

The Lemon Street Schools Oral History Collection
Marietta City Schools System, 2019-2021
Michael Rhett interview
Conducted by James Newberry
January 24, 2020

Complete Transcript

- Interviewer: All right. This is James Newberry and I'm here with Georgia State Senator for the 33rd District, Michael "Doc" Rhett. It's Friday, January 24th, 2020. And we're at the Kennesaw State University Center. And I want to thank you for sitting down with me. And I just want to ask to begin with, do you agree to this interview?
- Rett: Yes.
- Interviewer: Well, thank you so much. So Senator, could you tell me your full name and birthdate?
- Rett: Michael Rhett. R-H-E-T-T. December 30th, is my birthday.
- Interviewer: Okay. And where did you grow up?
- Rett: I grew up in New York City.
- Interviewer: What part of the city?
- Rett: In Manhattan, on the Main Street in Harlem, on 125th Street, just two blocks down the street from the Apollo Theater in public housing.
- Interviewer: Okay. What were your parents' names?
- Rett: My mother name was Lilly. And my father name was Harold. He was a decorated Korean War veteran.
- Interviewer: And what did they do for a living?
- Rett: My father worked in the textile industry. And my mother, she was a nurses aid.
- Interviewer: Okay. Do you have any siblings?
- Rett: I have one brother, his name is Curtis. He's a retired school administrator in New York City. And my sister, she's currently in Pennsylvania. She's working with the City of Bethlehem. What she does, she goes around and locates senior citizens, and they worked with the grant from the federal government where they grant them \$20,000 to fix up their house. And so she tries to recruit senior citizens to do that. My brother's a retired administrator. Worked all of his career in the South Bronx.

Interviewer: Okay. What was life like then in Harlem when you were growing up?

Rett: Well, it was a time of transition, because that was the main street where a lot of prominent people who were in the Civil Rights movement gathered to speak to people. Also, during that time, you couldn't, if you were African American, you couldn't stay in the hotel downtown. So you stayed in the Old Teresa Hotel, which was about four blocks from my house. So it was just interesting listening to people like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, even Fidel Castro came through because that's where he stayed at. And just listening to them talk about ... also, we had the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers, just listening to them talk about how to liberate themselves from the bondage of Jim Crow. So there was a lot of activity talking about going to school and getting an education, staying of trouble. A lot of families. A lot of working class people. This was just before integration took place. Then probably in about the mid '70s, you know that old TV show with The Jefferson's moving on up?

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Rett: Well, the middle class African Americans started to move out towards the suburbs. And so when you had that middle class leave any community, they're the ones who kind of enforce the standards and norms, and the rights of passage to adulthood. Then after that the community started to change, plus industry left also. Jobs. So it was pretty interesting time.

Interviewer: Well, that kind of segues into my next question nicely. Can you tell me about your education, your goals at that time?

Rett: I always knew I would graduate from high school and go to college. I always knew that it might take a while to get there, but that was pretty much emphasized. In my father's side of the family, a lot of them were teachers, educators. My uncle, uncle Raymond, he was the first African American principal for Charleston High School in Charleston, South Carolina. And my aunt worked in the school system. As I told you, my brother and even myself, I've worked in school systems. But, we just knew that we were going to go to college. There was no doubt about that.

Interviewer: Where did you complete high school?

Rett: New York City, Manhattan. I went to a Catholic high school. Bishop Dubois. It's a sister school to Cardinal Hayes. And went there, grades nine through 12.

Interviewer: Okay. And then from there, where did you go?

Rett: Went to the State University of New York at Albany, where I played football and ran track and field. And went there and graduated.

Interviewer: And then tell me about your early career.

Rett: For a while I worked as an underwriter for insurance companies. And then after that, I did that for a while. I enlisted into the Air Force. Kind of interesting how that happened. I was playing a game of pool with the recruiter. And if I won I was supposed to get \$50. And if I lost, I had to enlist. So, that's kind of how I started my Air Force career.

