come around and say, “Look he’s just a guy. Get
to know him.”
TB: With that said, I know you related back to school with your friend in middle school when your friend wanted to confront that person, and you said “no.” Was that the last time you had an issue with a friend?

VD: That was probably the only time I had an issue with a friend over race.

TB: Okay. Lastly, I don’t know if you have any more questions, but 9/11—a lot of people saw it on the news—that is something that sticks out in people’s heads that they witnessed and changed a lot of people’s lives moving forward. Was there a specific time that you read or you saw on the news or in person anything that really maybe shaped you as a person, anything like that?

VD: That’s a good question, very good question. The thing that probably shaped me the most was reading *Stranger in the Strange Land*. I think the things that probably shaped me most were the assassinations of King and Kennedy, both Kennedys. Those were the things that really made me want to work for peace and work for unity because those were very frightening things. And I was at that age when that happened that this was very important. I was sitting in class in the fifth grade when President Kennedy was shot. We were in art and I can’t remember what we were doing, but I just remember there were about a dozen children. Our classes were twenty-eight or twenty-nine people at the time. Most of class just sat there because they were never aware. They never paid attention to politics or social events or things like that. But I remember the look on my teacher’s face—Mrs. Nelson—I remember her name to this day. She just had abject horror on her face. I mean she was just—. And then immediate tears. Of course, I was pretty unhappy too because I always thought Kennedy seemed like a pretty good guy. That was a big shock,
and then just a few years later his brother and Dr. King got killed. Those three events were probably the three biggest events of my life that shaped me.

SC: And at the time Kennedy got shot, because you were fairly young, did you have a full understanding of what happened and why it happened?

VD: I didn’t know why, and I still don’t think anyone really understands why, not that I had a complete understanding. I know that a very important man had gotten killed, and I knew he was really loved by quite a few people in the country. I believe he had given the country new hope. But understanding death, to a ten year old, is not real easy because I was ten when President Kennedy got killed. That was sixty-three wasn’t it, or was it sixty-two?

TB: It was sixty-three.

VD: So I was ten years old. Yeah, it was hard to understand that but it was much easier to understand what had happened before, because both of those guys were working to better the country, to better everyone’s lives. It wasn’t so much the guys that pulled the trigger; it’s hatred that killed them. Hatred pulled the trigger and they just used these two other guys to do it.

TB: Just to go on that more, you see this movement towards progressivism, this unity and desegregation. You see it over the years. At least with myself and what I’ve seen in general today, with President Obama getting elected. Do you think we’ve taken a step back towards this separation?

VD: I don’t think the nation has taken a step back but I think there are certain factions in the nation that want to take us back to what they call a simpler, better time. But they want to take us back to the dark ages. I mean, personally, I was very happy to see Obama
reelected again. I think it’s a definite step in the right direction. I don’t think the other
guy [Romney] really cared about the country. His history had shown that he wasn’t a
uniter. He was more interested in big business than the everyday lives of the people he’d
be leading. So a lot of the hatred that I saw out of this election comes from that faction
that is known as the Tea Party, which I couldn’t consider a political party. To me, they
are just more of a temper tantrum. And I don’t see them trying to help. I was reading
yesterday that in twenty different states there are these movements trying to secede. And
I am going, “Well, okay go ahead. That will drop everybody’s tax rate down and reduce
the national deficit. And you’re on your own.” I just hope if Texas secedes that they will
move Austin to a different part of the country because I like that town too much.
TB: You don’t necessarily see a racial aspect of it?
VD: Oh yeah, there’s definitely a racial aspect, because too many people think there
shouldn’t be a black person in the White House. That’s just wrong thinking in my mind.
It’s very wrong and it will not help. And these companies that are laying off and firing
people because of this election, these people in my mind-- how did they get to where they
are today? How did they get so stupid? Papa John, has an underground garage that will
hold twenty two cars. He lives in like a castle. His carriage house is 6, 000 square feet.
And he said he’s going to have to cut the hours of all his employees now because of
Obamacare. He’s going to have to charge fifteen cents more per pizza because of
Obamacare. And last month he gave away two million pizzas. There’s something wrong
there. I mean it’s a stretch to call it pizza to begin with. But I can’t buy from him, and I
realize that my not buying from him hurts local people that work for him, but I’d rather
boycott than write an angry letter or scream about it. Money talks in this country.
TB: You got anything?

