

“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville
2016

Cassius Smith, Overton High School

Canzada Hawkins, community advocate. Her father was A.Z. Kelley of *Kelley v. Board of Education*, a lawsuit to desegregate Nashville public schools.

Mary Margaret Randall, One Voice Nashville

MMR: Welcome to the “My Witness” podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support *Witness Walls*, Nashville’s Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

CH: We certainly have hope that things will be better. I have seen where things got better and I have seen where things reversed.

CS: My name is Cassius Smith. I go to John Overton High School, I’m in the 9th grade, and I am interviewing with Miss Hawkins, and we are going to be talking about school segregation and legal actions. Can you please describe when you became aware of racism, or just race in general?

CH: Wow, that’s....you know, that’s amazing that you would ask that question because I really hadn’t thought about that. I grew up in a family—even though I was born in 1953—I grew up in a family that did not talk about racism. Even though my father did what he did as far as the desegregation of the public school system, he never discussed it.

MM: The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs the Board of Education* had declared separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional. Nashville was slow to implement this change, however. In 1955, Ms. Hawkins’ father, A.Z. Kelley, joined other families in filing a lawsuit against the Nashville Board of Education.

CH: So racism did not come into play until probably when I started the third grade.

CS: Yeah, so I imagine the third grade was things getting more, you know, intense...things, segregation, white people not wanting to have their children to go into school with black people...was that when you became more aware?

CH: There was a process of changing. Housing in east Nashville—we were moved to the Inglewood area, which was a little farther out of Nashville. So once we moved from the east Nashville area and went to

Inglewood, I had to attend an all-white school. And that's when I became introduced to racism...8, 9 years old.

CS: When were you aware your father had put a lawsuit against the Board of Education?

CH: I was not aware of what my father had done because it was not a topic at the dinner table. If you...I don't know, you wouldn't remember because you weren't born, but if you know history, there were a lot of bombings. Z. Alexander Looby, one of the lawyers for the case...his home was bombed. There were schools that were bombed. Hattie Cotton School was bombed. So I guess my father kept that part of our lives pretty secretive because he didn't want us talking to other people about it, and I guess he was being protective.

CS: Yes. And having knowledge of these different places being bombed, was there any fear going through you or your siblings' heads, just to go to school at all?

CH: Well actually, I was the only one who went to an integrated school. My brother, who is the one who we had filed the lawsuit for, never attended an integrated school. But because we had moved into an all-white neighborhood, I was zoned to go into an integrated school. That's how I became introduced into an integrated situation.

CS: Well how would you describe going to a public school that was more diverse than going to different schools like Pearl, where they were all black and they were all together? How would you describe going to an integrated school? What was that like for you?

CH: Well I did attend Meigs school for two years, my first and second grade years. And of course it was all black, all of my friends were there, and I didn't quite understand why did I had to leave to go to a school that I didn't know anybody. And it was very difficult. I can remember...and forgive me, because sometimes it is very painful to think about. Children didn't want to sit next to me. Now that was in third grade...can you imagine? There were some who were nice, some who weren't very nice. Once I left Inglewood, I attended Stratford...I can remember there might have been 25 black children in Stratford, in a school of 1,200 at that time. And constantly we would walk the hallways and we would be spat upon, and called the N word...repeatedly. You know, racism has to be taught. It is a learned behavior, I'm sorry.

CS: The situations you have gone through throughout your life, and your father and his role in the Civil Rights Movement...how has that really affected the life of you and the lives of people around you and your peers?

CH: Well, I did have friends of both races, black and white. I didn't ever think about being a trailblazer at the time, but I was actually the first black cheerleader at Stratford. I had lots of friends after I became a cheerleader, both black and white. So I think my experience being in an integrated situation...it was good at times but then there were not so good times. My brothers and sisters, of course...again, they

didn't have that experience that I had. However, now, when I think back to the interest of the teachers...I can remember when I went to Inglewood, during my formative years, elementary school, I had teachers that I could tell did not want me there. But when I went to Stratford, there was one particular teacher that I knew was genuinely supportive of me, supportive of...just being a teacher. What teachers should do. She wanted to teach and she didn't care what color I was. She was loving and nurturing and a wonderful teacher.

CS: Even though your father really didn't really talk about anything that was going on at that certain time while you were younger, when you had found out, were there any different lessons that he tried to teach you or anything he tried to get into your head, just to make sure that you'd be ready for life? Anything that he taught you?

CH: He was the kind of person who, again, loved people regardless of...again, he had many experiences where people were unfair to him. Not just with the school system situation, but he also was a mortician. And he had to take the undertaker test...I don't think they said undertaker, but they said mortuary. He would have to take a test in order to pass and he took the test over and over many, many times. Not because he didn't know the material, but because he was being discriminated against. So his experiences with discrimination was on lots of different levels.

CS: Well your father actually knew nationally-known Civil Rights leader Rev. Kelly Miller Smith of First Baptist, Capitol Hill, here in Nashville. Later on in life, did he ever talk to you about his important role in Nashville race relations?