Interviewer: By a fluke.

Rett: Yeah.

Interviewer: And where did that take you? Your Air Force career?

Rett: Oklahoma. I was stationed in Oklahoma City. And been to Warner Robins, Georgia. Dobbins Air Force Base here. Reserve Base here. Italy in Aviano. Alaska, Eilson. And Turkey. And few other places.

Interviewer: So how many years total?

Rett: I did 33 years, active duty, guard and reserve.

Interviewer: So that was the career then?

Rett: Yeah, well I used education. I always set up a triangulated check and balance on myself to make sure my life wasn't too far out of tilt. Being in the military, if your life's out of tilt, they're going to let you know it right away. So that was a check there. If I was still in and maintained the standards, my life wasn't too far out of tilt. Going to school, as you see, I have several college degrees.

Interviewer: Right.

Rett: If I wasn't flunking out, then my life wasn't too far out of tilt. And then of course, I always said a prayer too, so I had a triangulated check and balance just to check on myself. Because sometimes things can sneak up on you. But just having those checks and balance, I'd have an early warning system like, "Hey, you better get your stuff together."

Interviewer: Well, you mentioned that one of those places that you were based was Dobbins.

Rett: Right.

Interviewer: How did you ultimately end up coming back to Cobb County?

Rett: Well, I always lived here. I would just commute back and forth to Warner Robins, Air Force Base down in Warner Robins. And then my last, let me see, then I transferred up here. One of my young airmen was trying to get into a program in the Air Force and she had to go through a recruiter, and she needed

my help. So somehow or another they got my name and information, recruiters, and recruited me to come back up here to Robins Air Force Base in Marietta.

Interviewer: When was that?

Rett: 2005.

Interviewer: Okay. And you've been here ever since?

Rett: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Rett: Retired in 2015.

Interviewer: Okay. From the military?

Rett: Right.

Interviewer: Okay. So how did you become involved in public life and what drew you to that?

Rett: Well, my parents were always community minded. They always did a lot of work in community to help people out, work with organizations. So, being in the Air Force Reserve and working in the community and also through my church, I always worked with a lot of different organizations. And I would join different organizations in the community, look at their organization plan, and try and help them to implement it by either helping them revise their organization goals, help them print an electronic newsletter, help them write grants to get grants. And I wouldn't charge them anything, because I enjoyed doing it. And so I did that for a number of organizations, like the NAACP, SCLC, Powder Springs, and Austrell Task Force, made some improvement. American Legion. So I enjoyed helping them out and then that's how I got involved. When I retired I had a job working in the city of Atlanta with recidivism and homeless and battered women, and had a program where I would help them try and make a U-turn and come back into the mainstream. I enjoyed that. It's always interesting looking at people, trying to realize, they've got to get to the point they realize they have to make a change, because that's really hard. Most of the time people are the last to know or won't admit it. So I enjoyed that. And it gave me some insights into myself at a time when I was transitioning, because it's kind of like if you're making stew or something for people, you got to sample it to see how it tastes. So I'm helping them with these different programs. Even I did a co-facilitated drug rehab also. After a while you kind of implementing these different programs, you kind of say to yourself, "I wonder how this would apply to me." So it also gave me a chance to be introspective as to how do I cope and things I have to look at. It used to be funny to them when we had drug rehab program, we had processing where you talk about your issues. Everybody would introduce themselves. They would say, "I'm John, a recovering alcoholic. I'm

Bob, a recovering drug addict." Then when it was my turn, I said, "I'm Mr. Rhett, your co-facilitator, recovering human being." That always fascinated them. I said, "Hey, we all trying to cope with something here." Just that I'm a little bit able to work with my kryptonite than you are, but we're working on that.

Interviewer: Leveling a little bit.

Rett: Right.

Interviewer: So you ran for public office first when?