SC: Going back to--. Today there’s a big controversy about gay marriage. Does it remind you, going back to racial tensions, to these tensions between the gay community and everybody who’s protesting this?

VD: Well, kind of. But you can’t look at a gay person and tell that they’re gay. You can look at an African American and say “Oh, he’s an African American.” To me, that is one of the funniest things in the world, because I have no problem with gay people. I have quite a few gay friends, and I think it’s so funny that I hear more hatred toward gays than I do towards black people. And I hear what they say, and I know the person standing next to them is gay and he’s just grinning his ass off because he thinks it’s funny. But that’s because he’s comfortable in his skin and it doesn’t bother him. He’s had to deal with this ever since he discovered he was gay. He’s had to deal with the hatred and people wanting to shun him and pushing him to the corner and say you’re not a human being. Yeah, there’s a lot of the same thing. It’s just harder to tell because, like I say, it’s harder to look at someone and tell if they’re gay.

SC: But when you do notice it, does it remind you of anything? Going back to how, if you look back now at everybody who-- all the adults protesting throwing eggs at buses and now they’re protesting this. Does it remind you of anything?

VD: It reminds me of the stupidity that I saw back then. That’s exactly what it reminds me of. I find it-- I don’t think they’re using their brains. You know, people say, “They’re gay people, they shouldn’t have children.” But I am trying to explain to them they’re gay, most likely they’re not going to be able have children. They’re most likely going to adopt. “Then they’ll turn their children gay.” I try to explain to them you can’t turn
someone gay. They either are or they’re not. They were born that way. I had a step-son in my second marriage. My step-son, when me and my wife got together, was probably six, seven. It was very obvious he was gay. I mean there was no doubt that he was gay. We split up when he was about twelve and I think, when he was about eighteen, he finally came out to his mom. Of course, his mom already knew and there was no anger, no bitterness or anything like that. One of my best friends growing up was gay and that was very obvious then. And in the sixties, this guy was flaming. He was quite a bit older than me. He worked at a record store. And me, being a music fanatic, I would go to that record store a lot because I always knew Jay would have something sitting out for me. I would go there and he would have a pile of records for me, “Here’s some stuff that came in. I think you’ll like it.” And it was cool back then because there were records—no CDs—and it was about the time that eight-track tapes were coming out. But they had a little room in the back with head phones and you could open up the record to see if you wanted to buy it, which was really cool. Now they have this little kiosk where you put the headphones on, scan the CD and listen to cuts. He was the first gay person I had ever met and we became instant friends. It was obvious to me that he was gay and he asked me one time “You ever thought of being with another guy?” and I said, “No, I haven’t. I kind of like girls but, you know, if I ever do, I’ll call you.” [laughter] And when he died —. He contracted AIDS because he wasn’t very careful in his sexual dealings. My wife and I had gone over to help him out. He had the hospital bed in his living room. His bedroom and bathroom were upstairs, and he was too weak to go upstairs. He was getting sponge baths every day from the nurses that would stay with him. He decided one day he needed a bath. So my wife and another one of our friends helped him upstairs
so he could take a bath and, by the time he got upstairs, he was too tired to get in the tub. And he said, “I just need to go back down and go to bed.” We, of course, wondered “how the are we going to get him down?” So I and the other girl’s husband went upstairs to see if we could bring him down. The staircase was really narrow. So I said, “There’s no way we can both help him down.” So I just picked him up. And he didn’t weigh anything because he had lost so much weight. So I said, “Put your arms around my neck, Jay,” and as I was carrying him down the stairs he goes, “Vaughn, I’ve always wanted to be in your arms. But I didn’t want it to be this way.” I said, “Shut up, you old faggot.” [laughter] Yes, I noticed the hatred more of the gay people than the black people. When I was a teenager, of course, I was sort of the hippy guy. There was this old black guy. He was a musician and we used to hang around every once in a while and play guitars. And we were sitting around sharing a quart of beer one night. He goes, “You guys have it bad now.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He goes, “You hippy guys, you’re taking the heat off of me.” I go, “What’s the heat on you?” He goes, “You don’t understand,” he said, “you’re the new niggers.” That was a kick in the face. I had never thought of that. And that was a kick in the face. Yeah, I am a minority.

SC: Did you notice that, being the minority?

VD: It never affected me. And it just made me work harder to make people accept who I was. People have all kinds of weird ideas about me. Some people think I am a redneck. Some people think I’m a hippy. Some people don’t know what to think of me. I figure that’s the best way, keep them guessing.