CH: Well later on life, yes. After we really became well over into our years of adulthood. How I found out what my father had done, I was a schoolteacher. My first year of teaching, the school secretary—for whatever reason—she had this book open and it actually had the different class action lawsuits listed in the book, and I saw where my father was listed in this book. And it had A.Z. Kelley...well not A.Z., because he filed it under my brother, Robert Kelley...vs. the Nashville public school system. This is how it was listed. And when I saw that, that's how I found out what my father had done. And I went home and we talked about it, and he said we didn't think you all would be ready for this until you become adults. And it was probably good that he didn't tell us, as I look back. Because again, he was trying to be protective. Had we talked to other children about it, they would've gone home, told their parents, and so he never knew who to trust. He wasn't very trusting. You couldn't be, because you never know who to trust.

CS: Yeah...at a certain age, certain things you tell a child can either make or break you. And so...that's very heartbreaking. I know that you said you were a teacher...is there anything that you would teach kids because today, in school, whenever they talk about black history, usually every February they talk about the people that are popular. I know Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, but I know there's a lot, a LOT more people that were really behind the scenes that did help support the movement and make a change. Is there anything that you would talk to your kids about?

CH: Oh yeah...we don't have black history just in February. We try to have...and we shouldn't even say black history, because history is history. I mean, we don't say white history, do we? No. We don't say Mexican history. We should incorporate history on a daily basis. And you're right—there are so many people who have...as a matter of fact, not only did my father do this—he was one of 21 people that did the filing. He was the initiative plaintiff, but there were 21 other people who were listed in this class action lawsuit. But because he was the first, and he was the only one who was self-employed, so he wasn't intimidated. Others were either employed by the government, so they could have lost their jobs. And again, we've talked about the bombings already...just fearful of their lives. So yeah, as I look back, there are so many people who contributed to our lives. So many people who have died so that we might have a wonderful life now. It's very heartbreaking that young people, and not all young people—I look at you and this is wonderful what you're doing today. But there are so many young people who don't know their history and if we don't know our history, we are subject to repeat some of the mistakes that we have done in the past. We need to do better, teaching our history.

CS: If there was one thing that you could go back and try to do to affect any decisions or anything that you could have done, what would be a thing that you would go back and do?

CH: Well, when I grew up, back in the day, because I'm a woman (that's a double whammy), women were pretty much subjected to not being out in the public. And then I have a husband, so I try not to overbound his decisions in life. I mean, he's pretty much the head of our home, okay? So if I could go back and do anything...I'd be a man [laughter]. First of all, if I could. Because men have the freedom...that's what holds us back sometimes—our gender and our race.

CS: Yes. And speaking of that, you were born back in the time where segregation and how strong racism was upon America...did that really change your view of the world? Like when it all stopped, did that just completely change your view of the world, or did you still feel a certain type of way about the world?

CH: Well again, my father taught us...he was a strong Christian. He was a very humbling man, a God-fearing man. He instilled Biblical principles in our home. So we were taught that no matter how you're treated, you turned the other cheek. And now it's hard, it's hard to do that. The world got better for awhile but if you think about it now we see other kinds of discrimination. We see how our young people are dying on the wayside...we're killing each other! You know, you have crimes that should not be. I just lost a grandson in January that was just shot down like a dog. And left out in the street. And that shouldn't be. So we've got to learn first to love ourselves. And what better way to love yourself than to learn where you came from. And to know the value of life. We weren't created to kill each other. We were created to help one another. To live in a peaceful world.

CS: In this generation, a generation where right now, young African American males and females are dying faster than the last generation, what would you tell them just to get in their mind and try to change their view of the world to where there would be less violence, and we could just go back to loving one another? Back to when we were all together trying to fight a certain problem, which might still occur today?

CH: That's a tough question. But I still believe that we have to be taught to love. Love overcomes everything, and if we don't love ourselves, we can't love other people. Not just African Americans, I'm just speaking in general, okay? I'm talking about everybody. Love has no color. My father, even though I went to an integrated school, he never said "don't bring home a white boy". He never said those kinds of things. Because he knows that love encompasses everything. Love...there is no color on love.

CS: If you were in your father's shoes at that time, is there anything you would have done differently?

CH: You know, my dad didn't ask to do this. He was just one, again, of 21 other people who could have done it, but because he was self-employed, it was easier for him to put his name out there as far as his business. They could have touched him with his family, but he kept his family secret. Not secret—but he kept us at bay. Yeah, his business did suffer a couple of times. They would throw stones and big boulders and rocks in his windows, but he never got bombed. What would I have done? I don't think there's anything that I would have done differently than what my father did. He just...he loved people and I do believe he was protected by the love of God.

CS: Right now, that we are in the site we are in, things have drastically gotten better since that time. But things are still not perfect. Where do you think the world might be at or be placed in the next ten years? Where do you think this place will be? Do you think it will get any better? Do you think that racism will just disappear, or...?

CH: You know, as time goes on—and that's what it takes, time—time can heal. For awhile, there was just a Band-Aid over racism. As Martin Luther King said, "do not judge me by the color of my skin, but the content of my character." So we've got to go back to that. The character of a person. How you treat each other. And not how you look. Okay?

CS: Yes ma'am. [laughter] If there was one question you could ask your father right now, what would it be?

CH: I'd have to say I miss him....I miss him... [trails off]

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this "My Witness" podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the *Witness Walls* public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts' Public Art Collection is funded through the Percent for Public Art Program with support from the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016