Rett: 2008 some people asked, a Reverend asked me, who runs an organization, asked me to think about running for County Commissioner. And I ran for County Commissioner and I think I came in third place. And then I ran a second time for a County Commissioner, came in third place again. But each time I lost, I identified organizations in the community or on my opponent's side that I need to be a part of. And so I would become a part of their organization and help them, even help the eventual victor in both cases when I ran, helped them with their program, their platform. Try to implement it. My parents always said, "It's not whether you win or lose, it's what have you learned from it?" So in order for me to learn stuff from it, I had to work with them. And we all became friends in the community.

Interviewer: What issues were important to you at the time?

Rett: To me, at the time, one of the things was just affordable housing. Because I saw in different communities, traveling around the country and even here in Marietta, that there was slowly but surely a demographic shift. And it was kind of making it ... not making it somewhat challenging for working class people to live in certain areas. And so I was looking at that and also in terms of how it affected things politically. And also the effect that it had on local churches and schools. So that's one thing that kind of caught my eye and made me think about running.

Interviewer: Well, tell me about the run for State Senate.

Rett: State Senate, well I was down to strike three.

Interviewer: Wait, what was strike three? So two times for the County Commission.

Rett: Right. And this is my third and I had one more strike.

Interviewer: Okay.

Rett: Like in baseball, three strikes you're out.

Interviewer: Got it.

Rett: So I kind of thought about it and prayed on it. And I came up with an idea. I said, "If I'm going to run for office this time, I'm going to start campaigning two years before the election." But, actually it wasn't like I was campaigning. I was doing what I always do in the community, helping people and organizations out. And I set up a plan where I can communicate and get to know the people who actually show up to vote. And I worked on that for two years. And then I decided to run for the Senate against the Dean of the Senate. Good friend of mine, Steve Thompson. He's the Dean of the Senate. He was in the Senate for 32 years, I think, about 32, 31 years. And so he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. So I said, "Well Steve, I'm going to run." And I won by 150 votes. And every vote counts. I had a young man come on board who was my campaign manager, Lance Jones. He had worked on one of my opponent's campaigns from my prior race, and he said that he thought he could help me out. And he said he's never lost a race and he can help me out. And he was right. He had a little more sophistication to the race. And social media and things like that, and just dealing with the voter demographics. But, I always told him that you still have to have the personal touch in order to win. Knocking on doors and making personal phone calls. And that turned out to give me the edge there.

Interviewer: And you're the first African American to hold this seat.

Rett: The first resident, African American resident from Cobb County who actually live here and ran for the seat and won. With the redistricting, some people may have had a part of Cobb, but they weren't from Cobb.

Interviewer: Okay.

Rett: And they didn't live in Cobb. Whereas, I was the first African American resident to actually run and win State Senate.

Interviewer: And that's been ... three-

Rett: ... 2014.

Interviewer: Okay. So, that makes how many terms?

Rett: Three.

Interviewer: Okay. And what are your expectations for that? Do you plan to continue running and hold the seat?

Rett: Well, as long as I'm effective. I've been blessed to be very effective as a Democrat in the minority. And then as a freshman Senator, I've been able to get a number of significant bills passed through both bodies at the legislature. And so as long as I'm able to do things like that and help people out, then I'll stick around and be effective. But, I said I'd give it 10 years. We'll see what happens. So far, it has been a good run.

Interviewer: And did those same issues you spoke of earlier, do they carry over? What are you hearing from constituents? What's significant at this time on the state level?

Rett: Still housing. Workforce housing. Also, some of them are concerned about ... of course, taxes. That's always an issue. But, Cobb is not really much of a problem. Well, I won't say that, but it has one of the lowest tax rates in the Metro area. Transportation's a big one, because you got more and more people running here. And right now people got to decide do we want to keep widening roads and building roads, or do we want to have a multi approach to transportation? Roads, buses, rail? We have to take a look at that, because when I-85 burned down, that was amazing the highway burned down. And people had to discover more of the train. And so that's a big issue too. Especially in my district, I have the largest amount of people who use public transportation in Cobb County. And just trying to ... when we talk about bringing in different businesses to the area, jobs, they look at your mode of transportation and how you can get back and forth.