TB: So it did change your life, just that statement?
VD: That one statement changed my life quite a bit. Well, not change my life but what I thought, because I never did think of that.

SC: So do you think it changed for the better?

VD: Of course, anytime you have change you have to make it work for you. If not, you’re just going to go down. You have to make change to lift you up. Even bad change. I was also diagnosed with cancer in ’98. I was told I had four to seven years to live. So I figured I’m going to make these years the best and I did chemo almost constantly for almost four years. But then my doctor said “You’re going to keep doing this for the rest of your life” and then one day he said, “There’s a chance you can have a stem cell transplant.” So I went and did a stem cell transplant on August 2, 2002. And it cured that cancer, which was previously an incurable cancer. Yeah, there’s a whole lot of changes you go through but you have to work to make those changes work for you. You have to keep a positive attitude and I was always taught and learned that attitude is everything and that any change, whether it’s the world changing, the nation changing, the city changing, it all starts within you. That’s where everyone needs to change themselves in order for things to work. Just seems like a logical explanation to me. Sounds simple but get people to do it.

TB: Well, you have anything else to add?

VD: I don’t know unless you have any other questions

SC: Do you have any?

TB: I ran out.

VD: I hope I’ve given you something you can use.

TB: You definitely gave us plenty.
SC: Going back, how old were you when you moved to from where you were born?

VD: Oh gosh, I was probably three or four.

SC: So you never really got the chance to realize what the racial tensions were where you were from?

VD: Where I’m from there weren’t a lot of black people. My dad’s father, he didn’t care for black people. But he kind of came around because he was a solid Democrat. Of course, as you know, the Democratic and Republican parties have switched. Because he couldn’t be a Republican, he actually changed the way he thought. He didn’t associate with black people. Of course, where he lived was an extremely rural place. It was maybe a mile to the next house. He was a mail carrier. When I was a child, I’d ride with him a lot when we went for vacations. I’d spend at least a week or more there every year. Early in the morning we’d go get in his jeep. This is the kind of mail man he was. He’d go pick up mail on the way out to go to the post office. The post office was about 25 miles away. He would pick up mail on the way out, and there would be a note and some money. People wanted a dozen eggs. He’d reach out and put about a dozen eggs in their mailbox. He’d take their mail, take their money, put the eggs in the mailbox and go on down. He had chickens and cows and milk and eggs that he would sell. He was a little different than the regular mailman, you see. We would go to the town--. The town is called Dante. It is spelled Dante, of course, and that’s where the post office was. I never remember seeing a black person anywhere near there. If there were black people there, they were probably working the mines. Almost everyone worked in the coal mines. You were either a farmer or you worked in the mines. Or timber, because you had to have timbers to work in the mines. I never saw racial tension there. As I got older, in my teens, as I
was hanging out with my cousins, I found that some of them were a little racist. They were always “n” this and “n” that. The word to me is very offensive. But Dick Gregory taught me how to use the word. I used it a couple times today because it was in the context at the time. During some of this stuff in high school, somebody handed me Dick Gregory’s book called *Nigger*. I don’t know if you ever read this or not, but it’s a great book. I started reading it and that was an eye opener. Dick Gregory was a comedian that I loved. I thought the guy was hilarious, and I didn’t know how radical he was. He wasn’t anti-white. He was just trying to get people to understand. Of course, the book was written by him for black people, I would say. If I’m not mistaken, he said somewhere within the book that white people should read this too. One of the sections of the book that struck me the most was talking to young black people. And he said if the word “nigger” bothers you, stand in front of the mirror, and look yourself in the eyes and say it over and over until you take away its power. I didn’t say it over and over again, because I had heard it enough, but I realized you can take away a word’s power just by not letting the word bother you. It’s a very offensive word, but the word has no power for me anymore. I can’t use the word. I would just as soon call you that as a black guy. The definition of the word doesn’t have a color. That book was something that struck me. I have recommended it to a lot of people that have a lot of problems with their own head when it comes to race. I have realized that there are bad black people and there are bad white people, and there are bad people everywhere. They will do bad things to you. The way I have to look at it is it is the person that did the bad thing to me and not the color of their skin. That’s the way I have to look at it, because that’s the truth.
SC: Is there anything else that you would like to contribute that you feel like we’ve missed?

VD: No, I don’t.

[End of Interview]

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