Interviewer: Sure. Well, can you talk to me about your connection to the Marietta City School system?

Rett: Yes. Do a lot of work in the community. Like I said before, and one of my degrees is in history. But I was looking around and I saw where the community was changing, but a lot of African American history was not being preserved. So, I got involved with the Elizabeth Porter Program. And then I went to the City Council and asked them to take a look at what are they going to do with the bond money they had saved up for the Lawrence Street recreation center, that we just renamed of the day after the first African American City Council person. And then a lot of people have mentioned to me about the Lemon Street school program. So I met with Dr. Rivera, and him and I, we knew our experience with museums and preserving history was zero to none. But, we wanted to do it. We felt it was important to preserve it, because my thing was this is not African American history, this is not white history, this is Marietta history. And we need to really take a look at that preserve. So that's when I called Dr. Scott to get involved, because just like you and I were talking earlier, people that don't know the past make the same mistakes again. It's important to know where you came from so you can know where you're going. And so that's how I got involved working with Dr. Scott and Dr. Rivera. And just try and encourage the people who were involved. Then I'm also involved every two years, they have a Lemon Street reunion where we have a parade. And then we have a dinner. But, I noticed some years back when they had the parade, the streets were crowded. But the last couple of parades, there weren't that many people. And that's what really caught my attention as to we need to, and I looked at the people who were involved in the parade and they were in their 70s and 80s. That's when I said, "Well, we need to really do something to look at trying to preserve this history before it fades way."

Interviewer: You talk about the parade. What other ways that you know of have people sought to preserve this legacy of Lemon Street? Can you talk about some of those?

Rett: Well, just like the other day when they have certain benchmarks, just like they had the first black nurse to work at Kennesaw Hospital, she turned 90 the other day. Ms. Jenkins. And they had a birthday party for her. Little things like that. Or if somebody, unfortunately transitions, just like coach Carter, who's one of the dominant and prominent coaches in the area. And once again I looked around, I saw, well the people are 70s, 80s. And I hear a lot of people talking about, "I remember this, I remember that." And so then working also with the American Legion, because I'm a member there and a number of them are members, and when we get together to recognize different veteran programs. And look around, same thing, people are fading on, transitioning on. And I hear people talk about this and that, but where is it being preserved? And so I started encouraging people at different functions. Why don't you bring out some of your artifacts so we can take a look at them? Don't get me wrong, I say this, but a lot of people who can tell a story and sometimes that story changes over and over. But if you bring an artifact, I said it adds a little authenticity to it.

Interviewer: Sure.

Rett: And then a few of them would bring them out. I said, "We need to find a place to store all this stuff so people can see it." And so that's kind of how it grew from those experiences.

Interviewer: Well, I want to sort of have you think about your education in New York versus Lemon Street and the Marietta schools in the 50s. What do you think are some of the differences or similarities between the two?

Rett: Well, going to school in New York City, I went to an integrated school, because I not only lived on the main street in Harlem, 125th Street. But a few blocks up the hill was Ivy League, Columbia University. And up the other hill was City University. So it was a large cross section of people from different backgrounds and cultures that you had to live with. And just do daily negotiations with. And just like different experiences, like St. Patrick's Day, green beer or putting your hand on the Blarney Stone and telling a story, telling a lie. Or having to work with people who are either Jewish, Arab, or Italian, or Asian. You got used to working with people from different backgrounds. And you have an understanding. So from that background, so it gives you ... as you can tell no, just moving off into society. It wasn't hard for me to intermingle with different people. Whereas here, and then also because I lived on the main street in Harlem, I had a lot of time to have access to just experience in the African American culture. Where here, it was because schools were segregated, it was quite a bit ... there wasn't that exposure to other cultures. It was pretty much just African American school, elementary school, middle school, high school. And if you went to college, you went to a black college. And then you go into the workforce, it can be, I don't want to use the word challenge, but because I'll tell

you a story. I remember a buddy of mine, he was in the military. And he looked at all white people as white people. He didn't realize that you have Irish, German, Jewish, Italian.

Interviewer: Right.

Rett: He had no idea about that. And whereas, when I would talk with him or we'd go to different places, I said, "Well, the Jewish people," he said, "Why don't we go to the Jewish merchant?" I said, "Well, it's the Sabbath. So they closed down at a certain time. They don't open back up." He's like, "I didn't know that." Or when it came to Columbus Day, he saw a large Italian entourage. He said, "I didn't realize they were," I said, "Well Columbus, he was Italian." Even though he went to Spain and the Queen gave him what he needed to come.

Interviewer: Right.

Rett: So just those little things. So it made it easy for me also to have dialogue with people from different cultures and background. So, that's one of the things that has helped me a lot in the Georgia Senate. As I said, it's not easy for a young Democrat or Democrat to pass the number of bills, because it's dominated by Republican. But, because of those backgrounds I'm able to just ... it makes it a lot easier for me to intermingle with people regardless of their background, because I've experienced people from different cultures. And spent time with them. And do different activities. So, it made it a lot easier for me. Where for some of my friends who hadn't had that exposure, it was a little more challenging for them to mingle, mix and just carry on in terms of trying to accomplish what they're doing because of that lack of exposure.

Interviewer: That's a really interesting contrast that you observed there. One of the issues that we're sort of discovering and considering is the complexity of integration. The fact that these schools, such as the Lemon Street high school there was so important to the community. I mean it was a hub. But integration, which put black and white students together, you lose that hub in many ways. They were very quick to demolish the school and have the black students go to the white school. So, is that an issue that you've encountered or talk to people about the fact that the Lemon Street schools after integration, it is this effort to preserve something that sort of fell away for many people?

Rett: Well, as you know, schools reflect the social and economic realities of a community. And a lot of times the school is the hub where people go. And not only just get educated, but learn about what's going on in the community, how they can get involved, things of that nature. And so I remember when I worked in the school system, you think about it, you spend more time with the children than they do with their parents. And every year it never failed. One of the students would slip and call me mommy. Say, "Mommy, can you help me with this? I'm like, "Mommy?" So, I grew a beard. But I say that to emphasize how important school is in a community, because they reflect the socioeconomic values and people come together and they try and learn not only just

schoolwork, but learn different norms. Just being prepped, so when they go out into society. And that's been a staple in the community for a long time. And then just to just disregard it, it's not that easy. Because it did so much to prep a lot of people who went through there, who went on to become leaders in the community and achieve a number of good things.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean to continue on that point, how do you think the Lemon Street schools before integration shaped the Marietta and the surrounding area that we see today?

Rett: Well, it's an incubator for leadership. It was an incubator for helping them to understand what they were going into in society, because it was Jim Crow. And how to work in society, maintain your dignity, but not cause a burden or a problem that can adversely come back to you, affect yourself. And then that generation was part of the generation that went on to lunch counters. Integrate lunch counters. Went on into the military. And that helped a lot of African Americans, because it's not comparing anyone to a dog, but if you have a dog on a leash for let's say years, and then you let that dog off the leash for one year. You're going to have a hard time putting that dog back on that leash. So you sent African-Americans over to Asia, Europe, where they were treated a little differently, with respect. I am a man. And then the GI Bill helped him to go to school, so that they can learn and know just as much, if not more, than another person. It's kind of hard for that person to come back and you put them on the leash of Jim Crow. So it prepped them as to, and prepared them to make that journey, and go in and try and tear down the walls of Jim Crow. And make a difference but still maintain dignity. Just like Martin Luther King said and others, try and follow the letter of the law. Don't break the law, but there are things you have to demand. So it was kind of interesting.

Interviewer: Well, I just have a couple more questions. And then we can wrap up. Are there things that you would like to see in a community exhibit, a sort of communal space, and literally, I mean Lemon Street and the school that'll be renovated, and the new building. Are there things that you want to see in those exhibits that you'd like to mention or share?

Rett: I think it's important that we show various aspect of African American life during that time period. Not just education, but politically, social activists, life, raising a family. But, I think it's also important, that's important, but what's more important is to show how when it was time to tear down those walls of Jim Crow, how people of various backgrounds came together and worked to try and erase the ills of the past, but make an opportunity for a better tomorrow. I think that's important. Especially, well that's always important, so that people can see that when it's time to do something right, that all people will come together and do the right thing. When you look at, just like they were talking on the news today about changing the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, when you look at films of that, you see people from different backgrounds, not just African American. All kinds of people coming together, rabbis, preachers, ministers, black, white. They all came together and worked. And I think we need to show

those various aspects about how African Americans lived under those ... in the community going to school, but also how we came together. Because like I said, it's not just African American history, it's not just this culture history, it's Marietta history. And I think that that's very important.

Interviewer: Well to finish up, I think you were present at the most recent focus group we had with alumni. And you expressed an interest in doing this. Can you share why you wanted to reflect on it and share an interview?

Rett: Well, I've benefited today from the people who went through those experiences. Good, bad, whatever, and Lemon Street. And then they decided to work hard to open the door so that somebody like myself can come and take it to another level. If they hadn't done what they did in the past, and then make the transition, I wouldn't be here today. And that was another reason, among others, why I contacted Dr. Rivera and then Dr. Scott. To show how we're still progressing in a favorable manner. Despite different circumstances. So I think that's important. That's one reason. Another one of the reasons why I got involved. Because one thing I didn't calculate about life is how fast it goes by. It really does. I went to a retirement at the Air Force Base of a buddy I served with, when I looked around, all the airmen were so young. I said to myself, "Wait a minute, maybe it's because I'm so old." And one thing we learned in the military, protocol and etiquette, and it's important to note certain benchmarks. And that's another one of the reasons why I got involved. Because when I look in the community at these different occasions where people come together, and particularly the last two, the naming of the rec center and then the first African American nurse. I looked around, everybody who were from the old Lemon Street school, they're up there, late 70s and 80s. And they tell a lot of stories. And then they go home. But, those stories need to be noted, because it talks about how people just ... average, every day people, trying to make a living like we all want to do, dealt with an adverse situation. But then made Marietta the place that it is today. The all American city. People coming together. So I think that's another one of the reasons, as I mentioned early, why it's important to preserve it. So that people can understand where we come from. And so to help us to have a little more clarity in terms of where we're going moving forward.

Interviewer: Are there any folks that you would like me to interview by name that you can think of?

Rett: Like coach Carter.

Interviewer: What's his first name?

Rett: You asked me that and I went blank.

Interviewer: I know we can pull him right up.

Rett: Right.

Interviewer: Okay.

Rett: He's definitely right. People like, well, let me think. I can get back with you.

Interviewer: Sure. Yeah. Any time. Just give me a call.

Rett: But, he's definitely one. James Dodd.

Interviewer: I spoke with him the day before yesterday.

Rett: Okay. He held a number of positions, City Council, School Board. But, if I think of some more, I can-

Interviewer: ... well, thank you so much, Senator Michael Rhett. And before we conclude, can you tell me how you got the nickname? The Doc?

Rett: Air Force saw something in me I didn't see. So they helped me go to the University of Georgia to work on my doctorate degree. And when I completed, I was still in the military, so they would call me Master Sergeant Doc or Doc Master Sergeant. Or hey, what's up Doc? So, I just answered to them all. I said, "You can call me what you want, but don't call me late for chow at the chow hall and we'll be okay."

Interviewer: Well, I really appreciate it. And we'll conclude there.

Rett: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.